

## Star Trekr - SCE 09 - The Riddled Post

By Aaron Rosenberg

"Starfleet, come in! Emergency! We've got catastrophic systems failure, equipment down across the board, we need help! Please respo-!"

Captain David Gold switched off the audio recording and glanced around the observation lounge-as always, Sonya Gomez admired his ability to stay calm at a time like this.

But then, he had heard the distress call already, as had Sonya, his first officer, and second officer Lt. Commander Kieran Duffy. Around the table, the rest of the S.C.E. team on the U.S.S. da Vinci looked more startled at the urgent cry for help.

Gold turned his blue eyes on Sonya. She nodded, and began filling in the gaps.

She tugged absently at her shirt cuffs and looked around the table at her team. "Okay, first off a bit about the planet." She pressed a control on the console in front of her, and an image of a planet appeared on the viewscreen. "We're looking at BorSitu Minor-anybody heard of it?" No one responded. "Right, that's not surprising. It's got only the one outpost on it. But BorSitu Minor does have something worthwhile-dilithium, some of the richest deposits ever found. The outpost is geared toward mining operations, and tends to rotate staff every year or two. Most of the work is automated, so the staff is pretty small."

"How small?" asked Dr. Lense from the other side of the table, though Sonya noticed the doctor didn't make eye contact with anyone as she spoke.

"Less than a dozen, according to their latest records."

Lense nodded. "We should be able to handle any casualties, then, but I'd like to know if there's a ship with a bigger sickbay around that we can call on just in case."

"Both the Fearless and the Sugihara are in the area," Gold said. "I'll have McAllan contact them."

"Thank you," Lense said quietly.

Gomez went on. "The biggest issue with BorSitu Minor is the atmosphere. It's highly ionized, and the charge blocks normal transporters, communicators, and sensors. In addition, it has a high acid content-it's dangerously corrosive. The outpost has a transporter pad, heavily shielded and with extra signal boosters-they've even got a matter/antimatter plant on-site for power, to give them enough to cut through the atmosphere and to shield against the atmosphere. But, based on that distress signal, the transporter probably isn't working-so the away team will have to take a shuttlecraft down there. And when they get there, the shield may be down as well."

"In which case," Kieran said, "We'll have to rig up a portable shield generator. The team can activate it as they open the shuttle door, and use it to move around."

"It'll have to be quick," Fabian Stevens said from his seat next to Duffy. "Those portables only last about an hour or so."

From her modified chair at the far end of the table, P8 Blue said, "For an outpost of that size, an hour will

be enough."

Sonya smiled. "Glad to hear you say that, Pattie, because you're on the away team, along with Corsi and Soloman. From you, I want a structural analysis, and any first guesses as to what happened." Turning to the short Bynar, she said, "Soloman, check the computer files and make sure the systems are repairable." Finally, she gazed upon the tall human security chief sitting next to Lense. "Corsi, assess the safety level-I need to know if we can all go in, and if we need security with us." All three nodded. "Meantime, Fabian, I want you to prepare possible attack scenarios for us."

Fabian frowned. "We're going to attack the outpost?"

"No, but somebody may have. I want to know who could have done it from orbit, and how. We'll compare those to Pattie's assessment and see if we get a match." She glanced at Gold, who nodded. "Okay, that's it. Let's get to work."

The meeting over, people began rising from their seats. Corsi was the first to her feet and out the door, as usual-she seemed eager to prepare, and Sonya repressed a smile. Corsi was always enthusiastic about security, and she was probably thrilled to be playing a major part in the first portion of this expedition. Gold was out next, back to the bridge and the business of running the da Vinci-including having the other two ships notified that they may be needed for medical backup. Soloman also wandered out, chatting with Bart Faulwell and Fabian. Carol Abramowitz and Pattie were right behind them-Sonya was glad to see that the two roommates were on speaking terms again, after a tiff they had over Carol's musical choices-as was Dr. Lense.

That left Kieran and Sonya alone in the observation lounge.

"Gee," Kieran said, "you and I not on the away team on the day we were supposed to have lunch. Coincidence?"

Sonya stood up and put on her official face. "Commander Duffy, I am shocked-shocked-that you would accuse me of putting personal preference before duty." Then she broke into a smile. "Besides, those three really are the best ones to go on the team-especially Pattie with her tough hide, in case there are problems with the atmosphere."

"Fair enough," Kieran said, with a smile of his own. "Shall we go to the mess hall, the mess hall, or maybe the mess hall?"

"Actually, I was thinking my quarters," Sonya said.

Kieran's smile widened.

"Entering BorSitu's atmosphere," Blue reported from the Franklin's co-pilot seat. "Shields holding, systems fully operational."

"Good." Corsi was piloting, blue eyes narrowed in concentration, and her steady hands held the shuttlecraft on-course. This, despite the sudden buffeting of the ever-present electrical storm, not to mention her hands being gloved, since both she and Soloman wore atmospheric suits. Blue's chitinous hide and Nasat physiology made such an encumbrance unnecessary for her.

Behind her, the Bynar sat quietly, absorbed in his own thoughts. He had come a long way in dealing with the loss of his mate, but she'd noticed he still disappeared into his own head when there wasn't work to

do. That was dangerous if something came up suddenly, but she already knew better than to rely on him in combat.

The shuttle rocked a bit, its stabilizers fighting to compensate for the lightning and wind, but Corsi kept them on target and within a minute they could see the outlines of the outpost up ahead. It grew rapidly in their view, and Blue glanced down at her readouts.

"Matter-antimatter readings normal," the insectoid announced, and Corsi allowed herself to relax just a little. That had been their first concern. If the power plant had been bled off or jettisoned, they would have needed to reinstall and recalibrate it before they had any hope of getting power again. With the generator's matter-antimatter chamber intact, they just had to worry about finding the problems and restoring functions.

Just. Corsi realized she'd been hanging around with engineers too long.

"The bad news," Blue continued, "is that I'm not getting any shield readings. It's down like we thought, so we'll need to use the generator and hope the damage isn't too severe."

Then the station came fully into view, and Corsi actually let a soft curse escape her-that distracted Blue enough to look, and even Soloman glanced up, then stared in shock.

The outpost was not that large-a dozen buildings, perhaps, all clustered together-and without its shields Corsi could clearly see each building even through the haze of the acidic atmosphere. The buildings were weathered, the air obviously having worn away edges and pitted surfaces once the shields had dropped.

But what had evoked the curse were the holes. Everywhere she looked, the buildings were riddled with them, drilled right through the walls at various angles. It was as if a giant needle had pierced the outpost, time and again.

"Approaching shuttle bay," Corsi announced, and she was angered that her voice shook slightly. At least her hands were steady. She shouldn't have been so affected by this. "Get the shield generator ready."

A minute later, the shuttlecraft settled to the deck of the shuttle bay-which, being exposed to the atmosphere, was also pitted and warped in spots. The Franklin's engines shut down with a whine, and they all unbuckled-she had insisted on everyone strapping in before they left the da Vinci, which had proved necessary in the turbulent ionization they had just flown through. As Blue set up the generator, Corsi drew her phaser as she stepped towards the exit hatch.

"Is that necessary?" Soloman inquired, gesturing towards the weapon. "Anything dangerous would have been killed by the outside air."

"Maybe, but I can't chance it," she replied, wishing in retrospect that she'd requested that Gomez let her bring another one of her own team down. "If it's safe, fine. But if there is something out there, something built to survive this stuff or prepared to handle it, I'd rather not have to waste time reaching for a weapon." The little Bynar seemed at a loss for a reply, and all three of them were silent as they gathered around the hatch. She looked at Blue "All set?" The eight-armed blue insectoid nodded. "Okay. On three I pop the hatch, you hit the shield, and we step out. One, two, three!"

It worked perfectly, especially for a non-security team-she opened the hatch, Blue already extending her arm and the generator, and the shield formed just beyond the shuttle door, protecting them from the atmosphere. Blue stepped out first, being careful to keep the shield just overlapping the hatch, and Corsi

followed, then Soloman. The Bynar shut the hatch behind him. Then Corsi took the lead and led the other two quickly over to the nearest building. The doors were inoperable, of course, but she knew where the manual override was and it took only a minute for her to flip the lever, pop the doors, and usher the other two inside. She noticed the head-sized holes in the door and the walls, but set that aside for now-she'd examine them more closely later.

Once inside, Blue set the generator down on the floor. She and Soloman turned to the consoles, while Corsi examined the rest of the room. It wasn't a pleasant sight. There were bodies on the floor, all of them largely decomposed-the air had done the same to them as to the walls, only far worse. The air felt alive even through the shield and their suits, as the charge transferred to every surface. Details seemed to waver slightly-Corsi knew it was a side effect of the current in the air, but it made her nervous, and she tightened her grip on the phaser for reassurance. At least the area seemed secure-no lifesigns, no movement beyond that shimmer, and no other entrances beside the door they'd used. So once again Corsi forced herself to wait and watch while the two engineers did their work.

"Systems all check out," Blue announced after several minutes, and Soloman nodded in agreement. "The shields are functional, at least on this end."

The next step was back outside and around the front of the building, to the emitter array. Once there, it was obvious even to Corsi what the problem was-the array had a hole the size of a hoverball through it.

"Could you give me a hand here, Commander?"

Corsi did as Blue requested, setting the generator down beside her and the phaser on top where she could reach it quickly, and among the three of them they managed to wrestle the damaged piece off the array. Then they trundled it back to the Franklin. Once inside, it took less than an hour for the two engineers to repair the damage, and only ten more minutes to restore the piece to its place. Soloman then rebooted the system and restored the shields over the outpost-Corsi always found it creepy to hear him speaking in computer language, interfacing directly with the systems, but she couldn't argue with the effects. It was another hour before the filtration system had removed all contaminants from the air, replacing corrosives with breathable elements-she insisted they spend that time safely inside the shuttlecraft, to be sure. Finally, the Franklin's sensors indicated it was safe to step outside, and they did so, this time without the portable generator.

Without the haze of BorSitu's atmosphere, the devastation was even worse. Every hole was clearly defined, and the buildings looked like ancient ruins, ready to crumble at any moment. But the damage was less than a day old, and Corsi knew that clues were often time-sensitive, so she didn't waste any time-once she was sure the air was safe she allowed her two companions to go about their assigned tasks, although she kept a close eye on them. She also scanned for lifesigns-and got a surprising response.

"We've got survivors!" she said. Soloman looked up, and Blue did as well. "Two lifesigns, human, over there." Corsi waved her phaser across the square. "Ten meters distance." She glanced up. "That's only half the size of this square. They're not on the other side-they're at the center." She turned towards the squat building in the middle of the open area, as did the others.

"That's the power station," Blue confirmed.

"Makes sense," Corsi admitted, leading them toward the building. "You said the generator was showing as normal. And there aren't any holes in this building. So these two, whoever they are, were in the only safe place when it happened. Whatever it was."

Stepping inside, she marveled at the difference. The power station hadn't been hit by whatever had caused the holes, and so although its outer walls had been worn down by the air, the inside was fully intact. It was like stepping out of a sandstorm and into a gleaming steel playground. Corsi wasn't an engineer, but she recognized several pieces of equipment around the area-before her eyes were drawn to the two figures slumped on the floor.

"Damn!" She slapped her communicator out of habit, and was surprised when Gomez responded.

"I linked our badges in through the Franklin," Soloman explained-the little Bynar actually sounded apologetic. "This way they have enough power to get through the atmosphere."

"I wish you'd told me," Corsi muttered.

"Told you what? Corsi, what's your status?" Gomez sounded worried.

"Sorry, not you. Status is good-we've got the shields restored, and the air breathable. And we've got two survivors, though they're both in bad shape. I'll get them to the shuttlecraft, and then bring them up. Have Lense standing by."

"How does the station look, Corsi?" Gomez asked. "Any idea what caused the systems failure?"

Corsi paused in the act of hoisting one of the figures-a stocky middle-aged man-onto her shoulder, and glanced out through the open door, at the holes decorating the other buildings. "Oh, I've got a pretty fair idea."

Back on the da Vinci, Duffy waited in the shuttle bay with an impatient Sonya Gomez. As soon as the Franklin had cleared the atmosphere, they had beamed the two survivors directly to sickbay, where Lense was working on them.

Corsi's call had come just as they were finishing up lunch. Sonnie had instructed the computer to route any calls from the away team to her. It was her way of justifying them indulging in their date.

And it was a date. Just like the old days on the Enterprise. In fact, it was almost exactly like their dates on the Enterprise, even with all the water that had gone under the bridge in the seven years since they broke up following her transfer to the Oberth. Duffy chose to view this as a good sign for their renewing of the relationship.

The Franklin soon settled in next to the da Vinci's other shuttle, the Archimedes, and the hatch closed. Sonnie turned her attention to Corsi as soon as she exited-Duffy wasn't surprised that the tall blonde security chief had a full report ready for them.

The content of the report was a bit surprising, though, and more than a little alarming-as soon as Corsi finished, Sonnie called a meeting of all staff, excepting the good doctor.

"We've got a problem," she informed the others when they'd all reached the observation lounge-Gold was there as well, but he'd deferred to her. "Apparently something took out this outpost by holing the buildings and letting the outside atmosphere leak in. But the shields themselves weren't damaged."

"I thought Pattie said they'd repaired part of the shield," Carol asked.

"No, we repaired a piece of the array that was damaged," Pattie replied. "The shield itself was fine." The cultural expert still looked puzzled, and Pattie explained. "Usually, when a shield is hit, the shield itself absorbs the damage. It may cause feedback in the controls or the array, shorting out circuits that have been overloaded, but the shield integrity is what gets hit the most. If you reduce a shield to half its normal strength, then shut it down, when you turn it back on the shield is still at only half-strength until the integrity has been fully repaired. I replaced part of the array, which had a hole in it, but when we switched the shields back on they were at full strength. No damage at all."

Fabian cut in. "So the only thing that knocked them down was that hole."

"Precisely."

"Which means something got through the shield itself and then damaged the array," Carol said. "Okay, yeah-that's bad. What can ignore a full-strength shield and then do physical damage to things on the inside?"

"Nothing. At least, that's what we thought." Sonya glanced around. "Which is why we have a problem. Sure, you can tune a weapon to the same frequency as a shield, and bypass the defenses that way-if you know the frequency for that particular shield. But that only works with energy weapons, most of which wouldn't work in this atmosphere. If someone's got a way to physically penetrate a shield, without affecting the shield."

"We're talking a major impact on starship combat tactics," Corsi said. "Shields would be functionally useless."

"If that's what this is," Duffy said. "I recommend we investigate with a full team."

"Agreed," Sonnie said. In fact, she'd already decided on this course of action before the meeting started, but she also suggested that Duffy make the recommendation and have her agree with it to present a united front. Duffy had to admit to liking the new Sonya Gomez-after her ordeal on the planet Sarindar, she had become more sure of herself. Duffy like the change, especially if it meant more lunches like today.

She turned to Fabian. "Did you have any luck with those attack scenarios?"

Fabian shook his head. "None so far. I mean, there are ways to hit the outpost from space, although that atmosphere's like a natural defense grid-it'll dull or even stop most attacks from penetrating through to the surface. But I don't know anything that can do what Corsi described. I'll need to get a firsthand look at the damage."

She nodded. "That'll be your job. Soloman, did you have a chance to work on the computers?"

The little Bynar shook his head. "We were concentrating on the shield controls, Commander. I volunteered to remain behind to examine the rest of the station's systems, but Lt. Commander Corsi felt the team should stick together."

Corsi smoldered at that, but Sonnie defused that quickly. "That was the right choice. We don't know the terrain well enough to leave someone there alone. When we head back down, you get to work on that. First priority is the transporter-if we can get that running again it'll make all our lives easier. Then check on the station logs, see if you can get any idea what happened. Duffy, give him a hand-you're better at sifting through entries."

Kieran groaned-he hated research, and Sonnie knew that-but he nodded anyway.

"Pattie, you and I will check out the power station-I want to know why it wasn't hit. There's got to be a reason, and I have a feeling it's important somehow." She glanced at the others. "Corsi, continue what you were doing before-give us a full sweep of the place. Not just possible dangers, but see what their security systems were, and how they were bypassed. Carol, I want you and Bart to do some digging-see if you can find anything out about this place, both the planet and the station, and any reasons why someone might want to put it out of commission. Everybody clear?"

She glanced around once more. Corsi, to Duffy's total lack of surprise, spoke up. "Commander, I want a full security team this time."

"That's fine. Everyone else, gather what you need-we'll meet at the shuttle bay in fifteen minutes."

As everyone got up, Gold said, "Be careful down there, people. We still don't know a damn thing about what happened here."

"We will, sir," Sonnie said with an encouraging smile.

Fabian's first comment, once Pattie had remotely opened a window through the shields and the Franklin had landed in the shuttle bay, was "Damn!" The others voiced similar sentiments-even the three who'd already been down seemed a little stunned by the sight before them. But they were all professionals, and after a minute they shook themselves, unhooked their safety harnesses, grabbed their gear, and set about on their various assignments. They broke into teams of three, mostly-two S.C.E. team members and one security guard-with Corsi taking the remaining security guards to do their sweep.

Fabian was the first one out, and he went straight to the nearest hole, running his tricorder over it. Behind him stood Frnats, a Bolian security guard.

"It's not a beam, that's for sure." He was talking more to himself than any of his teammates, recording first impressions to be checked over later. "Not smooth enough. The corrosion accounts for some of that, but not all. Not a laser, either-the edges are hot, probably from friction, but the rest of the metal is cool, and the material's been stressed, not just melted away." He glanced at the hole again, then out and away, eyeballing the angle, then down at the tricorder, then back at the hole.

"The angle's all wrong," he muttered.

"All wrong for what?"

Fabian looked up to see Commander Gomez, Pattie, and another security guard, Hawkins, standing nearby. "For an attack from space. It would have to be at least fifteen degrees sharper for a ship to make this hole from orbit, unless it's firing from the side, almost on the horizon. And with BorSitu's atmosphere there's no way a shot like that could penetrate this far." He glanced over at Sonya. "This was done from the ground, Commander, or near to it. We're looking for something on the surface, not something in space."

Gomez nodded. "Well, that'll narrow it down a lot. Good work, Fabian. Keep at it. Come on, let's get to the central core."

The slender woman, the short blue insectoid, and the tall man set off together for the power station,

leaving him and the Bolian woman standing by the hole. He ran his fingers around the edges again, then dug into his belt pouch and pulled out a small emitter, which he affixed to the top edge. After that he moved on to the next hole and placed an emitter there as well.

Duffy had located the transporter pad on the schematic before heading down, and he, Soloman, and Lipinski from security made a beeline for it as soon as the Franklin had landed. There were two full-sized transporter pads, and although one of them had been shattered by two different holes the other was still intact. The controls were another matter.

"This one's shot," Duffy pointed out, studying a console which had taken a direct hit through its front panel. He deliberately overlooked the body slumped half out of the console chair-it had been hit by the same blast or whatever, and even with the decomposition Duffy could see gaping hole in what had been the woman's chest. He quickly moved to another panel.

"We've lost readouts, but I think the main controls are okay on this one." Then he stepped to the final station. "And this one's got readouts, and half the controls. Okay, let's perform a little surgery here." He opened up the console and removed the display panels, then transferred them back to the second station. Next he wired them in, replacing any damaged components.

Soloman had been rooting through the room's power relays, chattering in that odd chirpy computer language of his, bypassing damaged areas and routing systems through backup lines-a minute or two after Duffy reassembled the control panel Soloman flipped a last switch and the panels lit up.

"Great! Now let's see." Duffy accessed the system and ran a diagnostic. "Yes!" He tapped his combadge. "We've got transporters online, Commander!"

"Good work, Duffy," Sonnie replied. "Fully operational?"

"Running the first test now," Duffy replied. He entered a quick command, and the pad hummed, as bluish-white light filled the air above it. Then the light and the humming faded away, leaving a small toolbox resting on the platform. "First test successful. I'll set the console to handle the rest at timed intervals, but judging from the readings I'm betting we're good to go, Sonnie."

"Great. Once the last test finishes, link the system in to our combadges so we can hightail it if we need to. And Kieran? Don't call me Sonnie on duty."

Duffy grinned at that-he could hear the smile in her voice, even through the combadge.

"Okay, you and Soloman get over to the command center and start accessing those files. Gomez out."

"Well, you heard the lady," Duffy said to Soloman, as they turned toward the door. "Command center, here we come."

Sonya, Pattie, and Hawkins were in the power station, examining the power plant and its surroundings. What they'd found so far was-nothing, aside from the structure itself.

"Why leave this building intact?" Sonya wondered out loud as they walked the floor. There were no holes here-Lense's preliminary report was that the two survivors had suffered from oxygen deprivation but nothing else, so they hadn't been directly attacked. But why would someone leave the power station unharmed, and even unopened?



"Perhaps they feared the possibility of explosion," Pattie suggested.

That would make sense-if the generator had been breached, the matter-antimatter would have caused an explosion, obliterating the outpost and everything in it. But that meant whoever did this hadn't wanted the station destroyed, just out of commission. She tapped her combadge.

"Gomez to Corsi."

The response came immediately. "Corsi here, Commander. Do you need me?"

"Just a question is all. If you wanted the people in this outpost to be out of the way, how would you do it?"

"Gas. Because of the atmosphere outside, the station's constantly filtering its air, all from central tanks. The scrubbers clean out any contaminants, but they're programmed to look for certain conditions and elements-that's something that can be reprogrammed. Drop gas in the tanks and everyone within the shield gets it. They'd be out-or dead-in a few minutes, and the only way to stop it is to flush the tanks completely, which is risky in this environment."

Sonya repressed a chill as she listened to the explanation-it was a bit frightening that their security chief had so quickly hit upon such an effective method for poisoning an entire outpost. She realized it was probably a question of forewarning-difficult to guard against a danger you couldn't imagine yourself-but it still spooked her. And it did nothing to answer her questions.

"But these people weren't gassed-the shield was knocked down and the buildings holed, and they were suffocated by the planet's air. So if you're going to attack with something that can put holes right through the walls, why not hit the power station as well?"

This time it was Fabian who answered-Sonya had deliberately put her call on an open channel, in case anyone else had some insight. "Too risky," her tactical expert replied. "You could detonate."

"What, the generator? But that's only a problem if you want the outpost intact."

"Not just the generator," Fabian corrected. "The planet." There was a moment of quiet, then he continued. "Think about it. BorSitu Minor's got dilithium deposits everywhere, right? And its atmosphere has a high electrical charge to begin with. So if you blow up the station's power plant, it could set off a chain reaction, cascading through the air itself, and the dilithium would simply augment that, adding additional charges spread across the planet. Do it the wrong way-or the right way-and the whole planet could go boom."

"Great." Sonya repressed another shiver. "Thank you for that cheery thought, Fabian."

"Sure, no problem." He even sounded cheerful. Then again, there was a big difference between hypothesizing explosions and actually planning them-for Fabian this was probably just a theoretical exercise. But at least it had answered the question. Now they knew why the generator was untouched. It also meant the attackers-whoever or whatever they were-had probably avoided this building altogether. So there wouldn't be much to go on here. Sonya hesitated, trying to decide what to do next, when her combadge beeped.

"Commander, this is Lense. My patients are awake, if you'd like to talk to them."

"On my way, Doctor." Sonya headed toward the door, glad for the sudden distraction. "Duffy, care to talk to some people? Pattie can help Soloman."

"Sounds good to me," Duffy replied. "I'll take people over log books any day."

"Good. Corsi, you're in charge until we get back."

"Will do, Commander."

"Hey, Commander," Duffy said, "last one to the transporter buys drinks!"

Sonya shook her head, but she broke into a light jog nonetheless.

Fabian, meanwhile, was examining the holes riddled throughout the camp. He had found a long pipe, a replacement piece for part of the filtration system, and now he inserted it through a hole in one of the building walls. Glancing through the pipe, Fabian saw a hole in the next building over. The walkways were not that wide here, everything built close together to conserve space and energy, and by pushing the pipe out a bit further he was able to reach the next hole with it, linking that one with the hole he was standing next to. Then he ran his finger along the edge of the hole, right above the pipe. There was a faint ridge there, and he filed the information away to examine later, but for now he was curious about something else. He took out his tricorder again. The wall was several centimeters thick. He measured the hole, then stepped outside and around to the next building, and examined that hole. It was the same size.

Fabian smiled.

"What do you have to smile about?" Frnats asked.

"Patterns, Frnats, patterns. That's what it's all about."

"The only pattern I'm seeing is that you're doing the same boring thing over and over again."

Laughing, Fabian pulled out another emitter, typing a frequency into it before setting it in place.

"This is Alex Volk and April Rictor." Lense introduced them when Sonya and Kieran stepped into sickbay. "They're engineers, both assigned to BorSitu Minor. Alex was there for two years, April for six."

The two survivors were both sitting up in their beds, and they were pale but alert-Alex was heavysset, with dark hair and a full beard, and April was slight, pretty, and blond. Both of them immediately struck Sonya as friendly, reliable people, the kind she'd have on her own team.

"I'm Commander Sonya Gomez. This is Lt. Commander Kieran Duffy. I know this is all pretty horrible for you, but anything you can tell us could be helpful."

"I'll help if I can," April replied, "but I don't really know how. Acid Camp-that's what we called it-was a pretty quiet place. We only had about a dozen people at any given time, sometimes less." She stopped for a moment, tears welling up, but managed to continue. "It was mostly miners-Alex and I, along with Carol and Tina, were there to keep the systems running, Price and Geoff broke up the occasional fight, and we always had a couple scientists around running experiments on new mining methods."

Sonya felt terrible for her-she wasn't sure she'd have been able to speak so calmly if the da Vinci and its crew were killed like that-but she forced herself to continue with the questions.

"Did you keep a large supply of dilithium on hand, or anything else that might be worth stealing?"

Alex shook his head. "Why bother? We had more dilithium coming through every few days. Most of our equipment's too specific for nonminers to care, or too heavily modified to be worthwhile-like our transporter pad. Sure, it's souped up, but just to cut through interference, and it's a lot more unwieldy and a much bigger power drain than even a cargo transporter."

"Had anyone new come in recently?" That was Kieran. It was a good question, but Alex shook his head again.

"No, the last new arrival was almost eight months ago-two new miners to replace ones who'd shipped out. And they never caused any trouble, really-okay, maybe Cortez kept bugging the scientists, but just out of curiosity. He never hurt anyone. No one did."

"What about new supplies, new equipment, anything?"

"We get supply shuttles every few months-last one was almost two months ago. It didn't have anything unusual on it, just some replacement gear."

Sonya tugged her shirt cuffs, then forced herself to stop. "What about the day this all happened? What can you tell us about it?"

Neither of them spoke for a moment, but finally April answered. "We were on shift, Alex and I-it's pretty boring, really, just keeping an eye on the matter-antimatter readings, doing general maintenance. We were chatting, and then suddenly we heard people screaming, and this weird sound, like a giant bee or something." Her voice was soft, so low Sonya had to strain to hear her, but she didn't ask the woman to speak up-this was hard enough on her.

Kieran glanced at Sonya, and she could tell he was thinking the same thing about what April had just said. A bee? Could this have been a native of the planet, attacking at random?

"Yeah, it was a hum, but low and sort of gravelly." Alex shook his head. "We opened the door to see what was going on, and saw people running and holes in the walls-and the shields down. So we slammed the door again and hid. I know we should have helped the others-" he faltered, and Lense patted his shoulder.

"There was nothing you could have done," she reassured him-Sonya was used to Lense's bitterness, and a bit surprised how well the doctor projected sympathy and understanding. "You were right to save yourselves."

The engineer shrugged. "Honestly, we weren't even thinking that clearly-I think we both just panicked and hid. Whatever was attacking never bothered us, but without the filters we had only the air in the power station, and after a while we both passed out. Next thing we knew, we'd woken up here."

Lense glanced at her charts. "You were both lucky. Even another twenty minutes and you'd have had brain damage. As it is, your lungs will feel a little weak for a month or so, but you'll be fine."

"I wish we could do more to help," April said. "I-I want to help. They were our friends, and now they're all gone." She didn't cry, though it looked as if she might, and Lense patted her arm as well.

"You've been a big help already," Sonya told her, "even if it's just by eliminating possibilities. We'll let you know if we think of any more questions-in the meantime, you should rest and get your strength back. Thanks." She stepped back out into the hall, Kieran right behind her.

"Well, I'm running out of ideas," she admitted, heading towards engineering more out of habit than anything. "So far, there's no explanation and no real reason behind whatever attacked."

"One of the others may turn up something," Kieran pointed out, which was true. As always, this was a team effort, and everyone played a part. Sonya just hated feeling like her part was useless. "We can head back and see how they're doing. But first, I think I owe you a drink."

That brought a smile to her face. "Yes, you do, don't you?"

He returned the smile. "One Earl Grey, coming up."

Fabian was at one of the outlying buildings of the little outpost-he had just set an emitter on the hole that perforated its back wall. Now he moved over to the building on the left, and studied the hole there. Similar height to the last one, and the same size. Running his finger along the inside edge, he felt that slight ridge again, although before it had gone from front to back, inside to outside, in a clockwise motion-now it ran counterclockwise. Fabian frowned, and inserted his handy length of pipe through the hole-there was a supply cabinet against the wall, also pierced, and he passed the pipe through there as well, so that it rested at the angle of the attack. Glancing back at the other building, he tried mentally extending the line from its last hole, and then extending the line from the pipe. They didn't line up, at least not right here-perhaps further out they would. But he'd deal with that later. Sighing, Fabian retrieved his pipe, set an emitter on the hole by the supply cabinet, and trudged back around the building to find the point on the opposite side.

Frnats continued to follow him, keeping a bemused eye on things.

"Okay, Fabian, what are all these for?"

Sonya and Kieran had returned to the surface after their quick drink. While Kieran had gone to check on Pattie and Soloman, Sonya had joined Fabian and Frnats in the outpost's center square. There were tiny emitters attached to the nearest holes, and glancing around she noticed that every hole in sight had one, which was an impressive feat in and of itself.

"Well, I've got these on every hole in the camp," Fabian explained, tapping a series of commands into his tricorder. "I noticed that several of the holes line up perfectly-they had to be made by the same shot passing right through several buildings in a row, or else the angles wouldn't have matched so precisely. So I've linked the emitters that line up, each line to a separate frequency." He hit a key, and a small map appeared on the screen. "Soloman found a schematic of this place, and the computer extrapolated it into a 3-D model. Now I've linked the emitters into the model and-voil...!" He handed her his tricorder-on it was a model of the outpost, with colored lines crisscrossing it. Some of the lines ran through a single building, others through two or three, and a few on the edges pierced four or more locations.

"Acid Camp with straws," she muttered.

"Sorry, Commander?"

Sonya shook her head. "It just looks like it's got straws sticking out of it. And 'Acid Camp' is what the two survivors referred to this place as."

"With that soup out there, it fits. Anyhow, this tells us a few things. First of all, this wasn't done by a single ship." Fabian took the tricorder back and pointed out one side of the image-the end points for the lines on that side ranged from centimeters apart to full meters away from each other. "See how far apart these are, and how the angles are different? The only way a ship could have done this is if it was shifting positions, rotating around and firing almost continuously. Even then, it should be more consistent-the angle should be changing by a set amount each time, as the ship pivots to face the center of the outpost. Plus," he pointed to where one line started, not far from the square, and pierced through two buildings farther out, "lines like this aren't starting on the outer edge, they're near the center. That'd take either a guided missile of some sort, or a shot that came down from above and leveled out-anything else would have to hit the buildings on the opposite side of the square, and the holes there don't line up. An attack like this, with all these variables, could take hours."

"That doesn't match up with what the two survivors said." Sonya let out a long breath. "They said the attack only took a few minutes."

"There could be multiple attackers, otherwise, I don't see how we could wind up with this many lines. But I'm still working on it."

Sonya nodded. This was definite progress. "Okay, what's next?"

Fabian grimaced. "Now I get to the fun part. I can run an analysis on the holes, comparing the stress on the materials and the amount of corrosion on the inner edges. That'll tell me which holes were made first. Using that, I can turn this image into an actual blow-by-blow, showing the attacks in order. The first and last will probably be the most important."

"So you've got to go to each hole and get readings?"

"Yep." He grinned at her. "Want to help?"

Sonya laughed. "No thanks." She turned to the Bolian security guard. "Frnats, want to do a little legwork."

"I thought you'd never ask, Commander. What do you need me to do, Stevens?"

Leaving them to it, Sonya went to the command post to get a report from Kieran and Soloman.

. "What have you two got for me?" Sonya asked as she glanced around. Corsi and her people had started clearing away the remains of the former inhabitants. It helped significantly. Sonya thought the holes that passed in one wall, through various consoles, chairs, desks, doors, and cabinets, and then out the opposite wall were still ominous, though.

Kieran and Soloman looked up from the console they'd been huddled near. "Well, Soloman's tapped into the station logs," Kieran said, "and he's already sorted through them a bit. It's pretty much what we'd heard from those two in sickbay-just a couple of miners, a few scientists and engineers, and two security officers. Nothing worth stealing, no major fights, no threats or strange occurrences. Nothing."

"There had to be something," Sonya said, glancing down at the logs herself. "Unless this was a random event, and I don't buy that-not with the power station so obviously left alone. What about swiping a shipment of dilithium?"

"Unnecessary." Soloman didn't even look up, although he did shift over to let her see the console more easily. "There are several dozen remote mines on this planet, fully automated-they have no real defenses, and could easily be robbed by anyone equipped to reach this planet undetected."

"Okay, so if you wanted to rob the place you'd hit one of those instead, not have to worry about witnesses or interference, and have a lot less trouble doing it. Got it. But if it's not the dilithium, and it wasn't the people, what was it?"

"Well, there is one possibility," Kieran admitted, although he looked a bit embarrassed.

"Spill it."

"Well, I was thinking-we've got scientists here working on new mining methods. What if one of them had come up with something really spectacular? Enough so that someone else wanted it?"

"Badly enough to kill for it? Sounds a bit far out, but right now we don't have anything better to work with." She thought for a second, then nodded. "You'll probably need to find personal logs or scientific records, though-I doubt the command post kept track of every device that got worked on."

Kieran stretched. "Great, more research. I thought this job was supposed to be exciting?"

"It is-you're researching how an entire outpost got wiped out." She turned and headed back towards the door. "Soloman, keep checking the logs in case we missed anything. Duffy, get to work." She stepped out quickly, before he could find anything to throw at her.

The next person Sonya checked with was Corsi-who only had more negatives to tell her.

"The good news is, this place is safe," the security chief admitted. "The shields here are strong enough to withstand anything short of heavy bombing, and the da Vinci would see any ship or missile attack coming. The bad news is, I can't find any traces of attack beyond the holes themselves. There's no forced entry anywhere, no signs of fighting, no missing or damaged ships-nothing. If people did this, they weren't interested in looting the place, and they didn't even want to kill everyone-I think that was just an unfortunate side effect. There aren't any bombs or booby-traps anywhere, and no signs of someone searching for anything hidden, whether in personal quarters or workspaces or cargo bays."

Sonya was impressed with the other woman's thoroughness. "I didn't realize you'd look for all that," she admitted. "I thought it would just be whether someone was lying in wait for us, or had left us a trap of some sort."

"There's a lot more to security than that," Corsi pointed out. "Part of it is anticipating your opponent, which means figuring out what he, she, or they want and then how they will try to get it. And I can't figure out what anyone could have wanted that would have caused this, unless they just hated this place and wanted to see it wrecked."

"Great, so we might be dealing with a revenge-crazed killer." Sonya sighed and shook her head. "Well, keep me posted."

Fabian and Frnats were going from hole to hole, checking the readings on each one. They'd entered one of the buildings now, sidestepping a body Corsi's team had not yet reached-Frnats paused to alert Eddy and Friesner that they'd missed one-and were entering those rooms which had been holed. The doors in this building were all blackened by phaser fire where locking mechanisms had been-Corsi's work, most

likely. Except for the one Fabian had just tried, which was undamaged.

"Stevens to Corsi." He glanced around the room as he entered. It looked much the same as the others in this building-cabinets along the walls, their surfaces half-eaten by the corrosive air, and several workbenches strewn about with machine parts covering them. Another workroom.

"Corsi here. Go."

Fabian wondered if he imagined the hitch in Corsi's voice. She hadn't spoken two words to him since their little one-nighter before the mission to Empok Nor. "Did you enter every building when you did your sweep?"

"Affirmative."

"Did you enter every room?"

"Of course." Now she sounded annoyed.

"Any problems getting in?"

"Only in one building-all the doors were locked. So I had to open them."

Fabian grinned-he could hear the shrug in her voice. "And you opened them by blasting the locks?"

"Look, mister, my job is to make sure this place is safe so nobody gets hurt. If that means wrecking a few locks-

He'd already thrown up his hands in surrender, then realized she couldn't see the gesture. "Whoa, Commander, I'm not attacking you-you did what you had to. I'm just asking a question. I'm in that building now, and there's one door that doesn't have blast marks on it. I just wanted to know why."

"Oh. Well, that door was already unlocked-no sense wasting a phaser blast on it. Anything else?"

"No, that was all I wanted. Thanks. Stevens out."

Behind him, Frnats was chuckling as she took out her tricorder. "Core-Breach doesn't like to waste phaser beams."

"Or time," Fabian said, trying to keep from laughing out loud.

"Corrosion reading shows at seventeen point five eight percent," Frnats added, examining one of the holes.

"Same as all the others." Fabian shook his head. "Okay, what about the temp?"

"Metal temperature along the edge of the hole reads at thirty-seven point eight nine degrees."

"Okay, now we're getting somewhere-that's point two-five degrees lower than the hole in the building facing this one. So this hole came first." He stepped over next to her, and ran his fingers around the edge of the hole, encountering the same ridge he'd felt in every other hole. This one ran clockwise, though, and the hole opposite had been counterclockwise.

Fabian stepped back and glanced around the room again, taking in the walls, the cabinets, the tables, the two low stools, the various parts and pieces of equipment, the tools-then he stopped and looked at the walls again.

"Frnats, take a look at this." He put his back against the outer wall, right beneath the hole, and gestured at the wall opposite. "What do you see there?"

His companion looked where he'd directed. "Nothing. Why?"

Fabian simply grinned at her. "Nothing. Exactly."

An hour later, the team had reconvened in the observation lounge on the da Vinci, this time at Fabian's request. Sonya had never seen the tactical expert so excited-he was like a little kid with a new toy.

"With Frnats's help, I was able to analyze each hole in Acid Camp."

"Acid Camp?" Gold asked.

"That's what the locals called it, sir," Sonya quickly explained.

Nodding, Gold said, "Fine, go on."

Fabian put up an enlarged image of one of the holes. "First off, we know what did this-at least, what kind of thing."

Gold leaned forward. "And what, you were just saving this information for a rainy day?"

"No sir-we just found out, and I'd already requested this meeting so I figured I might as well tell everyone in person." Fabian pointed at the image onscreen. "Notice the edges of the hole itself-I've had the computer remove the corrosion damage, so all we're seeing is the hole the way it first looked. The edges are slightly jagged, which means they were torn rather than burned or even cut. But the metal beyond the immediate area is barely stressed, not bent or bowed at all, so whatever tore through was moving so fast it didn't affect the surrounding area. And if you look very closely," he magnified the image along one edge, "you'll see a slight ridge running through the hole, at a diagonal. Whatever did this was rotating."

"Like a drill bit?" That was Carol, and Fabian smiled at her-it reminded Sonya of a teacher who'd just gotten the right answer from a favorite student.

"Exactly. Which makes sense-this is a mining camp. Now, it would take an enormous drill to do these, far too big for a person to lift, and some of these holes are in places no drill-rig could reach-not to mention the fact that these lines go all the way from one end of camp to another, which would require a drill bit some two hundred meters long. But it's a start."

"And every little bit helps," Sonya said. "Good job, Fabian. But you were going to call us together anyway, so I'm assuming you have something else to tell us." She already knew he did-Fabian wasn't the type to get all worked over something minor.

She immediately saw that she'd been right, as the eager look returned to Fabian's face. "Not to tell you, Commander-to show you. Like I said, Frnats and I analyzed each hole in the camp. Now, the corrosion levels proved to be a dead end-they're the same for every hole."



"So they were all caused at the same time?"

"Either that or the shields didn't drop until after the holes were made. So no help there. But it's only been a day since the attack, and something moving that fast generates a lot of heat-when we first went down there those holes were still hot to the touch. So we measured the temperature of the metal around each edge-minute variations on some, but enough for the computer to organize them." Fabian hit a few keys on his padd, and the model of the camp came up, with the crisscrossing lines he'd shown her before. "Now, when we factor in those variations, and tell the computer to display each hole as it occurred, in order-"

The lines disappeared, leaving the model untouched for a moment. Then a hole blossomed in one building, on the outer rim of the camp. A line formed from that hole to the next building in, continuing until it had passed through the center square and then through several buildings on the opposite side. A second line began an instant later, angling back in towards the center and across. Everyone watched silently as line after line appeared, and Sonya noticed several shudders as her team thought about what it must have been like with those holes sprouting all around them. She fought down the shivers herself, determined to present a strong front to her team. Then Kieran leaned forward.

"Computer, freeze sim!" The line stopped in mid-formation, and everyone turned towards him, but he gestured at the screen instead. "Sorry, but look! That line isn't straight. A lot of them aren't."

"Right," Fabian said triumphantly. "Good catch, Duff. I did a computer simulation of the lines before, but only linked the holes where the lines matched angles perfectly, so I had lines starting and stopping within the outpost. That was my mistake-the temperatures showed they were continuations of other lines, just not perfectly straight ones. Whatever did this was veering away every time it came near the power station. So either we had an operator directing things, or programming to avoid the risk of explosion." He resumed the simulation, and they watched again until the last line was formed.

"Okay," Gold commented, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Maybe I'm just an old man, but what does that tell us?" He frowned. "No, scratch that-I'm just slow today. There's only one attacker, isn't there?"

Sonya shot him a surprised glance, as did several of the others, but Fabian just grinned.

"Got it in one, Captain. Each new line doesn't start until the previous one ends-no overlaps. So we've got a single object here, not multiples. And I know how it did all this so quickly." He keyed in another command. "Watch the screen. I've extended each trajectory beyond the first and last hole, until each line touches the one before and after it." The pattern became a single unbroken line, with sharp reversals at each end. "Notice that those connections all happen the same distance from the buildings."

"It's the shields!" That was Corsi, and she looked abashed at her own outburst, but kept going. "This thing was inside, and ricocheting off the shields!"

"Exactly. Until it holed the emitter array here-" Fabian pointed to a hole midway down the last line segment, "and the shields dropped. Then it just kept on going, out past the station."

"So this thing didn't bypass the shields after all," Sonya commented, fighting an insane urge to giggle-it was a response to the sudden stress release, and she managed to keep it down this time. "It started out inside, and just kept bouncing around. We don't have a shield-killer on our hands." Everyone slumped a bit-that had been their single greatest fear, finding out that something or someone had learned how to ignore their shields. Whatever had done this was still dangerous, and still a major threat, but at least it wouldn't nullify Starfleet's primary defense.

Fabian was still fiddling with the screen. "It did start inside, Commander-and I can even tell you where." The screen now showed two holes side-by-side. "Both of these are shown from the outside-they're the first and second holes, respectively. Notice the scoring on the inside edge-that diagonal ridge I mentioned."

Bart Faulwell spoke up. "They're mirror images, not matches-so it's reversed on one of them." Leave it to the linguist to catch the visual cues, Sonya thought to herself. And of course that was why Bart and Carol were both in most briefings-they sometimes caught things the engineers didn't.

Fabian was already agreeing with Bart's assessment. "Right, it's spiraling in the opposite direction. Which means this first one isn't an entrance hole-it's an exit. And there aren't any other holes in that room, so whatever did this came from inside there."

Soloman, who had already downloaded all the station's records, spoke up. "That's a workroom for one of the scientists, V'reet D't Madl'r. He's a Syclarian and has been assigned to BorSitu Minor for eleven months."

"One of the bodies was a Syclarian," Lense said. "They've got a distinctive digit structure, tentacles rather than fingers-even after the decomposition the computer identified that."

"He's the only one on-station," Soloman said, "so that would be him."

Sonya stood up, feeling a warm glow of pride for her people. "Nice work, Fabian-really. Okay, troops, now we know where it came from and almost what it is. Kieran, get down there and tear that room apart-I want to know anything and everything about this guy, and about what he was working on. Soloman, I want anything and everything you can about V'reet D't Madl'r, both from station records and from our own library. Fabian, you and Pattie put your heads together-tell me how large an object we're looking at. Go down with Kieran and take a look at this guy's notes and equipment. That should help narrow the field." She smiled. "Let's get to work, people!"

Fabian, Duffy, and Pattie stood in the workroom, glancing around.

"It was unlocked?" Duffy was asking.

Fabian nodded. "The only one in the building that was-I checked with Corsi. She blasted her way through the others."

His friend grinned. "That's our Core-Breach." Then Duffy sobered. "This was Madl'r's private workroom, judging from the records. Those locks on the doors, they've got codes keyed in by whoever's assigned the room. The central computer doesn't have access to them, except in an emergency situation, when it can lock or unlock the entire building, depending on what's necessary." Duffy shook his head. "I mentioned to Sonnie before that someone could've been after whatever the scientists were working on. Well, we'll worry about that later. Let's see what we can find here."

The three of them began combing the room. Fabian took one of the worktables and Pattie the other, while Duffy checked the cabinets.

"I have something," Pattie announced after several minutes. She was studying an object on the table, and Fabian joined her, as did Duffy. The object was roughly three meters on a side, square but mostly open-a hollow half-sphere formed the center.

"Notice the surface," Pattie indicated with one claw. "No breaks or gaps. This is a finished piece."

"Okay, but what is it?" Fabian ran a finger along the inside of the ring, searching for tactile clues. "Looks like a cradle of some kind. I'd guess these are power couplings, for recharging." He pointed to several small linkages he'd felt near the top.

Pattie was holding her tricorder. "Two meters exactly-the same size as the holes."

"So we've found the holder of the thing. That'll help." Duffy glanced around again. "But blueprints would be better, or a log, or something." He frowned. "What's missing here?" Fabian and Pattie both looked around the room.

"The device?" Fabian offered, but Duffy waved it off-it had been the obvious answer, of course, and Fabian had known it wasn't what Duffy was thinking, but he'd wanted to eliminate every possibility.

"A computer?" Pattie suggested, and Duffy nodded. The minute she said it Fabian knew she was right.

"That's it-no computer. What kind of scientist works without a computer?" On a hunch, Fabian stepped back over to the other worktable, rummaged again through the objects piled haphazardly on top, then noticed the shallow drawer slung underneath. "Aha!" he announced, pulling it open and hauling out several large sheets of paper. And, amazingly enough, a book.

"I'll bet night duty for a month that this is what we're looking for." Neither Duffy nor Pattie took him up on the offer, as he hit his combadge. "Commander?"

"Well, I've got good news and I've got bad news," Fabian said to Sonya over the comlink. "The good news is, this Madl'r was a typical scientist, kept notes on everything. We even found a journal."

"And the bad news?"

"He didn't write it in anything we can read."

"Write it? He didn't record his notes?"

"Of course not-that'd be too easy." Even on the combadge Sonya could hear Pattie and Kieran chuckling in the background. "This guy actually hand-wrote his journal-on paper!"

"Great, a Luddite." Sonya leaned back in her chair and tugged absently at her cuff. "Well, bring it up and we'll set Faulwell on it. What about diagrams, schematics, blueprints?"

"That's the other bad news. We've got what are probably engineering diagrams, but we can't make heads or tails of them-they're written in whatever he did the journal in, and it's more scribbles and little sketches than anything else. We know this thing is round, at least."

"Which we'd already guessed. He had nothing on the computer?"

"Just the same basic personnel record everyone had-he was either really paranoid or really old-fashioned. Or both."

"All right, bring up what you can. How are Commander Duffy and Pattie doing?"

Kieran came on the link. "We've found some of his tools-odd-looking things, must be because of those digits Lense mentioned. And Pattie found a cradle for the device itself-about two meters in diameter. And those diagrams. But not much else."

"Well, keep looking-something may turn up. Send that journal up here on the double. Fabian, you're pretty sure this thing doesn't have the power to punch through shields?"

Fabian spoke up again. "Not a chance. It would have drilled its way through right from the start, if that were the case. No, even if it's still active and hopping around out there we're safe from it. And I'd be willing to bet it doesn't have enough propulsion to exit the atmosphere, so the da Vinci's fine too."

"Some good news, anyway. Okay, keep me posted. Gomez out." Sonya rubbed a hand over her face and sighed. The bigger threat was gone, at least, but their job wouldn't be done until they knew exactly what this thing was, why it had wrecked the outpost, and how to prevent any repeats in future. And now it was sounding like that information was all locked away in a book-a book!-that none of them could read. Well, maybe one of them. She hit her combadge. "Mr. Faulwell, please meet me in the observation lounge."

Bart Faulwell was excited. He enjoyed his time on the da Vinci, but usually his only involvement was lending a hand in research matters, and sometimes offering suggestions when they were puzzling over the wording of journal entries. To be given the chance to decipher a journal-a handwritten one!-was thrilling. It was like the old days of the Dominion War when he worked for Starfleet Intelligence decoding enemy communications.

A little less thrilling was the fact that the entire S.C.E. crew were waiting on his results. Which meant that-like his superiors at SI-they kept checking on his progress.

"This sort of thing takes time," he reminded Commander Gomez after her third visit back to the observation lounge. "This isn't a common language, so it's not something I can simply translate."

"No, we don't have a Sycclarian dictionary," he answered Duffy on his second trip. "The Sycclarians are reclusive, first of all, and they tend to use communicators and padds like everyone else. This is actually the first time I've seen their written language-and it may be the first time anyone has."

"Yes, they have an alphabet," he replied to his roommate Fabian Stevens, on his second time checking in. "Every language does. But some are for letters, others are for words, others are for images or phrases or even whole ideas-it can vary widely. The first step is to determine what the alphabet is by looking for repeating patterns. Then you figure out what each symbol stands for. Then you can assemble a working translation program, and actually convert the writing into usable information. But it all takes time."

Privately, in between these little visits, Bart admitted the truth-he had no clue where to begin. Oh, he'd translated languages before, certainly. But usually they were on a tricorder, or in a computer system. He would copy over the files, then run them through his translation programs-the programs would search out any patterns, and compare those with all the languages it had on file. Often that was all it took-the computer would then recognize the language, and proceed to translate it. Sometimes it would find near-matches, languages with similarities, and Bart would then tweak the match, analyzing the files and extrapolating variants of the ones they'd found until he had a cohesive root structure that fit every instance in the file. Then the computer ran the program. But this! He'd scanned the pages into the computer, of course, but even familiar languages could vary widely between handwriting and programmed text, so he was unsurprised when the computer found no matches. They had very little on the Sycclarians to begin

with, and what contact they'd had was through standard channels, which meant it was already in their own language and format, not that of the Syclarians.

He stared down at the journal again. It was a handsome book, actually, fashioned of dark leather worn smooth over time, with a single swirl embossed into the front. The pages were thick and velvety to the touch, with just a bit of crinkle to them-held up to the light, they showed a faint tracery through them, golden-brown and speckled like an egg. To Bart, who preferred writing letters to his beloved Anthony on paper and who generally preferred the tactile aesthetics of ink on paper, it was a glorious sight.

But the writing! Bart wasn't even sure he could call this writing, in the normal sense. It looked more like painting, or perhaps stamping. Each page was covered in dark blotches, overlapped as if ink had spilled repeatedly and then spread. It was like staring at an old Earth inkblot test, with the dark color forming odd patterns on the paper. It was at once fascinating and frustrating.

"No, I haven't-" he started, as the door behind him slid open, but he stopped when he saw who was standing there. Carol Abramowitz was one of his closest friends on the da Vinci-as the other non-engineer in the S.C.E. crew, she understood the frustration of being useless in technical situations. And, as a cultural specialist, she knew as well as he did that some problems took time to solve.

"Sorry, I just wanted to see how you were, and if I could help at all." She slid into the seat next to him.

"No, I'm sorry-everybody else keeps poking their heads in to see if I'm done yet, and I thought it was one of them again." He sighed. "To be honest, I don't have a thing yet. This one's completely new to me, and not like anything I've seen before. Plus it's on paper, which means the computer's almost useless."

"I know-what little I've been able to glean about the Syclarians is that they kept a lot of their old heritage but moved it to the background, and adopted Federation standards on the surface. So we don't see their language at all, because they only use it for private things now. But you probably found that yourself."

Bart smiled at her. "Yes, but it's nice to hear you confirm it. What else can you tell me about them?"

Carol pulled out her padd. "Not much, really. Humanoid, but with tentacular digits on hands and feet and eyestalks on their head-most likely evolved from cephalopods. Vestigial gills, and a strong cultural interest in aquatic sports and activities." She smiled. "That ink is probably from an h'stirip, their equivalent to an octopus-they're favored pets, and the ink is popular for personal letters and greeting cards."

"I thought it looked like real ink, judging from the blotting." He held up a page to show her. "And he used a real pen, too-if you run your finger across the surface you can just make out the scratches."

Carol set her padd aside, though she toyed with the stylus. "So it wasn't a stamp? That's what I thought when I saw it, what with those big circles."

"No, it's a pen-the circles were made deliberately by a smaller instrument." Bart spun the book around slowly. "To be honest, I'm not entirely sure which way is up. Especially on the inner ones-they leak over to the ones around them, so it's hard to tell exactly where they start." He glanced up at Carol, who was absently making circles on the table. "If we-"

"What?" Whatever she'd been thinking of was lost as she realized he was staring at her.

"That's it!" Bart laughed, and spun the journal around, a little faster this time. "Carol, you're a genius!"

"I am? Well, of course. What did I do?"

Bart was staring at the journal again. "The Syclarians have tentacles-small ones in place of fingers." She nodded. "And their eyes are on stalks. So they can rotate around." Carol nodded again. "Look at this." He flipped the book shut and pointed to the whorl on the front. "I thought this was just a design, but it's not. It's his name! Or the word 'journal,' or something like that-but it's writing! They write in little swirls!" He opened the book again, to a random page, and stabbed at one of the blotches. "I don't know if they're words or sentences, but I'm guessing longer because of all the scratches involved. Each swirl holds a lot of information. It could even be a whole paragraph, one discrete thought per circle. They start in the center, then spiral outward. When that thought's done, they start a new swirl-if the two are related, the new one starts where the old one stopped, which is why they overlap!" He tapped on the screen, and pulled out his own padd. In an instant he had one of the swirls displayed, magnified several thousand times.

"Look there, that's the actual marking." Bart pointed out the lines within the larger swirl. "Also circular-they don't have sharp angles themselves, so they think in circular patterns instead. My god, the sheer amount of information they can fit on one page-it's staggering!"

Bart set to work, and it was only after he looked up and saw that Carol was gone that he'd realized that she'd left.

Making a mental note to apologize to her later, knowing full well he'd forget to, he dove back into the work.

"It's a journal all right," Bart explained a few hours later-they were all back in the briefing room again, and the slight linguist was standing for once, looking like nothing so much as a professor Sonya had had back at the Academy. "Once Carol and I figured out how their language worked, it wasn't that hard to isolate symbols and break them into patterns. The cover symbol is his name, V'reet D't Madl'r-it means 'Swimmer in Deep Waters,' by the way. That gave me a key to work from. Each swirl is an entire thought made up of smaller swirls for sentences, which have smaller ones still for words or objects or actions." Kieran rolled his eyes-Bart noticed the response and smiled. "Sorry. I get a little excited. Anyway, Madl'r was a scientist-miner, and he was working on a new device to help find dilithium more easily. It's a sensor, really-it's attracted to dilithium right through the rock."

"So why wasn't it drawn to the power station in the camp?" Kieran asked.

"It was," Fabian said. "But Madl'r was smart." He gestured at his roommate. "Once Bart cracked the language, he translated those diagrams for us, too. They tell the real story." He looked at Bart, who sat and gestured for him to continue. "Madl'r's device is round, with sensors inset on all sides, and self-propelled. It's built to rotate at high speeds, like a drill-leave it to a race that thinks in circles to design something like that. Dilithium is hard to find because it tends to be deep underground, and that much rock interferes with sensor readings-and it's worse here because of the ionized atmosphere. So you've got to get closer, almost right on top of it, before you know it's there. Madl'r's device has all these sensors linked in together to create a stronger array-it can pick up dilithium a little further away than most, and it's built specifically to work through rock and metal. What happens is the device locates a dilithium deposit and zeroes in on it. It drills its way right through the surrounding rock-not a big hole, we all saw the size, but enough to put equipment through and enough that miners could easily expand them into real tunnels. It rings the deposit, but doesn't touch it-that could risk an explosion, which could lead to a series of bigger ones. So the device is programmed to skirt the dilithium itself, and just make tunnels close by-it's small enough and fast enough that it can switch direction quickly, so it's got ample time to change course and avoid hitting the deposit. It was meant as a labor-saving device."

"How's the design?" That was Gold asking, and Sonya hid a smile as Fabian, Kieran, and Pattie grinned at each other. Give an engineer a diagram and he'd show it to other engineers, so they could all pore over it together-she'd wanted to take a crack at the thing herself.

Pattie actually answered the captain's question. "Very good, actually. There are many failsafes, several redundancies, and the sensor array is clever, as is the general design-he managed to protect the sensors from damage while making the device strong enough to drill through solid rock, and it's highly maneuverable. I think miners will find it very helpful."

"So what went wrong?"

The change in the room was obvious. Gold had, sensibly, let the engineers finish going through their explanation, knowing that he wouldn't get anything useful out of them until they finished explaining the new toy. Once that was done, though, it was time to get down to the business of why this miraculous device wiped out an entire outpost.

"We're still working on that, Captain," Sonya said. "We think it must have gotten turned on accidentally, and not by Madl'r-Corsi found his body in the commissary, nowhere near the device. There may have been a tremor-BorSitu's atmosphere has electrical storms all the time, and when they hit the shield they can cause a slight shudder-or the cradle had a power surge, or a cleaning 'bot bumped it somehow. We don't know yet. But the device switched on, and its programming kicked in. It set out to find dilithium. And the nearest source of that-"

"-was the power plant," Gold finished. "Okay, so it rings the station, drilling its way through everything, thinking it's making paths to the deposit. Every time it hits the shields it bounces back and makes another pass. Then it holes the shield array, and on its next pass it goes outside the boundaries of the camp. So why didn't it come back?"

"This thing was built to make enough holes for miners to use, and then to move on to another location," Fabian explained. "It had already provided plenty of tunnels-if not for the shields it probably would have moved on long before. So once they dropped, it set out to search for another deposit."

"Did it find one?"

"Probably not." Pattie glanced down at her padd. "The rock is thick here, and the sensors don't work as well above ground-too much electrical interference. Once beyond the camp, the device probably decided it couldn't find any more deposits, and shut down."

"Is it still out there?"

Pattie and Fabian glanced at one another, then nodded. Fabian explained. "Like I said, Madl'r was smart. He built this thing with enough protection to withstand the atmosphere's corrosive effects. If left out there for a week or two, it'd eventually get worn away, but right now-yeah, it's still out there."

It looked like Captain Gold was done with his questions, so Sonya leaned forward. "Okay, good work. We know what did this, and how. The why sounds like pure chance-crazy but it can happen. So the question is, do we retrieve it?" She glanced at Gold-as captain, it was really his call.

If she was hoping for a decisive answer, though, she was disappointed, as he shrugged. "The mission was just to find out what had happened, which you've done. Then it was to make sure this wasn't some

'shield-killer' weapon, which it isn't. So do we need to go get that thing? Probably not. But it just doesn't sit well with me to leave it out there."

"Actually, there's a very good reason for going to get it," Kieran put in. "I'm assuming this place will be restored and restaffed, right?"

"It'd make sense," Pattie said. "BorSitu's too valuable to leave unattended, and this outpost is already established and easy enough to repair. In fact, we've already done most of the repair work ourselves. Why waste the effort to build a new one?"

Kieran nodded. "Okay, so they're going to put more people down here. Now, we're guessing that device is still active somewhere. What if it winds up near the camp again?"

"It'd get stopped by the shields."

"Sure-if it came at them from above ground. But this thing's built to go below ground-let's say it burrows in at some point. It could wind up under the outpost."

Sonya froze as what he was saying sank in, and she silently berated herself for not catching it before. The shields were built to provide a protective dome over the camp. They didn't extend far below ground.

"Right, we go get it." She tugged at her cuff and forced herself to take charge. "Pattie, look into boosting the shuttle's sensors-I want some way to see what we're doing out there. Fabian, project the device's exit trajectory, and see if you can approximate storm movement so we know if it's been knocked out of its flight path. Kieran, I want you and Soloman to go over the device's schematics again-Bart, help them if they need it with the translations. See if there's a way to contact it remotely, some frequency it responds to. If so, set up something that can reach it through that mess down there. Let's do it, people."

"Well, I'd say you have things well in hand, Commander." Gold stood up, smiling. "Good. Let me know when you need the shuttlecraft."

"Yes sir." Sonya watched him walk out. For a moment she'd worried she'd overstepped her bounds by essentially dismissing everyone, but once again Gold had made it clear that he didn't stand on protocol much. As long as the job got done. And she was confident they'd get it done.

"We've boosted the sensors," Pattie reported a few hours later. "Actually, we borrowed from Madl'r's design, and built several smaller sensors into a larger array. The results are impressive. We should be able to cut through the atmospheric disturbance without any difficulty now."

Sonya nodded at Pattie, who was standing next to her in the docking bay. "Good job, Pattie." She turned to her tactical expert, who was discussing something with Kieran. "Fabian?"

"I've plotted its course. I also tapped into the outpost's sensor logs-got the weather patterns right up until the incident. Then I had the computer extrapolate them, and merged that in with the readings once the sensors were back online." Fabian was grinning, clearly proud of his work, and Sonya didn't blame him. "I've got the weather for the entire period, and I factored that in. I'd be willing to bet I've got the thing placed within two meters of its actual location."

"Impressive, Fabian. We'll have to see how close you came. Kieran, any luck?"

"Well, we did find a frequency-Madl'r built it with a retrieval switch, and if it picks up the signal it'll



retrace its path until it reaches the original dropoff point. Only problem is, that would be the workroom inside the camp, and it can't backtrack to there because we've got the shields back on. We could drop them again, at least long enough for it to come in-

"But that means exposing the outpost to the air again, which I'd rather not do if we can avoid it."

"Actually," Kieran gave her a sheepish grin, "I was going to say we couldn't because it would rip right through the shield array again. Unless we lowered the shields, unhooked that segment, recalled it, then reassembled that portion and raised the shields again. All while using the portable generators to keep ourselves alive."

"Right. Sorry, I should have let you finish." Sonya mentally scolded herself-trust your team and don't second-guess them so much. "Okay, so the recall's out for now. Good to know we have it, though, if we wind up needing it." She frowned. "I suppose there's no chance of just locking onto its location and beaming it back to the base?"

"Doubtful," Kieran replied. "The transporter down there can cut through that soup to get us up here, and it could probably reach a little ways outside the camp, but not too far-and based on Fabian's calculations, I'd say it's well out of range."

"Okay, so we do it the hard way-we shuttle down, land right next to it, put up a portable shield and drag it inside. Messy, but it'll work." Sonya made sure her team was all paying attention-she hated having to repeat herself. "Fabian, you're with me. Corsi, you've got the helm. The rest of you, stay put-we shouldn't be too long." And she climbed into the Archimedes and started strapping herself in.

"Sonnie, pull out!"

The ride down had been uneventful, Corsi holding the shuttlecraft to a tight descent and riding out each stormfront they encountered, and Sonya had started to relax a little, sure this mission was almost over. The sudden shout through the comm systems made her start, and she winced as the straps cut into her skin.

"Kieran? What the hell-?" but he cut her off before she could finish.

"Tell Corsi to break off, now!" She wasn't sure what was going on, but the panic in his voice was unmistakable, and she nodded to Corsi, who frowned but immediately changed their flight path.

"Alright, Lieutenant Commander," she said, reminding Kieran who was first officer here, "we've veered off. Now what's this all about?"

"Set down at the outpost-it's closer than the da Vinci. I'll beam down and meet you there." And he cut off.

"Dammit, Duff, if this is some sort of joke it'll cost you," Fabian muttered from the back seat, but Sonya could tell it was an empty threat, and a glance from Fabian confirmed it. Kieran did like to joke around, but they both knew he'd never do it in the midst of a mission, especially under such conditions.

Besides, she knew him more than well enough to know that something had him spooked.

Twenty minutes later they had reached the outpost-Kieran had obviously transported down and beaten them there, because the shield opened for them before they even requested it. Sonya was already

undoing her harness. By the time the shuttlecraft's engines switched off Sonya was standing by the door.

"Alright, what's this all about?" she demanded when the door slid aside to reveal Kieran waiting.

"Sorry to startle you, Commander-we had to get your attention fast, before you got in range." Kieran's hand reached for her, but he visibly fought down the impulse and turned instead, leading her and the others to the outpost's control room. Pattie and Soloman were already there when they arrived.

"It's the device," Pattie explained as they entered. "It really was well-built. Even down to a standby mode."

"Okay, so it's got a standby-so what?" That was Corsi, who didn't look too happy at having her mission aborted. "What difference would that make to us?"

"Quite a bit, actually," Fabian admitted, wincing. "I should have thought of it myself. Damn! We almost got ourselves killed back there."

Corsi whirled on Fabian. "Killed? I thought we were just retrieving the damned thing!"

"That was the plan, but we forgot about the standby." Kieran didn't look as overwrought now, but his hands still clenched tightly to the back of the chair he was standing behind. "The device shuts itself down if it goes a certain amount of time without finding a deposit-eight hours, to be exact. It conserves its power until either it does detect a deposit or it's retrieved. It destroyed this place almost fifteen hours ago now, so it's been inactive for seven. But the minute a sufficient quantity of dilithium comes in range, it'll wake back up and home in on that source."

Corsi winced. "And the shuttle's got a warp engine." Both the Archimedes and the Franklin were warp-capable.

"Well, I'm glad you called, then," Sonya admitted, shaking her head to hide the shakes in her hands. "But what do we do now? We can't go after it in the shuttle, obviously."

"We could eject the warp core," Fabian pointed out. "It'd take a while, but we could do it-then we grab it with the shuttlecraft the way we'd planned, bring it back, turn it off, and reinstall the drive."

Sonya was glad he'd given her something to focus on instead of their near-death. "Workable, but not optimal. Ejecting the core's easy enough, but it will take time to put it back in-and we'd probably have to do it at a starbase. I don't think Captain Scott would appreciate our taking the time. It's an option, but I'd rather save it for a last resort."

"We could recall it," Kieran pointed out. "We'd have to set up shield generators."

"I know, but it's dangerous-if something goes wrong we could wind up without any shields here, and that means more time to refabricate them and then rebuild them."

"Suits are out?" Corsi asked.

"Absolutely," Fabian said. "This atmosphere'd shred them in a matter of minutes."

"Can we beam it back?"

Shaking her head, Sonya said, "We already thought of that, but it wouldn't work-the transporter on the outpost isn't made to reach that far across this interference. It can go up and out, especially with another transporter on the other end, but this is too far and too one-sided. And the da Vinci's transporters couldn't cut through the atmosphere."

After she finished, Sonya noticed Fabian was staring off to the side-she'd seen that look before-usually in the mirror. "Fabian, you've got an idea?"

"Maybe," he admitted. "It's a little crazy, but I think it'd work. Only thing is, I need someone who's good at targeting-a lot better than I am. Someone who can pick off a small, high-velocity target without hesitation."

They all turned to look at the tall blonde security chief, who actually grinned in return.

"What do you want me to shoot?"

"Everybody ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

"Ready here."

"Affirmative."

"All set."

"Let's do it."

Sonya smiled with pride. This was her team. "Alright, here we go. Kieran, hit it."

At the communications console, Kieran flipped a switch. Instantly a signal went out, beaming at a set frequency-the frequency that recalled Madl'r's sensor device.

"I'm detecting movement, Commander," Pattie announced from the sensors. "Small object, picking up speed. The dimensions match those of the device." She checked her readings. "Stevens, I'm showing the device was seventeen centimeters from your projected location."

Fabian grinned but didn't say anything.

Sonya spoke up to keep them focused. "Okay, here it comes. Fabian, how are our shields?"

"Full power, Commander. That thing'll bounce like a rubber ball."

"Perfect. Corsi, you ready?"

"Standing by, Commander."

They all waited, watching the screen. "One thousand meters and closing," Pattie announced, as the dot appeared on the screen's periphery. "Eight hundred. Five hundred. Three hundred. Impact."

Sonya thought she felt the shield ripple, but it was probably her imagination. On the screen, she watched

as the device hit the shield and rebounded-then disappeared.

"Got it!" Corsi shouted through the link-she had used the impact to pinpoint its location, and had locked the transporters on it, catching and sending it in one quick motion. "Sending it to-"

"I have the device, Commander," Soloman announced from the power station. "It appeared as planned, and I have now removed its command board."

"Great." Sonya let out a sigh, and allowed herself a smile. "Okay, team, everybody to the shuttlecraft. Time to get back to our ship."

"It was the failsafe again," Sonya explained to Gold once they'd returned to the da Vinci. "Madl'r didn't want to risk any chance of dilithium explosion or damage, so he set the device to avoid direct contact with a deposit. But if it did wind up too close for safety, the device was set to deactivate-immediate shutdown of all systems, so that it couldn't accidentally bump anything. Corsi transported it into the outpost's power plant, and it shut itself off the minute it appeared. Then we just pulled the plug on it."

"Risky plan," Gold pointed out, "trusting a feature you'd only read about in the plans of a dead scientist whose writing you could barely understand. What if he'd forgotten that feature, or left it out, or altered the programming?"

He glanced down at the device itself, now sitting safely in its cradle. Deactivated, the thing looked harmless enough, its dull metal surface pocked by inset sensors, with ridges swirled about them. Those ridges were cutting surfaces-once the device activated, it began to spin, and the ridges functioned as a drill, corkscrewing through solid rock as if it were paper. Small jets were set about as well, interspersed with the sensors and also inset to avoid interfering with the ridges-the jets were used to maneuver, and with so many of them the device could change direction at a phenomenal speed. It could even stop and reverse, all in less than a meter.

Sonya shook her head. "The thing already avoided the power plant like the plague when it was first activated. It was just too well-built. Madl'r included every safety he could think of."

"It's sad, really," Gold commented, running a finger absently along one ridge. "If he hadn't built it so well, Madl'r would probably still be alive, and so would the rest of Acid Camp. But he made it so effective it destroyed them all."

"Just goes to show you can't predict everything," Kieran chimed in. "Or maybe that sometimes it pays to do shoddy work."

"Well, don't try that one on my ship," Gold warned, "or you'll be digging through some deep rocks yourself, catch my drift?" He smiled to show he wasn't serious-about having to give the warning. He was dead serious about the punishment.

"Yes sir, Captain!" Kieran's salute was only half-mocking, and Gold let it pass. The young man had done some good work here, as usual, and he'd never been one to stand on formalities.

But he did still have a question for his first officer, something that had bothered him since they arrived. "Did we ever figure out how it all started?"

Sonya grimaced. "Unfortunately, we think so."

"Oh?" He waited for her to explain.

"Well, the door to Madl'r's room was unlocked when Corsi first found it-the only one in the building that was. This was his private workspace, and he was obviously serious about keeping things secure, so he didn't just forget. Someone opened it."

"Not Madl'r?"

Sonya shook her head. "His body was near the commissary. But one of the other miners, a man named Stephen Cortez, was found just beyond the building." She sighed, and Gold was reminded again how young she was-and how old he sometimes felt. "Cortez had transferred there eight months ago, one of the last to arrive. According to his records he was a solid worker, specializing in computer operations and remote drilling, but he kept switching from spot to spot, always going for places with fewer people but high potential reward."

"Out to strike it rich, eh?" Gold frowned. "Never works, you ask me. Hard work is the only way to succeed, not hoping for one lucky strike."

"Which is probably why he kept moving on-each place failed to pan out. But here-according to the station logs and our two survivors, Cortez kept prowling around the scientists, asking questions about their work."

"Looking for something he could use, no doubt."

"Exactly. And he must have decided Madl'r had it. We're guessing he waited until Madl'r had just left, then snuck into the building and managed to crack the lock. He found the device, probably poked at it a bit to try figuring it out-and set it off."

"-and killed himself and everyone else down there." Gold shook his head. "Bad enough he got himself killed, but he took out everyone else along the way. I hate it when other people suffer because one schmuck couldn't control himself." He turned back to Sonya. "Good job, Commander-as always." He meant it, too-the young commander had done nothing but impress him ever since she'd taken over the team.

"Thank you sir-the team gets most of the credit." That was one of the things he liked most about her-like himself, she was always willing to give her people credit. She didn't notice his smile, though-she was glancing at the device instead. "What's going to happen to that thing, Captain?"

He shrugged. "I don't know-I put a call in to Starfleet, letting Captain Scott know we had it. We'll see what they want done. I'd just as soon have it off my ship, to be honest. It makes me nervous." Sonya looked up and met his eyes, and he could tell she agreed. That thing had killed an entire outpost-the sooner it was off the da Vinci, the better.

"Be careful with it," Fabian warned as the two Starfleet officers carried the device and its cradle onto their shuttlecraft. "We think sudden changes in air pressure or maybe ambient current could activate it. Not right now, of course-we pulled its circuits before bringing it up. But if it's reassembled, tell them to be careful and to keep it in a shielded room."

"We can handle it, thanks," one of the two replied. Then they were inside the shuttlecraft and the door had closed behind them. Fabian thought they'd seemed in a hurry to leave, but perhaps that was just because they'd been rushed-their ship had been pulled from another mission to detour and retrieve the

device.

"It bugs me that Starfleet wanted to see the thing," Duffy commented, standing next to Fabian in the docking bay. "And especially that they wanted the schematics as well."

"I know what you mean," Fabian admitted. "If they just wanted to know how it worked, we could have sent them diagrams. And if they wanted to be sure it was no longer a threat we could have dismantled it entirely. But to ask for-well, okay, demand-the entire device, and all plans? It's pretty weird."

"More than weird-it smacks of some big plan, and I hate it when we stumble onto those." Kieran didn't have to say what both of them were thinking. Bombs could be placed on ships, and then detonated from within their shields-but bombs destroyed people and materials indiscriminately, and most security sweeps could detect all known explosives. This device didn't use explosives-it wouldn't show on a scan as anything more than a mechanical device of some sort. It was capable of self-starting, and of going dormant for long periods of time. Being within a shield only made it more dangerous, and more effective. And it could be programmed to avoid certain objects or even people-and to aim for others.

"Maybe we should-" Whatever Kieran had been about to say was cut off as both their combadges beeped.

"Everyone, meet in the briefing room at once. We've got a new assignment-and it's going to be a doozy." At the sound of Gold's voice, both men automatically turned and headed for the lifts. Fabian shrugged to himself, trying to put the problem of that device behind him. This mission was over-time to worry about the next one.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Originally from New Jersey and New York, Aaron Rosenberg returned to New York City three years ago after stints in New Orleans and Kansas. He has published short stories, poems, essays, articles, reviews, and nonfiction books, but for the last ten years the majority of his writing has been in role-playing-he has written for more than eight game systems (including Vampire, DC Universe, Witchcraft, and Star Trek) and is the president of his own game company, Clockworks ([www.clockworksgames.com](http://www.clockworksgames.com)) <http://www.clockworksgames.com/>. Aaron has also taught college-level English and worked in corporate graphics. The Riddled Post is his first published novel.

The End

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