

## CHAPTER 1

"I can't find anything wrong with this thing, Duff," Fabian Stevens said from under twelve tons of machinery.

"There's got to be something wrong," Lt. Commander Kieran Duffy said as he peered at his tricorder. "I mean, it's not working."

"I know that, but everything here is checking out."

"Except for the whole not-working thing," Kieran added dolefully.

Fabian climbed out from the hatchway that gave him access to many of the critical systems in the Tellarite generator. "Yeah, except for that." He wiped the sweat off his brow. "I dunno—we've been runnin' around like crazy people for days, and we spent most of the last day repairing this monstrosity. I don't think I'd know a fried EPS conduit if I saw it at this point."

Kieran smiled. "What, you don't like dashing around half the galaxy mapping gateways and fixing blown-out power systems?"

"Over the course of a month, sure. Over four days? Not so much. The captain wasn't kidding when he said this was gonna be a doozy."

Holding up his tricorder, Kieran said, "Well, in any case, these things don't get exhausted, and it says that everything appears to be functioning normally, too."

"Gomez to Duffy."

Grinning, Kieran tapped his combadge. "Duffy here. You're back, Sonnie?"

"We'll be flying the Archimedes into orbit of Tellar within five minutes."

"So the comm relay's all fixed?"

"Yup. Pattie did most of the work by crawling around the thing's outer hull and replacing the burned-out relays. What I'm wondering is where the da Vinci is."

Kieran chuckled. "Was wondering when you were gonna ask. They found a derelict ship that apparently fell through the same gateway that blew out the comm relay you were fixing. The captain's towing it to Starbase 12. They should be back—" he checked his chronometer "—actually, any minute now. Didn't realize how late it had gotten."

"How are you and Fabian coming with the generator?"

"It's, ah, it's coming."

"Still haven't figured out what's wrong yet, have you?" Kieran could hear her smile.

"You know me too damn well, you know that?" he said with mock indignation.

"Do you want a hand, or would you two rather prove your manhood by fixing it yourselves without any help from us?"

"Oho, a challenge. Fine, we'll have it fixed before the da Vinci gets back."

"Really?"

Kieran could hear the dubious note in Sonya's voice. So, apparently, could Fabian, given the guffaw he was trying to suppress.

"Do you doubt me, madame?"

"No, just wondering if you're willing to put your money where your foot is."

"Tell you what, when we have that overhaul at Starbase 96 next month, the winner picks where we have dinner."

"You're on, Duff. We'll be in orbit if you need us. Gomez out."

Fabian frowned. "She called you 'Duff.' I thought that was my nickname for you."

"You take it up with her."

Holding up his hands, Fabian said, "No thanks. I don't mess around with officers."

It was Kieran's turn to frown. "Fabe, I'm an officer."

Fabian snapped his fingers. "Dang. Keep forgetting that." He removed one of the panels from the generator. "I gotta say, I was really worried there for a while. Gateways opening up all over the galaxy, fights breaking out, planets in danger- it was a major mess."

"I wasn't worried."

Shooting Kieran a look, Fabian said, "You weren't?"

"Nope," Kieran said as he opened up another panel. "They put Picard in charge."

"Yeah, so?"

"Soon's I heard that, I knew everything would be fine."

"You're kidding." Fabian was looking at Kieran like he had two heads. "How?"

Kieran opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, and closed it again. Finally, he said, "You've never served with Picard, have you?"

"No."

"Then you won't get it. He's just got this ineffable- Picard-ity. When he's in charge, you just know that he's gonna find a solution to the problem."

"Uh, okay."

"Might I add that he did find a solution to the problem?"

"True," Fabian said as he peered more closely at the circuitry he had exposed. "Is that? Oh,

no, that's fine. Damn." He closed the panel, then opened another one. "Of course, he wasn't alone. As I recall, certain former crewmates of mine on Deep Space 9 did a nice job disrupting the gateways."

"For all of ten minutes."

"Yeah, but from what I hear, that was a pretty useful ten minutes. Helped expose those fake Iconians for the frauds they were. And it was engineered by one Lieutenant Nog. You remember Nog, right, Duff? The 'kid' you were so condescending to on Empok Nor? The one whose plan you wouldn't even listen to? The one who made us all look like idiots?"

"Yes," Kieran said in a tight voice, "I remember. It should be pointed out that I did apologize and offer him a spot on the team."

"Actually, it was Captain Gold who offered him the spot on the team, and would you take it if you were treated the way you treated him?"

Kieran sighed. "Is there any way I can win in this conversation?"

Fabian looked like he was pretending to consider it. "No, not really," he said.

"Just checking."

"All kidding aside, though, I'm especially glad we didn't find ourselves in the middle of any major wars. I mean, bad enough that the gateway that connected this place to Andor led to that little bit of thievery-

"What little bit of thievery?"

Fabian turned to look at Kieran. "Duff, we've been on Tellar for a day. All anyone's been talking about are the Andorians who came in and stole the colAndor Scrolls."

Kieran shrugged. "It's best to just tune out Tellarites complaining about Andorians. You'll live longer."

"Good point."

"I was more worried about that nonsense between the Carreon and the Deltans. Not to mention the Markanians and the Aeron."

"Who?"

"Couple of former members of the Thallonian Empire."

"Oh, okay. I don't follow all that post-collapse Thallonian stuff. I tried, but it just got too complicated. I lost track. Is Captain Calhoun still dead?"

"As of this week, he's alive," Kieran said with a grin.

"Okay, just checki-" Fabian cut himself off.

"What is it, Fabe?"

"You're not gonna believe this."

"Believe what?"

"I mean, you're really not gonna believe this."

"I certainly won't if you don't tell me what it is."

"This is really unbelievable."

"So I've been led to understand."

"You know how the gateway on Tellar started draining power from this generator?"

"Considering we just spent most of the last twenty-four hours fixing the damage done by the power surge, yes, I do know. Get to the point, Fabe."

"Well, when that surge hit, it knocked an isolinear rod out of whack. Not much, only about a millimeter or so."

"So that's why this thing won't work?"

"Yup."

"This entire piece of twelve-ton machinery is dead because an isolinear rod is a millimeter out of alignment?"

"Yup."

Kieran hesitated. "This is the part where I say, 'I don't believe it,' right?"

"It would bring the joke full circle, yes."

Sighing, Kieran put his head in his hands. I suppose I walked right into that one. Then he looked at Fabian, who was simply standing there. "Uh, Fabe?"

"Yeah?"

"All we need to do to fix this is put that rod back into place, right?"

"That's right."

"So, uh- why haven't you?"

"I was waiting for your order. After all, you are an officer, second in command of the S.C.E. team, third in command of the da Vinci, and all-around important person. I am but a humble engineer, a mere cog in the mighty wheel of Starfleet. I would never presume to circumvent the chain of command by proceeding without an order from you."

Okay, it's official, Kieran thought, we need shore leave, and soon. That damned overhaul at 96 can't come soon enough. "Mr. Stevens," he said in a mock-formal voice.

"Yes, Lieutenant Commander Duffy, sir?" Fabian said in a like tone.

"Would you be so kind as to put the isolinear rod back in place?"

"Yes sir, right away, sir!" Fabian saluted sloppily, then reached into the generator.

Two seconds later, the large piece of Tellarite machinery hummed to life.

"Congratulations, Mr. Duffy," Fabian said, "it's a generator."

"Da Vinci to Duffy."

Kieran blinked. That was Captain Gold's voice. He wondered when they came in-system relative to when Fabian found the rod- mainly as it would determine where he and Sonnie ate on Starbase 96 next month. "Go ahead," he said, tapping his combadge.

"You two finished down there yet?"

"Just done now, sir. And Commander Gomez and P8 Blue are in orbit."

"I know, the Archimedes is docking now. I need you two up here pronto- we just got a distress call from Maeglin."

"Oh God," Fabian said, "not the Androssi again."

"No, it's actually another gateway problem. And they asked for us specifically."

"Nothing like gratitude," Kieran said. "We just need to tell the Tellarite authorities that their generator's finally up and running, and then Diego can beam us up."

"Good. I'll let Corsi know we're pulling out, as well."

"That'll just thrill the heck out of her, I'm sure, sir."

## CHAPTER 2

Malk had fully expected to live his entire life without ever seeing a twelve-meter-tall, two-meter-wide green scaly creature with yellow eyes.

Then again, he had also fully expected to live his life as a farmer on Maeglin with all the comforts of twenty-fourth-century living.

This, he thought as he stared up at the twelve-meter-tall, two-meter-wide green scaly creature with yellow eyes walking toward his farm, will teach me to have unrealistic expectations.

Things had been bad enough these last few months. Maeglin had been colonized about a hundred years earlier by a group of Tellarites who wanted to "get back to nature." Malk had always found that bitterly amusing in light of recent events.

Maeglin was not part of the Federation, and so when the third straight year of bad crops meant that the colony was in serious trouble, they didn't have an immediate recourse. Some advocated asking the Federation for help, but others were against that. Adding fuel to the fire was the presence of the Androssi, an alien race of technicians who offered a solution to

all their problems for a very cheap price.

Ultimately, it came down to a bidding war with Starfleet, in the form of one of their vessels full of engineers, the da Vinci. The da Vinci offered a method of reenergizing the soil that would take time and mean another difficult year, but with tremendous long-term benefits, and no deleterious side effects whatsoever. The Androssi offered instant gratification, but would not let the authorities (or the da Vinci crew) examine the specifications, and they were vague about the long-term consequences.

Despite the lack of consensus, some Maegline went ahead and struck a deal with the Androssi. As a result, they had good soil again- but the equipment used to revitalize the planet's ground also released a duonetic field into the atmosphere. Suddenly, no electronic equipment of any kind could work on the planet. Both Maegline authorities and the da Vinci tried to stop the Androssi, but to no avail.

However, the engineers on the Starfleet ship were able to retard the effects of the field, enough so that at least some equipment would work. Their crew were regarded as heroes, and they went on their way. Malk, for his part, didn't see them as heroes. If they were real heroes, they'd have stopped the Androssi in the first place.

This all served to explain why Malk could only get his equipment to work about a quarter of the time, and why he'd been reduced to such menial and out-moded tasks as hoeing and weeding and mowing.

It did not explain why there was a twelve-meter-tall, two-meter-wide green scaly creature with yellow eyes walking toward his farm.

Then, about three meters from the farm, the creature stopped.

Malk's nearest neighbor was named Dav. When the duonetic field first hit, Dav had dug up an old projectile weapon, saying that he, at least, would be safe. At the time Malk had thought Dav to be insane.

Right now, Malk was wishing Dav was nearby. Malk had a phaser somewhere in the farm, but phasers weren't the most reliable weapons these days. Besides, it would take him several minutes (if not hours) to find the damn thing, and who knew what the creature could do in the meantime?

The creature started making an odd kind of noise and gesturing. Malk didn't understand a word of it.

"Go away!" he shouted, knowing how ridiculous it sounded.

More noises and gesturing.

Again, Malk shouted, "Go away!" Then, for good measure, he added, "Get out of here!"

Still more noises and gesturing.

"Damn you, get off my farm!" Malk cried, shaking his fist.

Suddenly the creature screamed so loud that Malk's ears rattled, and then it stomped forward, right into the farm.

Within minutes, Malk's farm, his equipment, his possessions, his food, and everything else he kept in the structure- which was made out of a plastiform that had withstood various nasty weather conditions with nary a scratch for three generations- was shredded.

Malk couldn't believe it. His jaw drooped from his snout. The chair his mother had given him. The clothes he had replicated. The food stores for next week's market. The kitchen. The only-sporadically-working comm and the old-fashioned radio, either one of which he might have used to call for help. All of it was reduced to rubble by the large green thing in the space of about five minutes.

And then it stomped off- heading, Malk dimly noted, in the direction of Dav's farm.

Maybe it's susceptible to projectile weapons, Malk thought with little hope. If it could tear his tough old farm up, he doubted that Dav's silly antique would have much of an effect.

Malk had thought, like most Maegline, that the day the Androssi came was the darkest day in Maeglin history. Now he had to wonder if it would have competition for that distinction.

### CHAPTER 3

"You understand, Captain, that normally we wouldn't send in the S.C.E. for this sort of thing, but Starfleet is still stretched a bit thin and you are in the area."

Captain David Gold kept a pleasant expression plastered to his face as he replied to Admiral Koike. "Of course, Admiral. Besides, we do have a history with Maeglin. And they did ask for us by name."

"True, true. The Malinche will be there in three days. But, of course, you should go in and do what you can to placate the Maeglin authorities until they arrive."

"Of course, Admiral." Gold somehow managed a smile.

"Good. Keep us posted as to your progress, please, Captain. Koike out."

As soon as Koike's face disappeared from the screen, the pleasant face and the smile fell, and Gold let out with a curse or six in Yiddish, concluding with, "Damn desk jockeys."

"Transporter room to bridge," came the voice of Diego Feliciano over the comm.

"Go ahead, Chief," Gold said, getting his voice out of what his wife called "grump mode" and back into what he himself thought of as "command mode."

"Commander Duffy and Mr. Stevens are back on board, sir."

"Good." Corsi and her team had beamed up just before Gold's little chat with the admiral, and Gomez and Blue had already docked the Archimedes. He turned to Wong at the conn. "Set course for Maeglin, Ensign, maximum warp."

"Yes, sir."

Turning to the tactical station behind him, Gold said, "Call a meeting in the observation lounge in five minutes, McAllan."

The lieutenant nodded, and Gold got up to get a quick bowl of soup before the meeting. If they were going back to Maeglin, he needed fortification.

\* \* \*

Domenica Corsi was exhausted. She had spent the better part of a day coordinating with the Tellarite police force, which had some unpronounceable name or other, to control the looting that was going on in the capital city, which had an even more unpronounceable name. This was a result of the city's primary generator going down.

That, in turn, was the result of some kind of gateway opening up on the planet, one of thousands that had opened all over the galaxy, apparently. Corsi didn't know the details, and didn't much care. She did her job as da Vinci security chief, and kept the looting to a minimum until Duffy and Fabe fixed the generator.

As she approached the quarters she shared with the ship's chief medical officer, she cursed at herself. Duffy and Stevens, dammit, not "Fabe." He's just another crewmate. Yes, he was nice to me that night when I needed him, and he's been good enough not to make a fuss about it since, but it's over now. So stop thinking about him that way.

Cursing Dar for the millionth time, she entered her quarters, and was surprised to see Dr. Elizabeth Lense sitting on her bed reading a padd. "What're you doing here?" Corsi asked.

Lense smiled a small smile. "I live here."

"No, I mean Hawkins and Eddy are in sickbay- they got knocked around by some Tellarite kids. Why aren't you there treating them?"

"I'm letting Emmett handle it," Lense said, using her preferred nickname for the da Vinci's Emergency Medical Hologram. "He can use the experience." Unlike the two previous EMH models, Emmett was on a kind of learning curve (and also was a bit less acerbic), akin to a first-year intern. Starfleet Medical thought this model might be easier to deal with.

Corsi considered arguing the point, then decided she was too tired. She walked over to the replicator. "Computer, double espresso."

As the drink materialized, Corsi thought back to that wonderful summer on Earth when she was twelve, going to the Café Roma in New York City. That was the first time she'd ever been to Earth- her parents were colonials- and also the first time she'd had espresso. She hadn't been able to live without the stuff since. The da Vinci replicator had done a particularly good job with it, thanks to some tinkering done by P8 Blue on Corsi's behalf. Sometimes it's good to serve on a ship full of tech-heads.

"S.C.E. team, report to the observation lounge."

Corsi closed her eyes. Damn. Should've known there'd be a meeting. We're being diverted somewhere, that always means a meeting.

Within five minutes, she and Lense had arrived at the observation lounge. Gomez and Duffy were already there, and the others arrived soon enough. Corsi noticed that Duffy and Gomez were staring at each other in a manner that was intended to be subtle, and had the reverse effect of being stunningly obvious to everyone in the room.



Corsi shook her head.

"I take it everything on Tellar went well," Gold said by way of starting the meeting.

"Yes, sir," Duffy said. "The Tellarite High Muckitymuck sent his personal thanks to you and the crew for all the work we did repairing the gateway damage."

Gold frowned. "He's not actually called that, is he?"

"Uh, no, sir, but I wouldn't dream of trying to pronounce it."

Bart Faulwell then let loose with a barrage of syllables. At Duffy's sharp look, the linguist smiled and said, "What can I say, Commander, we have different dreams."

Turning to Corsi, Gold said, "We're not leaving Tellar in the lurch security-wise, are we, Commander?"

"I don't think so, sir," Corsi said. "Honestly, the only reason they needed our help was because the generator went down. With that back up, the locals should be able to handle any further problems."

"Any casualties?" Gold asked Lense.

"Just some bumps and bruises. Emmett's handling it."

Gold gave Lense a funny look at that, but said nothing but, "Good. Commander Cho's people at Starbase 12 found a match for the ship we towed- belongs to a race called the Wadi from the Gamma Quadrant. In fact, they were the first race from Gamma to make contact with Deep Space 9 after the Bajoran wormhole opened."

"And it fell through a gateway?" Stevens asked.

Gold nodded. "And had the stuffing pounded out of it at some point, by the looks of it."

Stevens chuckled. "I heard stories about that first contact on DS9. I'm not surprised that they got pounded." He shook his head. "I wish we'd had a chance to check out the gateways before they went down."

"I agree," Blue said, making one of those odd noises she made. "Their power consumption ratios must have been-"

Gold held up a hand, which Corsi was excessively grateful to see. "Speculate on your own time, people. Doping out the gateways is someone else's problem. Our problem, as usual, is to clean up other people's messes."

"The S.C.E., the waste extraction robots of the galaxy," Duffy said with that idiotic grin of his.

"This particular mess," Gold continued, "is at a waste extractor we've been to before, so to speak. Maeglin."

Corsi winced. "Not the Androssi again."

Chuckling, Duffy said, "That's what Fabe said."

Corsi winced again.

"We should be so lucky," Gold said. "No, it's another gateway problem. Apparently, a gateway showed up on Maeglin, too- and it had no trouble operating in the duonetic field, either."

Gomez leaned forward. "Completely unaffected?"

"That's what they tell us."

She nodded. "Actually, that fits. The gateways have seemed to have a huge power store on their own. It's only the ones that got used heavily- like the ones in the Tellarite system- that started draining power from other sources."

"According to the communiqué from Governor Tak, nobody on Maeglin used the gateway. They couldn't tell what it was, and they didn't want to risk it. Besides, the readings they were able to take on the other side were- weird."

"Weird?" Duffy asked with a smile.

"They're sending us the telemetry now, but that's a minor point. After our old pal Nog did that ten-minute shutdown of the gateway-

Several people gave Duffy amused glances at that. Duffy seemed to slide farther into his seat. Corsi thought he damn well should look abashed- Nog was a good officer, and he deserved better treatment than Duffy gave him back on Empok Nor. Corsi never liked Duffy much, though he comported himself decently enough against the Tholians, but mostly she thought him a sorry excuse for an officer. She expected that kind of behavior from the noncoms, but Duffy was an Academy graduate.

"-suddenly, the gateway was a hotbed of activity. All sorts of things came running out of it."

"What kinds of things?" Gomez asked.

Gold grinned. "Monsters."

Corsi pursed her lips. The captain could sometimes be frivolous, though never to a fault, but this was just silly. "Monsters?"

"Well, no, not really, but they sure do fit the profile." Gold touched a panel on the table in front of him, and an image appeared on the viewscreen. It was a large biped with scaly yellow skin, and a huge tail. That was followed by an image of a flying creature that vaguely resembled an Earth pteranodon, then another image of something that Corsi swore was a dead ringer for a Vulcan sehlat, only- based on the house it was standing next to- about ten times the size.

"My God, they are monsters," Carol Abramowitz said as the image shifted to a six-legged creature with compound eyes and massive insectoid wings. "Every one of those looks like something out of a childhood nightmare."

"Speak for yourself," Blue said haughtily. "All of our childhood nightmares on Nasat involve

short, skinny bipeds."

Gomez turned to Gold. "How many?"

"So far these four are the only ones they have images of, but the reports indicate at least two more roaming around. No sentient fatalities yet, but they have been consuming crops- and animals."

"That could wreak havoc with the ecosystem," Lense said. "Introducing a host of new predators into the environment-"

"So we need to, what?" Gomez asked. "Help them round up the creatures?"

"And communicate with them, if possible. It'll take four hours to get there from here. Gomez, Duffy, Blue, Stevens, I want you to give us ways to get equipment to work as efficiently as possible in that duonetic soup down there. Get Barnak to help out, and anyone else you need. We don't have much time, and the Maegline have enough problems without half a dozen rabbits stomping through their briar patches. Get to it, people."

Everyone got up. Most made a beeline for the exits. Corsi finished her espresso and went to the replicator to get another one.

Gold went up to Gomez and Duffy, who were standing extremely close to each other. "I'm guessing you two had a lunch date. Sorry to cut it short."

"We'll have other chances," Gomez said with a smile.

"It's not that- I just want you to eat more. You need some meat on your bones, Commander. You almost wasted away to nothing on Sarindar."

Duffy grinned. "I'm trying to fatten her back up, sir."

Chuckling, Gold said, "Get to work."

They departed, leaving Gold and Corsi alone in the room.

"All right, Commander, what's on your mind?"

Corsi blinked. "I'm sorry, sir?"

"You've been drilling your baby blues into my head since the meeting started. What's bugging you?"

Ninety-five percent of the time, Corsi was grateful to have a CO who was perceptive. This particular instant fell into the wrong five percent, however.

To her surprise, words did fall out of her mouth. "I don't think what those two are doing is appropriate, sir."

One of Gold's bushy eyebrows raised. "I beg your pardon?"

"I don't think it's appropriate for the two of them to be involved, given their... situation. Regulations-"

"-are sufficiently vague," Gold interrupted, "and generally left to the captain's discretion." His voice grew deeper, which Corsi knew was his more serious tone. "This particular captain has no problems with it as long as it doesn't interfere with the performance of their duty. Both their service record and my observations of them since they've been under my command indicate to me that that won't be an issue. If I'm wrong, I'll deal with it, but there's been nothing to suggest it's an issue yet. Are you questioning my judgment, Commander?"

Corsi knew that there was only one answer to that question. "No, sir. I withdraw the objection, sir."

"Good." He broke into a smile. "I do value these little chats, Commander. Any time you have a grievance, don't hesitate to bring it to my attention."

In a much smaller voice, she said, "Yes, sir," and moved toward the doors.

"Oh, and Commander?"

Corsi stopped, but did not turn around. "Sir?"

"Whenever you're ready to tell me what's really bothering you, I'll be here."

Definitely the wrong five percent, Corsi thought. "Yes, sir," she repeated, and left the observation lounge.

Damn you, Dar.

#### CHAPTER 4

Lin had been spending more and more time at the lake lately. Well, her free time, anyhow. She did her chores, of course, and was at the table for mealtimes, but aside from that, she liked the lake better than being around her parents.

It wasn't that she didn't love her parents. She loved them more than anything- except maybe egrimat pie. But lately, all they did was argue.

It didn't used to be that way. They used to be nice all the time. But then all the stuff stopped working right. Lin remembered it really well, since it was right after her fifth birthday. It had been her best birthday yet, with lots of egrimat pie.

It was also around when those weird brown people came, and then the other weird people- they all had the silliest noses. They were all long and skinny and the absolute strangest things Lin had ever seen.

After they came and stuff stopped working right, Lin's parents started fighting. They had never fought before, but now they couldn't do anything else.

Lin picked up a stone and threw it into the lake. It made a nice splooshing sound. She picked up another stone and did the same thing. This kept her attention for several minutes, until she ran out of stones. So she decided to start walking around the edge of the lake. This was one of her favorite things to do. So far she'd never fallen in.

Well, okay, there was that one time when her father surprised her by calling her name, but

aside from that, she'd never fallen in.

Her arms extended to keep her balance better, Lin started walking around the lake. The sun was starting to go down, so when she came around, the sun was in her eyes. She stopped, blinked the glare out of her eyes, then started walking again.

Or she would've, except there was a big furry thing in the way.

Lin screamed, and lost her balance. She twirled her arms in an attempt to get it back, but it didn't work, and she fell in.

Luckily, she had fallen in before, and knew what to do: she swam. It wasn't like the last time, when she almost swallowed all that water. She wasn't a baby anymore, she was smart. She learned how to swim, and now she kicked her legs and stroked with her arms. Within seconds, she was back at the edge of the lake.

The furry thing was still there, staring at her with big, yellow eyes. It was more than twice as big as Lin. It was covered in brown fur and had a long snout that looked like a funny mix of a proper snout and those weird strangers' noses. It also had lots of really sharp teeth, and big claws.

"Uh, hello," Lin said softly. Her parents had always tried to get her to speak more forcefully, but she was shy. She was also cold from all the water, which was dripping on the ground.

It had been lying on all fours. Now it gestured with one of its front paws and then made some kind of weird noise.

"My name's Lin. What's yours?"

It made another gesture, then made another noise.

Then it reached into the lake and splashed some water.

Lin frowned. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to do next. So she did the same thing. Her splash was a lot smaller than the furry thing's, of course.

The furry thing seemed to like this, as it then made a funnier noise and splashed again.

Lin decided to make the same noise- or at least come really close to it- and splashed again. She tried to splash harder so she could make almost as much noise as the furry thing.

"Lin!"

That was her father's voice. "I'm over here!" she cried out.

For some reason, the furry thing didn't like this. It started shaking and making a really awful noise.

"Don't worry!" Lin said. "It's just my father. He's usually really nice. Except when he and my mother are fighting, but still, you'll like them."

Lin's father came over the small hill that led to the lake. As soon as Lin saw him, she said, "Look! I made a new friend!"

She had thought that her father would be happy to see the furry thing, as he seemed to be nice and friendly. But her father started getting that look he always got whenever he argued with her mother.

"Move away from that, Lin- now!"

"What's wrong?" Lin asked, confused.

Her father grabbed a stick off the ground, and waved it at the furry thing. "Get away from her!" he yelled. Lin noticed that the nostrils in his snout were wider than usual.

The furry thing just made another strange noise. But then it surprised Lin by getting up on its hind legs.

Her father then got a weird look on his face.

It took Lin a moment to figure it out. He looked scared. Lin couldn't believe it. Her father was never scared!

"I said, get away from her! Lin! Move away!"

"But-"

"Move away!"

Lin didn't move. She didn't understand. The furry thing was just a nice animal who came to watch her walk along the lake. She thought maybe she could explain-

The furry thing waved its arms and made another noise.

"He isn't trying to do-" Lin started to say.

"Get back!" her father yelled. Then he threw the stick at the furry thing.

The furry thing batted the stick away. Then it made another noise. Lin's father grabbed her, picked her up, and ran back toward the farm.

Lin screamed. Not because of the furry thing, but because her father was hurting her. She was just trying to make a new friend!

The furry thing continued to cry out, but it didn't follow them back to the house. As soon as they got back inside their large house, her father finally put her down, and she could breathe properly again.

"Why did you do that?" Lin asked. "It was just-"

"What the brobah were you thinking?" Her father yelled so loud that the windows rattled. "Don't ever get close to a crazed animal like that!"

"It wasn't an animal, it was-"

"Don't talk back to me! Now stay inside!"

Her father went into one of the closets. The door to it was always open because the doors didn't always work right. Her mother figured it was better to just leave it open all the time.

He grabbed the nasty gun.

Lin got scared. "You're not gonna shoot him, are you?"

"Damn right I am! Nobody tries to kill my little girl!"

"He wasn't trying to kill me! Why won't you listen to me?"

But her father still wasn't listening. Instead, he was calling for her mother to look after Lin while he went out with the gun.

Lin was scared. Not so much for herself, but for the furry thing.

She hoped it would be okay.

## CHAPTER 5

"Take a look at this, Kier."

Lieutenant Jil Barnak, chief engineer of the da Vinci, and the only person who referred to Kieran Duffy as "Kier," for which Kieran had always been grateful, plunked the two boots down on the workbench in engineering. Kieran looked at them for several seconds.

"Those are gravity boots," he said, showing what Sonnie often referred to as his keen grasp of the obvious.

"Yup."

Continuing in that vein, he added, "And they're blue."

"Yup."

"Okay, I'll bite, why are they blue?"

Fabian, P8 Blue, and Sonya all chose that moment to enter engineering. Sonnie had called a meeting to see what progress had been made in what Kieran had been jokingly referring to as "Operation: Mighty Maeglin Monster Hunt."

Fabian grinned. "They're not happy with their lot in life?"

Pattie joined in. "They're long-lost relatives of mine?"

"No," Jil said with an amused shake of his graying head. "It's blue because making it pink would've been silly."

Kieran chuckled. "Of course, that should've been my first guess."

"In any case," Jil continued, "it's a coating of my own design. It'll keep out the effects of the duonetic field."

"You sure?" Sonnie asked.

"Tested it in the hololab myself." The da Vinci did not have a holodeck as such, but one lab had been given over to holographic use. The hololab was strictly used only for duty-related matters, much to the chagrin of most of the crew complement, though Corsi would have been just as happy to get rid of it altogether. But it was too useful for bench tests and other applications to not have. Kieran had tried to find a way to finagle using it for a date, but Sonnie shot that down before he could even finish the sentence.

Pattie made one of her tinkly sounds. "That'll work for anything that doesn't have a display or an interface."

"Beats a kick in the head, certainly," Kieran said. "Thanks, Jil."

"Ina to Gomez."

"Go ahead," Sonnie said, tapping her combadge.

"Commander, I've downloaded the telemetry Maeglin sent us of their probes into the gateways. You should take a look at this."

"Pipe it down to engineering, Mar."

"Acknowledged."

Sonnie walked over to a wall console, Kieran behind her. Pattie, Jil, and Fabian remained at the workbench, but fixed their gazes on the screen- curious enough to look, but not wanting to crowd the first and second officer, Kieran thought with a smile.

Kieran peered at the readouts, but couldn't make heads or tails of it. Sonnie was looking at it pretty intently, though. "Mar, is that what I think it is?"

"Looks like it, Commander. Whatever was on the other side of that gateway wasn't in this universe."

Kieran put his head in his hands. "Oh God, no. Interdimensional travel always gives me a stomachache."

"Actually," Pattie said, "it's not that bad."

Though sorely tempted to pursue that revelation with the Nasat, Kieran knew they didn't have time. "Mar, have any of the other gateways been like that? I thought they were just space portals."

"Way ahead of you, Commander. Apparently there was an interdimensional gateway they found in the Sagittarius cluster about a hundred years ago that might have been one of the Iconians'. There've also been some reports of some of the gateways being time portals. So there's some precedent for atypical gateways, anyhow."

"Good work," Sonnie said, and Kieran silently agreed with the sentiment. "Keep digging, see if you can find any more specifics. Maybe we'll get lucky."



"Yes, sir."

"Ina Mar, research junkie," Kieran muttered with amusement. This was a side to their Bajoran ops officer he hadn't known about.

"She plays a mean saxophone, too," Fabian said.

"How the heck did a Bajoran learn to play the saxophone?" Kieran asked.

"What, Bajorans can't play human instruments?"

"I didn't say that-"

"If you two are finished," Sonnie said with an indulgent grin. "Pattie, think we can cobble together a force field generator that'll work?"

"With Jil's paint, absolutely," Pattie said with one of her happier tinkles. "I should have a dozen of them by the time we arrive."

Sonnie turned to Fabian. "What about weapons, Fabian?"

"No joy there," the black-haired engineer said, blowing out a breath. "I've tried everything- yes, Commander, even that scattering-field-negating trick you pulled on the Breen and the Eerlikka- but none of them get past the deadening effect of the duonetic field. We may have to settle for them conking out on us periodically."

Setting her fists down on the workbench, Sonnie leaned forward and said, "We're not 'settling' for anything."

"Why not just use the paint?" Pattie asked.

Kieran shook his head. "Once we apply it, we're stuck with whatever setting it's on when it gets painted. We don't even know what settings are effective against these things. We have to be able to change it."

"And," Jil added, "if we don't paint the panel, it'll be just as susceptible to the duonetic field."

Pattie made one of her more contemplative tinkles. "Why not use a remote control?"

This time it was Sonnie who shook her head. "No, that won't work either- it'll be just as susceptible to the field."

"Not if I make a force field small enough to fit around someone's hand. I'll make it a wrist unit."

Fabian smiled. "That could work. Whoever's armed can fire the phaser with one hand and change the settings with the remote in the other hand."

Jil rested one large hand on his equally large stomach. "Yeah, but that means they can only fire one-handed, and the other hand'll be useless. They won't be able to do anything except shoot."

Shrugging, Kieran said, "That's the long definition of security guard."

With an amused tinkle, Pattie said, "I dare you to say that in front of Corsi."

"Do I look stupid?"

"Kieran, don't ask questions you can't handle honest answers to," Sonnie said with a wicked grin. "Okay," she went on, growing more serious. "So we'll try to herd these guys with light phaser fire and cage them in force fields until we figure out what to do with them. Hopefully, even with the duonetic field, the universal translators will be able to work out their language. And I want recordings of every encounter with these things for Bart, in case the UTs need some help. Now- what about the one that can fly?"

"Or ones," Fabian said. "We still don't know what they all look like."

"That's why I asked Jil for the boots," Kieran said. "I figure I can play chicken with the flyboy- or boys," he amended with a look at Fabian, "and lure it to the ground and let one of Core-Breach's flunkies and Pattie's force fields do the rest."

"Isn't that dangerous?" Pattie asked.

Sonnie grinned. "Says the woman who spent the morning crawling around the outer hull of a comm relay. Don't worry, Kieran's got an A-rating with the boots. In fact, I remember a certain holodeck program on Ardana that you were quite adept in."

"As opposed to you," Kieran said, "who kept flying into the clouds."

"I prefer to keep my feet on the ground, thanks."

"Commander," Jil said hesitantly. The Atrean scratched his oversize ear.

"What, Jil?"

"Well, if what Lieutenant Ina said is correct, these things aren't from this dimension."

"Right."

"Well, I assume the reason why you checked the telemetry of the gateway was to see where they came from, and maybe get them home, if they came from close enough. I mean, we can't use the gateways anymore- from what I understand, they've been permanently shut down- but they could easily be from this general area of the Milky Way and we could get them home, then. But if they're from another universe altogether..."

There was quiet around the workbench for several seconds. Then Sonnie finally said, "We'll build that bridge when we come to it. Besides, even if this was one of the regular gateways, there's every chance they'd be from somewhere deep in the Beta Quadrant, or the Delta Quadrant, or a part of the Gamma Quadrant that's nowhere near the Bajoran wormhole. Right now, our priority is figuring out a way to minimize the damage they're doing to Maeglin. We'll worry about the possibility of returning them later."

Jil nodded.

Sonnie looked around the workbench. "Fabian, Kieran, set up the remotes for the phasers. Pattie, Jil, make us some force fields. I'll coordinate with Corsi on the security

arrangements. Let's go."

Kieran smiled. Sonnie had always been the take-charge type, but there was something different about her ever since she came back from Sarindar.

Of course, since that's also when she decided we should be an item again, I'm probably biased, he thought with a smile as he and Fabian started work on the remotes.

## CHAPTER 6

Andrea Lipinski felt ridiculous holding a bright blue phaser in her left hand.

Normally Lipinski liked the look and feel of the type-1 phasers- easy to handle with one hand, able to change settings quickly, and they always hit their target. But normally, the phaser wasn't so... so... blue.

Worse, because it was covered in this blue whatever-it-was, she couldn't change the settings, so she was carrying a remote control in her right hand- and her hand was covered with a small force field, so the hand was useless except for holding the remote.

All this because of what the Androssi did to Maeglin.

Lipinski made a mental note to strangle the next Androssi she happened to come across.

She also made a mental note to strangle Corsi Bad enough she had a blue phaser, but also a blue bug- she had been assigned to accompany the Nasat.

"Are you okay?" Blue asked, causing Lipinski to jump and aim her phaser at the surprise noise. "Easy," Blue added, waving two of her icky armlike things. "I'm on your side, remember?"

That's easy for you to say, she thought. "I'm fine. I just-"

"You don't like bugs."

Lipinski blinked. "Uh, well, no, I- How'd you know that?"

"Body language. You get that instinctive human jerkiness every time I'm around. Most people get over it after they've gotten used to having me around- well, except Carol when she wants to get into a snit about some imagined slight I've perpetrated in our quarters- but you haven't yet. Every time I come across it, it usually means some kind of entomophobia."

Lipinski actually chuckled. "Figures."

"What?" Blue asked while making one of those weird noises she always made.

"You're an engineer, so of course you've got some kind of technical term for it."

"Of course," Blue said with another funny noise. "It's how we fool people into thinking we know more than they do."

"You mean you don't?" Lipinski said, perhaps a bit too snidely.

"Oh, sure we do. Just not as much more as we let on."

Lipinski honestly couldn't tell if Blue was joking or not, and that just irritated her more.

They kept walking through the underbrush of this jungle in the middle of the main continent on Maeglin, where most of the Tellarites had set up their homes. It was humid and Lipinski's uniform was starting to stick to her skin. Why the hell does Starfleet insist on these damn two-layer uniforms, anyhow?

Blue let out a kind of bell-like noise. "What is it?" Lipinski asked, raising her phaser.

"The khest'n tricorder's not working again. Damn duonetic field."

Lipinski tried to relax a little. Just take it easy, she's not going to crawl all over you or eat you or anything like that. She's a crewmate. Not like those things back home on-

Don't think about it.

They moved into a clearing, Blue tapping commands into a tricorder that responded by making none of its telltale noises.

Why couldn't Corsi have put me with Stevens? He's nice- and cute. Maybe if we were paired up, I'd finally screw up the courage to ask him out.

But Corsi had teamed up with Stevens herself- which was odd, in and of itself. She usually went with officers. Lipinski wondered if there was anything to that.

Nah, not Core-Breach. Heart of duranium, she's got.

Blue made a chirpy noise, scaring Lipinski out of ten years of life, punctuated by an exclamation of, "There we go! Tricorder's working, and we've got a fix. Follow me!"

Then she got down on all eights and started skittering forward at some ridiculous speed. Lipinski struggled, both to keep up and to keep her lunch down. Watching those legs skitter like that reminded her way too much of-

Don't think about it.

They ran through some more underbrush, then came out at what Lipinski thought was another clearing, but was in fact a field of farmland. Lipinski hadn't the first clue what any of it was, and at the moment she didn't care, because it was what was in the middle of the field of crops that had her undivided attention.

It was a giant bug.

Dealing with the small bugs from home had been bad enough. (Don't think about it.) Dealing with serving on the same ship as a human-size bug had been barely tolerable.

But this- this thing was several meters long, had six icky, spindly legs that were all longer than Lipinski was tall, big wings that looked flimsy for all their size, and huge eyes that bore into her head like-

"Shoot it!"

Lipinski blinked. "What?" She realized that the bug was moving away from them at a speed that even Blue wouldn't be able to keep up with.

"Shoot it, or it'll get away!"

Setting her phaser on light stun with her encased right hand, she fired.

The bug didn't even notice the amber beam that struck its thorax.

Of course not, they're indestructible, just like-

Don't think about it!

Raising the level to heavy stun, she fired again, just as the bug was going out of sight. However, heavy stun got the thing's attention. It stopped and started to turn.

She fired again.

It made some kind of odd noise, and also raised two of its legs in some kind of gesture. With growing confidence, Lipinski fired again. It made another odd noise/gesture combination, but she didn't let it bother her. This isn't so bad.

She believed that right up until it charged at her.

Oh God, I'm going to die, was the only thought that ran through her head as a several-meter-long bug that was roughly the size of the moon she grew up on charged toward her at some obscenely high speed. She couldn't move, she couldn't act, she couldn't breathe, she couldn't think beyond the fact that she was dead meat, and that she was- as she had always feared- going to die at the hands of an insect.

Then, suddenly, the insect stopped moving forward, as if it had crashed into something, just as the air crackled with-

With a force field. Of course. That was the plan, after all. I fire on it to distract it and goad it into coming close, then Blue hits it with the force field.

The insect continued to make odd noises, and gesture a lot.

"Sometimes," Lipinski muttered, "I really, really hate this job."

"Did you say something?" Blue asked.

"Nothing. What now?"

Blue made more of those damn noises of hers. "That's unfortunate."

"What is?"

"The UT can't make heads or tails of this. It's looking more and more likely that these things aren't sentient."

Lipinski made a face. "What, you thought these- these things might be?"

"Any particular reason why I shouldn't?"

While she couldn't really read Blue's tone very well, Lipinski realized that the Nasat probably took offense at that statement. "I'm sorry, it's just that-"

"That you're an entomophobe, and you can't imagine insectoid life being sentient."

In fact, that was exactly what Lipinski had been thinking, but Blue made it sound so... prejudicial.

That's probably because it is prejudicial.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, sounding more emphatic this time. "I guess old habits die hard."

"Usually, yes." She made another noise, then tapped her combadge. "Blue to Gomez."

"Go ahead."

"We've neutralized the large insect."

Blue then gave the coordinates of their location, to which the commander replied, "Good work. I'll let the Law Enforcement Bureau know, and they'll collect it."

"According to the reports from the Maegline, we've still got at least five more to go, correct?"

"Four, actually- Jil and Friesner got one also. Duffy, Drew, and I are hot on the trail of the pteranodon-like one, and Corsi and Stevens think they're close to the green one. You two see if you can track down one of the other two."

"Acknowledged." Blue tapped her combadge, reached into the bag she had tucked into her chitinous armor, and pulled out another force field generator. "Shall we?"

Lipinski took a long look at the force-field-encased giant insect as it kept wailing and gesturing.

Wish we had those damn force fields back home.

"Yeah, okay, let's go."

## CHAPTER 7

I should've been a bird, Kieran Duffy thought giddily as he flew through the air.

In his life, both as a kid growing up and taking apart the family replicator, and later as a Starfleet engineer, Kieran had encountered all manner of technological devices, but his favorites were always the gravity boots his uncle got him for his sixteenth birthday.

The six months that followed that birthday were among the happiest of Kieran's life- and among the unhappiest of his parents', as they were convinced that he was going to break his neck crashing into something. Or several somethings. He wore the boots so much that Dad was convinced his feet had atrophied.

Unfortunately, where the pleas of his parents and the endless safety lectures from his uncle failed to curb his enthusiasm, biology succeeded. Kieran hit his growth spurt midway through his seventeenth year, and soon the boots no longer fit. And there was no way in hell his parents were going to let him have another pair.

Then came Starfleet Academy and one of the happiest days of his life: when they issued him gravity boots as part of an exercise. After being denied his favorite toy for three years, someone willingly gave them to him.

He quickly amazed Professor Hsu with his prowess, and he was instantly recruited for the 3D polo team. He was captain of the team by senior year, and led the Academy to the championships twice.

But all of that was secondary to the sheer joy of being able to fly through the air unfettered like this. No encumbrances, no ship's walls surrounding you, nothing holding you in place. Being able to tell the wind was shifting just by listening to it. And the view was just spectacular.

Kieran particularly appreciated being able to take in Maeglin this way. The last time they were here, he had been too busy dealing with Overseer Biron and his Androssi goons to truly appreciate the natural beauty here. He could see what the Tellarites who founded the colony a century ago saw in it. Growing up in the heavily technological Earth of the twenty-fourth century, getting to see something as magnificently pastoral as Maeglin was a rare treat. Now he wished he'd ordered up more blue gravity boots so the rest of the crew could see what he was seeing.

"Lieutenant Commander Duffy, come in, dammit!"

"Yes, Mom!" Kieran said instinctively. "Uh, I mean, sorry, Commander."

"I've been calling you for a full minute." Sonnie sounded rather peeved.

"Sorry," he repeated. "I've been, uh, distracted."

"I'll bet. Well, get your head out of the clouds-"

Kieran couldn't resist. "That's gonna be hard up here."

A pause. "I walked into that, didn't I?"

"With both feet, your eyes wide open, and a bull's eye on your face."

"You know, Kieran, between that and the 'Mom' line, you're cruising for a serious bruising when you come back down to earth."

"Yes, sir. Anyhow," he added quickly before Sonnie could reply, "any sign of the big guy?"

"Unfortunately, the duonetic field has kicked in, so we're not picking up anything. That's why I contacted you, I was hoping you saw something."

"'Fraid not, but I-"

He cut himself off as he saw the giant orange shape flying right at him- and getting closer by

the second.

"Check that, Sonnie, I've got him. I'll lead him to-" He looked around. "Aw, hell, I've lost my bearings. Where are you?"

"Right where you left us. Unfortunately, I have no idea where you are, since the tricorder's out."

"Joy."

Kieran immediately started flying toward the orange pteranodon-like creature. Just as it lunged right at him, he swerved downward. Luckily, gravity boots had controls on the inside and were manipulated by pressure made by the toes- Jil's paint had no effect on it the way it did on the touch-sensitive displays on other devices.

Angered, the creature flew down after Kieran, as planned- except, of course, Sonnie and Drew weren't right under him because he'd been too busy reliving his callow youth to pay attention to where he was. Dammit, Duff, you're an officer now, not a sixteen-year old. Clowning is one thing when it's just you and the gang horsing around, but we do have a job here.

As he neared the tree line, Kieran angled his body upward and shifted the boots' acceleration so he'd start flying horizontally. It wasn't the most elegant of turns, but it didn't need to be, as long as he surprised his quarry.

Unfortunately, it was better equipped for flying than Kieran. It recovered quickly- and was gaining on him. Figures. He's been flying all his life, I've been flying as a hobby on and off. Of course, he's better at it.

He found himself over a lake. Okay, let's see how he likes this. Hope Jil made that stuff waterproof....

Again, he angled himself downward, again shifting the boots' acceleration. It was only about six meters down to the lake. At least, I hope it's a lake. And it isn't a shallow one. Suppose I should've checked that before-

He broke through the ice-cold water, which was like being repeatedly slapped by a wet towel. He went down about three meters before his momentum lessened enough to allow him to turn around.

No sign of him.

He looked up and saw a water-distorted image of the monster was circling the area of the lake that Kieran had dived into. Guess he doesn't like the water.

"Gomez to Duffy- we've got the tricorders again. And- what the hell're you doing underwater?"

Sound traveled just fine underwater, but Kieran was in no position to answer just yet. He watched the creature's pattern of flight around the lake for three revolutions, found a good window, and then fired the boots upward at the right moment so he would (he fervently hoped) surprise the creature and get the jump on it.



He burst through the water and zipped upward. The creature made an odd noise and some kind of motion with its tiny feet, then went up after him.

"Sorry about that, Sonnie," Kieran said, grateful for being able to breathe once again. "Needed to keep this thing busy for a minute. Where are you?"

"Keep flying due west for two hundred meters, then due south for fifty, and you should be right over us."

"Damn. I did stray, didn't I?"

"Just a bit, yeah."

"Sorry 'bout that. I should be in position in thirty seconds."

"Your friend is right behind you," Sonnie said, sounding worried.

Kieran had kind of figured that, though he didn't bother to turn around, as that would slow him down. By flying ramrod straight, he cut down on his wind resistance and was able to move faster through the air. With the monster's speed, he needed every advantage he could get.

After he turned south, he saw Sonnie and Drew pretty quickly. Sonnie was studying her tricorder intently, then looked up and smiled at him. Drew, of course, had his phaser ready like a good little security guard. Kieran immediately veered downward again, counting on the creature to follow.

He couldn't just land, though- he needed to dump velocity or he'd be a smear on the pastoral Maeglin ground- so he immediately veered back up, crying, "Get him!"

Unfortunately, the whole plan was predicated on his quarry following him down, Drew shooting it, and Sonnie slapping the force field on.

The creature, however, was not cooperating. It learned its lesson from the last time it followed Kieran in a downward trajectory and almost got wet. It remained circling over Sonnie and Drew.

Kieran's own trajectory took him back upward, and he slowed the boots down as he rose, then hovered in the air, even with the monster's circling, but from a distance of about thirty meters.

He tapped his combadge. "Okay, that didn't work."

"Brilliant observation," Sonnie said dryly.

On one of its go-rounds, it must have caught sight of Kieran, because then it made another screechy noise, waved its feet some more, and flew right toward him.

"Yipe!" Kieran cried, and started flying away.

Drew, bless his heart, chose that moment to fire his phaser, which stopped the flying monster dead in its tracks.

The phaser blast didn't do any harm- it was only a light stun from the sounds of it- but it did

force it to reconsider which human it was going to go after.

The hell with this, Kieran thought. He flew upward about fifty meters, then angled himself back downward, and flew straight for the ground- except for the fact that he had placed himself so that the creature was smack between him and the surface.

Which meant that it was rather surprised to find a human crashing into its back. At least, Kieran thought, it sounded surprised when he crashed into it.

They both went careening toward the ground. About half a second before they'd hit, Kieran threw the boots into full reverse.

Unfortunately, while doing so lessened the impact, it did not negate it as Kieran had hoped. They were going too fast, and the boots could only go so far against that momentum. The impact jarred every bone in his body. As he rolled off the monster crying, "Now!" in the hopes that it would prompt Sonnie to put it in the force field, he felt like one massive bruise.

"You okay?" Sonnie asked.

"Fine, did you-"

"Yes, I got the force field up. It's secure. Mind telling me what you were thinking?"

"I was thinking that- ow- we needed to convince it to come down to earth. I figured that would do it."

"You could've broken your neck!"

Note to self, Kieran thought, do not ever let Sonnie know how much she sounds like my mother right now.

## CHAPTER 8

Bart Faulwell was practically on the edge of his seat in the observation lounge waiting for everyone else to arrive. Captain Gold was first, followed by Commander Gomez, then Pattie, and finally Carol Abramowitz and Dr. Lense came in together. Commander Duffy, Fabian Stevens, and Commander Corsi were missing, he noticed, but as soon as Carol and the doctor sat down, Gold started the meeting.

"Before we get down to brass tacks, how's Duffy doing?" Gold asked Lense.

"Emmett's taking care of him- he's fine, really, just some bumps and bruises."

"Good," Gold said, though Bart noticed that the captain seemed irked at the doctor for some reason. "Where are Stevens and Corsi?" he asked Gomez.

"Still down on the planet. There are two of these things unaccounted for, and they were hot on the trail of one of them- the big green one. The other one seems to have disappeared, but it's one of the ones the Maeglina made a visual record of, so we know it's out there. And there could be more."

"Good. Now then, our linguist called this little confab, so- talk to us, Faulwell."

Bart leaned forward in his seat, trying not to sound overanxious. "I've been studying the recordings you've all been making on the planet and running them through my translation programs, trying to see if there's a language there that the UT isn't picking up for whatever reason." He touched a command on the panel in front of him, and the frozen image of one of the creatures came on the screen. "What was confusing was that I found the remnants of a language, but not enough to form a proper translation matrix. Parts of the structure seemed to be missing."

"Remnants?" Gomez asked with a frown. "What, they used to know how to talk but only remember parts of it now?"

"That was actually my first thought," Bart said, "but no, that's not it. The thing is, the UT, and all the other translation programs that have been developed over the years, work on either spoken or written language."

"What else is there?" Blue asked.

Bart grinned. "Watch and learn."

He touched the panel again, and the image started to move. It then switched to another creature, then another, then another.

"I don't get it," Abramowitz said, "what are we looking at?"

"I chose these particular images for a reason," Bart said. "They all have something in common."

"Gestures," Gold said suddenly. "They're each gesturing. In fact, most of those are the same gestures."

"Exactly!" Bart said, excited. "Are any of you familiar with sign language?"

"Sure," Gomez said. "I remember people talking about it on the Enterprise. It was right before I came on board- there was this diplomat who couldn't hear. When he lost his interpreters, Commander Data communicated with him through American sign language. It's an old way of talking-" she smiled, making the connection "-through gestures."

Bart nodded. "Exactly," he said again. "I remember reading about that mission, actually. Advances in technology made sign language pretty much redundant now, which is why your Commander Data had to dig it up in the archives. But there are some similarities between these gestures and some of the basics of the various sign languages developed by humans, Vulcans, and Bajorans centuries ago- enough that I was able to run it through the computer. I think we've got enough that we might be able to communicate with them."

Gold leaned forward. "So you can program the translators?"

Wincing, Bart said, "Probably not, sir. The UTs are geared toward spoken language- combadges don't have optical receptors to pick up the gestures, and their language is a combination of the verbalizing and the gestures. The UT just isn't equipped to handle that. I'll need to communicate with them directly and act as an interpreter- the same way Commander Data did on the Enterprise."

Smiling, Gomez said, "Good work, Bart. Captain, with your permission, Mr. Faulwell and I

will beam down and start working on communicating with the ones we've captured."

"Granted," Gold said with a nod. "I'll talk to Governor Tak."

\* \* \*

Sonya wished they had had time to stop at sickbay to check on Kieran. But right now the priority was to put Bart's plan into action. If these creatures weresentient, she just hoped they understood why the S.C.E. did what they did to round them up- after all, they were rampaging and causing severe damage to a colony that had enough problems. At least they had, so far, accomplished that goal in a manner that did the least harm to the creatures themselves.

Still, a trip to sickbay would've been nice, she thought as she, Bart, and Drew stepped onto the transporter platform. If nothing else, it'd give me another chance to yell at him for being such a jerk.

She still wasn't one hundred percent sure how she felt about Kieran. Maybe she did love him- but she certainly cared about him enough to really hate the idea of his taking such ridiculous risks with his person as he did today. Being captain of the 3D polo team fifteen years ago does not mean you can fly like a lunatic now!

Alas, that castigation would have to wait until the mission was over- and would probably be done in the privacy of one of their quarters rather than the middle of sickbay. Which would make it that much easier for Kieran to make it up to her...

She smiled as they materialized on the planet. As soon as they did, she put thoughts of the future out of her head to concentrate on the present.

That present turned out to involve standing around and waiting for Bart to work his magic. The four crea-tures that had been rounded up- besides Duffy's friend, Pattie and Lipinski had captured the insect and one that looked like a furry orange ball with arms and legs and big eyes, and Barnak and Friesner had nabbed the yellow scaly one- were then brought to a large warehouse near the capitol building. Here, they had been kept captive by a larger version of the force field, emitting from a bright blue generator.

Bart slowly approached the warehouse, and started making odd noises and gesturing. This seemed to surprise the creatures, who all moved away from him. Then one of them- the insect- moved closer.

"Commander?" Drew asked, pointing at the insect. "Who was it who captured that one?"

"Pattie and Lipinski. Why?"

"Hmp."

"What does 'hmp' mean, exactly, Mr. Drew?" Sonya asked with a smile.

"Oh, it's just that... well, Andrea's kinda got this... well... this thing about bugs."

"Bugs."

"Uh-huh. Don't know the details- something happened when she was a kid- but she really

hates bugs. I think it's kinda funny that Corsi put her with Blue and they wound up corralling the insect, that's all."

"Funny's one word for it," Sonya said neutrally. She made a mental note to have a word with Corsi about Lipinski when this was over.

Bart, meanwhile, continued his dialogue with the monsters, which seemed to be going well, based on the fact that the conversation was fairly sedate, the monsters weren't smashing up against the force field in an attempt to maul Bart, and Bart had on his intense-but-enthusiastic look. He'd had it when he was plowing through the Syclarian journal last week at BorSitu Minor, too, and Sonya enjoyed seeing it.

At one point, the insect was doing almost all of the talking, with Bart only throwing in the occasional comment, then Bart "spoke" for several seconds. And still not a peep from the universal translators. I guess the gestures really are critical to this language.

Then, finally, Bart turned and walked back to Sonya with a grave look on his face. "We've got a serious problem, Commander."

## CHAPTER 9

Domenica Corsi stared at Fabian Stevens as he smacked his tricorder on the side, and wondered why she had assigned herself to him.

She'd mostly been avoiding Fabe- Stevens- since Empok Nor. It was better that way. Lense knew about their tryst, but she wouldn't say anything, and miraculously, the gossip hadn't seemed to spread beyond some salacious remarks made by Hawkins and Drew. Stevens himself hadn't said a word- he'd done just as she requested, treated it as a one-time thing with no strings.

So why did she choose to spend all this time alone with him now?

She wasn't sure. It wasn't like she took advantage of the time at all, since they only had duty-related conversation while they tried to track down one of the extradimensional things and encase it in one of Blue's force fields.

This one had already destroyed one person's farm- the owner, a cranky old Tellarite named Malk, had carried on for several minutes on the subject- and had moved on to another farm down the road. At present, they were about a hundred meters away from that house, and getting closer.

Unfortunately, that duonetic field that the Androssi inflicted on Maeglin was now interfering with the tricorder, so they'd lost their mark.

"Aha!" Stevens said suddenly.

"What?"

He held up the tricorder and smiled. "We have achieved tricorder. And our green monster is right up this way."

As he moved forward, Corsi held up the phaser with her right hand, the remote control in her force-field-encased left.

"I just want to say-" she said, then cut herself off.

Stevens, still looking at the tricorder, said, "What?"

"I wanted to thank you."

Now Stevens did look. He seemed confused. "For what?"

"For not saying anything about- about what happened last month."

"You asked me not to," Stevens said with a shrug. "Assuming you really meant it, what else was I supposed to do? You asked me not to tell anyone, and I didn't. You also indicated that it wasn't the beginning of anything, so I don't expect it to be."

Corsi frowned. "What do you mean, 'assuming you really meant it'?"

Stevens stopped and turned to look at her. "Did you really mean it?"

"Of course!" she said angrily.

Again, he shrugged. "Then it's no big deal. I'm not going to betray a confidence. It was what it was, and we've moved on." He peered back down at the tricorder. "It's still in the same spot. Let's go."

Shaking her head, Corsi said, "Right. Of course." Focus on duty, she thought. And he's right, we've moved on.

So why the hell do I keep harping on it?

They soon came within sight of a large structure that was dwarfed by the much larger green bipedal creature standing over it- and bleeding a yellow ichor from its side. It was also holding a Tellarite in its massive green claw. Corsi noticed some kind of primitive projectile weapon on the ground near the creature.

Indicating the tableau with her head, Corsi said, "My guess is that our friend there shot the big guy with that weapon on the ground."

Stevens nodded. "And the big guy took umbrage."

"He ain't seen umbrage yet," Corsi said as she raised her phaser. She may not have had the best handle on her feelings, but now she was in her element.

"Gomez to Corsi."

"I'm a little busy, Commander- one of our new playmates is about to squeeze the life out of a Tellarite."

"Don't shoot it, Domenica, that's an order!"

"What?"

Then came the voice of Diego Feliciano, the da Vinci's transporter chief. "I'm locked on to

their position, Commander."

"Energize."

Moments later, Drew, Gomez, and Faulwell materialized a meter to Corsi's right.

Before the transporter effect had even died down, Gomez was holding up one hand. "Don't fire, Commander- there's more to this than we thought."

Faulwell started to move closer to the creature and then started bellowing at it and gesticulating madly.

"What the hell-?"

Gomez added, "You and Drew keep your phasers ready, and put 'em on heavy stun. If there's any kind of move against the Tellarite or Bart, go ahead and fire, but only then, understood?"

Corsi let out a breath between her teeth. "You're the boss."

Faulwell continued his bizarre diatribe. After a minute, the creature put the Tellarite down.

"It's okay, sir," Faulwell said to the Tellarite, who ran for his weapon. "Please, Afredaspweotynerek doesn't mean you any harm. He's just confused."

"That grabthar tried to kill me!"

With an anger Corsi wouldn't have expected from the usually easygoing linguist, Faulwell asked, "Was that before or after you shot him?"

"I was defending my home!" And the Tellarite went to pick up his weapon.

Corsi nodded to Drew and they both aimed their phasers at the Tellarite. "Touch it and you won't get the chance to pick it up."

Ignoring them, the Tellarite bent over. The moment his fingers touched the weapon, Corsi and Drew both fired. The Tellarite fell over, stunned.

Stevens looked at Faulwell. "What goes on here, Bart? Is Fred here a good guy after all?"

"And what about the farm he trashed?" Corsi asked. She didn't see any good reason to let the Tellarite shoot the creature again, but she wasn't completely ready to trust this- "Fred" yet.

"Back where he comes from, he's a prisoner."

"What!?" Corsi raised her weapon and aimed it at "Fred."

"A political prisoner! " Faulwell said quickly, holding up his hands. "Him and the others we captured were rounded up by someone called Grujaerpoiucdwqil- he's like that furry one we still haven't tracked down yet. " Corsi noticed that every use of a proper name for one of these creatures was accompanied by some kind of weird gesture. "He apparently rounded up everyone who wasn't like him and put them in prisons. When the gateway opened, these

six were sent in to test it out. The feeling was, they were prisoners, they were expendable, so they'd send them in first. Then the gateways shut down, and they were stuck.

"The problem was, nobody could talk to them, and all their attempts at communication failed- obviously, since we couldn't talk to them, either. They're sorry for the destruction they caused, but they were lost and confused. They want to make amends."

"And you believe them?" Corsi asked, shocked at Faulwell's naïveté.

"Yes. Because they have no reason to lie- and because they could have broken out of the force fields any time they wanted."

Even Gomez was surprised at that. "What?"

"Yes, Commander- they can. We can even prove it now. Fabe?"

Faulwell held out his hands. Smiling, Stevens tossed the force field generator, and Faulwell caught it. He put it on the ground, said several things while gesticulating some more to "Fred," then turned on the force field.

Moments later, "Fred" literally walked through the force field.

Corsi felt her jaw drop. "How in the hell did he do that?"

"They all can," Faulwell said. "But they realized what was going on when they were being rounded up, and they decided that it would be better if they bided their time until they could communicate properly. Until we started corralling them, they didn't even realize they'd done anything wrong."

Gomez nodded. "Hopefully, we can defuse this and figure out what to do- without all the property damage."

Stevens grinned. "That'll depend on whether or not the Maegline are all as trigger-happy as Farmer Brown here."

Returning the grin, Gomez said, "Governor Tak is more reasonable, I'm sure."

"He'd almost have to be," Drew muttered.

Corsi, however, noticed that Faulwell was still having a conversation with "Fred."

"Uh, Commander?" he said, turning back to Gomez.

"Yes?"

"We've got a bit of a problem."

"What?"

"You know the last prisoner left- the one we haven't caught- is of the same race as the one that's in power in their home dimension?"

Gomez closed her eyes. "I just know I'm not going to like this."



"You're not. The five we've got were all political prisoners. The other one- his name is Natywpawerldatqwewob- is a criminal. A psychopath."

Corsi let out a very loud curse.

"Blue to Gomez- Commander, the last creature has broken through the force field, and phaser fire is having no effect, repeat no effect, not even on the highest setti- oooof!"

Gomez tapped her combadge. "Gomez to Feliciano. Diego, lock onto Blue and Lipinski, get them out of there, now!"

One second later, Feliciano said, "Got 'em, Commander. Ay, madre- Feliciano to sickbay, medical emergency!"

"What's happening, Diego?" Gomez asked anxiously.

"Both Blue and Lipinski are unconscious, Commander- and Lipinski's bleeding like crazy."

"Dammit!" Gomez said.

"Commander," Faulwell said, "Afredaspweotynerek says he can take care of Natywpawerldatqwewob."

"Tell Afredas- Tell 'Fred' we appreciate it, Bart, but-"

"Fred" let out a wail and gesticulated like crazy. Corsi had a feeling that he was pretty emphatic about whatever point he was making.

Faulwell gave a quick reply to the creature, then said, "Commander, we can't stop Natywpawerldatqwewob without his help. You heard Pattie- not only won't the force fields work, neither will the phasers."

Gomez frowned. "We'll stop them together. Corsi, set phasers on maximum." She tapped her combadge. "Gomez to Feliciano. Six to beam to the location where you transported Blue and Lipinski."

## CHAPTER 10

Afredaspweotynerek knew that this was going to happen. He and the others had tried to reason with the creatures, tried communicating in every way they knew how. They hadn't realized the harm they had done until Bartfaulwell's people took punitive action. True, it wasn't really effective, but Afredaspweotynerek and the others knew it was best to bide their time. Bartfaulwell justified that faith.

But Natywpawerldatqwewob was another problem entirely. Afredaspweotynerek and the others just wanted to be free of Grujaerpoiucdwqil's tyranny. Natywpawerldatqwewob, though, he wanted to kill things. As many things as possible.

"We're about to be transported," Bartfaulwell explained.

"I don't understand."

"Like the gateway that brought you here, only not so big a jump. We can move from place to place."

Suddenly, Afredaspweotynerek felt an odd tingling sensation. When it cleared up, he found himself in a different place.

Truly, Bartfaulwell's people could do wonders. Yes, Afredaspweotynerek decided, he was going to like this place.

Assuming, of course, that they could stop Natywpawerldatqwewob. Afredaspweotynerek saw the killer just as he was slashing through one of the natives of this world.

One of Bartfaulwell's people cried out and fired her weapon at Natywpawerldatqwewob. Unfortunately, it only served to anger him.

Another of Bartfaulwell's people made a noise, and then two of them fired their weapons for a more prolonged period.

Natywpawerldatqwewob's response was to lunge after them. Afredaspweotynerek feared for the lives of his new friends- not to mention the lives of his comrades. They had a chance to start over, make a new life, but if Natywpawerldatqwewob kept up his killing ways, it might never happen.

Afredaspweotynerek would not allow that. He ran toward Natywpawerldatqwewob, saying to Bartfaulwell as he ran, "Tell your people to stay back. Natywpawerldatqwewob will kill them!"

"What are you going to do?" Bartfaulwell asked.

"What I must."

At that, Natywpawerldatqwewob laughed. "Do not be a fool, Afredaspweotynerek. I will kill you as easily as I killed that minuscule life form." He indicated the fallen male native of the world, who was presently being stood over by two females, one his own size, one considerably smaller.

"I will not let you harm these people anymore!"

"You'll have to stop me!"

"Oh, I plan to."

Then Afredaspweotynerek slashed at Natywpawerldatqwewob with his claws.

The clash was an epic one. Afredaspweotynerek was stronger than Natywpawerldatqwewob, but Natywpawerldatqwewob was faster. He ducked under Afredaspweotynerek's attack, and slashed with his own claws. Afredaspweotynerek blocked that and kicked at his foe, but he was able to avoid it.

Afredaspweotynerek was not sure how long he struggled against Natywpawerldatqwewob. The only thing he knew for sure was that he was losing ground. Gathering all his strength, Afredaspweotynerek managed to flip Natywpawerldatqwewob over his head.

But even as he crashed to the ground in a heap, Natywpawerldatqwewob made a grab for

one of the bits of flora that Bartfaulwell called "trees "and ripped it from the ground. He swung it at Afredaspweotynerek, who was too fatigued from being shot and from the fight to dodge it.

The impact collided with Afredaspweotynerek's head, and he, too, fell to the ground. He tried to force himself to get up, but Natywpawerldatqwewob got to his feet first, still holding the "tree."

Before Afredaspweotynerek could react, Natywpawerldatqwewob rammed the tree through his chest.

Afredaspweotynerek had felt pain before- particularly during his interrogation at the hands of Grujaerpoiucdwqil's enforcers- but nothing like this. He could feel the life flowing out of him.

Natywpawerldatqwewob laughed. "You are such a fool. Now I will kill everyone on this planet- perhaps everyone in this entire universe!"

Fury gripped Afredaspweotynerek. Bartfaulwell and the others stood no chance. Natywpawerldatqwewob had killed at least one person, possibly more. Afredaspweotynerek could not let this go on, no matter what the cost.

He gripped the "tree" with his talons, his yellow claws digging into the plant's surface. Though painracked his body, he yanked on it. Unfortunately, it didn't come out. Afredaspweotynerek almost blacked out from the wrenching agony, but somehow he forced himself to try again.

Gripping the "tree" even tighter, he pulled upward- and the plant was free!

Of course now his life was draining from his body at a great rate. He had only a short time to get to Natywpawerldatqwewob before he expired. But he would not die without taking that murderer down, too!

Screaming a cry of anguish, he lunged after Natywpawerldatqwewob, who had moved on to try to kill Bartfaulwell and his people. In fact, Natywpawerldatqwewob had one of them gripped in his talons, much as Afredaspweotynerek had held that native who shot him. She looked like she would be dead in a minute.

"No more deaths!" Afredaspweotynerek cried with the last of his breath as he heaved the "tree" into Natywpawerldatqwewob's back.

Then the world went dark, as he fell to the ground once more.

## CHAPTER 11

"Report," Captain Gold said from the head of the observation lounge table.

Sonya tried not to scratch the bandage on her side. She had only just gotten all her movement back from when the monster shii ripped her torso open on Sarindar, and then she got hoisted by another monster. "Governor Tak has agreed to take in the remaining four creatures-

"They're called Yewqapoiueqrpoui," Bart said helpfully.

"-and provide them with homes. One of them, in fact, specifically said he'd work on the farm owned by that man that Nat killed."

"Nat?" Gold asked.

"For simplicity's sake, we started referring to the green one as 'Fred' and the furry one as 'Nat.' Mr. Faulwell's the only one who's been able to properly pronounce their full names."

Gold chuckled. "Fine. Go on."

"In any case, the governor was moved by the sacrifice that Fred made- basically giving his life to prevent more Maegline from being killed. And he was especially appreciative of the fact that the, uh, Yukes were willing to be captured the way they were."

"The only problem," Bart said, "is communication. The UT won't work with a language that integrates so much with a physical component. So, sir- I'd like to request permission to stay here for a while, to teach the Maegline how to speak to the Yewqapoieqrpoui and to teach them how to speak Tellarite."

"Unfortunately, we can't stick around," Gold said. "It looks like all the gateways mishegoss has calmed down, and we're back on our usual duties- which means we have to pick up some mining equipment at Starbase 413 and then head to Beta Argola." He grinned. "But that's not something that'll require a linguist, I don't think. We'll muddle through without you for a few weeks, Faulwell."

"Thank you, sir," Bart said with a smile.

"Is there any way to get these people home?" Gold asked Sonya.

She shook her head. "They're not interested. They were prisoners, and with the gateways shut down, there's probably no way to get them back home even if they wanted to go."

Gold leaned back. "Well, if the Maegline don't mind having them, and they don't mind being there..."

"Sir," Bart said, "Afredaspweotynerrek- Fred- died so that the Yewqapoieqrpoui could have a new home. I think we owe it to him to do everything to allow that, rather than waste our energy trying to open a dimensional portal for no good reason."

"Fair enough," Gold said with a chuckle. "How we doing on the casualty front?"

"Only one Maegline died- the one Nat killed. His wife and little girl are a bit bruised. The girl- her name is Lin- was pretty traumatized, but her mother seemed to think she'd be all right. Beyond that, the only real damage on-planet was structural, and, even with the duonetic field, that's fixable."

"What about our people?"

Sonya folded her hands in front of her on the table. "Lipinski and Blue will both be okay. Lipinski's out of action for at least a week- she got torn up pretty bad by Nat." Grinning wryly while gingerly patting her side, she added, "I know how she feels, believe me. Pattie only needs a day or two, though."

"What about Duffy?"

"He's fine. He'll be back on duty next shift." And he'd better not think he's off the hook for that lamebrained stunt.

"All right. Get some sleep, Commander. And Faulwell?"

"Sir?"

"Good luck," he said with a smile. "And try not to get too attached to Maeglin- we still need you here."

Chuckling as he got up, Bart said, "Don't worry, sir. Farm life isn't really for me."

"Bridge to Gold."

"Go ahead," Gold said as Bart left.

"Message from the Malinche, sir. Captain Sanders says they'll be here in thirty minutes, and they'll be ready to take charge of the situation."

Gold looked at Sonya. Sonya looked at Gold.

They both laughed for several seconds.

"Sir?"

"Nothing, McAllan. Tell Captain Sanders to take his time."