

Star Trek S.C.E. 6
Cold Fusion

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HISTORIAN'S NOTE

Cold Fusion takes place between the Star Trek Deep Space Nine novels Avatar Book 2 and Section 31 Abyss. It also takes place simultaneously with Star Trek S.C.E. 7-8 Invincible Books 1-2.

ONE

"Commander, I humbly request permission to feed Abramowitz to the larva."

Kieran Duffy sighed, rolled his eyes, took a sip of his coffee, then looked up at the Nasat standing before him in the mess hall. "What is it this time, Pattie?"

P8 Blue, presently standing upright on her two rear legs, was tossing a padd back and forth among four of her arms. "Oh, it's nothing different. She simply will not stop playing that music."

"Have you asked her to stop?"

"Repeatedly. Endlessly. Constantly."

"Well, at least your grasp of adverbs is improving."

"Commander-"

Holding up a hand, Duffy said, "Look, I'll talk to her, okay? I have to be on the bridge in five, and-"

"That's the other thing, we're always on and off duty at the same time. I cannot avoid her. I would like to renew my request for a new roommate."

"I've asked around, but nobody-"

"Of course nobody wants to room with her!" Pattie said. Her voice raised several octaves-a range Duffy hadn't known her to be capable of-and she was now tossing the padd around so fast, it was blurry.

"Nobody can stand that music of hers!"

Sonnie, come home, was all Duffy could think. Especially since this was mostly her fault. Kind of.

In addition to her duties as commanding officer of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers team on the U.S.S. da Vinci, Commander Sonya Gomez was also the da Vinci's first officer, and was therefore responsible for making up the duty assignments. Of course, the last time she'd done so was before Carol Abramowitz, the S.C.E. team's cultural specialist, got her hands on a new recording of Sinnravian drad music, specifically the newest from Blee Luu, the founder of drad's "atonal minimalist" subgenre.

Unfortunately, Gomez was presently on a special assignment to the very distant planet of Sarindar, helping the Nalori Republic get a subspace accelerator working. This left Duffy, normally the ship's second officer, pulling double duty as the ship's XO. Which meant that personnel issues like this, that he had been more than happy to dump on Sonnie's lap, were now his problem.

In all his years in Starfleet, Kieran Duffy had heard many different types of music, and many more reactions to same. He'd heard Klingon opera that could put a spring in one person's step and stop others dead in their tracks from the headache. He'd once seen a Vulcan ambassador moved to tears by the same Mozart piece that, years later, moved a Tellarite engineer to throw up.

But pretty much everyone who wasn't from Sinnrav (and many who were) found Luu's music to be completely unlistenable-except for Carol Abramowitz.

Gulping down the last of his coffee, Duffy got up. After swallowing, he said, "Pattie, I'm not really sure what I can do, except-"

Except maybe change the duty roster, he thought suddenly. You're first officer until Sonnie comes back. You can do that.

"Except maybe change the duty roster," he said after his moment of clarity. "I'll fix it so that you're on Gamma Shift when Carol's off. Okay?"

Now holding the padd in only one hand, Pattie made a tinkling noise. Most non-Nasats couldn't distinguish one such noise from another, but Duffy had been serving with Pattie long enough to be able to do so. This one-high-pitched, with the higher notes about a second-and-a-half apart-was the equivalent of a sigh of relief. "Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome. And no feeding her to the larva." Duffy hesitated. "Do your larva really eat people?" Another tinkly noise, this one lower-pitched-a shrug. "Only when they can get them. They'll eat anything. Well, I must take this report to Lieutenant Barnak. Thank you again, sir."

With that, Pattie got down on all eights and skittered out of the mess hall. Duffy wondered how much of Carol's insistence on playing Luu's music was personal preference, and how much was a defense mechanism triggered by living with an insect.

Two security guards, Drew and Hawkins, were sitting at one of the far tables. Hawkins said, "I think she was kidding, sir. About the larva."

"Definitely," Drew said. "They're actually very picky eaters."

Sighing and shaking his head, Duffy left the mess hall, wondering if Sonnie had ever had to put up with this.

TWO

David Gold had been listening to the latest letter from his granddaughter Ruth for the fifteenth time when the call from the bridge came.

"Message from Deep Space 9, sir," said Lieutenant McAllan.

Gold frowned. They were en route to DS9 already. "On screen."

Ruth's pretty, glowing face was replaced on the viewscreen in Gold's quarters by the Starfleet logo, and then by the image of a woman wearing the uniform of a Bajoran Militia colonel. Though he had never met her, Gold instantly recognized her as DS9's commanding officer, Kira Nerys.

"Colonel Kira, he said. This is Captain Gold. Is everything all right?"

Hello Captain. Yes, everything's fine. Don't worry, this is a simple diversion call.

"So the last dispatch we got was accurate? Those Jem'Hadar that attacked the station were renegades?"

For some time, the whole quadrant was on yellow alert and many were convinced that the Dominion War, over for less than four months, was going to start right back up again. Gold was worried that this call was going to be bad news-unexpected calls from high-ranking officers almost always were.

Yes, the dispatch was accurate. Unfortunately, part of the process of stopping them involved ejecting our fusion core.

"Oy."

Kira looked almost amused. "Oy pretty much sums it up, Captain. We still need your help putting the station back together, just not here at the station. You're to rendezvous with one of our runabouts, the

Rio Grande, in the Trivas system. We're forwarding the exact coordinates to you now, along with the details. You'll meet up with Lieutenant Nog, our chief operations officer."

Gold recalled that the Trivas system was in unclaimed space near the Cardassian border. "And this is going to help the station?"

"Let's hope so. We need to get this place operational before we run out of emergency power. The lieutenant will have all the details."

Whatever you say, Colonel. We're happy to be of service however you need us.

At that, Kira actually smiled, though it didn't extend to her entire face. This is a woman under a lot of pressure, Gold thought, being all-too-familiar with that look from his own years in the center seat.

Actually, Captain, the S.C.E. has already been a great help to us. And, honestly, if you could accompany the Rio Grande back to DS9, we could probably use some more of that service.

That should be do-able, Colonel. I've heard a lot of good things about your station-in fact, one of my engineers used to serve there. It'll be a privilege to visit-and to help out.

The privilege will be all ours, Captain. And I wouldn't worry about the mission, either. Nogs a pro. I'm sure it'll all go completely smoothly.

THREE

Fabian Stevens stared at the sleeping form of Domenica Corsi in the bed with him, wondering how, exactly, this had happened. He had gone into the mess hall when he had come off shift the night before, figuring to do a little reading over a synthale before going to bed. To his surprise, Lt. Commander Corsi had been there. It was the first time Stevens could ever remember seeing the da Vinci's chief of security in the mess hall. She generally preferred to eat in her quarters. Even more surprising was her request for him to join her. He'd conversed with her while off duty about as often as he'd seen her in the mess hall, and yet here she was inviting him over.

Intrigued by the novelty as much as anything, he had agreed.

"Senior staff and S.C.E. team, report to the observation lounge immediately."

It was Lieutenant McAllan's voice, and the beep that had preceded it had an immediate effect. In repose, Corsi's features were unusually soft-like a porcelain doll sitting under lights in a glass case. The effect was magnified by her blonde hair, normally tied severely back, cascading loosely about the pillow.

As soon as the beep sounded, though, the hard edges returned, and the porcelain became duranium as she awakened.

"Let's go," she said, getting up from the bed without hesitating. She went from dead asleep to wide awake in less than a second, an ability that Fabian Stevens envied, to say the least.

The previous night, Corsi had moved toward the bed with a lithe elegance and softness that Stevens would not have previously credited her with. Now, though, the word soft was the last word he'd use to describe how she moved away from it.

Efficient, though, that he'd use. Though he'd been awake for almost half an hour, it took Stevens several seconds to drag himself out of bed, grab the various parts of his uniform (he hadn't really been paying attention to where he'd dropped them last night), and put them on. By the time Corsi was in uniform and had tied her hair neatly back, Stevens was still struggling with his pants.

"Mr. Stevens," she said formally, "I'd appreciate it if you didn't speak of this to anyone, and I hope you won't think that it was the beginning of anything."

Stevens let out a bark of laughter. "To be honest, I hadn't thought that far ahead. I just-"

"I appreciate what you did," she said, still talking like an officer, which Stevens supposed was inevitable, "and I am grateful, but I'm not in the habit-"

Holding up a hand, Stevens said, "Say no more, Commander. This stays between us."

"Good. I'm going to go ahead to the meeting. I'll see you there."

She turned on her heel and left. Stevens watched the door for several seconds before finally commencing to putting on his shirt.

When he arrived at the observation lounge, most of the usual suspects were seated. Captain Gold was at the head, of course, with Duffy at his left. Duff was holding a mostly full cup of quinine water in his hand,

so he'd already had his morning coffee. Soloman, Corsi, and Dr. Lense sat next to him-Corsi seemed to be pointedly not making eye contact with Stevens as he entered.

Pattie Blue was in her special chair opposite the captain. Abramowitz was, Stevens noticed, sitting next to Gold on his right, which put her as far from Pattie as possible. Guess the drad music battles haven't concluded yet, he thought with a smile. Of course, Abramowitz could only sit there because Gomez-the one missing S.C.E. member-was still off-ship.

Faulwell was seated next to Abramowitz, which left two chairs free-one opposite Lense, one opposite Corsi. Deciding that discretion was the best he could do, Stevens sat opposite Lense. Corsi didn't seem to notice.

"Now that Stevens has deigned to join us," Gold said dryly, "here's the story. We're not going to Deep Space 9 to help them with repairs, though we are going to their aid. We've been diverted to rendezvous with one of their runabouts and then proceed to an abandoned Cardassian station in the Trivas system known as Empok Nor."

Stevens muttered, "Quoth the Empok, 'Never Nor.'"

"Excuse me?" Gold said, one of his bushy eyebrows raised.

Shifting in his seat, Stevens said, "Sorry, sir. That's something one of the engineers at DS9 came up with after the first time we- Well, see, when I was assigned to DS9, our chief of operations, Miles O'Brien, went over there to get some spare parts. Unfortunately, half the team didn't make it back-there was some kind of Cardassian booby trap left behind. We never really wanted to go back after that, and one of the engineers was a fan of old poetry, so she made that joke. It kinda stuck."

"Edgar Allan Poe's The Raven," Abramowitz said helpfully. "The line is really 'Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore'.'"

Nodding, Gold said, "Well, these ravens are flying back. DS9 had to eject their fusion core, and their new chief of operations-a lieutenant named Nog-is meeting us in the Trivas system in order to obtain a replacement."

Stevens looked up in surprise at that. "Nog's chief now?"

"You know him?" Gold asked.

"Yeah, he was a cadet when I was there. In fact, come to think of it, he was part of the team that went to Empok Nor."

With a small smile, Duffy said, "Obviously he was one of the ones who survived."

"Good guess," Stevens said, also smiling. "He's a lieutenant now?"

"That's what the mission profile says," Duffy said, punching up a display. It showed the familiar features of the nervous young Ferengi Stevens remembered, but now wearing a junior-grade lieutenant's uniform. First Corsi and I wind up in bed together, then I find out that Nog's got a commission and is doing the chief's job. This is a very weird day.

"The plan," Duffy continued, "is to detach the fusion core and bring it back to DS9."

"The whole core?" Stevens asked.

"Yup. Apparently they had to eject it during that little brouhaha with the Jem'Hadar."

Stevens started scratching his chin. "Geez, the emergency power wouldn't last five minutes-we'd have to link together a bunch of emergency generators, maybe six or seven to get them running."

"Way ahead of you, Stevens," Gold said with that avuncular smile of his that meant he was being indulgent of the silly engineers and their endless ramblings. "They don't need our help with that-there's already a passel of S.C.E. folks on-station. What they do need help with is getting Empok Nor's fusion core from Trivas to DS9."

Faulwell spoke up. "Are we sure there's anything there to take? I mean, if the station's just sitting there" Duffy shrugged. "The lieutenant seemed to think there was."

"Uh, sir?" Corsi said as she stared down at a padd. "I'm looking over the records of the station right now. From the looks of it, it's a security nightmare."

"Oh, c'mon, Corsi," Duffy said with an incredulous look. "The station's in the middle of nowhere. The Cardassians didn't just abandon the station, they abandoned that whole star system-and it's still unclaimed. It's got to be the least strategically valuable piece of real estate in the sector."

"Maybe, but besides the mission Stevens mentioned, there've been a bunch of incidents on the station. It's been used as a 'neutral territory' meeting place on more than one occasion, and a group of Bajoran cultists used it as their base of operations last year. Last reports do have it being abandoned, though."

"So what's the problem?" Duffy asked.

Corsi finally looked up from her padd and fixed Duffy with a withering look. Stevens found he couldn't help but contrast it with the expression on her face not fifteen minutes earlier when she was asleep. "The problem is that anybody can just waltz in. The station has no defenses worth mentioning, but plenty of equipment that might attract salvagers. I can easily see Ferengi, Yridians, Orion, or Cardassian pirates-not to mention someone like the Androssi-gutting the place. We need to be on alert for anything. Whatever or whoever you send over there, I want a security detail of at least five."

Duffy nodded. "Fine." He looked around the table. "This is a straight-up nuts-and-bolts operation, so it'll be me, Stevens, Blue, and Soloman. Fabe, you'll be especially useful, since your time on DS9 means you actually know these systems."

"Well, mostly," Stevens said. "I mean, I spent most of my time on the Defiant, and the station had been pretty thoroughly modified by the time I got there. Empok Nor's still pure Cardassian. I'm not saying I can't do anything, but I don't want anyone getting raised expectations or anything."

Smiling Duffy said, "Don't worry about it, Fabe-we always have low expectations for you."

A chuckle passed around the table. "Gee thanks," Stevens said sardonically, and he considered throwing something at the second officer.

"Anyhow," Duffy said, turning back to Corsi, "counting this Nog guy, that's five-one security guard for each of us."

"We may want to double the security detail." Corsi's lips were pursed.

Duffy frowned. "We've already got a ten-person away team, Commander. I think making it fifteen is excessive."

"I don't. Those cultists I mentioned? I just noticed who led them." She held up her padd, the display of which now showed a familiar Cardassian face. "Dukat. You remember, the guy who brought the Dominion to this quadrant in the first place? And before that, the station's crawled with Jem'Hadar, Vorta, Ferengi-not to mention that mission that Fabe mentioned with the Cardassian booby trap."

Stevens looked up sharply. She called me "Fabe." While on duty. In a meeting, for crying out loud. What the hell-?

If Corsi or anyone else noticed the slip, they didn't show it.

"A ten-person team is enough," Duffy said.

"Good," Gold said, cutting Corsi's protest off. "We're set to rendezvous with the Rio Grande at 0830. Make sure the team's ready, Commander."

Duffy got up. "Yes, sir."

A buzz started to sound in the room as people got up from their chairs. Corsi, Stevens noticed, shot a venomous look at Duffy before turning and leaving the observation lounge. Pattie also didn't get up from her chair until after Abramowitz had left the room. Stevens went to the replicator and got himself a cup of coffee. By the time it materialized, only he and Bart Faulwell were left in the lounge.

"So," Bart said, "when did this thing between you and Corsi develop?"

Stevens sputtered his coffee.

Chuckling, Bart said, "Computer, napkin." One materialized in the replicator, and Stevens snatched it and wiped the stains off his uniform jacket.

"How the hell did you-?"

"Deductive reasoning," Bart said with a grin. "You two were the last ones in, you spent the entire meeting pointedly not looking at each other, and you didn't actually come back to our cabin last night."

Trying to sound dismissive, Stevens said, "That's it?"

"Plus, she called you 'Fabe' during the meeting. That pretty much clinched it for me."

Stevens sighed. I suppose if anyone was going to catch that, it'd be the linguist. "Look, Bart, this can't get out. We-"

"Easy," Bart said, holding up a hand. "The only reason I figured it out is because I know you didn't come

home last night. If you two want to have an affair and keep it secret-

"Hell, it isn't even an affair. Just a one-nighter, really. And I still haven't got the first clue as to what brought it on."

"What happened?"

Stevens told Bart about seeing her uncharacteristic appearance in the mess hall and her equally uncharacteristic invitation to join him. "We talked for hours. She moved around a lot when she was a kid-her family lived on about twelve different planets. That got me going about planet-hopping around the Rigel colonies with my parents' shuttle service. Then it was Starfleet stories."

He took a sip of coffee, managing to actually swallow it this time, and then continued. "Next thing I knew, she's inviting me back to her cabin. Lense was on duty, so we had the place to ourselves."

"Now there's a pairing," Bart said. "What on Earth do you think our security chief and chief medical officer talk about in their downtime?"

Chuckling, Stevens said, "Bart, until last night, I wouldn't have believed that Domenica ever was off-duty."

"Now you're doing it."

"Doing what?"

"You called her 'Domenica.' I don't think anyone on this ship has ever referred to her as anything other than 'Corsi,' 'Commander,' or 'Core Breach'-at least in the four months I've been here."

Stevens thought back. "She asked me to. I was actually calling her 'Commander' for the first hour or so, then she said to call her 'Domenica.'" He laughed. "Come to think of it, she also said if I called her 'Dom,' she'd kill me."

"Well, they teach you that stuff at the Academy."

Another sip of coffee. "She was amazingly-well, gentle. And warm. Bart, I did not spend the night with a woman who deserves to be nicknamed 'Core Breach.'"

"And you don't know what prompted it?"

Stevens shook his head. "No clue."

"Well, do yourself a favor. Try not to think about it until after the mission. Neither of you needs the distraction."

Grinning, Stevens said, "What, you're ship's counselor now?"

"No, but you don't need a linguist for this mission, so I thought I'd moonlight," Bart said, returning the grin. "Seriously, before I met Anthony I had my share of one-nighters. They have this tendency to linger in the brain-more so, if you have to interact with the person." He put an encouraging hand on Stevens's shoulder. "Just be careful, okay?"

Stevens took a sip of coffee, then nodded. "I will. Thanks, Bart."

"Hey, that's what us roommates are for."

FOUR

Nog hated being alone.

The fact that he spent most of his formative years in Uncle Quark's bar probably had a lot to do with that. Most of his life was spent in either the bustle of Deep Space 9, the crowded confines of the U.S.S. Defiant, or at Starfleet Academy. Indeed, the only time he was ever truly alone was during his convalescence after losing his left leg at AR-558-hardly a fond memory.

So he popped a tube grub into his mouth, took a sip of root beer, and tried to will the da Vinci to hurry up and arrive here in the Trivas system already.

Ideally, of course, he would've had a team of engineers with him in the Rio Grande. But if DS9 could have spared the engineers, he wouldn't have needed the da Vinci's help in the first place. The entire engineering staff and the other S.C.E. personnel that Starfleet had assigned and the Bajoran engineers were all too busy keeping DS9 from falling to pieces without a fusion core, and also preparing the station for the insertion of a new one.

I just hope this plan works.

Of course it'll work. Shar and I ran the numbers a hundred times. Both Colonel Kira and Commander

Vaughn approved it. It will work.

So why don't I feel confident?

"Computer," he finally said after swallowing the last of his tube grubs, "play some music."

"Please specify."

Nog thought a moment. Since I am alone, may as well take advantage. "Play the third movement from Blee Luu's Endless Dream."

The drad music cascaded over Nog's ears, and he immediately felt more relaxed. Nog could never understand why so many people reacted so badly to this lovely sound, but everyone from Jake and Uncle Quark to his roommates at the Academy had practically run screaming from the room every time he tried to play it. One of these days, I need to get my hands on a copy of her new recording.

Naturally, the da Vinci showed up just as he was getting into it.

With two quick stabs at the console, Nog opened a channel and cut off the music. "Rio Grande to da Vinci, this is Lieutenant Nog. It's good to see you."

The face of an older human with wispy white hair on his head and four pips on his collar appeared on the viewscreen. "This is Captain Gold of the da Vinci at your service, Lieutenant. We're ready to head to Empok Nor whenever you're ready."

"Thank you, sir. Please set course 187 mark 9 and proceed at full impulse. We'll be there in twenty minutes."

"Good. Lt. Commander Duffy has a full away team ready to go."

"I'm transmitting beam-over coordinates now," Nog said, and he suited action to words on his console.

"That'll put us right at the access to the core."

"Good," the captain repeated. Then he smiled a friendly smile. "Let's get moving."

Nog nodded and cut the connection. He took an instant liking to Captain Gold, and it gave him a good feeling about the mission in general. He had a plan, it would save the station, and the da Vinci crew would help him implement it.

In ten minutes, Empok Nor was close enough for visual range. He called it up on the main screen. His left leg started to itch. He didn't bother to scratch his prosthetic—besides, he knew it was just a psychosomatic reaction to this place. After all, he'd been here twice before, and each time he'd almost been killed—once by a drug-crazed Garak, once by a squadron of Jem'Hadar during a prisoner exchange. Let's hope that I keep the not-dying streak going.

The first time he came here, he thought it looked exactly the same as the Bajoran station. And on the face of it, it was the classic Cardassian design of a circle with pointed protrusions that looked like limbs trying to claw themselves out of dirt. One of Nog's classmates at the Academy theorized that it was an architectural metaphor for how Cardassian culture managed to claw its way up from being a resource-poor planet to a major player in Alpha Quadrant politics.

Now he looked at it with a more professional eye, and he could see all the differences. Empok Nor had been abandoned for four years, after all, and hadn't had the benefit of the Starfleet upgrades that had been going on on Deep Space 9 for the last seven-plus years. Empok Nor had none of the weapons or sensor upgrades, the improved structural supports, or any of the other dozens of improvements—some of which Nog had been involved in himself.

Of course, Empok Nor right now had one very critical thing that DS9 didn't, and it presently sat enticingly in the lower portion of the station.

A working fusion core.

The core was still active, too, and the quick scan Nog did showed that life support and artificial gravity were still functioning, as they were last year when the Defiant rescued Colonel Kira from the pah-wraith cultists. However, some of the readings, Nog noticed, didn't jibe with the readings the Defiant took back then.

"Rio Grande, this is the da Vinci," said a voice that wasn't Gold's over the runabout speakers. "We're ready to beam over."

Nog settled the Rio Grande into a parking orbit—the pylons were too unstable to risk docking there, especially with nobody in Ops to check on the station end—and then responded. "So'm I, sir," he said,

hoping that "sir" was the right thing to say, since whoever this person was didn't identify himself. It was probably the Lt. Commander Duffy person Gold mentioned, assuming Duffy was also a male, as the voice was. He'd been so busy quadruple-checking his calculations, he hadn't had the chance to familiarize himself with the names of any of the da Vinci crew.

Setting the runabout on standby, he programmed the transporter to beam him to the core access. Within moments, he was present on the eerily familiar catwalk. An access panel sat to his right, and nine Starfleet personnel—all, Nog noticed, in gold-trimmed uniforms, with the exception of the Nasat, who simply wore a combadge. Nog assumed the four humans and one Bolian holding very large phaser rifles were security and the two humans, the Nasat, and the Bynar were the actual S.C.E. team. He was surprised to see a single Bynar—I thought they all came in pairs, he thought—and one of the human engineers looked familiar. He also noted that only two of those present were officers. Though an officer himself, his years studying under Chief O'Brien had made Nog appreciate the importance of enlisted personnel, especially in engineering.

The human female security officer started directing her people to take up positions at various parts of the catwalk. Nog caught the names of each of the guards the dark-skinned human male was Hawkins, the pale human male was Drew, the olive-skinned human female was Lipinski, and the Bolian was called Frnats.

The other human engineer—the officer—walked up to Nog and offered his hand. "I'm Lieutenant Commander Duffy. I'm in charge here."

Taking the hand, Nog said, "A pleasure, sir. If you don't mind, I need to check something."

Duffy shrugged. "Check whatever you want. We'll get started now."

Blinking, Nog said, "Excuse me?"

"Don't worry," Duffy said, putting a hand on Nog's shoulder, "we'll get your core for you before you can eat a tube grub."

Sputtering, Nog said, "But-sir, with all due respect, I've already—"

"Don't worry about it, kid."

Kid? "Commander Duffy, I'm not a 'kid,' I'm the chief operations officer of—"

"Hey Duff, you'd better take a look at this. You too, Nog."

Nog looked over to see that the other human engineer was at the console. Duffy moved to join them, as did Nog. Once he got a good look at his face, Nog finally recognized him. "Stevens, right?"

Fabian Stevens smiled down at Nog. "Yup. Good to see you again, Nog. And congrats." Then he turned to Duffy. "Take a look."

"All the reaction chambers are online," Duffy said after a moment.

Nog said, "What!?" He looked at the console. Sure enough, all six of the fusion reaction chambers were active. "That's incredible! We don't—didn't even keep all six active on DS9."

"I thought this place was dead," the female security officer said to Nog. "The reports from your first trip here said that it was just running on emergency battery power."

"Well, one of the chambers was brought online by the pah-wraith cultists that squatted here," Nog said.

"But all six—it doesn't make sense."

"Someone's been here," the security woman said, hefting her rifle. "We need to bring more people over."

Duffy shook his head. "Corsi, that isn't necessary."

The Corsi woman moved almost eye to eye with Duffy. "Commander, there's a very good chance that we're not alone on this station."

"Actually, there's no chance that we aren't. We checked—there's no life signs here."

"Excuse me," Nog said.

"Right now, maybe," Corsi said, ignoring him, "but somebody had to bring those reactors online, and I doubt it was pah-wraith cultists."

"Excuse me," Nog repeated.

Also ignoring him, Duffy said, "Keep your people on alert, and I'll let Captain Gold know, but we don't need more security down here." He smiled. "There's too many people on this catwalk as it is."

"Excuse me," Nog almost shouted.

"What is it, Lieutenant?" Duffy asked.

"Sir, I have already laid out a plan for the extraction of the core and the transporting of it to DS9. If you'll just-"

Again, Duffy put the hand on Nog's shoulder. Nog was sorely tempted to brush it off. "Look, Lieutenant, I appreciate you wanting to look good to your superiors, but don't worry about it. We're pros. We do this sort of thing every day. We'll have your core out before you know it. Just sit back and watch us go at it, okay?"

He then turned his back on Nog and went to talk to the Bynar.

I don't believe this. I spent days on this, and they're just blowing it off. Who do they think they are?

Before Nog could say anything, though, he heard a strange noise. It was fairly high-pitched, and seemed to be coming from behind him. "What's that noise?"

Duffy frowned. "I don't hear anything."

Nog closed his eyes and focused in on the sound. "It's over-there!"

He pointed right where Frnats was pacing on the catwalk. She walked a step closer to the edge of the catwalk-

-and then the noise grew louder, energy crackled around her, and suddenly what appeared to be a giant brown mesh appeared in the air.

The Bolian went flying across the catwalk toward Hawkins.

Nog peered at the mesh. It seemed to be covering the entire fusion core. The strands of the mesh were about twenty centimeters wide with small square holes. It was brown, and Nog noticed that it seemed to be well, flowing. Almost as if it were a running body of water.

What was most fascinating was that the mesh didn't project out from a source, the way, say, a Starfleet force field could be seen to emanate from emitters in bulkheads. It was simply there, as if it had always been.

"The Androssi." Corsi, Duffy, and Stevens all said it simultaneously-the security chief with a tone of anger, the engineers with more of an "oh-no-not-again" attitude.

Although Nog had heard of the Androssi, he couldn't recall much at the moment. There wasn't time to try to dredge the memory in any case, as another high-pitched sound came from the middle of the catwalk, and another form materialized there.

It was the same shade of brown, and shaped like a ball about a meter in diameter. Its surface also seemed to be flowing.

"Androssi Protocol 1, now," Corsi said, and fired her own phaser. It fired at, of all things, Level 2, which was a light stun setting. Nog stared incredulously at the security chief.

However, the other three standing guards followed suit and fired.

Amazingly enough, the ball seemed to disrupt for a moment, fading in and out. Then it came back into existence and arcs of electricity shot out at each of the guards.

Corsi, Drew, and Lipinski managed to duck out of the way, but Hawkins was still standing near Frnats's prone form, and so was unable to avoid the attack.

"They've upgraded," Drew said grimly.

"Protocol 2," Corsi said without missing a beat.

Nog ran over to where Hawkins and Frnats were now both lying on the catwalk, the former twitching.

He hadn't come armed, but the Bolian wasn't using her phaser rifle anymore, and Nog hadn't spent the Dominion War fighting-and losing his leg-in order to stand and watch a fight now.

The Nasat and the Bynar did likewise, the former grabbing Hawkins's phaser, the latter checking the two guards with his tricorder.

Protocol 2, based on what the Nasat did with Hawkins's phaser, involved putting the phaser on random mode. All phasers created after Starfleet's first encounter with the Borg a decade earlier were able to randomly change settings and frequencies.

Okay, so obviously these guys have faced this Androssi security device before, Nog deduced as he changed the settings on his phaser.

As Nog joined the others in firing at random settings on the device and ducking to avoid the bolts of

electrical energy that shot around the catwalk, Duffy tapped his combadge.

"Duffy to da Vinci. We've got an Androssi security device here. Two guards are down, and the trick we used on Maeglin isn't working this time."

"Dammit," Gold said. "So much for an uninhabited station."

Nog ducked as another arc of electricity shot at him, then he fired two more shots, one at Level 1, one at Level 9, each at a different EM frequency. The ball seemed unimpressed.

"Duffy to transporter. Diego, please tell me you can punch through the interference this time."

"Sorry, Commander, but I lost the lock on you guys about a minute ago."

Gold said, "Find a way this time, Feliciano."

"Trying, sir."

One of Lipinski's shots disrupted the ball-its surface stopped flowing and it disappeared from view for a second. Unfortunately, when it came back into view it immediately zapped her, and she also fell to the catwalk.

Nog fired again, cursing the thing for its effectiveness-Lipinski hadn't had a chance to call out what setting she'd used, and there was no way anyone could risk moving over to her.

Or so he thought. The Nasat suddenly curled up into a ball-making her look like a chitinous counterpart to the security device-and rolled over to Lipinski. Two electrical bursts hit her, but they didn't seem to slow her down. She uncurled when she reached Lipinski and checked the setting.

"Level 4, low-frequency!" she said in a tinkly voice.

Nog quickly adjusted his phaser accordingly and fired.

So did the others.

The brown ball fizzled, and then disappeared. As soon as it did, the shots being fired continued through past where the ball had been. Drew, who had been standing opposite where Nog was crouched, barely ducked Nog's shot in time.

Letting out a very long breath, Nog tried to ignore the latest phantom itch on his leg. The war's been over for months, and it seems like I'm fighting just as much since it ended as I did during it.

"Good work, Pattie," Duffy said. "Soloman?"

The Bynar looked up at that. "All three guards are alive. But they will require immediate medical attention."

Duffy tapped his combadge. "Diego, any luck?"

"Sort of. The interference is still there, but I can actually get a lock on Lieutenant Nog's signal."

Stevens was looking at his tricorder. "I think I know why, Duff. Look at this." He showed his tricorder's display to the other human.

Corsi said, "Let's see if we can take out the mesh the same way."

Nog was about to take a look at Stevens's readings-it was odd that his combadge would penetrate the interference when no one else's would-when he heard Corsi's words. "No!" Nog cried. "If you disrupt it, the phaser shots will go through to the core!"

Nodding Corsi said, "Fine, we'll try something else." Then she regarded Nog's phaser rifle. "Nice work with that, by the way."

"Experience," Nog said quickly, not wanting to dwell on it.

Again, Corsi nodded. "Right, DS9 was pretty much the front line for most of the war, wasn't it? Well, thanks for the assist."

"I don't believe this," Duffy said before Nog could reply.

"What is it, Duffy?" Gold asked.

"Captain, apparently these security devices are broadcasting a huge number of specific interference patterns-including ones keyed to our specific combadges. In fact, one of them is 111's combadge."

Nog noticed the Bynar wincing at that statement. Sounds like 111 isn't around anymore. Is that the other Bynar? Is that why this one's alone and has such a weird name? It'd certainly explain why he speaks so hesitantly.

He didn't ask, though, but simply said, "I don't get it."

"What it probably means," Gold said with a deep sigh, "is that we're dealing with Overseer Biron again."

Corsi fixed Stevens with an incredulous look. "Wait a minute. You mean to tell me that, when we were on Maeglin, the Androssi scanned and recorded the combadge frequencies of the entire complement of the da Vinci and programmed it into their security on the off-chance that they'd meet up with us again?" Duffy smiled grimly. "That's exactly what we're telling you, Corsi."

"Hey, Feliciano," Stevens said. "I got an idea. Can you use the signal you're getting from Nog as a booster on the overall signal?"

"If that doesn't work," Duffy said, "we might be able to just take turns beaming people back and forth with his combadge."

"We can make it work," Stevens said. "Just modulate the pattern enhancer to the upper ranges and increase the confinement beam's range."

Nog looked at them like they were insane. All they had to do was beam Nog himself up to the da Vinci, then beam him back with a pattern enhancer.

"Or," Feliciano said before Nog had a chance to voice this thought, "I can just beam the lieutenant up, hand him a pattern enhancer, then beam him down."

There was a dead silence.

Duffy and Stevens looked at each other.

"Yeah, okay," Stevens said.

"I mean," Duffy added, "if you want to actually do it the sensible way, sure."

Rolling his eyes, Nog thought, These are the people I'm supposed to trust with extracting the core?

"Can the comedy, you two," Gold said. "Let's get the lieutenant up so we can get the wounded out of there. Once that's done, we're going to yellow alert-if I know Biron, he'll be back, and I want to be ready. Hell, if DS9 didn't need this core so badly, I'd call the whole damn thing off. I want reports every fifteen minutes, Duffy, clear?"

"As a bell, sir," Duffy said.

Corsi said, "Sir, I recommend that new combadges be replicated for the entire crew as well, and I'll need three more security guards to replace Frnats, Lipinski, and Hawkins."

"Way ahead of you on the combadges, Corsi. Barnak's already on that. Nog, get ready to be beamed up."

"Yes, sir."

As the transporter effect started to form around Nog, he heard Duffy say, "We'll get to work on the-" Then Nog found himself on a small transporter platform, only slightly larger than the one on the Defiant. "-field surrounding the core in the meantime." That was the rest of Duffy's sentence, heard over the comm.

A human with olive skin and black hair stood behind the console. His eyes went wide, and he said, "You're a Ferengi."

"And you're a human," Nog snapped. He wasn't in the mood for the usual shock at seeing a Ferengi in a Starfleet uniform. He'd gotten more of it at the Academy than since he returned to Deep Space 9, but it still grated. "Can we get a move on, please?"

"Right. Sorry, just didn't realize." He grabbed something off the floor and then walked around to the platform. "I'm Chief Feliciano. These are the pattern enhancers." He set them down on the platform.

"Great," Nog said. "Let's get going."

"Hang on," Feliciano said, walking back to the console. "I'm supposed to wait on security." He hesitated.

"Look, I'm sorry about that Ferengi comment. You probably get a lot of that. I just wasn't expecting it, is all."

Nog let out a breath. "It's okay. I'm sorry I snapped. Things have been a bit hectic."

The doors opened and three security guards walked in, all human females. One of them tossed a combadge to Feliciano. "New jewelry, Chief."

Feliciano caught it with a smile and looked at it. "I'm not into brooches."

The guard snorted, then looked at Nog. "I'm Robins. This is Eddy and Friesner. You must be Nog."

Nog just nodded. He wanted to get back to the station-for one thing, he wanted someone to tell him precisely what they were up against with the Androssi; for another, he still hadn't had a chance to check

out that anomalous reading he'd gotten on the Rio Grande.

"Energize, Chief," Nog ordered as soon as the three guards were assembled on the platform.

FIVE

The chime alerted Overseer Biron to the fact that his shift was to begin shortly. He awakened instantaneously and immediately noticed that something was wrong with the engines. The vibration of the deck that he felt under his bare feet as he got down off his hammock deviated from the norm.

The Androssi overseer touched his ear with one hand. "Engineering."

"Engineering." It was one of the workers; Engine Master Claris would not be on duty for another hour.

"This is the overseer. The overdrive is not performing at maximum efficiency. Please check the eldrak consumption rates. It will be repaired in one hour."

"Yes, my overseer, it will," the worker said without hesitation or surprise. After all, he was the overseer. If he said it would be fixed in an hour, then it would be done. That was the way of things. If the worker somehow failed to bring the overdrive back to proper efficiency within that timeframe, Biron would instruct Claris to have the worker disposed of and replaced.

Within five minutes Biron had removed his sleeping clothes and put on his overseer's jumpsuit, tied his waist-length hair back, and put in the five noserings that symbolized his position. This last he did in front of a small mirror; the reflection that gazed back at him was of a male Androssi with light sepia skin, slightly wavy golden hair with a full brown beard, and an unusually bulky build for one of his kind. The latter was due more to his weakness for anprat, a particularly fattening delicacy from the homeworld. As he prepared himself, he went over the day's schedule in his head, and also thought of a better way to integrate the new weapons systems they had obtained with Cardassian technology.

He left his quarters-which were the same size as every other cabin on the ship-and went to the flight deck. Sub-Overseer Howwi stood up upon Biron's entrance, as did the other four workers. They remained standing until Biron took his place at the front left seat of the rectangular deck.

Biron turned his head slightly to look at the darker-skinned Howwi in the seat to his right. The sub-overseer had trimmed his golden beard down to almost the skin, an affectation that Biron had never understood. Such attention to irrelevancies tended to interfere with the work. Still, Howwi had proven to be competent at his job, and perhaps he would learn the uselessness of trying to groom himself as if he were a member of the Elite. Like Biron, Howwi was of the officer class-which meant, if nothing else, that he was entitled to eye contact when Biron spoke to him.

"Have we heard from the client?"

Howwi blinked his eyes four times. "Negative. We will receive a communication via subspace within the hour."

"No more specific time than that?"

"Negative. The client is-elusive with regards to punctuality, as usual."

Biron sighed. He entered the idea he had earlier into the ship's vast database.

"Overseer," one of the workers said.

"Speak," Biron said without looking back. Those of the worker class were only worthy to be spoken to on duty-related issues, and then only when given leave.

"The security on the Cardassian station has been breached."

"Specifics?"

"The trioar field around the fusion core has been activated and the panshar has been disabled."

Frowning, Biron turned to Howwi. "Starfleet?"

"Possibly. They have proven to be most resourceful."

Again, Biron sighed. This was all the client's fault. Biron had not wanted to leave the Cardassian station, but the client had insisted on this face-to-face meeting, and also insisted it take place here in the Vlugta system. It left the Cardassian station exposed to other salvagers.

But the client needed to be kept happy, in this particular case. This client was providing the upgraded holo-emitters that Biron's sponsor among the Elite had been wanting for so long. As with every member of the officer class, Biron's sole purpose was to provide technology for the ship's Elite sponsors. He had

been particularly skilled at doing so for his sponsor-it had led to his quick promotion to overseer. In fact, Biron had achieved that rank faster than anyone in recorded memory, mainly because he knew how to properly exploit the clients. In this case, it was best to give in to the client's peculiar whims.

However, now the security on the target had been breached.

"Set navigational course 44491," he said without looking up. "Set FTL at 7.2. Send a subspace communication to the client. Message to read 'Must investigate security breach on target. Will reschedule rendezvous when difficulty is solved.'" He did not give the orders to anyone specific-he knew that someone would carry them out. If they did not, he would simply dispose of the four flight deck workers and bring in replacements.

Not that he expected that. His successes meant that the workers on his ship were particularly efficient. Sure enough, his status board indicated that all his orders were carried out with dispatch. The viewscreen showed the visual distortion of space brought about by the implementation of the faster-than-light drive. At 7.2 x 10⁹ times the speed of light, they would arrive at the Cardassian station in under an hour.

"With respect, Overseer," Howwi said, "the client will not like this."

Biron looked at Howwi. "The client will like losing the station even less. If it truly is Starfleet, we cannot risk letting them run loose."

Howwi scratched his nose at the spot where, once he was promoted to full overseer, his fifth nosering would go. "Might it be possible that the da Vinci is the ship we will face?"

"To speculate would be unproductive." Biron considered. "However, I would certainly welcome a chance to face them again." The defeat at Maeglin still grated on Biron. He had not failed often in his career.

"Overseer," said a different worker.

"Speak."

"Receiving telemetry from the trioar field now."

"Report."

"It has detected and interfered with the communication badge signals from nine members of the crew of the Starfleet vessel U.S.S. da Vinci, registry NCC-81623 Kieran Duffy, Domenica Corsi, Fabian Stevens, 110, P8 Blue, Vance Hawkins, Stephen Drew, Andrea Lipinski, and Frnats. It no longer detects those signals, however."

"Perhaps they left," Howwi said.

"Or perhaps they discovered the interference and adjusted their communication badges accordingly," Biron said. "Adjust FTL to 9.5."

That would bring them to the Cardassian station in fifteen minutes. To go faster would risk damage to the engines, which Biron was not willing to risk. As it was, he was disappointed in his emotional response to the presence of the da Vinci. Such thoughts of revenge were inefficient.

But he wanted to get back at the humans David Gold and Sonya Gomez and the rest of their crew for the humiliation on Maeglin. The fact that he would get to do so while continuing to service the client that would get his sponsor the holo-emitters simply made it more efficient to do so.

SIX

Fabian Stevens stared at the Androssi field that was now surrounding the fusion core. He had spent the last several months trying not to think about their last encounter with the Androssi-it had been Commander Gomez's first mission on the da Vinci, and more than once he had been convinced it was going to be her last.

As if it wasn't bad enough that they might have to deal with that Androssi overseer Biron again at any minute, there was also the fact that each second that they couldn't get at the fusion core was another second that DS9 was in serious danger. Stevens still had plenty of friends on the station, and he was seriously worried about them right now.

Then there was Corsi. Each time that damn brown ball shot at her, Stevens's heart skipped a beat. Focus, Fabe, focus. Remember what Bart said-don't let this distract you.

Looking over at that hard face-such a contrast from the peaceful woman who was sleeping next to him

this morning-he knew that there was no chance of anything developing between them. Leaving aside any other considerations, he doubted that Domenica herself would allow herself to get involved with such an inappropriate dalliance.

Not "Domenica." She's Corsi. Or Core-Breach. Just keep it professional.

He heard the familiar sound of a transporter-in fact, Stevens could tell just from the level of noise that it was four people materializing-and turned to see Nog, Eddy, Friesner, and Robins appear on the catwalk. Nog had three pattern enhancers, which he wasted no time in placing in a triangle, with one point at Lipinski's twitching form, the other two around the heap that Hawkins and Frnats had fallen into on the opposite side of the catwalk.

Robins, meanwhile, started distributing new combadges to everyone. Stevens had to admire the thoroughness of Biron and his people, despite himself-that had proven a remarkably effective tactic. If Nog hadn't been here, we might've had serious problems. They probably still would have been able to get the casualties off-station, using the da Vinci's shuttlecraft, but who knew what other security was floating around here?

After the three guards dematerialized, Nog said, "Can someone please explain to me what it is, precisely, that we are up against?"

"Simple," Duffy said. "The Androssi. They first showed up in the Demilitarized Zone a few years back, trying to convince the Maquis to accept their help."

"Help?"

Duffy sighed. "In a lot of ways, the Androssi are like the S.C.E.-they offer to fix technical problems. The difference is, they always have a price."

Nog seemed confused. "What's wrong with that?"

Stevens grinned. Once a Ferengi

"There tends to be a big difference," Duffy said, "between what they ask for and what they actually take. They've also been known to cause the problem in order to come in and solve it. Most of the places they claim to help out are usually worse off than when they started-mainly because what they ask for is technology. They're constantly looking for new tech."

"What about adjusting existing technology?" Nog asked.

Stevens frowned. "What do you mean?"

Nog walked over to a console. "When I got here, I picked up some strange readings." He started entering commands into the console. "Look at this."

Stevens and Duffy both walked up to join the young Ferengi at the console. That's Lieutenant Young Ferengi to you, Fabe, he admonished himself. He still had trouble wrapping his mind around Nog as an officer-hell, it had taken him a while to get used to the idea of Quark's nephew as a cadet

Looking at the console, Stevens saw that Nog had called up the station specs and put them alongside an internal scan of the station.

Duffy spoke before Stevens could. "They've made modifications."

Corsi stepped forward. "What kind of modifications?"

"Not sure," Duffy said. "The Androssi use dimensional shifts in their technology. It's why their stuff will sometimes not be visible until you interact with it."

"Okay, here's a question," Corsi said. "Let's say they've modified the station. Do we have any reason to stop them?"

Nog whirled on her. "We need the fusion core."

"So the hell what? I remind you, Lieutenant, that we're on an unclaimed station in unclaimed space."

"Overseer Biron and his people are still wanted on Maeglin after what they pulled," Duffy said.

"That's assuming that this really is the work of Biron, which we don't know. Besides, we don't have the authority to act on behalf of the Maeglin government, and it doesn't change the fact that this station is in free space. They have as much a right to it as we do."

Stepping forward, Nog said, "We're not just abandoning the station to these people! We have to have that fusion core."

Corsi looked at Duffy. "Commander?"

Well, that's impressive, Stevens thought, she's actually passing the buck to Duff. But then, Corsi always deferred to whoever was in charge, once she got her complaint in. Normally that was Gomez or Gold, but with the commander off on Sarindar, that left Duff in charge-just, he remembered, like it was against the Tholians.

"I'm with Nog here, Corsi. You're right, the Androssi have as much right to the station as we do-but we have just as much a right to try to dismantle their net. Besides, we really do need this fusion core."

"Lieutenant Commander Duffy?" The hesitant voice belonged to Soloman.

"Talk to me, Soloman."

"I have done a preliminary investigation of the Androssi security device. As far as I can determine, the Androssi have upgraded their technology from the last time we encountered them. I do not believe that I can interface with their technology as 111 and I attempted the last time."

Stevens sighed. He had expected something like this-and honestly, he was grateful. Soloman had been through enough since 111 died on that big ship at Blossom IV. His and 111's attempt to interface with Androssi computers on Maeglin almost didn't work-he doubted that Soloman could handle it on his own now without his partner.

Duffy nodded. "Okay. Take a look at the station computer, see if you can figure out what they've done to it."

"Yes, sir."

Stevens thought about that incident on Blossom IV-the Beast, they'd nicknamed that massive ship that had fought the Enterprise to a standstill and whose uninvited insectoid inhabitants had killed 111. It had been a near thing that they weren't all decapitated by those things

P8 Blue then skittered over on all eights. "I have an idea, sir."

"Good, we could use one," Duffy said dryly.

"The field was disrupted with a Level-4, low-frequency phaser blast. The problem is, we can't just fire on it without risking hitting the core once it's disrupted."

"We know all that, Pattie."

Then something occurred to Stevens, and he went back to the console.

"Right," Pattie said, "but what I'm thinking is that we can set up one of the rifles to emit a pulse at that level and frequency that would dissipate on impact no matter what."

"It's certainly worth a shot-if you'll pardon the pun," Duffy added with a smile.

"That's it!" Stevens cried.

"What is it, Fabe?" Duffy asked.

"I was trying to figure out why these modifications look so familiar. The Androssi have added their own wrinkle to this stuff, but it looks like the same kind of tech that we found on the Beast."

"The Beast?" Nog asked.

"An alien ship the Enterprise came across," Duffy said quickly. "We crawled around its guts before we had to blow it up. It was huge, about a thousand times the size of a Sovereign-class ship-more like a planet. Had some pretty nasty weaponry, too, as I recall."

Pattie was looking over another console. "I think you're right, Stevens," she said. "Once you compensate for the dimensional shift the Androssi always use, the match is pretty close."

"Great, so the Androssi came across a Beast of their own," Duffy said with a sigh.

"Maybe it was even the same one," Stevens said, "and they just copied the tech."

Nog let out a small noise, then said, "It doesn't matter! We need to find a way to get around it!"

The Ferengi seemed particularly anxious. Stevens remembered that the kid was always a bit high-strung. Then again, with Rom as his father and Quark as his uncle, he could hardly be otherwise. And he's not a "kid," he's a lieutenant.

"Easy, Nog," he said aloud, "we'll find a way through it."

Pattie had gone back to modifying Eddy's phaser rifle. The security guard, in turn, was pacing the catwalk with a hand phaser.

Stevens, meanwhile, started doing a more detailed scan of the modifications. Now that he knew what he was looking at, he was able to ask the computer the right questions-even this somewhat more limited

Cardassian computer. It had been a couple of years since he had to deal with the eccentricities of Cardassian systems, and he hadn't missed it all that much.

"Modifications are done," Pattie said, clambering up onto her hind legs while hefting the phaser. She handed it to Eddy. "Would you like to do the honors, Claire?"

Eddy smiled. "Happy to do it."

Okay, Stevens thought as he ran through the scan, the parts up on the pylons are in the same spot as where we put the weapons upgrades on DS9. No, wait, the ones on the lower pylons are different.

Weird. But it looks like-

Oh boy.

Eddy fired her phaser at the fusion core-or, more accurately, at the mesh surrounding it. Stevens noted that it looked like the Defiant's pulse weapons rather than the standard beam one got from a handheld phaser. It did, however, seem to have the desired effect-the mesh surrounding the fusion core disrupted and then disappeared, but the beam did not continue through to damage the core.

"Yes!" Nog cried, pumping his fist.

"Good work, Pattie," Duffy said with a grin.

"Uh, Duff?" Stevens said, hating to dampen everyone's enthusiasm with what he just figured out.

"Yeah, Fabe?"

"I think I know what they've done here. I'd kinda like you and Soloman to check it over, though."

Duffy went to the console to examine his findings. Soloman was still communing directly with the main computer in that weird way Bynars did. By the time he came out of his trance, Duffy was finished.

"I'd like to state for the record that this really really sucks," Duffy said. He tapped his combadge. "Duffy to Gold."

"Go ahead, Commander."

"I've got good news and bad news, sir."

"Give me the good news."

"We've broken through the field around the fusion core, so now we can get at it."

"Good."

Duffy let out a very long breath. "The bad news is that the Androssi appear to have salvaged some tech from the same people who built the Beast. Based on what we've been able to determine, assuming that our reading of the Beast equipment is accurate, and without being a hundred percent sure how it works exactly-

"Spit it out, Duffy!"

Duffy took a breath.

"The Androssi are turning Empok Nor into the mother of all mobile weapons platforms."

SEVEN

Captain David Gold stared at the viewscreen, which presently showed him Empok Nor drifting in space. The station itself gave no clue as to its sinister new purpose.

"You sure about this, Duffy?"

"Completely? No. To be honest, we'd need about a year, a full research team, and a starbase facility to dope most of this stuff out. But they've definitely put some upgraded thrusters onto the lower pylons and some very nasty weapons systems into the upper pylons. We're talking phasers at what I'd have to call Level 30 or so."

"Damn," Gold muttered. That was enough to split a planet in half.

Stevens added, "It also looks like they've got some kind of plasma-based directed energy weapons. I've never seen anything like it, and I couldn't begin to figure out how powerful it is."

"Sir, if I may?" That was Nog's voice.

"Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"I just examined the fusion core itself. These Androssi have also made modifications to it. Only one of the reactor chambers is actually running the station. The rest of it is powering a massive propulsion system that's been integrated with the core itself. If I'm reading this right, it might well be capable of speeds up to

Warp 6."

"Captain," Soloman put in, "I have communed with the station computer. It confirms what Mr. Stevens, Lt. Commander Duffy, and Lieutenant Nog have said. In addition, there are preparations underway, albeit incomplete, for the installation of quantum torpedo bays in the docking ring. Based on the specifications, the torpedoes would have a yield of approximately one thousand times that of the torpedoes on a Defiant-class ship."

David Gold tried to figure out a way that this all could be translated into good news, but couldn't. A weapons platform the size and shape of Deep Space 9 capable of speeds up to Warp 6 with enough weaponry to lay waste to a solar system in about half an hour, all in the hands of Biron.

"Gevalt," he muttered. "All right people, listen up-I want a full analysis of what the Androssi have done to the station."

"Sir, what about extracting the core?" Nog asked.

Gold's instinct was to tell the young Ferengi that they had bigger problems-but, of course, they didn't. True, the Androssi were bad news-it would be decades before Maeglin fully recovered from what Biron and his crew did to the place-but Deep Space 9 was counting on that fusion core. They needed it, not just for the people on the station, but the billions of lives in the Bajoran sector that DS9 was responsible for.

"We can do both, sir," Duffy said before Gold could say anything. "Soloman can handle the analysis. Stevens and the lieutenant both know these systems well enough that they should be able to handle the computer even without his help."

"Good," Gold said. "Then-"

From ops, Lieutenant Ina interrupted. "Sir, long-range scans are picking up a vessel on direct approach to Empok Nor-travelling at Warp 7.3."

"Identify." Gold gripped the arms of his command chair. If the queasy feeling in his gizzard was any indication, it would be the Androssi. To his chagrin, his queasy gizzard had proven to be depressingly reliable over the years.

"Configuration and power output matches that of the Androssi," the Bajoran ops officer said. "Sensors say it's a ninety percent match with the ship we encountered at Maeglin."

Gold muttered several curses in Yiddish. "Yellow alert."

"Transporter room to bridge."

"Go ahead, Feliciano."

"Sir, I've lost the lock on the away team."

"Da Vinci to Duffy," Gold said immediately.

When no response was forthcoming, he turned to McAllan at tactical, who was operating his console and shaking his head. "I've lost the away team's signals-all of them, even Lieutenant Nog's. Something's jamming them."

Gold muttered several more curses in Yiddish. "Engineering. Barnak, punch a hole through that damn interference, pronto."

Jil Barnak, the Atrean chief engineer of the da Vinci, said, "On it, sir."

"Androssi ship coming out of warp and on an intercept course with us," Ina said.

McAllan added, "They're running weapons hot."

"Raise shields. Arm weapons, but don't lock on yet. Let's give them a chance to play nice."

Gold could feel McAllan's dubious look without bothering to turn around and see it. The tactical officer said, "Sir-do you really think they're going to?"

"No," Gold said with a grim smile. "But I like to live the life of a cockeyed optimist. Put 'em on screen."

The viewscreen's image changed from Empok Nor to that of a familiar-looking ship. The hull was colored brown-just like Androssi skin, and the jumpsuits that they seemed to favor. Gold's first impression of the Androssi had been that they had no aesthetic sense whatsoever, and their vessel design bore that out the ship, which had no name as far as anyone knew, was basically a big box. Abramowitz's cultural profile on them, limited though it was, indicated that the Androssi had a preference for the practical that bordered on the utilitarian. That, their overriding interest in technology, and their rectangular

ship construction had led some to make comparisons to the Borg, but the Androssi had a definite hierarchical structure and they were most definitely individuals.

"Hailing frequencies."

McAllan manipulated his console. "Open, sir."

Gold sat up straight in his command chair. He had a tendency to slouch-something about which his wife had constantly given him tsuris-but he always made sure to sit up whenever he was sending a visual communication. "This is Captain Gold of the Federation Starship U.S.S. da Vinci. Identify yourselves."

"They're responding, sir, but audio only."

"Just like last time," Gold said with a nod. The Androssi never communicated visually. Abramowitz's theory was that they didn't want anyone to see any aspect of their technology, even if it was just in the background. "On speaker."

"This is Overseer Biron. You are once again interfering in a legitimate Androssi operation, Captain Gold. You will utilize your transporter to beam your away team off of the station and warp out of the area immediately, or we will be forced to take hostile action."

"So, it is you, Biron. Don't insult my intelligence. You know damn well that I can't 'remove' the away team because you're jamming their combadges. In any case, this is unclaimed space. You have no jurisdiction over our actions, and no justification for taking any kind of action against us."

"Perhaps not, Captain Gold, but you have no jurisdiction over ours, either."

Smiling, Gold said, "Actually, we've been deputized by the planetary government on Maeglin. We have standing orders to place you under arrest and remand you to Maeglin Law Enforcement Bureau." That was a complete fabrication, of course, but Biron didn't know that. "We therefore request that you lower shields and prepare to be boarded."

"Now it is you who insult my intelligence, Captain. Do you really expect me to accede to that request?"

Gold gave a half-smile. "Not really, no. But I thought it was worth a shot. Now the question is--"

"They're firing," McAllan interrupted.

"So much for cockeyed optimism," Gold muttered. "Red alert. Wong, evasive."

"Yes, sir," the conn officer said.

McAllan said, "It's a torpedo. If it's anything like the last time, our shields should hold."

Ina shook her head. "It's not a perfect match for that one, Mac," she said.

"Lock phasers and fire," Gold said.

"Firing." As McAllan spoke, Gold saw the image on the viewscreen of the amber beams from the da Vinci's phaser banks strike the Androssi vessel. "Torpedo impact in ten seconds. Their shields are down to eighty percent. Torpedo impact in threetwoone"

The torpedo struck with what felt to Gold's experienced self as a light blow. "Damage?"

"No damage at all," McAllan said, sounding rather surprised. "Maybe they- Oh, hell. Captain, shields are completely gone."

Gold was grateful that Yiddish had such an impressive lexicon of curses.

"They're firing again," Ina reported. "Phasers this time."

Which will cut us to pieces without shields, Gold thought grimly. "Wong, get us the hell outta here, full impulse, pattern gamma."

"Pattern gamma, aye."

Under Songmin Wong's expert guidance, the da Vinci blasted away from Empok Nor at its fastest sublight speed.

Away from Empok Nor and, to Gold's annoyance, away from Duffy and his team.

But without shields, they were sitting ducks.

"Sir, whatever that torpedo did completely disrupted the shields," McAllan said. "I can't get them to reconstitute."

Wong said, "Androssi ship is not pursuing."

Gold leaned forward. "What?"

"They're taking up a position relative to one of Empok Nor's upper pylons."

The captain pounded his fist on the console. He had run out of Yiddish curses, and started muttering a

few in Klingon.

"Bring us back, Wong. We can't leave the away team exposed. McAllan, as soon as we're in range, full spread of phasers."

The da Vinci arced back toward the box-shaped ship.

"Sir, they've lowered their shields," Ina said.

"In weapons range," McAllan said at almost the same time.

"Fire," Gold almost shouted. The only reason the Androssi could have had to lower shields was to transport someone to the station.

Phaser fire lanced out from the da Vinci once again, this time striking right on the Androssi's unprotected hull.

"They've raised shields," McAllan said.

"Barnak to bridge. Captain, I can't get the shields back up, and whatever's jamming communications has increased in intensity."

Ina said, "They're firing phasers."

"Evasive, Wong," Gold said, "pattern epsilon."

McAllan added, "They've also raised shields again, still at eighty percent."

Wong's maneuvers were partly successful-there was an impact, but it was less than Gold had feared, though more than he'd hoped. "Damage report."

"Hull breach on Deck 6," Ina said. Gold noticed that the lieutenant put one hand to her left ear. Bajoran beliefs said that the pagh, or life force, resided in the left ear. "Force fields holding. Power systems rerouting." She turned around to look at Gold with a dismayed expression. "Sir, they were able to get a transporter beam off before we fired. Sensors are picking up five Androssi life forms on the station."

At this rate, I'm going to run out of Klingon curses, too, Gold thought.

EIGHT

Duffy heard Ina Mar say, "Sir, long-range scans are picking up a vessel on direct approach to Emp-" before the signal started to degrade.

He tapped his combadge. "Duffy to da Vinci-you're breaking up."

"-figuration and po-the Androssi. Sens-ered-Maegli-"

"Da Vinci, come in!" Duffy shouted.

Corsi tapped her combadge. "Corsi to da Vinci, come in."

Duffy looked over at Pattie, but it was Nog who spoke. "There's some kind of jamming field-the combadges are useless."

"Which means we can't be transported even with these pattern enhancers," Pattie added with the tinkly noise that indicated that she was annoyed.

Corsi hefted her phaser rifle. "Ina identified them as Androssi. I think they came back to see who's been sleeping in their beds."

Duffy snorted. "Fairy tale references, Commander? That's new." He did notice that Stevens was particularly taken aback by the reference.

"Commander Duffy, this is serious. We need to-"

"Keep doing what we're doing-what the captain ordered us to do," he added quickly, hoping that it would cut off Corsi's inevitable objection. "Soloman, continue the analysis. I want to know everything the Androssi have done."

"It would be best if we..if I did that work in the central computer core, Commander."

Duffy winced at Soloman's slip. He'd done so well adjusting generally to living up to his new designation that the Bynar's occasional lapse into thinking himself as part of a two-person team was fairly jarring.

"We shouldn't split up," Corsi said sharply.

"Actually, we'll have to," Nog said. "If we're going to extract the core, I'll need to get deeper into the system in order to see what, exactly, the Androssi have done to the core."

"I strongly recommend against it, Commander," Corsi said to Duffy. "The Androssi might be boarding the station at any minute. We have to be ready for anything, and splitting us up will make us considerably

more vulnerable."

Before Duffy could make a decision, he saw a bizarre transporter effect in the midst of the platform. It was one he'd seen before, on Maeglin-it was faster and quieter than Starfleet's transporters.

Five Androssi appeared in the midst of the catwalk. Like all Androssi, they had brown- or sepia-toned skin, with long hair of either blond, gold, or brown, and wearing beige jumpsuits; the men also all had thick beards. They were probably the most nondescript aliens Kieran Duffy had ever seen in his career. Two of them wore three noserings, two wore none, and one wore four. Duffy recognized the last of those, who stood in the center Sub-Overseer Howwi, Biron's second-in-command.

Corsi and her people moved as one-each of them stood between the Androssi and a member of the S.C.E. team, with Friesner standing beside Nog. Corsi herself stood by Stevens, which surprised Duffy-he had expected the chief to go to the second officer's side. Not that he cared one way or the other, but it was the kind of protocol thing that Corsi usually followed pretty religiously.

Duffy shot Corsi a look, and she gave a quick nod back-they wouldn't fire unless Duffy himself gave the order. They did, however, all point their weapons.

Okay, he thought, let's see if we can get through this without trying to kill each other. Duffy did not like the idea of a firefight breaking out on this ever-more-crowded catwalk, but it was looking inevitable.

"Lieutenant Commander Duffy," Howwi said upon sighting him. "This is the second time you've interfered in a legitimate Androssi operation." Duffy noticed that the Androssi appeared to be unarmed, but with their dimensional-shifting technology, those appearances were quite deceiving.

"That's your interpretation, Howwi," he said, trying to maintain an amiable tone. "We were the ones who were asked by the Maeglin authorities, and we have as much claim to Empok Nor as you do."

"Perhaps. But we have a mission to fulfill."

Duffy smiled grimly. "So do we. In fact, thousands of lives are counting on us to get this fusion core to one of our space stations."

"In fact," Nog said, to Duffy's surprise, "that's all we need. Can't we negotiate this? Most of your systems are tied into other parts of the station. Surely you can supply your own power source? We can extract the fusion core, and you're welcome to the rest of it!"

Duffy glowered at the little Ferengi. Dammit, kid, we don't work like that! But he didn't say that out loud-the last thing he could afford to do was show weakness of command in front of Howwi. Of course, Nog had never dealt with the Androssi, so he perhaps didn't know what, precisely, they were dealing with. But even a Ferengi should know that there was no possible way that a weapons platform of this magnitude could be used for any good purpose.

Howwi shrugged. "Why do these lives you wish to save concern us?"

Duffy blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"We are performing a mission for the Elite. You wish us to hamper that mission in order to preserve the lives of irrelevant aliens. I'm afraid that this negotiation would serve no purpose. We have nothing to gain by allowing you to take the fusion core." He turned to his people. "Kill them."

Dammit, dammit, dammit, Duffy thought as he ducked to his knees behind Drew.

One of the Androssi wearing no noserings pressed a button on her wrist and a force field that looked just like the flowing brown mesh that had surrounded the fusion core-and was, indeed, the signature of much Androssi tech-formed around the quintet of Androssi. Duffy noted that, just like that one, it did not appear to come from any particular source-one second it wasn't there, the next it was.

Like the security device, this thing shot out electrical bursts. As it did so, Corsi said, "Fire!"

All five security guards fired-at, Duffy noticed, Level 4, and on a low frequency. Eddy's was still in pulse-phaser mode; the other four were standard beams.

The mesh dispersed instantaneously, and Duffy found himself facing five very surprised-looking Androssi. Duffy grinned. "You ain't the only ones with cute tricks, Howwi."

"On stun," Corsi said, "and fire!"

All five security guards fired, this time on the standard stun setting, and the five Androssi collapsed.

"You know," Duffy said, still grinning, "it's really nice for it to be easy every once in a while."

"We're not out of this yet," Corsi said.

Nodding, Duffy said, "I know." He looked at his people who, in turn, were all looking at him, waiting for orders. Part of him once again thought, Sonnie, come home. This should've been her job.

But, to his own surprise, that was only part of him. The rest of him felt relatively calm and confident. The cold sweat he broke out in when he was in command of the da Vinci and the old Constitution-class Defiant fell into interphase while the Tholians opened fire was nowhere to be seen. Kieran Duffy chose to view this as a good sign.

He took a deep breath through his nose and then breathed out through his mouth. "Okay, we need to figure out how to get the Androssi tech separated from the Cardassian tech, and we need to figure out how to extract the fusion core."

Nog spoke up. "Sir, I've already put together a plan for extracting the core-it's one that's already been approved by Colonel Kira and Commander Vaughn."

"And I'm sure it's a fine one, Lieutenant, but we prefer to do things our own way. Besides," he added with a smile, "I need you and Fabe here to do something more important."

Stevens raised an eyebrow. "Why do I always get nervous when you smile like that?"

Ignoring the comment, Duffy said, "Fabe, you've said before that the biggest problem on DS9 was always getting the Cardassian and Starfleet equipment to talk to each other."

"Yeah, the chief complained about it all the time. Like I said, I was mostly detailed to the Defiant, so I didn't have to deal with it much"

With a smile of his own, Nog said, "I certainly did. I think I know what you want us to do. Chief O'Brien showed me when I was assigned to the station as a cadet how he'd worked around the incompatibility issues. You want us to make the Cardassian systems reject the Androssi additions."

"If that's possible."

Stevens had what Duffy had come to recognize as his inspirational look. Fabian Stevens worked best when he was handed a problem and told to fix it somehow. He could improvise a solution with the best of them, and he had the feeling that Nog was cut from the same cloth-especially given that they both worked under Miles O'Brien. The former Enterprise transporter chief was one of the more creative engineering minds Duffy had ever encountered.

Nog and Stevens immediately started putting their heads together. Leaving them to it, Duffy turned to Pattie and Soloman. "You two get cracking on the fusion core. I'm going to try to punch through this interference so we can find out what's happening with the da Vinci."

The two aliens nodded, and went to work.

As Duffy turned to Corsi, Drew spoke up. "Sir, I think I've worked out a program that will recognize when the Androssi use that dimensional shift of theirs."

"Really?" Duffy said, his eyes wide with surprise.

Drew shook his head. "What, you think you guys are the only ones who know how to use a tricorder on this ship?"

Putting up his hands, Duffy said, "I stand corrected. Good work, Drew. Between that and Nog's ears, we should have a good early-warning system in place if they come back."

"Not if," Corsi said, "when. Howwi's the sub-overseer, remember. As soon as Biron realizes his second hasn't reported in, he'll send a replacement."

Unholstering his tricorder, Duffy said, "Assuming that Captain Gold hasn't taken care of Biron on his own."

"We can't assume that."

Way to keep the morale up, Duffy thought sourly. "That's why I'm going to be working to punch through the interference. Let's get to it, folks. We may not have a lot of time before trouble comes back."

NINE

Just once, David Gold thought, I'd like to go on a mission where my ship doesn't have the crap kicked out of it.

Damage reports were coming in at a constant clip. Much shorter and less impressive damage reports on the Androssi ship were also coming in, but it was a losing battle for as long as they didn't have shields.

They couldn't even get out a distress signal as long as Biron kept that interference up. Unfortunately, the ship's engineers were too busy keeping the ship from coming apart at the seams to focus properly on finding a way to cut through it to contact the away team. Sensors were still detecting five Androssi, seven humans, one Nasat, one Bynar, and one Ferengi on the station-all in the same general vicinity-but they couldn't determine anything more specific than that. All Gold knew for sure was that his team was alive-for the moment.

"Faulwell to bridge."

Gold frowned. The S.C.E. linguist/cryptographer should have been in his quarters. He had no engineering training-aside from what he might have picked up by osmosis from being on the da Vinci-and this particular mission didn't call for his talents.

But Gold also knew that he wouldn't have contacted the bridge at this particular juncture without a damn good reason. "Go ahead."

"Sir, what about the runabout?"

"What about it?"

"We have its prefix codes, and I'm willing to bet that it has shields and weapons and other things like that."

Gold blinked. Then he blinked again. Then he turned to McAllan, whose look of annoyance combined with embarrassment more or less matched how Gold felt right now.

"He's, ah-he's right, sir," McAllan said. "We can remote-control the Rio Grande from here."

"You want an engraved invitation, man? Do it!"

The da Vinci took another hit. "Structural integrity field down to sixty percent," Ina said. "Another hit and we're going to start coming to pieces."

"Computer, prepare escape pods. McAllan, return fire and get that runabout over here."

"Sir, we're down to our last four torpedoes-and I now have control of the Rio Grande," McAllan added with a grim smile.

Ina whirled around to face Gold. "Sir, Androssi starboard shields are down!"

Gold leaned forward in his command chair. "McAllan, target the starboard shields with those last four torpedoes, but don't touch that fire control until I say so. Set the Rio Grande's course to 189 mark 2 and have its phasers do a strafing run on the Androssi's port side."

"Yes, sir," McAllan said. Gold could hear the unasked question as to what the hell the captain was thinking implied in those two words, but the lieutenant was a good enough officer to keep that question unasked. Mainly, Gold thought, because he knows I'd bust his tuchas back to ensign so fast. As soon as the Rio Grande started firing, the Androssi ship changed its position in order to keep its vulnerable side away from the runabout and also to put it at optimum position to return fire.

Which was exactly what Gold was hoping for. "Fire torpedoes!"

The torpedoes blasted away from the da Vinci just as the Rio Grande finished its run. Since torpedoes travelled slower than phasers, the Androssi ship actually had time to try to take an evasive course, but it was too little, too late.

"Multiple hull breaches on the Androssi ship," Ina said. "Their overall power levels are reading at fifty-five percent."

"Follow it up with dessert, McAllan," Gold said. "Fire phasers."

As the phasers fired, tearing more into the Androssi hull, Gold added, "Bring the Rio Grande about and prepare to extend its shields around us."

"Sir," Ina said, "if we do that-"

"We'll only get twenty percent effectiveness from the runabout shields. I took basic engineering at the Academy too, Ina, even if it was before you were born-the old man's mind isn't that addled. It's still twenty percent more than we have now."

Ina turned contritely back around to her console.

"Overseer."

"Speak."

"There is a runabout moving toward our position with its impulse drive."

Biron actually looked at the worker who made this pronouncement. "Explain yourself!"

"The Starfleet runabout U.S.S. Rio Grande, registry NCC-72452, was in a standby position proximate to Upper Pylon 1 of the Cardassian station. It is now in motion and on an elliptical course toward us."

"I should have been informed of this sooner," Biron said. He pressed a button on his right cuff. An electrical charge surged through the chair on which the worker was sitting, vaporizing the worker instantly.

Another worker said, "Starfleet runabout is arming its phaser weapons and preparing to fire."

"Adjust position to present minimal aspect to runabout. Prepare another ladrion burst for the da Vinci."

"Overseer, we can't fire the ladrion bursts," came the voice of Engine Master Claris over the

communication system. "We have sustained damage to that system from the Starfleet's ship's phaser fire."

Biron thought. He had use of the remaining anril torpedo, but it was only effective against shields-it would have minimal impact on the da Vinci's hull, even as damaged as it was. Several of his ship's other weapons systems had been integrated into the Cardassian station at the request of the client, who had found Biron's original designs for the weapons platform to be insufficiently powerful.

His status board indicated that the runabout was firing on their still-shielded port side. Good, he thought.

Now we can-

No. The board also indicated that four quantum torpedoes were being fired by the da Vinci at their vulnerable starboard side. If we still had the ladrion burst or our other weapons

But recrimination was foolish. Instead, he barked orders. "Set an evasive course away from the quantum torpedoes and implement overdrive instantly!"

Instantly, as Biron could have predicted, was not fast enough.

"Overseer, our hull has been breached four times over," Claris said. "Our power levels have been reduced to fifty-five percent of capacity and our tactical and defensive systems are offline."

Biron cursed. The mission was becoming less and less viable. "Open a subspace communication channel to Sub-Overseer Howwi."

Several seconds passed, and Howwi did not reply.

Overseer Biron considered his options. Scans showed Howwi and the officers he'd brought with him were still alive. Those same scans also showed that the workers and the Starfleet personnel were also alive. So Howwi's mission to secure the station from Starfleet must have failed. Starfleet's rather confusing predilection for preserving individual lives at the expense of the greater good was probably the only reason why Howwi and the others were still alive-even the workers.

His weapons capacity consisted of one anril torpedo. His shields were reduced to forty percent of capacity. His opponents now had two ships with which to fight.

Much as Biron's sponsor wanted the holo-emitters, the mission was now becoming too risky. As it was, he had several more risks to take in order to retrieve Howwi and the other two officers.

And the client's own actions were the reason why it had come to this. If Biron's ship had its full complement of weapons, he would be able to dispose of this tiresome Starfleet ship and its smaller compatriot with little difficulty. Instead, he was being forced into the position of fleeing the da Vinci-again.

I swear by the power of the Elite and the glory of the Leader, he thought at the entire crew complement of the Starfleet vessel, you will pay for this effrontery.

Still, the mission was not a total loss. They had obtained a certain amount of Cardassian technology on the station that would be worth something to another client.

"Lock matter-transferral device onto Sub-Overseer Howwi, Officer Dun, and Officer Huuk."

After a moment, one of the workers-one who hadn't been on the flight deck before; this was obviously the replacement for the one Biron had disposed of-said, "Lock achieved."

The status board showed another hit from the da Vinci. It would be several seconds before they fired again, if the usual Starfleet pattern held. "Power down the shields and engage matter-transferral device. Engage dimensional blockers on all equipment currently present on the Cardassian station."

Howwi, Dun, and Huuk appeared on the flight deck, unconscious. Biron remembered that Starfleet's weapons had a setting that could do that-one of many things about Starfleet that Biron did not

comprehend. They were a strange conglomeration of beings, this Federation they represented-they did not exploit. It continually amazed Biron that such an inefficient government had managed to survive all these centuries.

Biron gave not a thought to the workers who had been left behind. They were, after all, only workers and easily replaced. But good sub-overseers and officers were hard to find-even ones who groomed themselves and allowed themselves to be rendered unconscious by Starfleet. Indeed, Biron felt that some kind of punishment was in order for Howwi.

That was for a later time, however. His status board indicated that the dimensional blockers had been engaged-Gold, Gomez, and the da Vinci's other workers would not be able to make use of the technology they had used to improve the Cardassian station. Biron made a note to retrieve the technology from Dimension 7 when they returned to Androssi space.

He also noted that the Starfleet vessel's navigation systems were damaged, and could only accomplish an FTL of 1.02. "Set navigational course 76521. Set FTL at 15."

Within moments, Biron's ship left the Trivas system behind.

"They're leaving the system at Warp 8.7, sir," McAllan said urgently.

"Wong?" Gold prompted the conn officer.

The young ensign shook his head. "Best we can manage is Warp 4, sir."

Gold sighed. "No point in the tortoise chasing the hare if the hare's actually gonna go full bore."

"Duf-Vinc-in. Duffy to da Vinci, can you hear me?"

"We hear you, Duffy. Status report."

Duffy hesitated before giving the report. Gold suspected that the lieutenant commander wanted a status report of his own, but that would have to wait. Right now, Gold needed to know what was happening on Empok Nor more than Duffy needed to know the current situation on the da Vinci. "Well, sir, we had an Androssi boarding party-including our old pal, Sub-Overseer Howwi-but we took care of 'em.

Unfortunately, someone beamed him and his two officers out. The workers were left behind, though. I guess they're prisoners?"

"I suppose." Gold rubbed his chin. "We'll turn them over to a starbase-maybe remand them to Maeglin. How about the station?"

"That's the weird part. Soloman screamed right as the three Androssi were beaming out. Remember last time, when all their tech just disappeared?"

"Let me guess"

"Yes, sir, they did it again. It all fell into whatever dimension they hide it in when they don't want us to know it's there. As far as we can tell, they left Empok Nor the way they found it."

"Is Soloman okay?"

"Yeah, he was more surprised than anything-the entire computer network hiccuped while he was in the middle of talking to it."

"Excuse me, sir," Nog said, "but Empok Nor hasn't been left exactly the way the Androssi found it. There are several components from the original structure that are missing."

"Biron's people probably salvaged 'em," Gold said. "Hate to say it, but they've got as much a right to it as we do to the fusion core. Anything else?"

"Yes, sir." Nog hesitated. "The structural integrity of the fusion core's been compromised. I don't think we can safely tow it back to Deep Space 9."

TEN

Nog stood in Empok Nor's Ops. It felt weird, sitting in a place that was so much like the Ops he was used to, and yet so different. Half the consoles didn't work right, and most of them looked different without the Starfleet upgrades.

Lt. Commander Duffy had ordered them all to come up here to evaluate their options. The catwalk by the fusion reactor was not ideal for that, and Duffy felt that they all needed a change of scene in any case. Nog found he couldn't argue, which numbered it among the few things Duffy had said for which that was

the case. Nog had used to think highly of the S.C.E.-and they certainly handled themselves decently against these Androssi saboteurs-but the Ferengi was well and truly sick of their condescending attitude toward him. As if somehow he wasn't worthy to be considered a real engineer because he wasn't part of the hallowed Corps.

Robins and Friesner had beamed back to the da Vinci, along with the two Androssi prisoners. Corsi, Drew, and Eddy remained behind, and were presently standing at the upper level of Ops. Stevens, P8 Blue, Soloman, and Duffy were seated around the table with Nog.

"All right people," Duffy said, "I want options and I want them now, and I don't care how ridiculous they seem."

"Can we not fix the structural integrity field?" Soloman asked.

P8 Blue gave a low-pitched tinkling sound, which, Nog noted, differed from other, like sounds the Nasat made. He wondered what the differences among them were. "Not unless you have Cardassian emitters in your pocket, Soloman. We don't have replicator patterns for them, and I doubt we'd be able to get Cardassia to ship us some new ones."

"Even if they could," Stevens added, "it'd probably take over a week to get here, and several more days to get the thing up to snuff."

"DS9 doesn't have that kind of time," Nog said anxiously. "Captain Gold just heard from DS9-we have ten days at the most before we'll have to abandon the station."

"We know that, Lieutenant," Duffy said in what the human probably thought was a soothing voice, but which only served to annoy Nog more.

"Can't you put it in a force field?" Corsi asked.

Duffy shook his head. "Not and tow it at warp, no. And if we stick with sublight, it'll take a helluva lot more than ten days to get there."

"Maybe," Stevens said, "if we use the runabout's warp engines-create a static warp bubble around the core so it can handle the force field."

Blue repeated the low-pitched tinkle. "With the SIF in the shape it's in, the stresses of the warp bubble would rip it to pieces."

Nog watched as the four engineers threw ideas back and forth, each more incredible than the last. Each suggestion seemed to top the last in being overly complicated and difficult to engineer-almost as if they were taking Duffy's admonition about ridiculousness to heart-or would require considerably more than the ten days they had left to them.

Then, suddenly, it came to him. An idea more ridiculous than anything the S.C.E. crew had said.

"but there's no way we could construct a sub-quark resonator for that," Stevens was saying.

"Besides," Blue added, "those things only work about half the time anyhow. They're mostly untested."

"Okay, that's out," Duffy said.

Finally, Nog thought, a lull. "Why don't we just move the whole station?"

Everyone looked at Nog.

"I beg your pardon?" Duffy said after about five seconds of silence.

"Move the whole station. Get a bunch of ships to tractor it at warp to the Bajoran system." Already, Nog was imagining the possibilities in his head. In retrospect, he should have thought of this in the first place.

Empok Nor was, after all, the perfect place for spare parts for Deep Space 9. They could stick it in orbit somewhere-maybe around Bajor or one of its moons-and have a permanent storage locker. Not to mention a testing place for new upgrades

"Uh, Nog, if I'm remembering right," Stevens said, "DS9 is about fifteen hundred meters by three hundred seventy meters-and this place has the same dimensions, right?"

"Yes."

"And you want to tow it at warp?" Duffy asked, incredulous.

"Low warp, but it can be done." He thought a moment. "We'd need twelve ships. One on each pylon and six around the docking ring."

"They'd all need to be the same general size and class," Blue said. "If not, the tractor beams will be incompatible."

"No, they won't," Nog said. "With that many ships, we can calibrate the tractor beams with each other. The Rio Grande can serve as the coordination point. It can take point and make sure the warp fields and the tractor beams stay aligned."

"Yeah, but you could only do that at Warp 2," Duffy said, "and then you'd never make it."

"We can do it at Warp 4," Stevens said before Nog could speak. Nog grinned. Finally, one of them's on my side.

"Fabe-"

"I'm serious, Duff, we could do it at Warp 4. I mean, c'mon, Warp 6 is the normal cruising speed for most ships anyhow. The da Vinci just took a major pounding from the Androssi and it can still do Warp 4. It's baby steps. Think out of the box, for a change."

Duffy rolled his eyes. "Don't get cute on me, Fabe. Besides, there's another problem think about what kind of subspace disruption you're going to cause. Communications will be spotty at best-how the hell're you going to coordinate everything when you won't even be able to stay in consistent contact?"

Nog deflated. "I'm not sure," he admitted reluctantly. "But there has to be-"

"Oh, that's easy," Blue said, this time making a much higher-pitched tinkling noise. "There's a new method of close-range ship-to-ship using tight-beam tachyon pulses. The Romulans developed it about twenty years ago, and finally decided to share it about a week before the Dominion War ended."

Blinking, Nog said, "I didn't know about that."

"Neither did I," Duffy said.

Another noise, this one of a medium pitch. "You people really need to keep up on the trades. It's all they've been talking about in the Journal of the Federation Consortium of Engineers and Technicians for the last two months."

"Can you build one of those?" Nog asked.

"Of course," Blue said. "I have the replicator pattern stored on the da Vinci computer."

Duffy had a few more objections, but either Nog or Stevens or Blue had an answer for it. Before long, even Duffy was sharing Nog's enthusiasm-he certainly seemed excited when they finally contacted Captain Gold on Empok Nor's viewscreen.

"There's only one problem," Duffy said after doing so. "We need twelve ships."

Gold's face broke into a smile. "Oh, let me just make a call"

ELEVEN

David Gold had been listening to the latest letter from his granddaughter for the sixteenth time when the call from the bridge came.

"Message from Earth, sir," said Lieutenant McAllan.

"On screen," Gold said, once again removing the image of Ruth's face and replacing it with the Starfleet logo-which was, in turn, replaced by the familiar visage of Captain Montgomery Scott, the liaison between the S.C.E. and the admiralty.

"I got your request, David, and I've got to ask you-have ye gone completely daft?"

Scotty had a huge grin on his face, which was the only reason why Gold wasn't stunned. After all, Nog's plan was the type of thing that Scotty himself would have come up with during his days as a full-time engineer.

"No more than usual. The real question is, can you do it?"

"Yes and no, lad. There are nine ships en route to the Trivas system now. They should be there within a few hours. I'm afraid that's the best I could do. And even then, I can't promise that they'll do what you're askin'. That'll be up to you an' your lot to convince 'em of."

"Fair enough."

"By the way-which one o' that motley bunch came up with this scheme? Duffy? P8 Blue?"

"Actually, it was the Ferengi kid from DS9-Nog. His idea, his specs for implementing it, and his request for twelve ships."

With a twinkle in his eye, Scotty said, "Well, then, I think it's only appropriate for me to be the one to break it to him that he only gets nine. Besides, I'd like to meet the man who came up with this. 'Tis only a

pity I won't be able to shake his hand."

Gold smiled and tapped his combadge. "Gold to Nog. Report to the captain's quarters immediately." Within a few minutes-which Gold spent giving Scotty a quick verbal report on the entire Empok Nor mission-the doorchime rang. "Come in," Gold said, and the doors parted to reveal the young Ferengi lieutenant.

"Nog, there's a man here that you need to meet. Captain Montgomery Scott, this is Lieutenant Nog." The Ferengi's eyes went wide. "It is an honor to meet you, sir."

"Pleasure's all mine, lad. This is quite a little plan you've cooked up."

"Thank you, sir. Coming from you, that means a lot."

"I'm afraid I have some bad news, though. I could only rustle up nine ships-and as I told the captain, I canna guarantee that they'll go along."

Grinning, Nog said, "Leave that to me, sir. And don't worry about it-with the da Vinci, we'll have ten ships, and that's actually one more than we'll need."

Gold whirled toward the Ferengi. "Then why'd you say you needed twelve?"

Nervously, Nog said, "Fifth-Fifth Rule of Acquisition, sir 'Always exaggerate your estimates.'"

Scotty laughed, which seemed to relieve Nog. "That was an engineer's axiom long before you heathens took it on," he said. "Well done, lad, well done."

"Thank you, sir. I know that this plan doesn't exactly follow the established norms, but-"

Waving his left arm dismissively, Scotty said, "Good God, lad, don't concern yourself. The established norms are just guidelines, and your job as an engineer is to find a better way around them. Always remember that."

Smiling, Nog said, "I will, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Now be off with you-I've business to discuss with the captain."

"Yes, sir."

Still smiling from ear to oversized ear, Nog left Gold's quarters.

"Back home, we call that a mitzvah," Gold said with a chuckle.

"Well, the lad deserved it. But I wanted to talk to you a bit more about the Androssi"

"What's the word, Doctor?" Domenica Corsi asked as she entered sickbay.

Seated behind her desk, Elizabeth Lense looked up from reading a padd and smiled. "The word is good, Commander. Frnats, Hawkins, and Lipinski all received serious shocks to their system, but with some bed rest and CNS therapy, they should be able to report back to duty within a week. For Frnats, more like a week and a half."

Corsi frowned. "Why so long?"

"Commander, CNS is central nervous system. The weapons the Androssi used on them was like the effect of a phaser on stun magnified by a factor of about a thousand. In fact, I'm amazed it didn't kill them, though it came pretty close with Frnats. I want to do some studies on our two prisoners, see if this weapon is fatal to Androssi. If it is, we have to be aware of the fact that they might eventually upgrade the weapon to have a maximum impact on aliens."

"That's a good idea," Corsi said with a nod. Lense took a practical viewpoint that Corsi found refreshing on a ship full of engineers who tended to have their minds buried in isolinear chips. She was also a good roommate-quiet, considerate, and not given to irritating habits. Her people had been chatting endlessly about the feud between P8 Blue and Abramowitz, and Corsi was grateful to have been spared that.

Leaning back in her chair, Lense fixed Corsi with another smile. "So what's happening between you and Stevens?"

"What're you talking about?" Corsi felt her face flush.

"He spent the night in our quarters the other day. I saw him coming out when that meeting was called yesterday morning."

Corsi clenched her fists.

Lense wasn't finished, though. "And when Drew was visiting Hawkins earlier, he was talking about how you were-how'd he put it?-'making goo-goo eyes' at him."

"What!?"

Corsi spoke loudly enough that Lense actually flinched. "I'm just telling you what he said."

"Right," Corsi said, forcing herself to calm down. It wasn't fair to the doctor, biting her head off like that. Though right now, Corsi wasn't all that interested in what was fair. What she was interested in was putting Fabian Stevens through a bulkhead.

What for, exactly? she thought as she excused herself from Lense and exited sickbay. For saying yes when I asked him back to my quarters?

No, it was hardly Fabian's fault that he was there for her when she needed companionship. It was her own stupid fault for indulging herself on a ship the size of a toolbox.

Damn you, Dar, why did you have to do this to me? Why did you have to-

She cut the thought off, refusing to dwell on it. The anniversary had come and gone. What was done was done.

Nog was hunched over the Rio Grande's controls, listening to his recording of Sinnravian drad, when the hail from the Sugihara came in. Finally, he thought. Captain Demitrijian was the only one of the nine ship captains who hadn't gotten back to him. The other eight had all agreed to go along with it-some enthusiastically, some with the greatest reluctance, but they all did agree in the end. Except for Captain Janna Demitrijian.

He put the captain's round face on the screen, then remembered to turn the music off.

"Lieutenant," she said, "I've been thinking about your proposal. I've also gone over it with my chief engineer. For what it's worth, she thinks you're categorically insane and has said that if we go through with this, she refuses to accept any responsibility for it."

Nog sighed. Well, I've been lucky up until now. Besides, with the da Vinci, we'll be fine.

"Well, thank you for taking the time to come here, Captain."

Demitrijian frowned. "I haven't said we won't do it, Lieutenant. Last time I checked, I was in command of the Sugihara, not Lieutenant Barbanti, nor you."

Feeling his lobes shrivel, Nog said, "I'm sorry, sir, I-"

"What I want to know is what's in this for me if I do go along?"

His lobes perked back up. Now the captain was speaking his language. "As I said in my original communication, you'll have shore leave for your crew on Bajor, which is one of the loveliest planets in the quadrant-plus whatever maintenance your ship needs from my engineering staff."

"Both of which I can get from Starbase 96 which, if nothing else, has a working power source. I'll need more than that."

Nog spoke slowly. "I'm not sure what else I can offer-" He let the sentence hang-usually if you paused there, the customer would finish the sentence for you.

"When you established the commlink," Demitrijian said, "you had some kind of music on. It sounded like Blee Luu's Endless Dream."

"Yes! Yes, it was! I can make a recording for you."

"No, thank you, I can't stand that stuff. But my son is dating a Sinnravian, and she loves Luu. However, they've been living on the Canopus Planet, and she hasn't been able to get her hands on Luu's newest recording-I forget what it's called."

"It's yours," Nog said.

"An original, not a copy," Demitrijian added. "Sinnravians are fussy about that sort of thing. Something about their inner ears."

Shaking his head at the relative ignorance of such stunted-eared folk as humans, Nog said, "You'll have an original recording by the time we reach DS9."

"In that case, Lieutenant, the Sugihara is at your disposal."

"Excellent! Thank you, Captain! Rio Grande out."

Nog cut the connection.

Now where am I supposed to get an original of Blee Luu's latest recording?

The runabout was currently docked at Empok Nor. P8 Blue was due back at any moment with a full

structural report, after which point the Nasat would come on board, download the information to the runabout computer, and then beam back to the da Vinci while Nog took up position at the head of the convoy that would tow Empok Nor back.

Nog started Endless Dream up again as he went over the data. The computer models were all encouraging, and the S.C.E. were all sure that it would work. Of course, the report he'd gotten from DS9 was that everyone except Commander Vaughn thought he was insane, but nobody actually objected, either-probably because they'd seen the computer models also, and besides, nobody had a better idea.

The doors to the runabout opened, and P8 Blue came in-and immediately let out a screech that nearly punctured Nog's delicate eardrums.

"Lieutenant," Blue said as Nog gripped his oversized ears with his undersized hands, "if you do not shut that music off, Deep Space 9 will need to find a new chief operations officer, as the present one will be larva food!"

"Computer, terminate music," Nog said quickly.

"First Abramowitz, now you," Blue said.

"Abramowitz?"

"She's our cultural specialist-also my roommate. She just got the latest recording of that fecal matter you call music by that Blee Luu person, and it's been driving me insane."

"Really?" Nog said. "Maybe we can help each other out"

Kieran Duffy was rather pleased as he sat in the center seat of the bridge for the da Vinci's Gamma Shift. Everything was going smoothly. The ten ships were taking up positions, with one ship on each of the six pylons and the remaining four evenly spaced around the docking ring. The Rio Grande was taking up position nearby, ready to lead the convoy to Deep Space 9. Some last-minute figures needed to be gone over, of course, but they were on schedule to start at the beginning of Alpha Shift.

Closer to home, the Abramowitz-Pattie difficulty had been settled thanks to their Ferengi visitor. Nog had apparently convinced Carol to let him have her new drad recording for the Sugihara's captain in exchange for-something. When Fabe Stevens shared this bit of intelligence, the engineer had been unclear on what the something was that Nog had promised to Carol, but Duffy was sure he'd find out soon enough.

The Gamma Shift tactical officer-a young ensign named Piotrowski-said, "Commander, we're getting a priority-one distress call." She looked up, and gave Duffy a stricken look. "Sir, it's from Commander Gomez on Sarindar!"

Duffy felt a fist of ice clench his heart. Oh no, Sonnie

It took him a moment to make his mouth work. "Confirm."

"The distress call is definitely coming from Nalori space, and was sent two days ago, sir."

"Engineering, this is Duffy. Are we back up to capacity yet?"

Nancy Conlon, the current duty officer, said, "Yes, sir, Commander. Can give you Warp 9.7 for twelve hours, just like the specs say-longer if we have to. Why? I thought this trip was going to be at Warp 4."

"We may be taking a different trip. Duffy out." He took another deep breath through his nose and exhaled through his mouth. "Captain Gold to the bridge."

It hadn't taken long for Nog to rearrange the convoy to accommodate the loss of the da Vinci. It simply meant that the three remaining ships on the docking ring would take up position halfway between each pylon.

Captain Gold was on the viewscreen as the da Vinci was preparing to warp away, apparently to respond to a distress call from the ship's first officer.

"I'm sorry I won't get to see the look on Colonel Kira's face when we tow the station in," Gold said.

"And tell her I'm sorry I won't get to see the station."

"I will, sir."

"You did good work here today, Lieutenant. Any chance I can convince you to transfer here? I get the

feeling you'd fit right in."

Standing next to Gold, Duffy added, "He's right, Nog. I know we may not have seemed very hospitable at first, but-well, I was wrong to slap you down. I'm sorry for that. And I'd be honored if you'd join us."

"I'm flattered by your offer, Captain-and I accept your apology, Commander-but I have to say no. I'm very happy where I am."

"It's our loss," Gold said with a smile. "Good luck, son."

"To you also, Captain."

The image of the da Vinci bridge winked out. Nog stared out the runabout porthole and watched the Sabre-class ship go into warp toward the far-off Nalori Republic. Nog didn't know Commander Gomez, though he knew of her reputation after the trick she pulled on the Sentinel during the war. He hoped that Captain Gold and the others would get to her in time.

Nog activated P8 Blue's tachyon communication network. "Nog to convoy. Engage tractor beams."

Nine Starfleet ships emitted blue cones of light that tethered them to Empok Nor. Nog smiled.

"Prepare to go to warp on my mark."

He was truly flattered by Gold's offer. But in the S.C.E., he'd just be a cog in the wheel. On DS9, he was the chief.

"Engage."

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The co-developer of Star Trek S.C.E., Keith R.A. DeCandido has written several other S.C.E. adventures, including *Fatal Error* and (in collaboration with David Mack) the upcoming two-book *Invincible* (which will explain where Sonya Gomez was during *Cold Fusion*), with more on the way. Keith would like to take this opportunity to thank editors John J. Ordover and Marco Palmieri, and authors S.D. Perry, David Weddle, and Jeffrey Lang, without whom *Cold Fusion* could not possibly have happened.

Keith has also composed Star Trek work in book and comic book form *Star Trek The Next Generation Diplomatic Implausibility* (the first novel featuring Ambassador Worf), *Star Trek Deep Space Nine Demons of Air and Darkness* (part of the Gateways crossover), the forthcoming two-book series *Star Trek The Brave & the Bold*, and the four-issue WildStorm comic book *Star Trek The Next Generation Perchance to Dream*. He has also written best-selling novels and short stories in the worlds of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Doctor Who*, *Farscape*, *Marvel Comics*, and *Xena*. Learn more than you needed to know about Keith on his web site at the easy-to-remember URL of DeCandido.net.