

CHAPTER

1

Space battles never took this long.

Captain Jean-Luc Picard shook his head in amazement as he stared at the main screen of the *Enterprise* bridge. He couldn't remember how many times he had been in engagements with enemy ships, with the fight usually only taking a few minutes. But not this time. The monster ship floating in front of them had kept them busy for almost two hours, its dark shape and strange configuration seemingly able to take all the *Enterprise* could throw at it, and then some.

And, so far, the *Enterprise* had withstood the enemy's weapons as well.

Punch, counterpunch. Each ship had held its ground, wearing the other down one degree at a time. And wearing Picard and his crew down as well. Dr. Crusher had just reported that sickbay was full with the casualties. Luckily, no one had been killed.

Yet.

Without standing, he glanced around the bridge. Commander Riker paced in front of his chair, sweat staining his shirt. Lieutenant Christine Vale at security just looked angry, and Troi fidgeted in her chair, the strain of the last few hours showing clearly on her face. Only Data, his emotion chip turned off, seemed as unruffled as ever. Picard envied that android calmness at times.

"They're powering weapons again, Captain," Data said.

"Target those weapons and fire before they do!" Picard ordered.

Picard could feel the *Enterprise* bump slightly as the phasers fired.

A small section of the alien ship's shields flared bright red.

The alien weapons cut through the redness, pounding the *Enterprise* hard. The inertial dampers fought to stop the rocking and shaking the impact had caused. As he had been doing for hours, Picard held onto his chair with both hands, keeping himself seated.

"Forward shields at thirty-two percent," Lieutenant Vale said. "Holding."

"Slight damage on three decks," Deanna said, glancing at the monitor on her chair. "No injuries."

That fire-return-fire scene had repeated itself at least fifty times over the last two hours.

"We have got to find a way to end this," Picard said, standing and taking a step toward the main screen, staring at the black alien ship facing him.

It was a monster, more than fifty times bigger than the *Enterprise*, and at least as deadly. It was round,

like a small moon, and its surface was covered with what looked to be some type of control housing. Two smooth rings circled the outer hull of the ship, each attached to the surface at only four places. The rings were as thick as the *Enterprise* saucer section and twice as wide, with one ring circling around the alien ship's equator, while the other ring went around the ship's poles. Picard had no idea what the rings were for.

Or who had built this strange ship.

Or what powered it.

Or even, for that matter, what was the front, back, top, or bottom of it. The sensors could tell when the alien ship was powering weapons, but little else. The alien shields had blocked every attempt they had made to find out more.

He stared at it, studying the black, equipment-covered surface of the alien ball, trying to come up with any way at all to put that ship out of commission. They had been able to punch through its shields in small areas, but the damage they had done to the surface of the ship seemed to make no difference at all.

And the shields reacted like no shields he had seen before. It was almost as if they were alive, healing damaged areas like water flowing back into a depression. Picard would give anything to learn how they worked.

An hour ago, he had even attacked one of the intersections where the two rings met, hoping that would cause the alien ship problems. They had managed to punch through the alien shields twice, hitting the surface of the ship's rings and blowing hunks out of one area of one ring. The alien shields quickly healed. Nothing changed.

The alien ship attacked, they attacked back.

Stalemate.

Over two long hours of the same thing.

However, for the residents of Blossom IV, the fourth planet of this system, the *Enterprise* had to win. The *Enterprise* had been nearby when the distress call had come in from the agricultural colony. The message said they were under attack from a massive black ball, and taking heavy damage. It had only taken the *Enterprise* fifteen minutes to be on the scene, but Picard didn't want to think about the damage the alien ship had caused to those farmers in those minutes.

The *Enterprise* had come in firing, and the alien ship had turned its attention away from the planet. But if the *Enterprise* was forced to retreat, or was defeated, there was no other help for those colonists. No other Federation ship that could stand up to this monster was nearby.

Picard also couldn't figure out why it had attacked this planet. Blossom IV had no resources, nothing worth taking from the two hundred thousand people farming the rich soil. Yet this unknown ship had suddenly appeared and started to fire on the colony. It made no sense at all.

Nothing about any of this made any sense.

Picard glanced at Data, then turned around to look at Number One. "I'm open to suggestions here, people."

No one said a word.

Picard nodded. None of them had any more idea what to do with this ship than he did. They just didn't have enough information about the alien ship to even try to come up with a plan, and the alien ship's shields were blocking all but the most basic surface scans.

"They are powering weapons again, Captain," Data said.

"Return fire!" Riker ordered.

The blast shook the *Enterprise* again, sending Picard staggering to grab the armrest of his chair.

"Shields at twenty-six percent," Data said.

"We punched a hole in their shields again," Lieutenant Vale said. "It has now closed."

Picard nodded, looking back at the lieutenant's fresh, sweating face. Vale had blue eyes, blonde hair, and a button nose that made her look much younger than her actual age. But she was a good tactical officer. Smart and very quick. And, from what he understood, deadly in a fight.

Suddenly, Lieutenant Vale's statement sunk in.

"Data," Picard said, "how long did that hole in their shields remain open?"

"One-point-three-three seconds," Data said.

"Is that enough time to get a probe through and the information back?"

Data glanced up at Picard, his yellow eyes showing just a touch of interest. "It could be done, sir," Data said. "But we would have to be closer."

"Let's do it," Picard said, dropping down into his chair. "Data, you take the helm and get us in close."

Data's fingers were flying over the panel as Picard turned to Commander Riker. "Will, ready the probe and fire the instant you have a hole in those shields."

"Understood."

Picard punched the comm link for Engineering. "Geordi, I need the front shields reinforced."

"Yes, Captain," La Forge's voice came back.

"Lieutenant Vale," Picard said, glancing back at the young officer. "I want you firing constantly until I give you the word to stop. Punch as big a hole in those shields as you can. Give Commander Riker a large target. He might need it."

Riker frowned. "I could fly a probe down a gopher hole."

"Make it a big hole, Lieutenant," Picard said.

She laughed. "Yes, sir."

Riker only frowned and shook his head.

Picard sat back in his chair, studying the alien ship, letting his people have a few seconds to get ready. A large empty area of the alien ship's surface seemed to suddenly pop out at him. It was above the equator ring, about halfway to one of the poles of the ship, and was just about the only area of the actual surface of the alien ship not covered with equipment. He hadn't noticed it before because it was painted exactly the same color as everything else.

"Data," Picard said, "take us right at that equipment-free area on the alien ship."

Data glanced up at the screen, then nodded. "Ready, sir."

"Make it so," Picard said.

The *Enterprise* surged directly at the alien ship on what seemed like a ramming course, firing phaser after phaser.

The alien ship returned fire, rocking the *Enterprise* like a child smashing a toy into the ground.

Picard hung onto his seat as the lights flickered and the ship shook.

"Shields at sixteen percent," Deanna said, her voice much calmer than Picard knew she was feeling.

Another blast rocked the *Enterprise*.

"Ten percent. Bulkhead failures on three decks."

"Keep pounding those shields, Lieutenant!" Picard ordered.

The alien shields flared bright red from the *Enterprise* phaser fire and then failed, right over the empty spot. The next phaser blast smashed into the alien ship, ripping open the black skin square in the middle of the smooth surface area.

"Probe away!" Riker shouted.

"Stop firing!" Picard ordered.

The probe slid through the opening, heading for the damage in the alien ship's surface.

"Bull's-eye!" Riker said.

"Nice shot," Picard said, nodding at his first officer's beaming face.

"Information coming in," Data said.

Another blast rocked them, but Picard didn't take his gaze from the probe and the area of the ship's surface they had hit.

"Forward shields failing!" Lieutenant Vale shouted.

“Data, put the aft shields between us and that ship!” Picard ordered. “Take us out of firing range.”

The *Enterprise* turned and started to move away as one more blast rocked them, sending Riker tumbling from his chair. Picard managed to hold on, but just barely. That was one of the worst hits they had taken so far.

“Damage on all decks,” Deanna said as she held on with both hands, her knuckles white.

“Aft shields holding!” Vale shouted, clearly excited.

If this didn’t work, Picard had no idea what they would do next. They had been lucky to get away from this attempt. He just hoped the information they were getting was going to be worth it.

He watched the alien ship, expecting the hole in the alien shields to close back up. Instead, for the first time in hours, something on that massive ship changed. The hole in the shields remained.

“Photon torpedoes! Target that opening!”

Suddenly the shields around the rest of the alien sphere flickered, flashed through blue and green colors, and then drained backward into a dozen holes in the ship, like water flowing down a massive drain.

The alien ship was completely exposed.

Picard could see that a series of explosions was occurring just under the surface of the alien ship, where the last phaser blast had gotten through. They had hit something, and for the moment the ship was vulnerable. But the question was, how long?

“Full scan of that ship!” he ordered. “Give me targets. I don’t want those shields coming back up.”

“They are not going to, Captain,” Data said.

Picard pulled his attention away from the area of the alien ship that was exploding and stared at Data. “Explain?”

“We have destroyed the ship’s control room,” Data said, studying the data coming in. Then he glanced back at Picard, his yellow eyes intense and level. “All twelve of the alien ship’s crew are dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yes, sir,” Data said. “From the readings I am getting, there are no life signs on that ship.”

Picard stared at the now-helpless black sphere floating in space. The longest fight he’d ever been in. And now it was over, that quickly.

It almost seemed wrong.

Almost.

CHAPTER

2

Picard sat back in his chair, a cup of Earl Grey tea in his hand, and waited, trying to get himself to relax just a little more. The last ten hours since the fight with the alien ship had ended had been long and very hectic. There had been a thousand things to do, both on the *Enterprise* and in the colony. He could feel the exhaustion crawling over his body, making his arms and legs ache. The tea helped, but not enough. A decent night's rest was exactly what he needed. And he was going to get it very soon. Only a few more things to do first.

He finished keying in the code on his communications screen, then leaned back and closed his eyes, letting the warmth of the tea and the quiet room calm and clear his mind. This fight had been strange from moment one, and the cleanup of both the *Enterprise* and the colony had been hard. And were far from over. It would take another week before everything onboard was back to complete normal. For the colony, it would take years; a rough count put over a thousand colonists dead and thousands more injured.

No one had any idea why the aliens had attacked. Picard had a hunch it was going to be a question that would trouble a lot of people for a long time to come. Maybe the answer would be found on the alien ship, but he doubted that, with the alien crew dead.

The communications screen in front of him beeped softly, and he opened his eyes as the Starfleet insignia was replaced by the broad, smiling face of Captain Montgomery Scott.

"Capt'n," Scott said, his smile getting even broader. "'Tis good ta see ya again."

"Likewise, Captain," Picard said, putting his tea down and leaning forward. "It has been far too long since we've had the pleasure of your company aboard the *Enterprise*."

"An it's gonna be even longer," Scott said, laughing, "as busy as they're keepin' me around here."

Picard had a hunch Scott was enjoying being busy, especially in his job. During the last months of the war, Scott had been appointed the liaison between the Starfleet Corps of Engineers and the Starfleet Admiralty. And he was the perfect man for the job. He was respected by everyone. Period. And he not only knew how to navigate the world of Starfleet politics, but how to deal and work with engineers of every type. Picard's only thought when he had learned of the appointment was, "Of course."

"I'm afraid," Picard said, "that I'm not going to help your schedule much. I have a big job to dump in your lap."

Scott's grin faded some. "I read your preliminary report and scanned the battle information. That's a strange bird all right. And big." Scott chuckled. "The *Enterprise* always was a giant-killer."

Picard laughed. "We were a little too close to being stepped on by that giant for my blood."

Scott shook his head. "Gonna take a lot more than a big, ugly ball to stop the *Enterprise*. So, what more can ya tell me about that alien monster?"

“Not much, I’m sorry to say,” Picard said. “We’ve been so busy dealing with our own repairs and helping the colonists that we haven’t had time to even start to explore the thing yet. I can tell you its metal is resistant to any scanning. We have no idea why.”

Scott laughed, the sound deep and rich, then waved a hand in dismissal of Picard’s apology. “That’s our job, Capt’n.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” Picard said. “We’re due in the Folnar system as soon as we can get there.”

“Don’t ya worry, Capt’n,” Scott said, “I gotta ship in the area. It will be there inside ten hours. We’ll take good care of your friend there.”

And Picard knew they would. The S.C.E. were the ones charged with the task of boarding unknown ships like the one they had just fought to sift through the rubble and learn what they could from the alien technology and even the remains of the aliens themselves. At times Picard thought that searching through alien ships for new information, new technology, would be exciting. In a way it was a branch of archaeology, his favorite hobby. Of course, when they were digging through the alien ships, most of the time it was in zero gravity, surrounded by intense radiation, and surrounded by far too many dead bodies.

But he knew that wasn’t all that the S.C.E. people did by a long ways. If anything in the galaxy needed to be built, rebuilt, programmed, reprogrammed, assembled, reassembled or just understood, the S.C.E. was who you called on.

In many ways, the S.C.E. was the branch of Starfleet with the most varied and interesting job after these recent times of war, and Picard slightly envied them that.

“Would you mind, Captain,” Picard asked, “if my Chief Engineer stuck around and worked with your people?”

“That monster’s got La Forge’s interest bubbling, has she?” Scott asked.

“Salivating, I think would describe it better,” Picard said. “He’s made sure all the major repairs to the *Enterprise* were done in record time, just for the chance to get over there and look at those strange shields and hull metal. But with us leaving for Folnar system, he’s not going to get the chance, unless he stays with your people.”

Scotty nodded. “I can remember doin’ that a few times myself. I’ll tell Captain Gold he’s goin’ ta have some help. He’ll be happy ta hear it.”

“Captain David Gold?” Picard asked. “*Theda Vinci* is nearby?”

“Sure is,” Scott said. “Speedin’ your way at warp six.”

Picard knew David Gold from all the way back to their Academy days. Gold had been one of the upperclassmen Picard had beat in the Academy marathon; they had become friends and kept in touch as often as their careers had allowed. Gold was what many called “old Starfleet.” He ruled with a solid hand, and always kept the mission and his crew at the top of all priorities. But he had a wicked sense of humor that Picard loved. Gold was married to Rabbi Rachel Gilman, who had a thriving congregation in New York. Picard had lost track of all the grandchildren and great-grandchildren they had.

“I wish I could stay and say hello,” Picard said. “Shame to be this close and not get the chance, but we’ll be leaving within the hour.”

Scotty smiled, the twinkle in his eyes clear from the contained laughter. “Well, you gotta pick up your Chief Engineer sometime, don’t ya?”

Now it was Picard’s turn to laugh. He hadn’t thought of that at all. Geordi would have a shuttlecraft, but meeting the *Vinci* after the next mission would be even better. It would be a great time to have an enjoyable dinner with Gold, find out how his wife and children were doing, and hear about some of the S.C.E. adventures and discoveries.

“Thank you, Captain,” Picard said. “I just might do that. Hope your people find something worthwhile here.”

“I’m sure we will,” Captain Scott said. “I’m sure you’ll be hearing all about it from Gold and La Forge.”

“More than likely,” Picard said, nodding at the smiling face of one of the legends of Starfleet history. “*Enterprise* out.”

Picard leaned back and took another sip of his tea, savoring not only the taste, but also the quiet of the room. After a moment, he brought up on his screen the image of the alien ship. The massive black ball with its strange rings seemed to just hang there, taunting him. Every time he looked at the ship, he felt a sense of dread and unease. Even dead and helpless in space as it was, the ship looked and felt dangerous. Picard just couldn’t shake the feeling.

Ten hours until the *Vinci* arrived. Too long for Geordi to be alone with that thing, even with the colony nearby. Picard sipped the tea, and then clicked off the screen. With a tap on his communication link, he said, “Lieutenant Vale, report to me in my ready room.”

If the *Enterprise* could make it a few days without its chief engineer, it could also make it without a security chief. And, that way, maybe he could sleep a little better as well.

CHAPTER

3

Lieutenant Vale’s light snoring filled the small main cabin of the shuttlecraft *Cook*. Lieutenant Commander Geordi La Forge glanced over at her and smiled. She had a young and innocent look about her, with blond hair cut in a pageboy style, and round, blue eyes. She stood—in boots—no taller than five-three, and looked slight. But Geordi knew someone didn’t make chief security officer in Starfleet without knowing every fighting trick there was. So far, she hadn’t had to prove any of her skills, and she seemed cool enough under the pressure of battle. He just hoped this side mission would be no exception. It was certainly going to be interesting having her along.

She was slumped in the copilot’s chair, her head back, her mouth slightly open. Captain Picard had forbidden him to enter the alien ship until the S.C.E. team arrived, but the captain had said nothing about landing on its surface and taking readings. No doubt doing nothing but gathering data for ten hours was

boring to her, but not him.

Especially not with *this* alien ship. Frustrating him, maybe, but not boring him.

At the moment, he had the *Cook* parked on a junction where the two rings met. They were very flat and smooth on top, and looked like wide highways leading off in four directions. Each ring was over a hundred meters wide and twenty thick. He had taken a dozen readings, using everything he could to penetrate the thick skin of the rings, but had had little success. The alloys that made up that hull were almost as good as shields when it came to blocking scans. He could tell there were no life signs, could get basic shapes and energy signatures from what appeared to be backup systems, and could tell there was a very wide hallway and lots of rooms in the rings below him, but nothing more. This ship's metal hull, whatever its exact makeup, might be a very important find for the Federation and Starfleet.

It was clear that unless he, or someone on the *da Vinci*, came up with a way to penetrate the hull, they were going to have to learn about this ship the old-fashioned way: by exploring it.

And finding out exactly what purpose these rings served was something *hereally* wanted to know.

He turned and eased the *Cook* off its position on the ring and moved across the surface of the giant ship like he was skimming over a moon. Unlike the surface of the rings, the surface of the sphere was almost entirely covered with what looked like equipment. Over the last ten hours, he'd managed to identify some of it; he'd found hundreds of redundant environmental systems, and what looked like energy collectors. He had also pinpointed over one hundred airlocks.

But what was under that surface he had no idea, and it was driving him nuts.

He slowly lowered the *Cook* over what had been the only smooth area of the ship's surface before the final *Enterprise* attack. Now it was a large hole, showing layer after layer of open decks below. The top deck appeared to have been the ship's main control room. It was now mostly gone.

The clear surface wasn't made up of the same material as the rest of the hull, but looked as if it might be transparent from the inside, sort of a one-way window. Only it had been the biggest window Geordi had ever seen. The *Enterprise* could have landed on it and not even started to cover it all. On top of that, to be that big, the material had to be fantastically strong. That interested him as well.

The control room had faced the center part of the massive window. It must have had some spectacular view into space. Now it was nothing but a giant hole.

He scanned down through the mess, trying to penetrate into the open decks the explosion had exposed. This ship looked like it was big enough to hold a city's-worth of beings, yet only twelve had been aboard flying it. Why?

He hoped to find the answer to that question before this was over. And a thousand other questions as well.

Lieutenant Vale coughed lightly, gave a small snort, and turned to her right. A moment later her snoring returned, light and consistent.

Geordi smiled and shook his head in amusement. For a young officer on a strange away-mission, she certainly had a sense of comfort and self-assurance. He never would have been able to sleep in her position.

Suddenly the proximity alert beeped, warning them that another ship was approaching.

Vale snapped awake, coming out of her chair with one hand on her phaser. Her blue eyes were very round, and Geordi doubted she had taken a breath.

“Easy, Lieutenant,” he said, holding up his hand to her as he glanced at the sensor readings. It was the *theda Vinci*, dropping out of warp. “No sense in shooting who we’re here to help.”

She glared at him, then stood up straight and stretched, as if nothing unusual had happened.

“Have a nice nap?” he asked, smiling.

“Not really,” she said, using one hand to massage her neck.

“Seemed like it was pretty good, considering how you were snoring.”

Vale looked at him, at first slightly confused. Then she got this defiant look in her eyes. “I don’t snore.”

Geordi laughed. “Whatever you say. But I had to turn up the warning signal to make sure I heard it.”

“Yeah, right,” she said, turning away from him and dropping into the copilot’s chair.

He could see a little red creeping up her neck, so he just smiled and said nothing. Having her along was going to be fun.

On the main screen, the *theda Vinci* swept in, turning and swooping in the same motion. The sleek ship ended up in a position just above the *Cook*. Geordi was impressed. Their pilot must be good, and very confident, to approach like that.

“Da Vinci to *Enterprise* shuttlecraft Cook.”

“Welcome, *theda Vinci*,” Geordi said as Captain Gold’s smiling face filled the screen.

Geordi knew that Gold was only slightly older than Captain Picard, but he looked older. He was a thick man, with graying brown hair and bushy eyebrows. Geordi could tell from his brown eyes that the man didn’t miss much.

“Seems like Picard has left us with a doozy this time,” Gold said. “Glad you wanted to stick around and give us a hand.”

“Thanks to you and the S.C.E. team for having me, Captain,” Geordi said. “Just couldn’t leave this one without knowing what makes her tick.”

Gold laughed. “We know the feeling. I assume you’ve gotten some readings in the last few hours?”

“What *I could* get,” Geordi said. “It’s not giving up its secrets easily.”

“They seldom do,” Gold said. “We’re ready for docking when you are.”

Ten minutes later, Geordi had slipped the *Cook* in beside the *theda Vinci*’s two shuttles, and he and Vale

were headed for the bridge.

“Never been onboard a Saber-class ship before,” Vale said, glancing around the hallway and into a medical lab as they passed. “Feels small.”

“Compared to the *Enterprise*, it is,” Geordi said. “The Saber-class holds a crew of forty at most. But these ships can move and fight, trust me.”

“Small and mean,” she said, nodding. “I like that.”

He glanced at her and decided it was just better to say nothing.

Ahead of them a door brushed open, and a woman stepped out, turning in the same direction they were heading. It took Geordi a moment before he recognized her. It was Sonya Gomez, who had been an ensign on the *Enterprise* ten years ago. He hadn't realized she was going to be on this mission. That's what he got for not checking.

He knew she had done well for herself in those ten years. She had ended up, during the war, as the chief engineer on the *U.S.S. Sentinel*. The *Sentinel* had found itself dead behind enemy lines, but Gomez had managed to get the warp core back up and running and adjust the warp field so that Breen sensors had thought the ship was Cardassian. She was decorated for that, and after the war she had been promoted to Commander and joined the S.C.E. as its commanding officer. Ten years ago he had been her superior officer; now, for this mission, she was going to be his.

“Not even going to say hello to an old friend?” Geordi asked, loud enough for Gomez to hear.

She glanced back and then stopped, a smile covering her attractive face. “Geordi.”

She waited and gave him a hug. “I was excited when I heard you were coming aboard.” Then she glanced at Vale and extended a hand. “Commander Gomez,” she said.

“Lieutenant Vale,” Vale said, shaking Gomez's hand.

Gomez looked her over for a moment. “So you're the *Enterprise*'s new Security Chief. Corsi's going to love meeting you.”

“Oh,” Vale said, “Lieutenant Commander Corsi and I go way back.”

Gomez looked at Vale for a moment, puzzled, but when the young security chief didn't go on, she shrugged and turned to walk beside Geordi toward the bridge. Geordi was going to have to ask Vale later about her history with Lieutenant Commander Corsi, the security chief for the S.C.E.

“So what's it like working S.C.E.?” Geordi asked. “Actually running it.”

“Wonderful, most of the time,” she said. “Gold is a great captain, and we are constantly challenged. I must have a backlog of must-figure-out projects that would last an entire year—assuming I don't add on any more.”

“Most of the time, huh?” Geordi asked, smiling at her.

“Climbing inside dead alien ships isn't always fun,” she said.

Geordi could tell from the flat expression on her face that there were a few bad memories attached to that comment, so he didn't push it.

"We just spent a week on a hot, desert planet trying to get a water system up and running for a candidate for Federation membership. I don't think I'm ever going to get all the sand out of places I don't want it to be."

Geordi laughed. "I see what you mean. I hope this project turns out better."

"Oh, trust me," she said, "as long as there isn't sand, I won't care. And, from the looks of the preliminary data the *Enterprise* sent us, we've got a real puzzle on our hands. That's always interesting."

"That's why I stayed," Geordi said. "Thanks for having me."

"As far as I'm concerned, you're always welcome," Gomez said. "The rest of the team is looking forward to meeting you. Your reputation precedes you."

"Not sure if that's good or bad," Geordi said, laughing. And he wasn't. But having Gomez make him feel welcome and wanted was a good sign of things to come.

The door to the bridge slipped open and Gomez led the way in, stepping to the right toward the science station. Captain Gold was sitting in the captain's chair, and the large alien ship filled the main screen.

Besides Captain Gold, there were three others on the bridge. A fit-looking man had the conn under the main screen. A blond Bajoran woman was at the operations station, and well-muscled Atrean male sat at engineering. Geordi didn't recognize any of them.

Captain Gold glanced around, then smiled and stood, moving to shake Geordi's hand. "Welcome aboard, Lieutenant Commander."

"Thank you, sir," Geordi said, shaking the firm, strong hand of the captain. Gold was instantly likable, and clearly in charge. Very much like Captain Picard.

Geordi turned and indicated Vale. "This is the *Enterprise*'s Chief of Security, Lieutenant Christine Vale."

"Welcome, Lieutenant," Gold said, also shaking her hand.

"A pleasure," Vale said. "And a beautiful ship you have here."

Gold laughed and winked at Geordi. "I like an officer who knows how to say the right things to a captain."

"Better warn Captain Picard," Gomez said to Geordi, moving over to join them. "Captain Gold here has a way of getting people he likes to work for him."

Smartly, Vale said nothing. Geordi was starting to understand exactly why Lieutenant Vale had gone so far so quickly. She was smart and knew when to speak and when not to, a valuable skill in Starfleet.

"Let me introduce you to my bridge crew," Gold said, "then Commander Gomez can get you introduced

to her S.C.E. team.”

The captain did a quick once-around-the-bridge. The young ensign at the conn was a human named Song Min Wong. He seemed very shy, and just nodded when introduced.

The Bajoran at Operations was Lieutenant Ina Ma. She had to be even younger than Wong, but nowhere near as shy. She had bright red hair and the longest, slimmest fingers Geordi had ever seen. When he shook her hand, he didn't want to let go, or look away from her eyes.

The bridge engineering officer was an Atrean male named Lieutenant Jil Barnak. He was middle-aged, heavysset, and very strong.

Geordi had a sense they were all very good at their jobs. And, being under Captain Gold as the bridge crew of the flagship of the S.C.E., they would see their share of action.

As the introductions were finishing, Gomez turned to Captain Gold. “My first insertion team will be ready to go in twenty minutes. You have any sense of where we should start first?”

Geordi was impressed. Gomez was in charge of the S.C.E., but she respected Gold enough to ask his opinion. Clearly, they had worked this a number of times in the past. It was the way Captain Picard and Commander Riker worked together at times. Picard was in charge, but he valued Riker's opinion. He didn't always take it, but he valued it.

Gold shook his head. “From everything Lieutenant Commander La Forge and the *Enterprise* have given us, plus our initial scans, I'd say slow-but-sure is best.”

“My thinking exactly,” she said. “We'll focus on building a map of that thing, identifying important areas, seeing if we can tap into its computers, and then decide what we need to take out.”

“What are you thinking of doing with it?” Lieutenant Vale asked.

“Way too early to know,” Gomez said. “Towing something that big to a starbase would be impossible on our own, and I doubt we're going to get it up and running again, from the looks of that damage. Often, we just take the information and hardware we think is salvageable and useful and drop the ships into the nearest sun. We'll see.”

Gold nodded. “Be careful in there. I think Captain Scott's description of this thing as a monster is right on the money.”

Gomez laughed. “I've been getting the same feeling.”

Geordi didn't laugh. He had had the exact same reaction to the alien ship since the moment he first saw it. It was an unknown beast, and taming it and pulling out its secrets was going to be something the best team of engineers in Starfleet might just have trouble doing.

CHAPTER

Gomez felt the transporter beam release them on an open ledge just inside the hole the *Enterprise* had blasted in the skin of the ship. The boots of her environmental suit snapped her onto the deck, holding her in place in what *should* have been zero gravity. Only she could tell it wasn't. The alien ship's artificial gravity system was still working. Amazing.

As per regulations, Gomez had her phaser drawn. But with just a glance around, she put it away. The force of the phaser blasts had pretty much cleared this area of everything.

"Standard check of suits," Corsi said, reminding everyone of that regulation. They were all in full environmental suits, and after any beam-in they were required to run a quick diagnostic of their suits and report any problems.

Lieutenant Commander Corsi was their security chief, and a stickler for following rules. She got on the nerves of the others on the team at times, but Gomez liked what she brought to the table. Corsi made their missions safer. And Gomez agreed with this annoying regulation, mostly because it was better to discover something wrong with a suit right away than when a situation got rough.

Gomez did the quick diagnostic of her suit, getting full green across the small display over her eyebrows. "Clear," she said.

Geordi, who was beside her, said, "Clear."

She had picked only four of her team for this first mapping session, and, one at a time, as per regulations, they reported in to Corsi.

"Clear," Stevens said.

Fabian Stevens had been an engineer with Starfleet for a number of years, including a long stint on the *Defiant*. He was their expert in tactical systems, which was why she had picked him for this first jump into the alien ship.

"Clear," Duffy said.

Lieutenant Commander Kieran Duffy was her second in command, and as good an engineer as there was. He had served as second in command under her predecessor, Salek. This mission on the *theda Vinci* was the first time they had served together since their days on the *Enterprise*, and since they had had an on-again, off-again long-distance relationship, they were both still taking it slow so far.

"Clear," Pattie said.

Pattie's real designation was P8 Blue. She was a Nasat—a member of a large, insectoid race that looked something like a terran pill-bug grown to almost human size—and had one of the more interesting environmental suits over her shell and eight arms and legs. Gomez had picked her for this first jump into the big ship because of the chance of running into any unforeseen circumstances. Pattie was the best they had in getting around in low gravity.

The rest of her S.C.E. crew was still onboard, watching and monitoring everything closely. She could see the *theda Vinci* holding over the hole, its presence reassuring her.

"Clear," Corsi said, finishing the drill.

Gomez glanced around at her team and Geordi, all of whom were now holding tricorders, scanning the area around them.

“Seems someone left the lights on,” Stevens said. “I’ve got constant point-nine-three gravity.”

“Power’s still on in what looks like energy conduits.”

“Looks like the *Enterprise* didn’t hit the power source,” Geordi said, “only the control area and crew.”

“Copy,” Gomez said, glancing down into the massive hole the *Enterprise* had smashed through the decks. That hole had now become a dangerous fall instead of an easy access path.

Around her the walls of the ship were blackened and twisted, but it was clear that they had been light gray, and the hallways that lead away from the destruction were wide and still lit. Gravity inside this big ship and power still on would make it easier to explore, by and large. Just more dangerous.

“It also seems,” Stevens said, “that airtight doors sealed in all exposed corridors. We still might have atmosphere in some sections of this baby.”

“This changes nothing, people,” Gomez said. “We stay with the plan to map this place slow-but-sure. Pattie, you and Stevens go to the right down that passageway; Duffy and Corsi, go left. Geordi and I will go down. No one gets out of contact. Understood?”

She glanced around at everyone nodding.

“Move out.”

“Deck at a time?” Geordi asked her after flipping his comm link so that only she could hear him. “Or all the way to the bottom of the blast hole?”

She glanced down. From the readings they had been able to get, the blast had blown a hole through at least seven of the alien ship’s decks. The two decks below the control room deck seemed similar to this one. “Down four,” she said. “I’ll lead.”

Geordi nodded.

She engaged the antigrav controls on her suit and stepped out into the air. The suit held her, and she let herself drop slowly, using her tricorder to record what she could see of each deck. Above her, Geordi was doing the same. All the readings from all the tricorders were being fed back to the *da Vinci*, where the computer was working on building a three-dimensional holo-image of this ship, deck by deck, as well as analyzing all the materials and equipment they saw.

The farther down she floated, the smaller the blast hole became, and the shorter distance the damage extended back into the exposed corridors and rooms. She picked a corridor leading off to her right on the fourth deck, eased herself over into position, and landed, stepping away from the edge to give Geordi time to follow her.

The corridor seemed to curve slightly away from her. It was wide and almost warm-feeling, with decorations covering one area just a few steps away. She waited for Geordi to join her, then pointed to one half-closed door nearby. “Want to give it a try?”

“I’m betting on personal quarters,” he said.

“No bet.” She had been thinking the same thing. This corridor looked like many personal areas of ships she had been on in the past. Only, if they were right, where were all the inhabitants?

It took both of them to budge the door enough to slip inside the room. It was a very large, very colorful room, with a type of bed against one wall, tables and other furniture in the center, and a private bathroom area to one side. There were no pictures of any of the inhabitants, but clearly, from the size and shape of the furniture, they had been humanoid.

“Wow, this is a lot nicer than my room on the *Vinci* .”

“Same with mine on the *Enterprise*,” Geordi said. “But I’ll bet, for this ship, this is small.”

“Again no bet,” she said.

Geordi moved toward a small room off the main one while she headed to where her tricorder showed her a clear space behind a bulkhead. As she approached, a door in the wall slid silently open, revealing odd, metallic cloth in various shapes and sizes hanging there, with other pieces on the floor, as if tossed there just recently. The metallic fibers scanned to be a variation on whatever metal it was that made up the hull of the ship. Alien clothing, Gomez thought, belonging to whoever built this ship.

She glanced back at Geordi as he came out of the bathroom and saw what she had found. “Okay. The *Enterprise* detected twelve life-forms on this whole ship. But there’s room for thousands—maybe hundreds of thousands—of passengers, passengers that were using these compartments. What happened to them?”

“I have no idea,” Geordi said, “but from the looks of everything, they haven’t been gone long. That room was a bathroom, I think, for someone with anatomy I think we’d recognize. It could use a good cleaning, unless that smell is some kind of air freshener. Looks like whoever left here intended to come back soon.”

She had to agree. This place looked as if it had been left only this morning. There was something else—there was a sense of alien luxury to the room. Gomez wished she’d brought Carol Abramowitz along—the alien culture expert. She’d be able to tell exactly what the room was used for. “Let’s keep moving.”

Geordi nodded.

“Commander?” Stevens’ voice called to her over the group channel.

“Go ahead,” she said as she and Geordi moved back out into the corridor and she pointed to their right to move farther down the wide corridor.

“We’ve run into three sealed emergency doors,” Stevens said. “In three different corridors. Looks like all the corridors were sealed off when the *Enterprise* ruptured the hull.”

Ahead of her, Gomez could see that she and Geordi were facing the same thing in this corridor. Chances were the sealed doors meant the rest of this ship was still pressurized and full of atmosphere. They were going to have to set up a way to get through those pressure doors without causing more decompression. Or get the transporter adjusted enough to beam to the other side. That would be the easiest, if they could

figure out a way to get through this metal.

“Commander,” Corsi said, breaking in, “if we missed both the gravity and the atmosphere in our initial scans through this ship’s hull, we might have missed more crew as well.”

“I’m starting to realize that,” Gomez said. She knew exactly what she had to do. “Everyone move back to the edge of the blast hole. Gomez *toda Vinci* . Bring us home when you have clear signals.”

She and Geordi moved back toward the end of the hallway. Ten steps from the ragged edge, the transporter beam took them. In their first short foray into the belly of the beast, they had learned enough to know they needed to be better prepared before they came back.

And as far as she was concerned, that knowledge was very much worth the trip.

CHAPTER

5

Geordi glanced up as Lieutenant Vale poked her head into the panel he was inside; he was lying on his back, working on a sensor relay over his head.

“Don’t you ever sleep?” she asked.

He laughed. “Not lately,” he said, dropping the calibration tool on his chest and cracking his fingers.

In fact, now that she mentioned it, he couldn’t remember exactly how long *ithad* been since he’d slept. He’d been on duty since before the distress call and the fight with the alien ship everyone was calling the *Beast* . Then, almost twelve hours of emergency repair work after the fight; then, ten hours of scanning the *Beast* while waiting for the *da Vinci* . Now they had been back onboard the *da Vinci* , after the first short mission, for almost six hours, working on the sensors and transporter, trying to find a way to get them to work through that alien metal. None of the engineers had slept, and it hadn’t occurred to him either.

“Well,” Vale said, “you are going to need to take a break pretty soon.”

“Friendship talking?” Geordi asked, smiling at her. “Or duty?”

“Both,” she said, her blue eyes showing him warmth and caring. “Captain Picard sent me along to watch your back and try to keep you out of trouble, and that’s exactly what I’m doing.”

Geordi laughed. “Noted. But, as you can tell, my back is safe at the moment.”

She laughed and scooted back out of the panel entrance as two people came up behind her.

“Thank—”

“—you,” the voices said to Vale. “We—”

“—won’t be long.”

“No problem,” Vale said. “I was finished.”

The two faces of 110 and 111 appeared in the entrance to the panel where Vale had been a moment before. 110 and 111 were the names of a linked pair of the computer-dependent race called Bynars. Geordi had heard of these two before meeting them. They were supposed to be two of the best computer experts anywhere, and somehow the pair had been assigned to the *da Vinci* as civilian consultants to the S.C.E.

How, Geordi had no idea, but it was very lucky they were here. Corrections and adjustments to the sensors that would have taken Geordi a day to figure out had taken the Bynars, with his and Stevens’ help, a little over two hours.

The only thing that annoyed Geordi about them was that they talked together, never completing an entire sentence alone. After the last number of hours working with and around the Bynars, Geordi could understand that maybe there would be a time when he would become accustomed their manner of speaking. But that was a long way off.

“Are you—”

“—almost finished—”

“—with the—”

“—relay adjustments?”

“One moment,” Geordi said. He did two small final adjustments and checked over his work. The alien ship’s metal alloys had been blocking the sensors in much the same way as a shield’s harmonics did. But, by running computer models, the Bynars had found an exact band that should penetrate the blockage. Geordi figured it was going to work, but the question was how well. With luck, good enough to focus a transporter beam.

“Done. Coming out.” He scooted feet-first out of the panel as the two Bynars backed out of his way.

“We are—”

“—ready as well.”

Geordi nodded and tapped his combadge. “Commander, give it a try.”

“Affirmative,” Gomez’s voice came back. “Stand by.”

Geordi smiled at the two Bynars, who simply stood like robots and waited. Even Data had more personality than these two at times, and Data was an android.

“Bingo,” Gomez said. “Good work, you three. Get back up here, and we’ll see what we can see.”

Both Bynars smiled right along with Geordi, then waited for him to lead the way, even though it was their ship. Thankfully, as far as Geordi was concerned, they didn’t try to make small talk as they walked.

The S.C.E. team had a staging room near the *da Vinci*'s bridge. Usually the room had only a large table and eleven chairs for the captain and the ten senior S.C.E. team members. But for this mission, the chairs had been pulled back against the wall and the center of the table had been rigged up to project a hologram of the alien ship. As they gathered details about the *Beast*, the computer would fill in the three-dimensional map floating above the table's surface.

As Geordi and the Bynars entered the staging room, the hologram was slowly filling in. Not with great detail, but at least with deck shapings and sizes, like a thin sketch. Clearly, the sensors could get through the skin better than before. Not anywhere near as well as he would have liked, but enough for the moment.

Gomez and Stevens were watching, along with Carol Abramowitz, a short, black-haired woman who was the team's specialist in intercultural relations, and P8 Blue, who was a structural specialist.

"We're getting clear images of the top deck area," Stevens said. "And the rings. But the deeper we go into the center of the ship, the worse it gets."

"We will—"

"—continue to—"

"—make adjustments."

"Please," Gomez said.

As one, the Bynars nodded, turned, and left.

Carol stared at the image of the alien ship filling in slowly. "We're going to need to find their central computer. Can you have the sensors locate and pinpoint it?"

"Sure," Stevens said, his fingers going to work on the computer controls.

Geordi watched as detail after tiny detail appeared, thick near the surface, very light and sketchy toward the center. Geordi could tell it was one amazing ship. There had to be far over a hundred decks, with large open areas scattered throughout. And the rings looked more like observation decks than anything else. There were a number of very large, multiroom private quarters scattered in the rings, and a lot of large gathering areas. Clearly the ship had been designed by a race as advanced as the Federation, to carry thousands and thousands of beings.

Suddenly Geordi realized that the surface of the rings was smooth. "Check out the material on the outer side of the rings," he said, pointing. "I'm betting you can see through it from the inside."

Stevens did a few quick calculations, then looked up, shocked. "You're right. Every inch of floor inside those rings had an unobstructed view into space."

"What the hell *was* this ship?" Gomez asked.

"I'm putting my money on a cruise ship of some sort," Carol said.

Geordi knew instantly she was right. It would explain the lush cabin they had been in, and the rings.

Gomez was nodding. "You just might be right. We'll have to wait and see."

Geordi watched as the computer scans slowly filled in detail after detail. The answers to the questions *What happened to the people on this ship?* and *Why was the ship built?* and *Why did it attack a colony?* weren't going to be filled in by the computer scanners, that much was for sure.

"Computer," Gomez said, "at this rate of scanning, how long until a complete image of the ship is finished?"

"Six hours, seven minutes, and ten seconds," the ship's computer said. "At this scanning level."

Gomez nodded. She glanced at Geordi, and then at P8 Blue. "Pattie, you want to stay here and monitor this? The rest of us need some sleep."

"Boy, you aren't kidding there," Carol said.

"Agree completely," Stevens said.

Geordi said nothing. He wanted to stay and keep working, but he knew he needed a few hours rest at least. After Vale had brought up the subject of sleep, he had been wondering how he would find time to catch a nap. Clearly, Gomez was taking care of her team on all counts.

"I would be happy to," Pattie said. "I find the structure of this alien ship completely fascinating, and would enjoy the time to study this as it forms."

"Thanks," Gomez said. "Inform me and the captain at once if the computer picks up any sign of life at all in there."

"Of course," Pattie said.

"Geordi, you all right bunking on your shuttle for the time being?"

"Expected it," he said. He knew the size of the *da Vinci*, and since they had a full complement, many of the crew were sharing rooms. That was standard for a ship this size. There was certainly no luxury of guest quarters, like on the *Enterprise*.

Or on that *Beast* out there.

Gomez nodded. "The entire team will meet back here in six hours."

Ten minutes later, Geordi crawled into the bunk across the shuttle's small sleeping compartment from Lieutenant Vale. She opened her eyes and smiled. "Glad you are following my suggestion."

"Commander's orders," he said. "Now, no snoring."

"I don't snore," she said firmly.

"Right."

He rolled over on his side to face the bulkhead, trying not to laugh.

“I don’t snore,” Vale said again.

He didn’t respond. A few deep breaths and the exhaustion took him before his mind could start to work again on the puzzle that was called the *Beast*.

CHAPTER

6

Gomez looked from the transporter pad at the worried face of Duffy and smiled. Clearly, he cared as much about her welfare as she did about his. If they could just both relax a little, being assigned together might turn out to be a lot of fun.

“Ready when you are, Commander,” Stevens said from the transporter controls. “I’ve got a clear lock just inside the sealed door on the top deck.”

Gomez glanced at Corsi to her right and then Geordi to her left. She had decided that the three of them would beam in first, with Stevens keeping a lock on them until they signaled the all clear. The sensors had shown the atmosphere inside the ship to be breathable, and no life-forms to be seen, at least on the decks closest to the surface. They still didn’t have a very clear picture of what was near the center of the *Beast*. She had talked with Captain Gold, and both of them had agreed that they shouldn’t risk a large part of the team. The three of them would test the waters first.

“Do it,” she said, nodding to Stevens. Then, with a smile at Duffy, she felt the transporter take her.

The inside of the hallway smelled of burnt wires and peaches. She hadn’t thought of peaches in a long time. It wasn’t a strong odor, but noticeable. The walls in this corridor were painted a soft white, the floor was soft under her feet, and what looked like a computer panel filled one wall about a dozen paces ahead. Behind them, the sealed door led out into the cold of space, where this ship’s control room had once been.

Geordi was doing a quick scan of the atmosphere while Corsi scanned for any life-form that might be dangerous.

“Preliminary scans from the *da Vinci* were on the money,” Geordi said. “A little higher levels of oxygen than we’re used to, but it won’t hurt us any.”

“No sign of any life,” Corsi reported, putting her phaser away.

“*Da Vinci*, can you hear me?”

“Clear as a bell,” Stevens’ voice came back. “And we still have a clean transporter lock on you.”

“We’re fine here,” she said. “Atmosphere is good. Starting our descent. Have the second team insert.”

“Affirmative.”

The second team was Pattie and the Bynars, led by Duffy. They were going to beam into a point on the

other side of the ship and start down toward the center of the ship, exploring and mapping as they went. Stevens was going to stay on the sensors and let her know when either team reached their point-of-no-return level as far as the transporter went. She figured that level was twenty decks down, but the Bynars said it would be twenty-three. She had a hunch they were going to be right. They usually were about anything to do with computers.

But that left over a hundred decks below that point. At some point, she was going to have to figure out what was worth exploring and what wasn't. Otherwise, they'd be roaming around inside this monster for the rest of the year.

Geordi had moved ahead and was using his tricorder to study the computer panel on the wall. She and Corsi moved over to join him.

The panel looked like a schematic, touch-screen type that was on standby status. It had a red line arching over the length of the panel. It took her a moment to realize that, more than likely, she was looking at a schematic of the hallway they were standing in.

"If this thing really was a type of cruise ship," Corsi said, "this panel should be easy to use."

"I think I can activate it," Geordi said, looking up from his tricorder. "You want me to give it a try?"

"Do it," Gomez said.

Corsi look worried, her ice-blue eyes slitted and focused, but she said nothing.

Geordi reached forward and touched a spot on the computer panel. The entire thing lit up in bright reds and greens. Gomez had been right, it was a map of the area of the ship on this deck—hallways, rooms, and all. And it even showed where they were standing, and the fact that there were three of them. Clearly, the *Beast*'s sensors, to a limited degree, were still working.

Geordi studied his tricorder for a moment, then reached up and touched another point on the wall.

"You are on deck one, quarter section red, fifth segment," a computer voice said.

"Our translators picked that up quickly," Geordi said. "The basic language of whoever built this ship must be compatible with our basics."

"Agreed," Gomez said. "Carol's going to love this." She stared at the board, trying to study what it could show them. "Corsi, walk ten feet away and then return."

Corsi did, and, as she moved, the red dot on the map indicating her position moved with her.

"Interesting," Geordi said.

"Can it show us the closest access to deck two?" Gomez asked.

A red line appeared on the screen, marking a path to a door on their right.

"It seems the *Beast*'s translators don't have a problem with our speech, either," Geordi said, laughing.

She didn't join in his laugh. Actually, it gave her shivers, for some reason she couldn't figure out.

“If there was a way to download this information to the *da Vinci*,” Gomez said, “we wouldn’t have to worry about mapping any of this monster.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice,” Corsi said.

“Especially if we could tap into it and track all the team’s movements,” Geordi said.

Gomez agreed completely. The sooner they could turn their attention fully to finding out more about who built this ship and what had happened to them, the happier she was going to be. And maybe, along the way, find out if there was anything on board that Starfleet and the Federation could use, like this ship’s strange shields.

She flipped open her tricorder, and she and Geordi spent the next minute studying the computer panel while Corsi paced. Finally, Geordi scanned down under the panel, then clicked open a small access area and continued scanning.

“Anything?”

“Maybe,” he said.

“Stevens to Commander Gomez.”

“Go ahead,” Gomez said.

“Any problems down there?” Stevens asked. “I’m not showing you three moving much.”

She laughed. “We’re fine. Just trying to access a working computer panel. Stand by and prepare an isolated computer storage area for a possible download.”

“Affirmative,” Stevens said.

“Got it,” Geordi said. He attached his tricorder to the inside of the panel under the screen and made a few quick adjustments. “Stevens, are you picking up the signal from my tricorder?”

“I am,” Stevens’ voice came back strong.

“This could be a large amount of data,” Gomez said. “So make sure you have enough space to handle it.”

“Affirmative,” Stevens said. “Stand by.”

As she watched, Geordi made a few more slight adjustments on his tricorder. Then he glanced up at her. “I’m fairly certain this panel only taps into specific data on mapping and layout of the ship, as well as tracking of passengers. I doubt we’ll get into the ship’s main computer from here.”

“Makes sense, security-wise,” Corsi said, “if this was a tourist liner.”

“Yeah,” Gomez said. “It actually does.”

“Ready,” Stevens’ voice came back clear.

“Starting download now,” Geordi said.

He tapped his tricorder and then stepped back. Gomez knew that, if nothing else, the speed of his tricorder was going to make the download a slow process, considering the size of this ship.

“Stevens,” Gomez said, “beam us another tricorder and we’ll continue exploring. How’s the other team doing?”

“Down seven decks, without problems,” Stevens answered as the tricorder appeared a few steps away and Geordi retrieved it. “They found a massive hydro-garden still alive on deck five.”

“Tell them not to worry about the information panels in the hallways,” Gomez said, “since we’ve already dealt with that.”

“Ahead of you,” Stevens said.

Geordi laughed. “You have a great team here.”

Gomez smiled. “Coming from you, La Forge, that means a lot.”

He smiled, then said, “How about, instead of going down for the moment, we go up and check out the rings? Give the computer time to get all the information from the panel directional system.”

Gomez looked down the wide hallway that slowly curved away in the distance. If their guess about this being a tourist liner was right, most of what they would find in the decks below were rooms. And the second team was exploring downward at the moment anyway.

“Good idea. Stevens, change of plans for team one. We’re going to see if we can find an access to the rings.”

“Affirmative,” Stevens said.

Geordi turned back to the computer panel, then stopped. “Let’s ask the next one down the hall.”

She laughed.

“What, afraid you’re going to overload it?” Corsi asked.

“Better to not take chances,” Geordi said.

“With unknown technology, I agree completely,” Gomez said.

A hundred paces down the hallway, past twenty doors, was another computer board. Geordi touched it and brought it to life. Gomez noted that, again, it showed them as three red dots. No doubt the red meant they were unidentified. If they had been passengers on this ship, more than likely they would have been a different color. And, also more than likely, still another color for the crew.

“Where is the closest access to one of the rings?” Geordi asked the computer panel.

The computer image changed scale slightly and a red line appeared, leading them in the direction they

were heading. The line ended in a large, open-looking area.

The hike was like walking ten times the length of the *Enterprise*, with smaller side corridors moving off in both directions about every hundred paces. She could see other, even smaller corridors branching off of each of those side corridors. And doors. Seemingly thousands of doors.

Gomez was getting a real sense of the size of this *Beast*. They were just walking a small part of one area of the outer deck. Their preliminary scans showed there were well over a hundred decks below this one.

“Wow!” Corsi said as the corridor finally opened up onto a massive room.

Gomez had to agree. In all her years, she had never seen anything this stunningly spectacular before. The room was more than large enough to land the *da Vinci* in, with massive growing trees and shrubs scattered everywhere. A beautiful waterfall cascaded down the side of a rock face near the center, giving the room a soothing background noise. There were literally hundreds of furniture groupings on different levels around the space, clearly designed like a massive meeting and resting place.

A slight wind blew through the trees, and the peach odor was stronger here.

“Elevators,” Geordi said, pointing at some almost invisible clear platforms that floated upward in continuing columns in five places around the room. A few feet from each upward column were platforms moving slowly downward as well.

All in all, this was one of the most spectacular rooms she had ever been in. But it wasn’t just the room that was stunning; it was the sky above them.

Or, more accurately, space.

Open, beautiful space, with the *da Vinci* off to one side, was the ceiling to this room. She knew that a hundred meters overhead there had to be the surface of one of the black rings. But from where they stood, she couldn’t tell it.

Geordi shook his head and glanced at her. “No matter what we find in this thing, I’m putting in a vote right now that this *Beast* be towed to a nearby starbase and repaired. It would be a shame to toss this into a sun.”

“I’ll second that,” Corsi said.

Gomez glanced at her hard-edged security chief. It wasn’t often Corsi was awed by anything, but clearly this was one of those times.

Gomez had to admit, she was just as awed. And now even more determined to discover where the passengers of this ship had gone. And why the twelve remaining crew had attacked a colony.

Once she found out the answers to those questions, then she would make the decision as to what would happen to this fantastically beautiful and powerful alien cruise ship.

CHAPTER

7

For some reason, even though he was now one hundred percent convinced that the *Beast* was an alien cruise ship, designed for tourists, that information didn't calm Geordi's uneasy feeling about it.

After exploring the spectacular observation decks on the rings, which was like walking in open space under the incredible windows, Gomez had recalled all the teams to wait for the results of the computer download.

Twenty minutes later, after the download had been completed, Stevens and the Bynars had meshed the information from the *Vinci* scans with the downloaded information from the *Beast* and fed it all to the holo-image of the ship in the staging room.

They now had a mostly clear deck plan of the *Beast*, one they could focus in on in very decent detail in certain areas. In other areas, it still showed nothing. It was those black spaces Geordi was the most worried about. Still, the detail of the holomap was going to make their job a lot easier, and let them get to working on the real questions much faster. And Geordi had a sneaking hunch a lot of those questions would be answered in the engineering section of the ship, and by accessing the main computer, not in the passenger sections.

But the problem was that the download from the directional computers on the *Beast* only showed public areas, calling the support areas private. Most of the lower decks were labeled support areas. And since the *Vinci* scans were still having problems getting all the way to the center of the *Beast*, there were still big empty areas in the center of the hologram image.

"Okay, people," Gomez said, getting the attention of the entire S.C.E. team and Captain Gold, who were all standing around the table, talking and discussing the alien ship.

For Geordi, this was the first time he had seen the entire team together. It was an impressive group of talent and skills Gomez had put together. Top-ranked engineers, two of the leading computer experts in the Federation, a respected specialist in intercultural relations and languages, a great flagship with an experienced captain, and some top security people. Geordi was glad he had gotten this chance to work with them.

The only member he hadn't met was the stern-faced Dr. Elizabeth Lense, but he knew her by reputation. She had served on the *Lexington* and graduated from her medical class as valedictorian, the same class that had contained Dr. Julian Bashir. Dr. Crusher had been raving about a couple of Lense's recent medical papers.

Lieutenant Vale moved over and stood silently beside him as Gomez went on.

"Since the *Beast*'s main control room was destroyed, we're going to have to get to the secondary control room, and the engineering section. From what we've learned from our scans, combined with the computer download, the secondary control room *should be* on deck ninety, and the engineering sections might fill the five decks below that."

"Are those decks still outside of transporter range?" Carol asked.

Gomez glanced at the Bynars.

“We have—”

“—made adjustments—”

“—but cannot—”

“—penetrate past—”

“—deck sixty.”

“So we go the rest of the way without a safety net,” Gomez said, glancing at Geordi.

Geordi nodded to her, agreeing. He didn't much like the idea of not being able to be pulled out in an emergency, but he'd been in lots of situations over the years where there was no quick escape. This would just be another.

“We do it by the book,” Corsi said.

“Agreed,” Gomez said. “I don't want any stupid heroics in there, people. We go in, we get what we are looking for, and we come out. Once we determine the place is safe, we can explore more. Understood?”

Everyone except Captain Gold nodded. He just watched, his sharp gaze missing nothing as far as Geordi could tell.

“I'll lead insertion team one,” Gomez said, “consisting of Commander La Forge, Lieutenant Vale, 110 and 111. We'll go for the engineering section. Duffy, you, Pattie, Stevens, Bart, and Corsi are team two. Find that secondary control room. And both teams are looking for the main computer, or any access to the main computer. Understood?”

Again everyone nodded.

“Good,” Gomez said. “We jump in on deck fifty-five and go down from there. I want the two teams to remain separated, but staying close enough to help the other if needed. We jump in ten minutes. Get ready.”

The room broke back into talking, and Lieutenant Vale turned to Geordi. “Anything special I need for this kind of mission? I'm afraid I'm not up to date on the S.C.E. insertion team regs.”

Geordi shrugged. “I've honestly no idea on the security side. Better check with Lieutenant Commander Corsi.”

Vale had a pained expression on her face, and Geordi suddenly remembered Vale had said the two went way back.

“Problem, Lieutenant?” Geordi asked, managing to not smile.

Vale took a deep breath and shook her head. “Meet you in the transporter room.”

Then, as Geordi watched, the young security chief moved toward the older woman, who frowned when she saw Vale coming. Geordi waited just long enough to make sure the two didn't come to blows, then turned to head for the transporter room.

He didn't need to ask Gomez what he needed to bring along. Give him a tricorder and a phaser and he was as ready as he was ever going to be. Missions like this were the reasons he had joined Starfleet in the first place. He loved going to new places, seeking out new information, new technology, boldly going where no Federation engineer had gone before.

And in a few minutes, he was going to be getting the chance to do just that again. He loved the chance, so why was he so worried about it?

Behind him, floating above the conference table, beside the two security officers, the image of the *Beast* rotated slowly.

CHAPTER

8

Gomez glanced around, her phaser drawn, as the transporter beam released them deep inside the *Beast*. Both Geordi and Lieutenant Vale had their phasers drawn as well. The room they had beamed into was large and well-lit, but not as plushly furnished as the upper decks. It looked to Gomez to be some sort of dining area. There were chairs and long tables, and some paintings attached to the walls.

"Clear," Vale said.

Gomez and Geordi both put their phasers away.

"Looks like this ship had some economy-class passenger fares as well," Geordi said.

"You didn't expect all the rooms to look like those suites up in the rings, did you?" Gomez asked.

"Actually, I was hoping they would," Geordi said.

"Always knew you were an unbridled optimist," Gomez said, smiling at her old friend.

She glanced around and saw the entrance to what looked to be a sort of passenger lift. She had had some discussion with Corsi and Duffy about using the lifts, then decided to go ahead. She wasn't sure if she liked the idea, but from what they could tell of the ship's layout, the only other way up and down was to crawl through maintenance tubes. And she just didn't want to do that for over forty decks.

"*Da Vinci*, can you hear me?" she asked, tapping her combadge.

"Loud and clear," Captain Gold's voice came back strong. "And we're going to try to hold a computer lock on you for as long as we can."

"Understood," Gomez said. "We'll stop and check in every ten decks."

She turned and headed for the corridor leading to the lift they had planned to use. Geordi dropped in behind her, with the two Bynars following together, and Lieutenant Vale covering their flank.

At the lift, she touched a glowing red panel underneath a glowing green panel. Duffy's team had figured out during the first insertion that on the lifts, the red meant down and the green up.

A moment later, the door slid open.

She didn't want to step into that large, round lift, but she forced herself to.

Geordi followed easily, clearly not bothered, and the Bynars moved in and stood to one side without comment, but Vale looked as nervous about coming onboard as she felt.

"Stand in the opening for a moment," Gomez said to Vale. "I want to make sure we know how to work this thing."

Geordi moved over beside her, his tricorder out. She touched the upper part of the small computer panel on one side of the lift wall.

"Deck?" the computer voice asked.

"Sixty-five," Gomez said.

Geordi nodded that it was working fine.

"Deck sixty-five," the computer repeated. "Please stand clear of the door."

Gomez motioned for Vale to move inside. As Vale did, the door slid closed.

Gomez glanced around. It didn't seem as if the lift was working. Less than five seconds after the door had closed, it slid silently open again.

"Deck sixty-five," the alien computer said.

Vale, looking confused, instantly drew her phaser and stepped back into the open doorway to make sure it stayed open, scanning the hallway in both directions.

"Fastest lifts I've ever seen," Geordi said, scanning his tricorder.

"We actually dropped ten decks?" Vale asked. "The hallway looks the same."

"Yes—"

"—we did," the Bynars said.

"Efficient—"

"—system."

"Very efficient." Gomez tapped her combadge. "Captain, you still with us?"

"That was a quick drop, Commander," Gold's voice came back, strong and clear. "You all right?"

"Smoothest lift ride I've ever taken," she said. "We'll go for another ten decks."

“Affirmative,” Gold said.

Gomez motioned for Geordi to tap the panel again, and for Vale to step back inside.

“Deck seventy-five, please,” Geordi asked.

The door slid closed, and Gomez tried to get any sense of moving. There just wasn’t any. No slightly increased gravity, nothing. Just as fast as the first time, the door slid open.

“Deck seventy-five.”

Vale stepped back into the doorway, checking the hall, phaser still drawn. “We are clearly in the economy class now,” she said. “The doors are spaced every ten paces, and there are more side corridors.”

“Captain?” Gomez said, tapping her combadge.

“We’re barely holding on to your signal,” Gold said, his voice much more distant. “We could not beam you out at that depth.”

“Understood,” she said. “We’ll just jump on down to deck ninety-one and see what we can find. Track us as best you can.”

“Will do,” Gold said. “Happy hunting.”

“Thanks,” she said.

She glanced around. “Okay, people, we’re on our own. Let’s go see if we can find the engineering room.”

“Deck ninety-one,” Geordi said as he tapped the panel.

“Access denied below deck eighty-nine,” the computer said. The door remained open, even though Vale had stepped back out of the way.

“I was afraid of that,” Geordi said. “We’re not crew, so we can’t take public transportation into the crew areas.”

“Can you override that?” she asked, pulling out her tricorder and moving over beside him.

“I don’t know,” Geordi said as he popped open the access panel over the control area and scanned it. Vale stepped back into the doorway to keep it open and guard them.

“The process—”

“—is simple,” the Bynars said.

Gomez tapped Geordi on the shoulder to have him step back and let the Bynars into the panel. Instantly they went into a fast-speaking, clicking exchange with the computer. When they did that, no translator could keep up with them. They were interfacing directly with the lift’s computer.

Geordi glanced at her with a puzzled look, and Vale just seemed stunned as the two Bynars worked and talked to the lift's computer system.

After a moment, they stepped back in unison, as they always walked.

“We have—”

“—allowed access—”

“—to all team—”

“—members—”

“—to all crew—”

“—areas.”

“Even the second team members?”

“Yes,” 110 said.

“All,” 111 said.

“Great work,” she said. She signaled for Vale to let the door close.

“Deck ninety-one,” Gomez said again.

“Deck ninety-one,” the computer said.

This time the door took seven seconds to reopen.

Vale poked her head out cautiously, scanning both directions with her tricorder, keeping her phaser out. Finally she said, “Clear.”

Gomez followed her out into the hallway. Here there was no soft surface, no art, just door after door on both sides of the hallway, leading off in both directions. At this depth, the hallways curved much quicker. And the gravity felt just a touch lighter than up higher.

“Crew's quarters,” Geordi said, studying his tricorder. “But there are energy signatures coming from ten decks down. I think that might be a warp core I'm reading.”

She nodded and tapped her combadge. “*Da Vinci*, are you with us?”

Nothing but silence.

“They will—”

“—be able—”

“—to track us,” the Bynars said. “But—”

“—they will not—”

“—be able to communicate—”

“—with us.”

Gomez nodded and turned back to Geordi. “Any idea what’s in the core of this thing?”

“Getting weird readings,” Geordi said, frowning. “It seems to be hollow, more than likely a null-gravity core of some sort, starting at deck one hundred and four. And it’s packed loosely with some sort of substance I’m not getting a fix on. We need to get closer.”

“So we head to the warp core area,” Gomez said, motioning for Vale to come back inside the lift.

“Deck one hundred and one,” Geordi said.

Five seconds later, the doors reopened.

“Still clear,” Vale said as Gomez and Geordi moved out, tricorders in hand, studying the large room in front of them. This one room seemed to extend and curve all the way around the ship, with only massive pillars holding the decks above it.

Gomez glanced at her readings, then at Geordi, wondering if he was as surprised as she was. The question of how this ship moved through space was answered. This entire deck level was one massive array of black-hole propulsion systems, all clearly designed to work in tandem.

She went to her left, glancing from her tricorder to the marvel around her. This ship was pushed through space by a drive that many races had tried and mostly failed with. From what she could tell, dozens of tiny black holes were dropped into subspace and then returned to normal space a slight distance away, shoving the containment, and thus the ship. From the looks of this, she would bet this ship could have reached speeds faster than the *Vinci* could, and maintain the speed indefinitely.

“This is an engineering gold mine,” Geordi said. “We need to find an interface with the computer.”

“Agreed,” Gomez said. “But where do we—”

“Excuse me, Commander,” Vale said.

Gomez glanced over at the lieutenant. Her face was pale as she stared at her tricorder.

“I think you need to take a look at the core of this ship before we do anything else,” Vale said.

Gomez quickly set her scanner to check out what was below them. Beside her, Geordi did the same.

For an instant, she didn’t want to think about what she was reading. The core was clearly null gravity, and she guessed it was normally empty. With this kind of structure and drive, an empty core would be the most stable.

But, at the moment, the massive core of this ship was far from empty.

She looked up at Geordi and the shocked expression that covered his face.

“Humanoid bodies?” she asked.

Geordi nodded. Then, weakly, he said, “Hundreds of thousands of them. All dead.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that.”

“Oh, no,” Vale said, her hand over her mouth at the horror of it all.

“It seems—”

“—we now know where—”

“—the passengers went.”

Gomez glanced at the Bynars, then back at her tricorder and the impossible readings she was getting. What had happened here? They had seen no signs of a struggle.

Who had killed these people? How?

And why?

The overwhelming dread of what she knew she had to order next filled her. She took a deep breath, then, as calmly and as in control as she could manage, she said, “Let’s go take a look.”

CHAPTER

9

The absolute last thing Geordi wanted to do was get anywhere near this ship’s core. Not with hundreds of thousands of humanoid bodies floating in it. Yet, he was working with the S.C.E. on an insertion team, and doing the hard jobs was what the S.C.E. did. Clearly, investigating this was going to be one of those hard jobs.

Gomez led them into the lift, and Geordi took a deep breath, trying to prepare himself. Clearly, Vale was as shaken as he was with the idea. The two Bynars even seemed agitated, talking in soft computer clicks between themselves.

“Deck fifty-five,” Gomez said.

The lift door closed as Geordi glanced at her. “Thought you said we needed to take a look?”

“We do,” she said. “But I’m not sure what I’d be looking at, to tell you the truth. I want Dr. Lense with us.”

“She’s going to thank you later,” Vale said.

“If she doesn’t kill you first,” Geordi said.

Gomez only nodded as the door slid open. She motioned for Vale to hold the door in position and tapped her combadge. “*Da Vinci*, come in.”

“Go ahead, Commander,” Gold’s voice came back.

“Are you still in communications contact with team two?”

“No,” Gold said. “They’re on deck ninety, as best our scans can tell.”

“Understood,” Gomez said.

Geordi watched her. Obviously she had wanted a bigger team to tackle what they were heading into, but it seemed that wasn’t really possible. At least not with her top people. And Geordi doubted that she wanted to spend the time to stop on deck ninety and find them.

“Have Dr. Lense beam down to join us,” she said.

“She is right here on the bridge,” Gold said. “She’s ready and heading for the transporter room. Give her one minute.”

“Understood,” Gomez said. “Out.”

They all stood there in silence, clearly thinking of what they were about to see. By the time Dr. Lense appeared, ten paces from the lift, Geordi had all kinds of things imagined in that core. His biggest worry was that nothing he imagined would be as bad as it was really going to be.

“Problem?” Lense asked, moving to join them in the lift.

“A big one,” Gomez said, motioning for Vale to clear the door and let it close. “Deck one hundred and four.”

“Deck one hundred and three is the last deck above the ship’s core area,” the computer said. “The lift does not extend down into the core.”

“Lucky it,” Vale said.

Dr. Lense gave her a sharp look, then turned back to Gomez, but the commander said nothing.

“Deck one hundred and three, then,” Geordi said.

Twelve of the longest seconds Geordi had ever lived passed as they waited in silence for the lift to take them down into the belly of the *Beast*. Dr. Lense clearly wanted to know why she had been brought along, but Gomez seemed unwilling to tell her at the moment. More than likely Gomez wanted Dr. Lense to get the readings for herself, to double-check what they had discovered.

The doors opened.

Vale, phaser drawn, checked both ways, then said, “Clear.”

“Someone want to explain to me what I’m walking into here?” Lense said.

“Bodies,” Gomez said. “If we can find a way into the core area of this ship.”

“The passengers—”

“—and crew—”

“—are there.”

“Dead.”

“But this ship could hold thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of humanoids,” Lense said, staring at the Bynars after glancing at Geordi.

“Yes—”

“—we know.”

All Geordi could do was nod at Dr. Lense as the reality started to dawn on her. She quickly pulled out her tricorder and scanned around them, something Geordi had been unwilling to do yet.

“Oh, my . . .” she said, her voice breaking as the tricorder gave her the readings.

“There’s an observation port ahead,” Gomez said, her voice firm. “Everyone, brace yourselves for this.”

She moved ahead, getting to the clear viewport a few steps ahead of Geordi. She staggered slightly as she got in front, as if punched in the stomach, then stopped, took a deep breath, and turned and stared.

Geordi knew his fears had been right the instant he was at the viewport. It *was* worse than he had imagined. The race that had inhabited this cruise ship was clearly humanoid in almost every fashion. Most of them wore bright clothing, and the crew wore white outfits. They all had thick, black hair and large, unblinking green eyes. They looked like an attractive people.

They were packed into what had to be a core area big enough to hold the *Enterprise*. They were all floating, limbs tangled up in limbs, faces moving slowly past the viewport.

Faces frozen in terror and pain.

It was like a giant, slowly moving, zero-g dance of bodies.

Lense was studying her tricorder, a bead of sweat dripping off her forehead.

“Can you tell me what killed them?” Gomez asked.

“No,” Lense said, “I can’t, exactly. There seem to be varied reasons. None of this makes any sense.”

“You’re telling us?” Vale said.

“What?” Gomez said, flipping her tricorder into action.

Geordi forced himself, after the doctor's strange comments, to study the mass in the vacuum on the other side of that port.

She was right. He couldn't tell right off what had killed the people closest to the port. Some seemed to show signs of the decompression that came with being tossed alive into space.

Other bodies looked like they had been cut apart in some way. Some bodies were missing arms; others, legs; a few, heads.

Still others had puncture wounds of different types. Actually, the more he noticed, the more he saw that they *all* had puncture wounds.

Then something caught his attention to the right of the port, just inside the core. A movement out there that didn't seem to fit in with the slow waltz of the dead. He studied the area, trying to make himself see only the patterns in the dead limbs and faces.

Then he saw it again. A movement along one of the body's arms.

"There's something moving in there!"

He pointed to the right, and both Gomez and Dr. Lense aimed their tricorders in that direction. Something small and dark was chewing on an arm, swallowing hunks of flesh as it burrowed inside.

Geordi felt his stomach twist as the entity disappeared into the body, leaving a pretty good hole in the dead flesh.

The creature looked like a combination between a crab and a wasp, and clearly was able to function in the nonatmosphere environment of space.

He looked at the body closest to him. There were small holes of different sizes all over it as well.

Suddenly Dr. Lense stepped back from the window, as if it had shocked her. "This is a breeding nest," she said.

"The bodies are food?" Geordi asked.

"Exactly," Lense said. "Placed there for the hatchlings."

"And the eggs have hatched, it seems."

"Less than an hour ago," Lense said, "from what I can tell."

"Which is why we scanned no signs of life in this ship," Vale said.

"Well, there's life now," Gomez said.

The bodies were starting to move more and more as the creatures devoured them, drilling in and out, making the cloth ripple on some. Every time Geordi got a glance at one of the creatures, he wanted to smash it, like a spider crawling on the floor.

How did they get in here, if they were space-born creatures?

Geordi scanned past the bodies at the walls of the core. There were large tubes, big enough to easily fly the *theda Vinci* through, that seemed to lead up through the ship, more than likely to hatches on the surface. And around the walls there were docking ports. This core had served more than one function. It was the loading and unloading area, more than likely for supplies. Through one of those ports—that must have been how the creatures got in.

The bodies were floating up into those tubes as well as in the core.

“Can you tell where the main nest is?” Gomez asked.

Dr. Lense shook her head. “I think you’re looking at it. The eggs were planted in these bodies. Some of these people were still alive when the eggs were planted.”

“Now I know I’m going to be sick,” Vale said.

“Where are the adults?” Gomez asked.

“Dead,” Geordi said. “I’ll bet those are the twelve killed in the fight with the *Enterprise* .”

“You mean these creatures are intelligent?” Vale asked. “And twelve of them did all this?”

“Oh, they are intelligent, all right,” Dr. Lense said, nodding. She pointed to a body floating beyond about twelve humanoids. “A hive-mind sort of intelligence, more than likely passed down from one generation to the other. There’s one of the egg-layers.”

Geordi followed where she was pointing and finally saw one of the adult creatures, clearly dead.

“More than likely there was an entire swarm of these things that took over this ship, but they must die when they lay their eggs.”

“And now we have a new swarm growing right in front of our eyes,” Gomez said. “The offspring of a swarm that killed hundreds of thousands of humanoids for food.”

“Exactly,” Dr. Lense said.

Geordi tried to imagine a man-sized creature that looked like a crab and wasp coming at him. He didn’t like the thought at all. But Dr. Lense’s theory did answer one question.

“That explains why this ship was attacking the farming colony,” Geordi said.

Dr. Lense nodded. “They were looking for more food, so that more of their young could be born.”

They all stood there in silence, watching the creatures grow larger and larger by the minute. Finally, Vale asked, “Now what do we do?”

“We get team two,” Gomez said, “and return to the *theda Vinci* . The last thing the Federation needs is a swarm of humanoid-eating creatures attacking ships. So, we’re going to toss this thing into the sun before any of these creatures can escape.”

That will not be allowed.

The voice seemed to fill Geordi's head, making him feel dirty.

All of them, including the two Bynars, had their phasers out at the same instant. But the voice hadn't come from one place. It had come from the hive, and Geordi knew it.

Slowly, Geordi made himself look back at the port. At least fifty of the half-eaten humanoid bodies were now lined up facing the view port, like soldiers on a field. The young creatures were almost four inches long, and getting bigger and bigger as they ate. Bones were starting to show, and creatures crawled in and out of the eyes and mouths.

And as they ate, the dead bodies seemed to jerk and dance, always keeping in a precise line, staring at Geordi and the rest of them.

"We should—"

"—leave."

"Agreed," Gomez said. "Let's move, people."

That will not be allowed.

Again the hive voice filled their heads.

"Geordi," Gomez said, "you've got four minutes to find a way to block that thing. And by that I mean one minute. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," Geordi said. If he cross-routed the tricorder circuits the way Deanna Troi had once shown him, Geordi thought, he could set up a static field to block the creature's telepathic broadcasts—probably throughout the ship.

Then the time for thinking was over. Geordi ran at full speed right behind Gomez and the Bynars and Dr. Lense. Only Vale was behind him.

CHAPTER

10

Captain Gold was stunned as he watched what he had thought was a dead ship come alive right before his eyes. The shields that he had studied on the tapes of the battle between the *Beast* and the *Enterprise* suddenly flowed from the ship like water, pouring out and covering everything.

"*Da Vincito* insertion teams."

He waited, hoping for an answer, but he knew that the teams were too far inside the ship to be reached, and now, with the shields up, there was even more interference.

"What are they doing down there?"

“Sir,” Ensign Wong said, “it might not be them.”

“Shields up!” Gold shouted. “Red alert!”

The instant he gave the order, the ship below started to power weapons. A moment later, the blast rocked the *da Vinci* like a powerful earthquake shaking a building. Gold managed to hold on, but just barely.

“Shields at seventy percent,” McAllan said. “Damage on three decks. No one hurt.”

“Take us back and hold us just out of weapon’s range!” he ordered. “And work on getting a signal through to one of the teams. I want to know what’s happening down there.”

He turned to Lieutenant Ing. “Put out a call to the *Enterprise*. I have a hunch we’re going to need them back here at top speed.”

She nodded.

“Out of range, sir,” Wong said. “Holding position, but we’re also out of transporter range.”

“We’ll worry about that when the time comes. Good warning on your part, Ensign.”

“Thank you, sir,” Wong said.

“No, thank *you* .”

Gold leaned forward in his chair and studied the alien ship on the screen, trying to make sense out of what had just happened. Only there didn’t seem to be any sense to be had. Who, or what, had brought that hulk of a ship back to life? Had his people done it accidentally?

Were his people still alive in there?

From out here, there was no way of telling and nothing he could do but wait, and try to contact them.

The problem was, waiting wasn’t something he did easily.

“Sir,” Lieutenant Ing said, “the *Enterprise* has responded. They will be back in just under three hours.”

Gold nodded. Three hours might as well be three days. The *Enterprise* had barely beat this monster once. He just hoped he didn’t have to go up against it full-on. But if he had to to save his teams in there, he would.

“Come on, people,” he said. “Tell me what’s going on in that *Beast* .”

None of his crew answered him. He actually hadn’t expected them to.

CHAPTER

11

The *Beast* was alive!

Lieutenant Commander Duffy stared around at the rest of his team. All had surprised and shocked looks on their faces.

The *Beast* was alive, and yet it couldn't be.

They had just spent the last half-hour in what appeared to be the *Beast*'s secondary—and only remaining—control room, getting what data they could and trying to figure out how this ship was run. They had been making some pretty decent progress, considering everything they were dealing with.

First off, the secondary control room was something far bigger than most ship's main bridges. It had seats for twenty crew, and stations that would take them months to figure out what they were intended to run.

Everything in the room seemed plush and done to impress visitors, yet it was clearly a functioning control area. And from what they could tell, when the main control room was destroyed, everything was automatically switched to this room.

Stevens had managed to figure out how to turn on the main viewscreen so that they could see the *da Vinci*, but beyond that, not much else had been tested yet.

Now, suddenly, everything was coming alive.

"Who did that?" Duffy shouted, looking around at his team as board after board became active.

"Didn't touch a thing!" Stevens said.

"Nothing here!" Bart replied from where he'd been trying to figure out the communications panel.

Pattie waved her two top legs in a negative gesture. "I did nothing to cause this, sir."

"Well, someone's doing something somewhere!" Duffy shouted. "Where's team one?"

"Near the core, from what I can tell," Stevens said.

Corsi nodded her head in agreement. She had been standing post near the control room door, and was now looking very worried. "I can barely make out their signatures on my scanners," she said.

"Could they be doing this?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Bart said, "but I would doubt there's another control room down there."

"This ship's shields are going up," Pattie said, four of her eight legs waving in agitation above a control panel. "I am doing nothing, touching nothing."

"Weapons are powering!" Stevens said.

Duffy couldn't believe this nightmare. How was this happening? How was a dead ship suddenly coming back to life? "Stop them!"

"I don't know how to even start them!" Stevens shouted back as he frantically searched what they had pinpointed as one of the weapons boards. He looked as if he wanted to touch something, anything, even start punching buttons at random, but Stevens was a good enough engineer to know that wouldn't help.

"I can tell you it isn't coming from here!" Bart said. "All these systems are being overridden somehow!"

As they all watched on the main viewer, the *Beast* fired on the *da Vinci*. For the second time in twenty-four hours, an alien cruise ship had attacked a Starfleet ship.

"*Da Vinci* got her shields up in time!" Bart shouted, and everyone cheered as the shot fired from the *Beast* was deflected by the *da Vinci*'s defenses.

Duffy didn't know how, but Captain Gold had managed to out-think what they couldn't figure out down here. The guy never ceased to amaze.

"*Da Vinci*'s moving off to a safe distance," Bart said. "No damage, from what I can tell from here."

"Okay," Duffy said, letting out a long breath he felt like he'd been holding since everything went crazy. "Now it's up to us. We're inside this *Beast* and in the driver's seat. I want control back in this room, or I want this ship dead in space, flat-useless. We go after both, people. We shut down those shields and cut the weapons."

"And if that doesn't work?" Bart asked.

"Then, if we have to, we blow up this monster."

He made sure he caught the gaze of everyone, to see if they understood.

They all did.

"Let's get to work," he said. "All shortcuts are allowed. I have a sneaking hunch we don't have much time."

CHAPTER

12

"We're not getting in that lift," Lieutenant Vale said, her voice firm as they ran away from the viewport.

"Agreed," Gomez said. She held up her hand and had them all stop just short of the lift. Then she turned to Dr. Lense. "In your best guess, how long until those things in there are big enough to get out of that core?"

"And come after us physically, instead of through the ship's systems?" Dr. Lense asked.

“Exactly,” Gomez said.

“An hour, maybe a little more, but I wouldn’t count on it from the rate of their growth and their food supply in there. It might be only thirty minutes.”

Gomez nodded. She didn’t much like the answer, but at least the answer wasn’t now. They had a little time.

“Somehow,” Gomez said, “we have to reach the secondary control room.”

“I doubt that’s going to help,” Geordi said.

“I agree with Geordi,” Dr. Lense said. “They are controlling the ship from connections in that docking area, using the power of the hive-mind to tap into the ship’s computer and override everything.”

“How the heck do you know all that?” Geordi asked.

“This isn’t the first time I’ve seen this kind of thing,” Dr. Lense answered. “During the war—one of the Dominion’s subject races . . . It wasn’t these creatures, exactly, but it’s close enough for me to make a guess.”

“We—”

“—agree with—”

“—the doctors,” 110 and 111 said.

“So we need to cut the power to the docking bay,” Gomez said.

“Exactly,” Geordi said. “Two decks above us in the engine room would be the place to do that.”

Both Bynars nodded in unison. “We can—”

“—cut power there—”

“—easily.”

“Access to climbing tube?” Gomez demanded, pulling out her tricorder. “Find us one fast.”

“Here!” Vale said, moving to a side panel and yanking off the covering. There was a ladder inside.

“Vale, take point,” Gomez said, “Doctor, you follow her as close as you can stay.”

“You got it,” Dr. Lense said as Vale headed into the tube and started climbing.

“I’ll guard the flank,” Geordi said.

Gomez nodded and indicated the two Bynars should follow Dr. Lense.

She was amazed at how fast they managed to climb that ladder. By the time she ducked out onto the

deck of the engineering area, both the Bynars were at a terminal, using their computer-fast speech to form a connection to the computer.

Vale was guarding them and Dr. Lense, who was studying her tricorder and frowning.

Gomez stopped Geordi as he came out behind her. On the way up the ladder, she had realized that maybe the hive-mind wasn't completely telepathic at such a young age. Broadcasting a thought at close range might be easy, but she wagered that listening to some thoughts two decks away might still have to be done through the ship's systems.

So she whispered in his ear. "I want a way to blow this ship out of space."

"We can do it," Geordi whispered back. "I can set these black-hole engines to cascade. But damn it—I can't help feeling that if Captain Picard were here, he'd have found a way to reason with these creatures. Turning an enemy into a friend is better than . . ."

"Geordi, I wish they were giving us that option. If it'll make you feel better, I'll order you to take this ship down."

Geordi stared at her.

"I outrank you now. This is my call to make."

Geordi nodded and headed off at a run toward the nearest black-hole-drive system. She watched him for an instant, realizing that, more than likely, she had just issued their death warrant.

"Commander!" Vale said. "We need to keep each other covered."

"I'll help the Bynars, you stay with Geordi."

Vale looked relieved and headed off at a run, phaser in hand, after her shipmate.

The Bynars turned slightly as she approached.

"They have—"

"—attacked—"

"—*theda Vinci*. It has—"

"—retreated—"

"—safely."

"Shields are up and weapons charged, huh?" Gomez said. "Well, shut them down. I don't care how you do it, but I want that core and all those bugs' access to the ship's systems shut off."

Both nodded and turned back to the computer, their high-speed computer talk almost painful to listen to.

She turned to Dr. Lense. "Anything getting out of the core yet?"

“Not that I can tell,” she said. “But they are growing at a fantastic rate. I’d say we have no more than twenty minutes before they can leave those food sources.”

“And after that?” Gomez asked.

“We don’t want to be inside this ship after that,” Dr. Lense said.

Gomez nodded and glanced at her chronometer, so she knew exactly how long was left.

Three minutes of eternity later, Geordi and Lieutenant Vale came running back into view from around one part of a huge engine. As they approached, Geordi said, “Fifteen minutes.”

Gomez nodded and again glanced at her chronometer. They were over one hundred decks inside this ship, with fifteen minutes to escape. Their chances were not looking good.

“We have cut—”

“—power to core—”

“—area. But we must—”

“—remain to monitor. You—”

“—go.”

Geordi did a quick scan. “The *Beast*’s shields are down, and weapons have shut down as well. Ship is dormant again, for the moment.”

“I’m not leaving anyone down here,” Gomez said. Losing someone was just not an option as far as she was concerned.

“We have no—”

“—intention of staying.”

“Just need—”

“—five minutes.”

Gomez nodded as they turned back to the panel and continued to work, talking to the ship’s computer at high speed again. “Geordi, you and Vale stay with them and make sure they get out. Dr. Lense and I will get to the second team and get them out.”

“The lift is safe for the moment,” Geordi said. “Use it.”

“Planning to,” Gomez said. “Make sure you give yourself enough time to get to a beam-out level.”

“We will,” Geordi said.

At a run, she and the doctor headed for the lift. She hated splitting the team, but in this situation, with the second team to think about as well, she had no choice.

She just hoped this choice of no choice didn't come back to haunt her.

CHAPTER

13

Duffy glanced around the plush, massive secondary control room at his team as panel after panel went dead in front of them. "All right, people," he shouted. "Now what's happening?"

Stevens glanced up at him. "Whoever was controlling the ship from the core area has been cut off. The *Beast*'s systems are now dormant again."

"But for how long?" Bart asked.

"That is a critical question," Pattie said.

"More than likely," Stevens said, "not long." He studied the information that was coming over his still-active panel for the moment, then smiled. "Someone in engineering is making sure nothing gets out of the core and retakes control."

"The Bynars?" Bart asked.

"From the speed, I would say so," Stevens said.

"So, what the heck is in that core?" Duffy asked.

"Trust me," Gomez said from the door, "it's not something any of us ever want to meet."

Duffy felt his heart soar. He hadn't let himself think about the chance of Gomez getting stuck down there. Hearing her voice and seeing her was wonderful.

He smiled at her, and she half-smiled back, but her eyes were almost dead with worry. Something was terribly wrong. Even worse than they had thought. Dr. Lense was with her, but Duffy couldn't see any of the rest of Gomez's team. They must be the ones still below, holding whatever was in the core at bay.

"We have just about ten minutes before we need to be off this monster," Gomez said. "Just in case what we have set up below fails, what can you people do from here to make sure this thing never flies again?"

For a moment there was silence, then, finally, an idea came to Duffy. "The ship's systems are mostly dormant now. We could set up a feedback loop that would only kick in if a system like the shields was brought back on-line."

"Perfect," Bart said. "That would—"

Gomez held up her hand for silence. "No more talk about what you are doing until you are back on the *da Vinci*. I'll explain then."

Duffy nodded, and Gomez smiled a faint thanks.

“Duffy, Bart, Stevens,” Gomez said, “do what you are thinking about in the next three minutes, and then get to a beam-out level and get off this ship. Not one second longer. Understood?”

Duffy nodded at the fierce look in Gomez’s eyes, then glanced at his chronometer. In all the years he had known her, he had never seen her look like that before. Something down there in that core had clearly spooked her good.

“Understood,” Duffy said.

“Dr. Lense, you stay with them and get off as well. Corsi, you and Pattie come with me. We’re going back to help.”

“You only have about nine minutes,” Dr. Lense said.

Duffy looked at the doctor, then at Gomez. Nine minutes, and Gomez was going back down with a team. What was happening?

“Stevens, Bart, Duffy, set it up and make sure it’s going to work. Two minutes and thirty seconds, and then out of here.”

Gomez nodded to him and then headed off at a run.

He didn’t have a good feeling about any of this. But with just barely two minutes to figure out a way to sabotage an alien ship, he didn’t have time to think about it.

“Stevens, you take shields,” Duffy said. “Bart, weapons systems. I’m going to try to make sure nothing gets out of the core area into space.”

He went quickly to work, setting up a feedback loop in the commands to open the cargo doors that led down into the core from the surface of the ship. If something, or someone, were to try to open those doors, the computer would shut them and freeze the door permanently shut.

“Done,” Stevens said, with eighteen seconds to spare.

Bart went right to the last second.

It took Duffy an extra five seconds over what he had promised Gomez, but he took the extra time anyway. Whatever was in that core had spooked the woman he loved. And she didn’t spook easy, so he didn’t want it coming out any time soon.

Then, at a run, they headed for the lift.

They asked the lift computer for deck fifty-five, but before the lift stopped, the transporter took them to safety.

There was only five minutes and ten seconds left.

CHAPTER

14

Geordi couldn't believe that Gomez and Pattie and Corsi had come back down. He would have done the same thing in Gomez's place, but it was still insanity, plain and simple.

He glanced at his chronometer. There was less than six minutes to go before those black-hole drives started cascading in on themselves. It was going to cause one major explosion. Not big enough to harm the colony, but enough to make sure nothing survived on this ship. And that meant all of them as well, if they were still here.

"We have to get out of here," Gomez said.

"We must build up—"

"—thirty seconds—"

"—of reserve time," the Bynars said.

Geordi knew exactly what they were doing. They were trying to make sure that everyone had thirty seconds to get up that lift and to safety before the hive-mind regained control of the computer.

"Thirty more seconds and they should have it," Geordi said to Gomez. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a movement—fast, like a bug.

"They're out!" he shouted, pulling his phaser and taking cover.

Gomez and Corsi moved to take cover near a computer bank, pulling Pattie with them.

Vale stayed with him, moving to cover his back.

The two Bynars stayed in position at the computer terminal, never hesitating, standing and working as if nothing was happening around them.

"What is that?" Corsi demanded as Gomez fired, spraying the guts of one of the bugs against the wall.

Geordi was stunned at how big it was. Just a short time before, they had all been less than an inch long, crawling in the skin of humanoids in the core. This one now had to be three feet tall, still almost snow-white, but with deadly looking claws and wings tucked against a hard shell.

Clearly, Dr. Lense had been right about the point when they could stop eating.

Another movement caught Geordi's attention, and he fired on instinct, cutting down a bug as it tried to circle behind them.

"We're running out of time here!" Gomez shouted.

Geordi agreed, but if the Bynars didn't buy them the thirty seconds they needed to get to and up that lift, it wouldn't matter how soon they made a run for it.

Corsi fired, then Vale.

Two more bugs exploded on contact with the phaser beam. The smell of burning chitin filled the area, choking them and making him cough.

Both Bynars turned from the panel at the same instant. They were done.

"Now," Geordi shouted.

"Everyone to the lift!" Gomez ordered.

But getting to the lift wasn't going to be easy.

Around them, hell suddenly crawled out of the shadows.

The smell was awful, a cross between a rotted corpse and a sewage treatment area. Geordi cut four, then five bugs down to the right, while Vale covered the left, firing almost constantly.

The two Bynars were firing together, first right, then left, bringing down two bugs at a time.

Gomez and Corsi and Pattie were trying to keep the path clear to the lift.

As a unit they moved, firing and making their way closer and closer to that lift door.

But to Geordi, each second seemed like an eternity.

The bugs just kept coming and coming. Geordi had never seen anything like it. Every step they got closer to the lift brought more bugs at them.

When Corsi and Pattie were within twenty paces of the lift, at least a dozen bugs bunched up right in front of them, seeming to not care if they were cut down.

At that point, Geordi and Vale and the two Bynars were almost on top of Gomez and Corsi and Pattie, forming a circle of defense and firing in all directions at the sea of wasp-crab insects. But Geordi knew that if they got stopped for even a few seconds in one spot, they'd never make that lift. These bugs would think nothing of simply overwhelming them with numbers.

"We have to get through this last group!" Gomez shouted between shots, clearly thinking along the same lines he was.

But the creatures seemed to be pouring in faster than the team could kill them. And there was a pile of dead insectoids forming in front of them, blocking their way to the lift. Going around or over was going to be hard, if not impossible.

The smell of burning insectoids was choking Geordi. If he lived through this, he would never get the smell out of his mind and off his skin.

"Corsi—maneuver 14!" Pattie shouted to Corsi.

“That’s a zero-g move!” Corsi shouted.

“It will work!” Pattie said.

“Cover them!” Gomez shouted.

Pattie flipped into the air, holding two phasers in her top hands, and came down curled into a hard-shelled ball, all six of her legs out of sight.

Almost in the same movement, Corsi had her with both hands and, with a mighty heave, rolled her at the pile of bugs and bug-parts between them and the lift.

Pattie’s hard shell smashed through the bugs like they were tissue paper, sending wasp-like crabs flying everywhere and drilling a path straight to the lift.

As Pattie hit the wall, she uncurled and came up firing, clearing away any bug that was near her.

Geordi and Vale and Gomez covered their flank as the two Bynars and Corsi laid down a constant fire, keeping the bugs back in the cross fire between them and Pattie.

The lift door opened and Pattie blocked it that way with her body, staying low and firing constantly with two phasers.

Geordi figured they just might make it when, suddenly, one of the bugs opened white wings that were under its shell, flapped them for an instant, and then flew at them.

Geordi hit it in flight, but one of its crab-like claws cut Vale across the back, smashing her into the ground.

She was up again almost instantly, but clearly hurt. Even though blood was pouring off her back, she kept firing. She was one tough person, that was for sure.

Corsi and Gomez made the lift and took up covering positions across from Pattie.

Then the Bynars reached the lift and moved to the right of the door, both firing constantly.

Now, more and more of the bugs had unfolded wings and were flying at them.

Geordi shoved Vale into the lift and dove after her.

“Come in low!” Geordi shouted as he and Vale fired high, trying to give the rest cover.

Corsi dove through, then Gomez backed in.

Pattie stepped back to let the Bynars in just as five bugs flew at them at once.

Geordi got one of them.

Vale took another.

Pattie blew another out of the air, and Gomez got the fourth.

But they all missed the other one.

As Geordi watched in horror, one of the bug's claws cleanly sliced off 111's head.

110 screamed in terror and moved to help his mate.

Geordi knew instantly there was nothing anyone could do for 111. She was dead.

Corsi grabbed 110, who was immobilized with shock, then tossed him over her shoulder and into the lift.

He scrambled to get up, to get back out to his mate, but Vale smashed him against the wall and held him down.

"Computer, deck fifty!" Gomez yelled.

The doors started to close as even more bugs smashed at them.

The firing was intense until finally the lift doors closed.

It was like slamming the door on hell.

One moment a desperate gun battle, the next silence, utter and complete, broken only by 110's sudden high-pitched keening, a sound like the death throes of a human computer.

Geordi just stared at the closed door, his phaser ready, expecting the doors to open again on his sure death. But for the longest seconds the doors stayed closed, and just as before, there was no sense of movement in the lifts.

Vale was trying to help the sobbing 110 to his feet when the transporter beam took them.

CHAPTER

15

Gomez stumbled off the transporter pad and tapped her combadge. "Captain, jump to warp and get away from here. Fast!"

She reached over the panel and clicked on the screen. The image of the *Beast* still filled the picture, but it was clear that the *da Vinci* was moving away quickly.

Suddenly, it seemed as if the skin of the *Beast* puffed out for a moment.

Then it shrunk back in on itself and imploded in a blinding flash of white light.

A moment later the screen cleared, showing only empty space. Wonderfully empty space.

She let herself lean against the console. Her knees were weak and her eyes felt as if they had had sand thrown in them. She couldn't believe she was out of that nightmare.

She looked around at her team. Duffy was clearly worried about her, but saying nothing. She would talk to him later, but right now wasn't the time.

Stevens and Bart both looked shaken, but fine.

Pattie sat on the edge of the platform, her six arms and legs drooping.

Geordi leaned against the wall, his hands at his sides.

Corsi stood, looking almost lost and in shock.

Vale sat on the floor, holding the Bynar in her lap.

They were all out of the *Beast*, except one.

She moved over to where Vale was trying to console the sobbing Bynar. Blood was pooled under her and in her lap from her wounds, and her skin looked white. She needed help and she needed it fast, yet she was trying to help another. Captain Picard had a real jewel in her.

Dr. Lense grabbed Vale and shouted to the transporter technician, "Get Lieutenant Vale and me to sickbay stat." A moment later the doctor and the wounded officer dematerialized.

Just then, Captain Gold appeared in the door, looking worried and relieved at the same time. Then he saw the lone Bynar and he stopped cold.

"Don't tell me," he said.

"We lost one, Captain," Gomez said softly.

"Damn," he said, shaking his head, the news clearly hitting him hard.

She didn't want to let the fact that she had lost someone sink in. Not yet. She knew she couldn't deny it, but she didn't want to face it right now.

Geordi put his hand on her shoulder, then said, "Let's get him to sickbay as well."

She nodded and took a deep, shuddering breath, then leaned down, pulling the still-sobbing Bynar to his feet.

He looked at her, his eyes hollow and empty. "You should—have let—me go—back. I belong—back there."

Gomez glanced at the captain, then shook her head. "No, I shouldn't have. But I am sorry for your loss."

Geordi moved around to the other side of the Bynar and they managed to get him to the bed beside Vale in sickbay.

An hour later, after trying to scrub the smell off her skin in the shower, she sat across from Captain Gold, a drink in her hand, and tried to tell him what had happened, from her point of view.

He let her ramble, let her get it all out of her system the way she wanted to. The way she needed to.

He knew how to listen as well as give orders. And right now, he was the only one on the ship who understood what she was going through.

On the way back to her cabin, she stopped in sickbay. Both patients were sedated and sleeping. She had lost one team member. She would learn somehow to accept that, but she had gotten the rest out safely, and had stopped who knew how many more from dying if those bugs would have gotten out of that core.

The mission wasn't a success, but it wasn't a failure either. They had stopped a menace to the Federation cold—although as Geordi had said, turning an enemy into a friend would have been better. A member of her team had died. More than likely she would lose a second as well, because sometimes Bynar bonded pairs did not survive the death of a mate. Only time would tell, and she was willing to give him that time. She owed him that much.

As Captain Gold had said to her, sometimes the line between success and failure was very narrow.

She had walked that line this time. It didn't feel good. But it wasn't all bad either.

CHAPTER

16

Geordi stood in the shuttlebay of the *da Vinci* and smiled as Lieutenant Vale got the shuttlecraft *Cook* ready to launch. She was doing everything by the book, right down to the last detail, and it amused him. He hadn't seen anyone go through this sort of preparation to take a shuttle flight since his days in the Academy.

When the *Beast* had blown up, the *Enterprise* had turned around and gone back to its mission. He and Vale had decided yesterday that she would take the *Cook* back to the *Enterprise* and he would stay and help the S.C.E. team a little more. There were things to do yet, files on the *Beast's* technology to study, and the colonists needed a lot of help getting back on their feet.

Plus they had to finish reports on those insectoids and brief Starfleet as quickly as possible. Who knew how many more hives of them were out there, waiting to take over some unsuspecting craft.

"Well, I think I'm ready," she said, her blue eyes full of life and the excitement of taking a long shuttlecraft trip alone.

Geordi could remember feeling the same way on his first long trip alone. Now he would just dread it. It was amazing how a person sometimes grew out of certain things. Long, solo shuttlecraft trips were one of those things.

"Lieutenant Vale," he said, stepping forward and shaking her firm hand. "You did great. Thank you."

She smiled. "Thank you for allowing me to come along. I'm not sure if I'll ever have another nightmare-free night's sleep, but I must say, this was exciting."

"The reason you joined Starfleet?" he asked.

She smiled. "No, Corsi was the reason I joined Starfleet. But that's a long story for another time."

"Now, wait," Geordi said, laughing. "You can't leave me hanging like that."

"You're staying here," Vale said, a very sly grin on her face. "Try to get the story out of her. That should be interesting."

Geordi laughed. "I expect a story when I get back to the *Enterprise*."

"Deal," she said.

She stepped back inside and, with a wave, closed the door to the shuttlecraft.

He waited and watched until she jumped to warp, then turned and headed toward the staging room. He was sure Gomez would have a hundred things for him to do. And right now, that was exactly what he needed. It was going to be fun, spending a little more time with the S.C.E.

Fun and work and maybe a little excitement as well.

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