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Star Trek S.C.E. 14  
Caveat Emptor

by Ian Edginton & Mike Collins

Ian Edginton  
117 Overdale Road  
Quinton  
Birmingham  
England  
B32 2QS

011 44 (0)121 426 5506

Mike Collins  
33 Heol Coed Cae  
Whitchurch  
CARDIFF  
Wales, UK CF14 1HJ  
011 44 29 2021 8162  
Chapter One

Forg held his breath and listened intently, straining to detect even the slightest sound.  
There was nothing.

A trickle of cold sweat snaked its way down the back of his neck, quickly prompting him to bite his lip, stifling a sudden squeak of terror. Under normal circumstances, the halls of a Ferengi Merchantman positively buzzed with the chatter of conspiracies and intrigue and of deals being struck. But now there wasn't even the reassuringly sensual chink of gold-pressed latinum.

It was unnatural.

Forg prided himself on having the kind of lobes that could detect the unique sound of a strip of latinum being dropped thirty meters away. In fact, during his apprenticeship back in the Commercial and Mercantile Institute of Ferenginar, he could correctly identify seventy-five different forms of currency just from the way they hit the ground. His father had been so impressed that he'd bought him an Institute Commendation, to be deducted against his future earnings of course.

Forg nibbled uncomfortably at his lip. The discomfort was nothing compared to the growing fear in his stomach. It was either that or the spore pie he'd eaten after he'd finished his shift six hours ago.

Six hours, had it only been that long?

He reached a junction and hesitated. Flattening himself against the wall, he peered tentatively around the corner. The corridor beyond was deserted. He allowed himself the luxury of exhaling. At the far end lay the escape pods. If he could just keep his nerve for a little while longer, he would be free of this nightmare. Tiptoeing as gingerly as he dared, he cast quick glances at the doorways either side, expecting them to suddenly hiss open at any second and see one of them standing there.

Forg froze. There was something on the floor just ahead. He recognized it as a strip of latinum. What's more, it was still in its mint wraps. And it wasn't alone. There were others, lots of them. So many, in fact, he could buy this ship a hundred times over and still have enough change to keep him hip-deep in Dabo girls for life. Forg felt the familiar tingling sensation of greed washing over him.

He followed the glittering trail to the bank of escape pods. A green light winked on the control console above one of the hatches. A pod had been launched. Someone else had escaped.

Down at his feet, a gray security crate lay on its side, spilling latinum. Like the rest they were all still in their wraps, as shiny and pristine as the day they were minted. He recognized the family crest stamped on the wraps. This wasn't just anyone's personal hoard. It belonged to the ship's owner, DaiMon Phug. Forg's momentary glee soon faded as he wondered what it was that could force Phug to abandon his fortune barely a meter away from freedom? Whatever it was, it wasn't there now and as such was Phug's loss. Forg balanced his fear against his avarice and found they came out pretty even. He decided to go with the latter; after all wasn't it the Sixty-Second Rule of Acquisition that stated, The riskier the road, the greater the profit?

Besides, he had a plan.

He popped the hatch of the nearest pod and began loading the latinum inside. Initially, he assured himself, he was only going to take the strips that were within arm's length. There was no need to take foolish risks.

But

To abandon those strips only a few steps away seemed foolish, not to mention wasteful. So he took the steps, then some more, and even more still, each time scuttling back to hurl another armful into the pod, mentally tallying up the worth of each load.

A matching pair of latinum lobe buffers and fang sharpeners. A complete, lifetime's wardrobe of the finest Tholian silk (including underwear). An estate in the Colloid marshes. A brand new, not reconditioned, trading schooner with its own captain's yacht. A moon-maybe two.

Plus, of course, a substantial donation to the Prophets of the Divine Treasury—ensuring his name was recited in the Annual Tally so that he might be looked upon favorably by the Blessed Exchequer and the Celestial Auctioneers. Forg wasn't usually so diligent in his spiritual devotions, but it never hurt to hedge your bets.

Somewhere among his fantasies of prospective underwear, real estate, and a comfortable afterlife, Forg failed to hear the hiss that he'd so previously dreaded. However, his terror returned with a vengeance as he waddled down the corridor laden with booty only to be confronted by a short, dark stranger. The tumbling latinum broke two of his toes but fear had stolen Forg's voice.

The figure was dressed in a floor length hooded robe improvised from black cargo sheeting. In his hand, a staff as tall as the figure himself was cut from a section of conduit piping. The figure slowly lifted his head to face him. Forgs eyes widened in recognition.

Zin? he finally croaked, incredulous.

No, not anymore Forg realized. He began to slowly back way, managing only a few agonizing steps before the ominous rustle of more robes behind him rooted him to the spot.

Please, he whispered, dont. But his plea fell on large, deaf ears.

He saw Zins dead eyes.

He saw the staff.

After that nothing.

## Chapter Two

The tiny Klingon paced furiously along the top of Captain David Golds desk, neatly skirting a cinnamon bagel the before resting his spiked boot defiantly on the lip of a china saucer.

No, no, no!" he snarled. The frustration was evident in his contorted little face. Your enunciation is a disgrace. Do you even know what a syllable is?

Gold set down his coffee cup. He contemplated replying but thought better of it. The small holographic Klingon was clearly on a roll.

And as for your pronunciation! Pfagh! he spat with undisguised venom. You sound like a toothless old man too long in his cups!

I understand, Gold replied with bemusement bordering on irritation.

In Klingon! bellowed the warrior, who looked to Gold as if he was about to have an aneurysm any second.

jIyajchu, Gold answered, attempting to correctly pronounced the uniquely hacking, phlegmy sound that punctuated most Klingon grammar. The warrior gave a sharp snort of approval just as the door chime to Golds quarters sounded.

Saved by the bell, he muttered. Come.

Commander Sonya Gomez, the da Vincis first officer entered, breaking into a broad beaming grin when she saw the miniature Klingon glowering up at Gold.

Good morning, Captain. I hope that Im not interrupting?

Interrupt away," he said, glancing over at the small, antique silver travelling clock. A captains timepiece from the Napoleonic Wars, it had been a gift from his wife Rachel on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Im just about finished here.

But I am not! the warrior bellowed. We are done when I say so!

Like hell. End program.

The fuming Klingon dissipated into a swirling cluster of light particles, returning to the small oval holo-emitter on Golds desk. A single red light winked like an angry red eye, signifying the program had been shut down.

Now if I could have done that to certain teachers at the Academy. I'd have been the most popular person in my year.

Gomez smiled. Every student's fantasy. I didn't know you were interested in learning Klingon.

I'm not-exactly." Gold indicated the holo-emitter. This was a gift from my grand-daughter, Esther-you remember, Daniels youngest? Her new beau is a Klingon politician, and she insists I bone up on the rudiments of the language so I can address him correctly. I think shes reprogrammed it herself to reflect a more realistic Klingon temperament. Shes a tinkerer. Wants to be an engineerthis week at least. She sent it to me a month ago, but I didn't really start using it until-" He hesitated.

"Kursican?" Gomez prompted.

Gold heaved a heavy sigh. "Let's just say that after what happened with Gus Bradford on Kursican, I've become a lot more conscious of family." Brightening a bit, he went on "In any event, were all supposed to be having dinner on my next shore leave. Poor Rachels going frantic trying to find a recipe for a Kosher

blood pie.

Remembering the background of one of her old crewmates on the Enterprise, Gomez said, "Tell her to get in touch with Sergey and Helena Rozhenko. Sergey is retired Starfleet-I think they live in Minsk. They raised Ambassador Worf."

Standing up, Gold smiled. "Thank you, Commander, I'll be sure to recommend that." He offered Gomez the door. Shall we?

They walked in the direction of the bridge, Gomez taking her place beside her captain, quickening her pace to match his.

Gold enjoyed these brief moments of informality. There was no real reason for Gomez to escort her CO to the bridge at the start of their duty shift save for the fact they both enjoyed the small talk and each others' company. It was difficult working away from family for such long stretches. Unlike other starships, the size of the da Vinci and the often hazardous nature of its mission meant she was not designed or equipped to carry both crew and their families. Gold had been concerned that Gomez would curtail the practice once she and Kieran Duffy, the da Vinci's second officer, had rekindled their romance, but that had not been the case.

Dating a Klingon, Gomez said with a small smile. That can be tricky.

I know, said Gold. But Esthers no slouch. Apparently theyve been inseparable since they met-you couldn't stick a pin between them. I think its a case of an irresistible force meeting an immovable object. Does the immovable object have a name? enquired Gomez.

Khor, son of Lantar-of the House of Gorkon.

"Wow," Gomez said. Gorkon was the chancellor who brokered the first of the Khitomer Accords with the Federation after the destruction of Praxis eighty years earlier.

"He was one of the youngest captains to command a fleet during the war. Last month, he was appointed to Chancellor Martoks staff.

A high flyer in every sense of the word. How did Esther snag him? asked Gomez. Not that she isnt capable, she added quickly.

Gold sighed in that indulgent, paternal way Gomez recognized from her own father back home in Vieques.

She got into an argument with him in a bar.

Gomez winced. A bar?

Gold nodded. I know. Dont ask. I didnt. Its easier on the nerves that way. Since finishing college, shes been backpacking around the galaxy while she tries to figure out what she wants to do with her life.

Seems she crossed paths with Khor and his colleagues while they were out on a binge. They saw her and started going on about human history. We had no truly great deeds or battles worthy of song and saga, the usual nonsense." Gold shook his head, smiling. So my Esther-no taller than a Ferengi, but with a temper that would give a Gorn a hard time-calls them out and informs them in language that would make a Nausicaan blush that they are mistaken.

So what happened? asked Gomez as they entered the turbolift. "Bridge," she added, and the turbolift sped upward.

Gold paused, his face suddenly solemn. She told them, in great detail, the about the Romans' siege of Masada, of the thousand Jewish partisans-men, women, and children-who sacrificed themselves rather than return to a life of slavery and oppression. He brightened. She mustve made an impression, because Khor apologized and escorted her to where she was staying. The next day he invited her to an opera recital and they havent been apart since.

The doors to the turbolift opened and the captain and first officer entered the bridge. Lieutenant McAllan half turned and said, "Captain on the bridge."

"Knock it off, McAllan," Gold said. He generally ran a comparatively informal bridge, and never insisted on the particular protocol that required bellowed his entrance like some kind of-well, Roman emperor. But McAllan, the da Vinci's tactical officer, kept insisting, no doubt encouraged by the ship's chief of security, the ever-spit-and-polish Domenica Corsi. Status?

"We were just going to call you, actually, sir," McAllan said. "We're picking up an automated

transmission from an unidentified vessel sixty thousand kilometers off our starboard bow. Based on the initial readings, it's an escape pod.

From the ops console in front of the captain's chair, Lieutenant Ina Mar said, Captain, they've picked up on our scans. They're firing maneuvering thrusters-" her eyes widened "-in the opposite direction.

They're trying to outrun us? Gomez asked.

This I have to see, added Gold. On screen.

The vast panoramic expanse of a starfield on the forward viewer was replaced by a less panoramic expanse, with something that looked like a pale orange beetle at its center. It was a ship, oval in shape, covered in overlapping bands of riveted metal. Its underside was flat and smooth with a pair of forward facing wings sweeping from half way along its sides, tapering down to narrow points at the front. At the rear, a cluster of exhaust vents glowed white as they attempted to propel the tiny craft away from the da Vinci.

"Getting its registry now, sir," McAllan said. "It's a Ferengi lifepod."

I'll be damned," said Gold. "Hail them, McAllan. Let's see what they're up to.

Yes, sir. McAllan opened a channel. This is the U.S.S. da Vinci to Ferengi pod, please acknowledge.

There was no reply.

Gold nodded at the screen. Keep knocking, McAllan.

I repeat, this is the U.S.S. da Vinci to Ferengi pod, please respo-

Go away! The reply was on audio only but there was no mistaking the vehemence in the tone.

Id say that qualifies as a response, Gold muttered.

Gomez moved to the tactical station next to McAllan, but spoke to the ship's conn officer. Ensign Wong, get us into tractor-beam range.

Aye sir, replied Songmin Wong.

Ferengi pod," Gomez said, "please disengage your thrusters and prepare to be taken under tow.

Are you deaf, human? I am perfectly fine and in no need of assistance. Now withdraw immediately!

Ina turned around. "Sensors indicate no Class-M planets nor other ships within the pod's range. If we don't bring him in, no one will."

Gomez nodded. Ferengi pod, under the articles of interstellar law, we are legally obliged to render aid and assistance to any ship in distress. By its very nature, your escape pod qualifies as just that.

Furthermore, we are your only chance for rescue.

You cannot was the spluttering reply.

Gomez motioned to McAllan to cut the link.

"In tractor-beam range now," Wong reported.

"Reel him in, Mr. McAllan," she said.

Gold nodded approvingly, then tapped his combadge. "Transporter room. Feliciano, lock onto the pilot of that pod and beam him directly to sickbay on my mark."

"Yes, sir."

Gomez said, "With your permission, sir, I'll greet our guest."

"Granted. Bridge to sickbay-Dr. Lense, prepare to accept an agitated, possibly disturbed Ferengi patient."

"We'll be waiting," said the ship's chief medical officer.

As the turbolift swallowed Gomez back up, Gold made one final call, to the ship's second officer. "Duffy, as soon as that pod's secure in the hangar, go over it with a fine-tooth comb."

"On my way, sir."

## Chapter Three

EEEEEEEE!!!

The Ferengis continued squealing set Dr. Elizabeth Lense's teeth on edge and shredded what remained of her patience. She was all for pastoral care but right now all she wanted to do was stuff a sock in her whining patient's mouth.

The Ferengi was dressed head to foot in black and purple velvet. The high collar and cuffs of his tailcoat were trimmed with elegant silver embroidery, the buttonholes and elaborate detailing picked out in gold thread. He also hadn't stopped screaming since Chief Feliciano's transporter beam deposited him on a biobed.

What are you complaining about? I haven't even touched you, she said, lowering the medical tricorder.

"And you're not going to, at least until you've taken your clothes off!"

Sorry, Lense said with a sigh, "never on a first date."

Is there a problem?" Gomez asked, entering the room, flanked by Lt. Commander Corsi and one of the security guards, Andrea Lipinski.

More clothed females! exclaimed the Ferengi. "This is an obscenity! First you seize my ship against my express wishes. Then you proceed to abduct me and subject me to this probing and inquisition, and now you surround me with clothed females!"

"I thought the new Grand Nagus had lifted the restrictions against Ferengi women," Gomez said.

The Ferengi sneered. "Just because the nagushood was granted to an idiot who has spent too much time among humans such as yourselves doesn't mean we have all turned our back on traditional values. I demand to speak to a male in charge!"

"I've had enough of this," Lense said. "Computer, activate Emergency Medical Hologram."

A dark-skinned, pleasant-faced figure materialized in the center of the room. "Good afternoon, Doctor," the holographic physician, whom Lense had nicknamed "Emmett," said.

Lense handed Emmett her tricorder. "This patient requires a physical exam. If you'll excuse me, Commander," she added to Gomez, then went into her office.

Emmett looked befuddled only for a moment, then started his examination. The Ferengi looked dubious, but was apparently satisfied that this was a male, even if he was a hologram, and didn't balk at the exam. Gomez sighed. I apologize for any distress, but it is part of Starfleets business to render aid and protection to the weak and the vulnerable. A lone escape craft adrift in deep space strikes me as being just that.

I knew what I was doing, female," the Ferengi said derisively. "There are dozens of worlds in the system where I could have made planetfall.

"According to our sensors, none of the worlds in this system can sustain humanoid life."

"Bah," the Ferengi said, slumping his shoulders.

Emmett said, "If you could please sit still, Mr.-?"

"My name is Phug-DaiMon Phug."

Gomez frowned. The title of DaiMon was only given to ship captains in the Ferengi Alliance. DaiMon Phug, what happened to your ship?" she asked. "Should we be searching for other lifepods?"

No, there's no need, there aren't any others. They're all dead. When we lost containment, the warp field collapsed. There was scarcely time to reach the escape pods. I almost didn't make it.

I'm sorry for the loss of your crew.

My crew? Pah! If they'd been up to snuff, this never would have happened! I always knew it was a mistake signing on a chief engineer who couldn't count to twenty without taking his shoes off. The Ferengi education system isn't what it once was, you know.

If you'll permit the doctor to finish his examination, I'll assign you quarters. We can discuss where you wish to be set down later. Would you like me to notify the Alliance that we've picked you up?"

No! I will see to it, thank you.

You're welcome. To the hologram, she said, "Carry on, Emmett.

"Of course, Commander."

Gomez and Corsi left, Corsi nodding to Lipinski, indicating that she was to stay and keep an eye on the Ferengi.

As soon as the doors closed behind them, Corsi said, Commander, you know he's lying, don't you?"

Nodding, Gomez said, Through his pointy little teeth. She tapped her combadge. "Gomez to Duffy."

"Go ahead, Sonnie."

Gomez shook her head. Part of her found it endearing when Duffy called her that, but it wasn't entirely

appropriate when they were both on duty. "Kieran, let me know as soon as you're done going over the pod. Our guest says he barely escaped a containment breach. I want that verified."

"On it, but I'm not seeing any indications that this was near any kind of breach. Initial scan doesn't show any of the usual particulate traces."

"No surprise there," Corsi muttered.

"Keep me posted, Kieran. Gomez out."

## Chapter Four

It was raining on Ferenginar.

In fact, it always rained on Ferenginar—even during the alleged dry season when it simply rained less. Several xeno-anthropologists posited the radical theory that this consistently inclement weather was actually the cornerstone of the Ferengi culture. This was reflected in the Ferengi language itself, which had no less than one hundred and seventy-eight words for "rain"—and no word for "crisp." With little else to do but huddle in their burrows while the deluge persisted, the early Ferengi would pass the long hours trying to work out ways of keeping warm, dry, and comfortable. They eventually came to the conclusion that the only practical solution to their problem primarily revolved around the acquisition of huge amounts of cash. It was the great thinker Gint (who later went on to become Ferenginar's first Grand Nagus) who stated, Money can't buy you love but it can buy you an umbrella.

It was, some claimed, from this simple desire that the entire Ferengi social, political, and religious structure evolved to create the foremost trading race in known space. Ironically it also led, millennia later, to the creation of the only desert on Ferenginar.

The Nimbi Massif was a vast rift valley terraformed into an arid, bone-dry expanse, its climate maintained by a series of colossal dehumidifiers. This change of environment enabled the valley to be lined with an array of parabolic baffles, transforming the entire geographic feature into a gigantic transceiver dish—a huge ear turned toward the sky. Via this dish, the Ferengi government could eavesdrop on interstellar communications, tracking the movements of stocks, shares, currency fluctuations, and investments across several sectors. Not to mention more politically sensitive data that had a price all its own.

Consequently, the Nimbi Array was manned around the clock by a legion of eager listeners, all sifting, extrapolating and interpreting the incoming material, aurally panning for nuggets of fiscal data from the great rivers of interstellar chatter.

Interpolator Brusk was one such listener. He was also the first to encounter the heretic but he wouldn't be the last.

Brusk had devoted almost six months to monitoring communications from Breen space. The Breen economy had been in turmoil ever since the fall of the Dominion and the reparations imposed by the Federation/Klingon/Romulan alliance, prompting them to consider selling the secrets behind their formidable technology. At one point during the war, the Breen energy-dissipating weapons almost bought the alliance to its knees. Sensing that blood was in the water and a considerable return could be had, Brusk sat and waited and listened.

Now his dedication was looking to pay off. The Breen government had gone into session to decide which course of action to take. Brusk knew that selling was their only option and he had requested a negotiating team remain on standby, ready to approach the Breen with a deal within hours of their decision. Of course, in keeping with the great Ferengi tradition of shameless nepotism, the team included his two brothers and several nephews.

Tugging at his right lobe with nervous excitement, Brusk leaned closer to his computer console, intently watching the screen as the internal communications traffic from within Breen space scrolled in front of him, the universal translator changing the complex Breen word forms into legible text. The session would finish any time now and the minutes of the meeting downloaded to their central files via a brief detour to Ferenginar.

Suddenly, the unfurling text vanished from the screen, replaced by a wash of static and white noise.

Brusk moaned in disbelief. He tapped frantically at the keypad, desperately attempting to reboot the

system but to no avail. Brusk stood and peered over the partition at the Ferengi at the next workstation. Rhut specialized in Klingon commodities, mostly Kohlar beast bellies and bloodwine, but he was also pretty handy with computers. Hed charge Brusk through the nose to fix his machine but with the state of play so critical it was worth the outlay.

Brusk put on his best poker face, ready to haggle. Rhut, my consoles just crashed I.

Rhut didnt pay him any attention. He was too busy concentrating on the screen in front of him, his fingers dancing urgently over the keyboard.

So? Join the club, he snapped. But you better have backed up your files because it looks like the entire systems gone down.

Brusk glanced out over the hangar-like expanse of the work floor. Hundreds of his fellow interpolators had abandoned their work stations and were gathered in nervous huddles. He could taste the panic in the air.

This was bad. This was very bad.

Then Rhut announced, It's back up!

The static had cleared, but the screen was now blank. As Brusk watched, a face began to resolve out of the gray nothingness. All the other Ferengi were as equally fixed to their screens. Whatever was happening, it was cutting in on all bandwidths and frequencies. The vast expanse of the Nimbi Array was receiving just one signal to the exclusion of all else.

A Ferengi face filled the screen, but it wasnt like any Ferengi Brusk had ever seen. The head was longer than normal, with fine, high cheekbones and an elegant, aquiline nose. The eyes were wide and compassionate. Even the lobes seemed to be more sculpted and swept back.

The face was beautiful. Brusk found it unsettling but there was worse to come.

The face smiled, showing two rows of white, even teeth. Brusk shuddered.

Peace, joy and contentment to you all my brothers and sister I am Milia. I am coming home.

Brusk screamed

along with ever other Ferengi in the room.

## Chapter Five

Sonya Gomez leant against the wall of the turbolift, her arms crossed. She gently tapped the padd in her left hand against her chin.

Duffy had been the very model of efficiency, and had produced a detailed report, with full spectrographic analysis of Phug's lifepod. Gomez had then reviewed the system diagnostics and had reluctantly agreed with the findings. It was Gomez's task as first officer to present the results and conclusions to her captain. Unfortunately, the answers Duffy had obtained only posed more questions.

She sighed. Why did it have to be a Ferengi?

Gomez had to admit that her opinions of the trader race were inevitably colored by her experiences aboard the Enterprise. About a year before she signed onto the Federation's flagship as an engineer, Captain Picard had might the first visual contact with the Ferengi. Since then, the ship had been involved in many encounters with the race, and Gomez-who, working in engineering, was often involved in cleaning up the mess left by the latest Ferengi scheme against the crew-had had developed an unhealthy distrust of the race. That distrust was fostered by the fact that the Ferengi were the ones who opened the first trade relations with the Dominion. Gomez had always wondered in the back of her head whether or not the war would have turned out the way it did if it had been the Federation that made first contact instead of the Ferengi.

Intellectually, she knew that her distrustful attitude was at odds with Starfleet's all-embracing philosophy. She needed to get past it-especially today, dealing with Phug and his pod.

The turbolift eased to a halt, the doors slid open onto the bridge. Duffy was at the conn, and he smiled at her. "Ready to give the captain the bad news?" he asked, getting up from the command chair.

She nodded, and they both went into the ready room.

"Tell me you have good news, Gomez," Gold said.



"I'm afraid not, sir. There's no evidence of any damage at all. None of the particulate traces you'd expect from a warp core breach, minimal hull scarring, none of which matches what you'd get from an antimatter explosion, no radioactivity beyond the usual background radiation of space. And, before you ask, there's no sign of distress from any kind of energy weapon-he wasn't running from a firefight, either."

"Or," Duffy added, "if he was, he did it without getting hit once, which is pretty unlikely in a pod with only type-2 maneuvering thrusters."

Gold blew out a breath. "He was running from something. What would spook a Ferengi DaiMon that much?"

"Someone's found a way of replicating latinum?" Duffy joked.

Indicating the padd's screen, Gomez said, "One bit of good news-we know the course he took."

"Good," Gold said. "Any information about Phug or his ship?"

Gomez shook her head. "No, there wasn't anything useful in the pod's computer. I can't imagine a Ferengi would put anything like that in an escape pod's databank where anyone could access it without paying for the privilege."

"Good point."

Duffy rubbed his chin. "Might be worth putting a call in to Deep Space 9. See if our old pal Nog knows anything about Phug."

Gomez remembered that Lieutenant Nog-the first Ferengi to ever join Starfleet and the chief operations officer of DS9-had worked with the da Vinci crew at Empok Nor a while back. Gomez herself hadn't been around for that, busy as she was with a mission to Sarindar, but she did know one thing Nog was the son of the new Grand Nagus, Rom. Rom himself was a former engineer on DS9-that was the time spent among humans that Phug had found so distasteful-and the architect of the brilliant self-replicating minefield that had held the Dominion in check for precious, valuable months while the Federation amassed its forces.

"Couldn't hurt," Gold said with a nod. "Have McAllan get in touch with Nog and have Wong backtrack Phug's course. My curiosity's been piqued now."

"Mine, too," Gomez said. "It's not like Phug himself has been forthcoming."

Within ten minutes, Wong had set a course back along the pod's route and McAllan had sent a message to Deep Space 9.

Within fifteen minutes, the da Vinci was rocked by a gravity wave of some kind. "All stop!" Gomez said.

"Captain Gold to the bridge."

"Answering all stop," Wong said.

"What the hell was that?" Gold said as he entered the bridge.

"Some kind of gravity wave," Duffy said from an aft engineering station. "Something's generating a massive field, but we're not picking up anything except normal space."

"Damage report," Gomez said to McAllan as she vacated the command chair for Gold.

McAllan checked his status board. "No significant damage. A few bumps and bruises."

"We're picking something up now," Duffy said. "Wow."

Gomez joined Duffy at the console. "Could you be a little more specific?"

"Not really," Duffy said. "Take a look."

She looked at his console, and saw an amazing sight. "Wow," she said. "Put it on the main viewer, Kieran."

Everyone turned to the viewscreen, which now displayed a Ferengi Merchantman. A floating commerce vessel, it was a virtual city in space. Never a race to allow aesthetics get in the way of practicalities, they had designed the Merchantman as an enormous version of their regular Ferengi vessels, but absurdly large-five decks where there was one on the original. It gleamed a tarnished gold, somehow brassy in the blackness of space. It was at once, ludicrous and threatening.

Gold was actually open-mouthed. "How the hell did that thing appear out of nowhere?"

"I don't know, sir," Duffy said, "but it didn't register on the sensors until we came within fifty thousand kilometers of it."

"Try to hail them, McAllan," Gold said.

"Aye, sir."

Moving to stand next to the operations console, Gomez asked the Bajoran woman seated there, "Mar, what can you tell me about the ship?"

"Registry lists it as the Ferengi Merchantman Debenture of Triple-Lined Latinum," Ina Mar said.

"That's a mouthful," Wong muttered with a smile.

Ina continued "Three kilometers in diameter, crew capacity of thirty thousand, though I can't get any definitive lifesigns right now. According to the database, it's owned and operated by DaiMon Phug."

Duffy grinned. "We have a winner."

Gold turned to McAllan. "Where's Phug now?"

"Emmett gave him a physical-he checked out fine. Corsi stuck him in the mess hall with two guards on him."

Frowning, Gold repeated, "Emmett gave him a physical?"

"The DaiMon had a problem being examined by a 'fee-male,'" Gomez said, impersonating the way Phug had sneered the word in sickbay.

Gold grumbled something, then said, "Put a call through to him. And keep trying to raise that monster out there."

Phug's high-pitched whine of a voice came on a moment later. "I demand an explanation for this disruption of my well-being!"

"This is Captain Gold. We were retracing your pod's route. It took us right to your ship."

"You found my ship?"

Gomez shot a glance at Gold. Phug had been indignant-now he was out-and-out scared.

"Get...us...out...of...here....now!"

Before Gold could reply, the ship shook again. "Report!" the captain bellowed.

"We've been caught in a tractor beam," Duffy said.

"Break us loose," Gold said to Wong.

Wong tried to activate the impulse engines, but the da Vinci didn't move. "We can't break free, Captain."

"You fools!" came Phug's voice-at once smug and scared. "You've doomed us all!"

## Chapter Six

Phug was not happy about being escorted to the da Vinci bridge-especially not by two clothed females. What he wanted was to be taken to his escape pod so he could use it to escape again. Maybe this time he'd find a planet where he could lie low for a bit and reestablish himself, rather than a Starfleet ship that insisted on bringing him back to the very thing he was trying to escape from. He was sure they were lying about there being no habitable planets in the system. You couldn't trust humans

Instead, the human female Corsi and her subordinate took him to the bridge, where the human DaiMon-what are they called, he thought, "kap-tans"?-sat waiting for him. Also present were a bunch of other humans-including, to his disgust, more clothed females-as well as a Bajoran and, surprisingly, a single Bynar. I thought those computer-lovers all came in pairs. Still, at least the Bynar was almost normal looking, though he did, of course, have the same hideously stunted ears as the others.

"DaiMon Phug, I'm Captain Gold. I wish I could say it's a pleasure to meet you, but considering that your ship is holding mine in a tractor beam right now"

"I accept no responsibility, Captain!" Phug cried. "I never asked you to come back to the Debenture."

"In fact, you told us the Debenture had exploded. Mind telling us why you really left?"

Phug said nothing. He saw no reason to just give information to this human, and it's not like someone from Starfleet would ever pay for it. So he remained silent.

"All right, let's start smaller-how come we didn't see the Debenture before it was too late?"

Again, Phug stood his ground-until the female Corsi put her hand to her phaser. Gold might have been a typical Starfleet weakling with no lobes for business, but Phug recognized in Corsi the type who liked to extort by the barrel of a phaser. This, he thought sourly, is what happens when you clothe females. They get delusions of Klingon-hood

"Multiple cloaks," he said. "Some Klingon, some Romulan. The Merchantman is so vast that it would overload a single device. There is a cloak array around the perimeter, they allow us to enter a trading area before the local customer base is aware of us."

Corsi smiled. "The One Hundred and Ninety-Fourth Rule of Acquisition 'It's always good business to know about your customers before they walk in your door.' You find out what they have the most need of and then magically appear to provide it."

Phug regarded the female with revulsion. To hear the Rules coming from a female mouth-it was despicable. He quickly turned his gaze back to the captain.

The female named Gomez was standing next to Gold. "You run several cloaks-that's got to require a huge amount of power."

Phug shrugged. "We acquire the technology we need to run the systems. We're traders, after all."

Gold cut him off. "As interesting as this is-and at some point there are questions you'll have to answer about how exactly you acquired this cloaking technology-we need more information from you. Can you override that tractor beam?"

Phug was about to ask why he should, when it occurred to him that he was as trapped as they were. The da Vinci would never break free of the Debenture's tractor beam. So it was in his own interests to acquiesce. He went to the tactical station and tapped in a code sequence, ignoring the doleful look the human male at that station gave him. "There. That will free your ship. It isn't a threatening device, its purpose is to maintain the proximity of ships of visiting customers. When you have purchased goods, there is a release code issued. I believe you have a similar tradition on your planet validated parking."

Corsi looked incredulous. "You trap your customers?"

Phug was offended. This female quoted the Rules, yet had no comprehension of them. "No-how can you imply that? We just want you to buy goods, then you're free to go."

"So by transmitting this code, the Debenture will assume we've conducted a transaction and then free us?" asked Gold.

Phug nodded, glad that the male, at least, understood business matters. "You must destroy this information immediately-if the Commerce Authority found I'd revealed this code, I could lose my Credit Rating."

Gold was about to reply when the ship lurched, throwing Phug to the floor.

"Report!" Gold bellowed, having managed to stay in his chair somehow.

"The tractor beam disengaged, sir," the human at tactical said, "but some kind of energy beam came from the Debenture. Now it's trapped us."

The Bynar spoke from one of the aft consoles. "Captain, something is attempting to take control of our computer systems!"

Gold looked at Phug questioningly.

"What?" Phug asked defensively. "I'm as surprised by this as you are!"

Gomez walked up to the Bynar. "Can you stop it, Soloman?"

"I'm attempting to do so now." The Bynar-who, to Phug's surprise, had a name rather than a numerical designation; Phug filed that fact away for potential future use, assuming he lived long enough-then let loose with a stream of high-pitched droning. "It's some kind of intelligent worm-it's very sophisticated. I will need to focus."

"Go to it," Gomez said, backing away.

Soloman chirped that droning some more. Phug put his hands to his ears. "Must he make that horrid noise here?"

"Suffer," Corsi said, again putting her hand to her phaser.

Then the droning mercifully stopped. "Commander Gomez," Soloman, "I can only hold off this invasive program for a limited time. It needs to be stopped at the source." Then the droning started again, stopped. "I must be vigilant here, or the da Vinci systems will be compromised."

Gomez looked at Gold. "We'll have to send an away team over there."

"Put it together, Gomez." Gold turned to Phug. "We'll need your help, Phug."

Phug looked around the bridge, realizing there was no escape from this. Why did these Starfleet types

have to be so eager and earnest? Why couldn't they have let him go, left him to float in his pod until he'd found a young, fresh world where he could introduce the natives to the holy joys of commerce, could amass a fiscal empire, make himself a new life and forget about this debacle? But no-these tiresome humans dragged him back to face...he couldn't even think the words.

"I shall aid you... but on the strict understanding that I will not set foot on that ship. I will provide you with specifications and routes to disable the computer systems... and when you are done I wish to leave here and never return!"

"Good. Let's get to it."

Phug noticed that Gold's statement was not an actual agreement to Phug's terms.

## Chapter Seven

Arrizon walked down the Path of Preferred Payment towards the Central Hall of the Debenture of Triple-Lined Latinum, his heart and soul at peace. Trade and commerce went on at stalls and boutiques on either side of the Path. Voices spoke softly, and gentle laughter drifted by him. As he passed by Ferengi, they bowed politely, smiled, and walked on. Words were not needed. They shared the joy that was the Way of Milia.

Turning through the Avenue of Actuaries, he reached the Central Hall, with its Fountains of Ystrad. It was a loving scale re-creation of the Swamp Forest of Arrizon's home district. Gold-rimmed, a disk some fifty meters in diameter, the forest rose up into the atrium of the hall. Benches ringed the public space, with timed credit meters mounted on each. Sweeping around the foliage were the fountains themselves, organic-looking threads, rising to above the canopy of green. The water flowed from the sculpted crystal fountains, falling as fine rain over the trees and fungi. He inhaled deeply of the moist, loamy atmosphere. This was a good day. Arrizon smiled again they had all been good days, since Milia returned.

Near the fountains, he saw and politely acknowledged Nakt and Tyvil, two brothers with whom he had been in a bitter dispute over Kevas franchise routes just weeks before. Now, that didn't matter. It was a detail, a curiosity in the greater fabric of the Way of Milia. They nodded back, genuine smiles on their faces.

Soon, he thought, all Ferengi would know this peace, this contentment.

As he moved on, seeking a bench to sit on for the allotted period his credits would buy, to fully absorb the ambience of the fountains, he noticed four humans. He approached them. Three of them were, he noted dispassionately, clothed females.

He smiled at them. He was glad to see them.

They seemed wary; the tall blond-haired one, carrying a large weapon, spoke quietly to the two dark haired females and their tall male companion. The male was also armed.

"That will not work here," he informed the male, politely. He turned at this.

"Excuse me?"

"Your weapon. No weapons work here. It is the Way of Milia." He beamed a beatific smile. "We have no need of such things. We are all friends here, all of Milia."

The female with the longer black hair started, "Friend ...uh...?"

"Arrizon," he prompted helpfully.

"Friend Arrizon," she continued, "we seek the Central Core of your fine ship. Can you help?"

In a grand gesture he indicated the Fountains. "Can there be a greater center than this? It is an expression of all that is glorious on Ferenginar the rain, the trees, the scent...all that binds us, all that makes us Ferengi!" He was lost in the ecstasy of his exhalations.

"I was asking more about a systems core. Where the machinery is?"

This brought Arrizon up short. The sheer resonant joy and the beauteous rhythms his heart and soul rang to were interrupted momentarily. A voice in his head said She shouldn't be asking about this. It was, he noted with some confusion, not his own voice.

He shook his head, looked away, raising his arm behind him to wave to them dismissively. "I, ah, can't

help you. Sorry, I have to move on now."

He started away, his gait a shuffling uncomfortable one. The Fountains of Ystrad and their attendant joys gone from his mind. He had to find his peace again, commune with Milia.

Gomez watched as the small, nervous Ferengi slunk away. Seconds before he was joy unparalleled, now he was nervous.

"Odd," commented Carol Abramowitz, the ship's cultural specialist. "That's the first negative reaction we've gotten from a Ferengi since we got here."

"I know what you mean," Corsi said. Despite the Ferengi's warning, neither she nor Vance Hawkins had lowered their phasers. "It's making me nervous."

Gomez sighed. "And Phug's directions are proving less than helpful... it's like someone's redesigned elements of this city-ship to deliberately hide the computer core."

"It's like a living representation of the Seventy-Sixth Rule," Corsi said. "Every once in a while, declare peace. It confuses the hell out of your enemies!"

Gomez shook her head. "That's the second time you've quoted the Ferengi Rules of Acquisition, Domenica. I'd expect Carol here to know so them, but it hardly seems your area of expertise, no offense."

"None taken." Corsi nodded at a passing trader decked in the long coat and gleaming bejewelled headskirt of a Senior Actuary, before continuing. "As far as I'm concerned, there's no difference between the Rules of Acquisition and any other handbook of war-Sun Tzu's Art of War, Admiral Chekov's Meditations on a Pre-Surak Vulcan, the writings of Kahless. That they call their battles 'commerce' is a matter of semantics." She smiled. "Two Hundred Thirty-Ninth Rule 'Never be afraid to mislabel a product.'"

As they turned into the Row of Restored Antiquities (as Phug's directions indicated) they noticed a short hooded figure, obviously a Ferengi though he carried himself differently to the others. He held a staff, made of conduit piping, Gomez noted with some curiosity. "Something" she muttered.

"What is it, Commander?" Corsi asked.

"There's something oddly familiar to all this...this niceness. Especially that one," she added, pointing to the hooded Ferengi.

The Ferengi then raised his staff, his hood falling back slightly.

Gomez noted with alarm his dead, dark eyes.

## Chapter Eight

David Gold paced the bridge, waiting for word from his away team. There was something that didn't feel right about the whole situation. Something irritatingly familiar, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Must be getting old, he thought with a wry smile.

He turned to the aft computer station. "How we doing, Soloman?"

The Bynar's eyes looked up momentarily to acknowledge the captain then flicked back to the displays. "I have restricted many of the subroutines that the worm has sought to access, though it seems to be learning quickly. I have had to change the encryption sequences every few seconds. It is, oddly, very much like the human game of chess-every move I make is responded to with a countermove."

"So how are you doing?" Gold asked.

Soloman stared intently at the displays in front of him, allowing himself a small smile. "I have lost perhaps two pawns, but no bishops or knights. My opponent has suffered loss of a rook and four pawns. Metaphorically speaking, of course."

Gold put an encouraging arm on the engineer's shoulder, "My wife always beat me, because I'd go for the queen first. She always got pawns across the board to collapse my second line. Keep up the game, Soloman." He turned to McAllan. "Any word from them yet?"

The tactical officer shook his head. "Not yet, sir. Still five minutes until the designated call-in point. Do you want me to hail them?"

Gold shook his head. "No, no-let's give them the five minutes."

It had taken less than five minutes for the away team to be surrounded.

Several Ferengi in robes had gathered around them. Each of them brandished an apparently hollow length of piping. Gomez recognized them as twenty-millimeter tetracarbide, hi-tensile, low-conductivity thermabore-hardly the most threatening weapon in the galaxy, especially against phasers. Even if that other Ferengi had been right in his statement that the phasers wouldn't work, Gomez had faith in Corsi and Hawkins's ability to take on half a dozen Ferengi with glorified pipes.

There was something about the way they were holding those pipes that was familiar to Gomez as well, but she couldn't put her finger on it.

The blissful traders had looked around to note the scene, but then turned back to their business.

Before Gomez could say anything, a projected image of a Ferengi appeared before the group. He beamed, his features were almost aquiline-he's almost attractive, Gomez thought with surprise. She'd never seen a Ferengi with straight teeth. Or such a look of serene contentment.

"Greetings to you, friends. I am the Prophet Milia. Are you of the Way?"

Suddenly, everything clicked in Sonya Gomez's head. The odd sense of familiarity that had been nagging in the back of her head finally came into focus as soon as the serene Ferengi asked about "the Way."

"Yes," she said quickly, "we are."

"My Adjusters were concerned about your inquiries. Such questioning is not of the Way. Being part of the Way of Milia is to be of the whole of Milia." He nodded to them, putting his hand to his chest, "Joy to you, friends. Peace and contentment will fill you."

He faded as quickly as he'd appeared, the moment of confrontation having apparently passed. Gomez, however, felt her apprehension growing.

"We," she said, "are in big trouble."

DaiMon Phug paced around the mess hall, occasionally looking up at the quiescent security detail stationed to watch him. He muttered and swore under his breath. Pausing, he turned to the guards. They were both males, thankfully, one a Bajoran male called Loten, the other a human named Foley. Having had his fill of humans, Phug posed his question to the Bajoran.

"When are we getting out of here? Do you know how long I've been cooped up in this room?"

Loten nodded. "About three hours."

"What is taking your people so long?" He shook his head, gesturing wildly with his arms. "Shouldn't have sent females! This stupid human belief in equality is going to be the ruin of your society!"

Suddenly, a connection he'd not previously made linked in his mind.

"Oh, no. They sent females." He turned to Loten. "Get me your captain-now!"

"Why?"

"Because your precious away team will be in desperate trouble if I don't."

Loten looked at Foley, who just shrugged. Then the Bajoran tapped his combadge. "Loten to bridge."

"Gold here."

"Sir, the Ferengi says that there's a problem with the away team."

"What kind of problem?"

"He won't say, sir."

"DaiMon, you want to join this conversation?" Gold said tartly.

Phug hesitated. "It's about the nature of what they're going to face over there.... and about the fact you sent females."

Gold made some kind of noise. "Why do you Ferengi cling to this barbaric notion of women as second class?"

"No!" Phug cut him off. "You don't understand-it's because they are the only females on that ship?" Phug ground his teeth, trying to figure out a way to phrase it without revealing any culpability on his own part.

"It's to do with the system set up on the city-ship-the, uh, nature of the situation over there-one which," he added quickly, "I will attest before a registered Commerce Authority attorney that I was wholly

unaware of when I engaged in the transaction!"

"Spit it out, DaiMon!" Gold shouted.

"You have to beam them off the Debenture right now. It's about to get very nasty over there!"

## Chapter Nine

The away team moved on, with several of the cloaked Ferengi following not far behind. Gomez was scanning ahead with her tricorder.

"You said we're in trouble, Commander," Corsi whispered testily, not wanting their pursuers to overhear.

"I'd appreciate some details."

"The power source seems to come from this direction," Gomez said. "Of course, we've thought that about six times in the past few hours."

"Commander-"

"Give me a minute, Domenica," Gomez said while still considering the readout on the tricorder. She indicated a narrow corridor to their left. Here, some very young-looking Ferengi had set up stalls. The goods didn't seem to have any theme to them, unlike other similar setups they'd seen on the Debenture.

"What is this?" Hawkins asked.

Abramowitz smiled. "What we have here is the Ferengi version of a coming-of-age ritual. When Ferengi boys first go into business for themselves, they sell off their childhood possessions to give them a starting stake in business."

The ambient noise in this area was even louder than it was in other commerce areas, so it suited Gomez just fine. Even taking into account the fact that Ferengi had superior eavesdropping abilities, she was pretty sure they could have a private conversation here.

"So what's going on, Commander?" Corsi asked irritably.

As if on cue, a blaring alarm sounded out across the halls of the Debenture.

"Dammit," Gomez muttered.

The Ferengi started shrieking and screaming, upturning stalls, shattering earthenware, ripping at drapes. Several turned from their wanton destruction and looked in the away team's direction. They were grinning. It was beyond any lascivious leer Gomez had seen on the face of a Ferengi, which was saying a considerable amount.

"Let's move, people," Gomez said. "Corsi, take point."

They moved almost as a single unit, Corsi in the lead as instructed, Gomez and Abramowitz in the middle, Hawkins taking up the rear. They turned the corner into a narrow alley, and watched as the rampaging mob shot past them. Gomez gave out a low gasp of relief, which was suddenly choked off by the figure that stepped from the shadows from amongst the detritus in the alley. It was one of the hooded Ferengi.

From the diminutive frame came a deep booming voice.

"Why are you not engaged in the Bacchanal? It is the Way of Milia."

"What, you're not calling it the Red Hour anymore?" Gomez asked.

"Huh?" Corsi asked.

Before Gomez could explain, the Ferengi raised the conduit pipe with the open end pointing at the away team.

"You are not of Milia. You must become."

Both Corsi and Hawkins raised their weapons to fire-and nothing happened.

The Ferengi's empty pipe welled up with energy that smoked and sparked, firing a charge at Hawkins.

"Agghh!"

As Hawkins slumped to the floor, Corsi leapt over his prone body, swinging her phaser rifle like a baseball bat, knocking down the hooded Ferengi.

Abramowitz crouched by Hawkins. The security guard had been in charge of the portable medikit. She took it from his prone form, opened the tricorder, and ran it over him.

"Okay, a medic I'm not, but his heart rate shouldn't be accelerated, should it?"

"Get away from him, Carol, now!" Gomez called out.

Abramowitz got up just as Hawkins's eyes snapped open, showing an almost glassy blankness. His lips pulled back into a rictus grin.

"Bacchanal!" he shrieked in a voice obviously not his own measured tones. He grabbed at the cultural specialist.

Before either Corsi or Gomez could react, the expression on Hawkins's face turned to one of surprise and then he slumped to the side, unconscious but with eyes still wide.

They looked in the darkness of the alley behind Hawkins. Another Ferengi stood there, a block of gold-pressed latinum in his hands. He was panting heavily at the effort required to club Hawkins in the head with it.

Corsi was about to return the favour when Gomez stopped her. "No wait, look! He's not like the others." The Ferengi gave her a withering look. "Oh, you think?"

He slumped against the wall. Gomez noticed his outfit unlike the other Ferengi they had seen, he was positively scruffy, as though he'd been buried amongst all this detritus.

"Thank you," she said. "We're indebted to you."

"And I'm already calculating the interest, you can be certain of that. We've got to get you off the streets while this madness goes on. You females are not safe."

Corsi looked suspicious. "What does it profit you to help us?"

He shrugged. "This ship is full of Ferengi all acting...polite." He practically sneered the word. "They're completely failing to take advantage of each other. It's a direct violation of the Eighteenth Rule."

Corsi nodded. "A Ferengi without profit is no Ferengi at all."

He looked at Corsi with surprise and respect on his face. "That's right. Anyhow, when I saw you wandering around, I realized that you were an opportunity to resolve this sad, sick situation."

"And looking for a way to gain advantage for yourself?"

He smiled. "Is that so bad?"

Corsi narrowed her gaze. "Ninth Rule 'Opportunity plus instinct equals profit.' You certainly aren't under this controlling intelligence."

"No, I'm not. C'mon, we need to get out of here." He removed the grille he was leaning against from the wall. "I have a safe area through here."

Corsi looked to Gomez, who nodded. The first officer was grateful that they had found someone not under the influence of this force that hadn't been heard of in almost a century. "Let's go."

"What about Hawkins?" Corsi asked.

Gomez sighed. "If we take him with us, it'll make it all the easier for them to find us. Believe me, as part of the Way of Milia, he'll be okay until we can sort all this out."

They made the security guard as comfortable as possible amongst the discarded displays and goods in the alleyway then crawled into the conduit. Corsi sealed the vent behind them as the Ferengi led them through the thin space.

The passageway led into a deep room, where the Ferengi had obviously been hiding for a few days. He gestured for them to sit on cushions he had scattered about the floor.

"Make yourselves as comfortable as you can," the Ferengi said. "My name is Forg."

"Pleasure to meet you, Forg," Gomez said. "So when did DaiMon Phug acquire the Landru computer?"

Chapter Ten

Gold had Phug brought to his ready room. The DaiMon looked shifty, uncomfortable. He refused to meet Gold's gaze.

"So you're saying that the technology you purchased to administer your systems after you installed the cloak array was from a dubious source?"

Phug looked alarmed. "Dubious? Why my brother had been married to his aunt's sister-I could trust Caerph as if he was a member of my own family." He paused. "Well, now you mention it..."

"My crew are in danger, DaiMon Phug-I need to know what we're dealing with here!" Gold snapped.

Phug looked concerned. "You mean you didn't beam them back as soon as I told you too? They're still



there?"

"Whatever it is that is trying to invade our system has managed to lock out transporters, temporarily. We can't hail them because they seem to have gone into some kind of shielded environment. So I need to know-exactly what is the situation over there?"

Phug shook his head. "This is bad, this is so bad." He looked up at Gold. "The administration technology was somewhat...antiquated. I got it for a good price. Apparently, it had previously been used to operate systems on a small, low-tech world. I figured that for the needs of my ship's cloak array it would be adequate."

"So what went wrong?"

Phug started walking around the room, gesturing wildly. "Well, at first, nothing. Then, my engineers started noticing that it began to interface with the other systems, in ways that just didn't make any sense. Before long, it had taken total control of the whole ship.

"Initially, that wasn't too bad. It meant I could lay off about a dozen maintenance staff. And let me tell you, on a ship that size, the opportunities to maximize the margins are difficult to find. Then, I started getting reports of all these incidents."

"Violent incidents?" asked Gold.

"No, just the opposite-everyone was being...pleasant to each other." He shuddered at the word pleasant as though it was something base and deviant. "Before long, everyone on the station was acting in an orderly, caring way." A further shudder, then he raised his hand, as though trying to push the very thoughts away. "And then, he came. Milia."

"I'm afraid the significance of that name escapes me, DaiMon," Gold said dryly.

"He is our darkest legend, Captain. A Ferengi unlike any other. He preached such values as peace, love, and understanding. This-this freak spoke of sharing, of being of a benevolent society. Naturally he suffered a legendarily brutal execution, as did his heretic followers." Phug sighed.

"When was this?" Gold asked.

"Several thousand years ago. Why?"

Gold was confused. "So how can he be 'back' then?"

The edge of fear was back in Phug's voice. "I don't know, Captain, but I just wish he'd go back to wherever it was he came from. He has changed some of our finest merchants into his 'keepers of order.' Any who speak out against Milia are absorbed into the whole. It started so gradually-then the whole ship was taken over, almost before I'd registered what was happening. I barely escaped with my sanity."

"So why are you so worried about my crew?"

"Because, for some reason, this 'peace and love' cult sporadically erupts into violence and lust. They call it the Bacchanal. And your crewmembers are the only women on the station!"

"Bacchanal?" Gold repeated, wondering why a Ferengi would spontaneously erupt into behavior named for the Greek god of wine and celebration, Bacchus.

Then he remembered something from old Starfleet records-specifically the early days of the S.C.E.

"Phug-this computer of yours. Does it have a name?"

In Forg's hideaway, the away team were being told the same story-Gomez nodding as the details emerged, fitting the pattern she knew from the historical record.

"On Beta III about a hundred years ago, the crew of the Enterprise encountered a planet that had become stultified as a low-level agrarian society. The world computer, Landru, maintained this static model for several thousand years. Everyone happy, everything calm and settled."

"Then what happened out there with 'Bacchanal' then? That hardly seems to fit," asked Corsi, constantly checking all the exits to the room as she spoke. She was sure they'd be invaded by a horde of smiling Ferengi any minute

Gomez shrugged. "There had to be a release of negative emotions, baser desires. For a period, these model citizens indulged in all kinds of lasciviousness, wanton destruction, random insanity. They called it 'Red Hour'. This happened every few months."

Forg looked surprised. "This is the third Bacchanal in the past four weeks!"

Corsi gave him a withering glance. "Obviously, Ferengi have far more negative emotions than mere 'hew-mons'."

Abramowitz looked at Forg. "How come you escaped all this?"

Forg shrugged. "I was attacked by one of the Adjusters-a spice-master called Zin, who I'd had dealings with. I was trying to escape the ship when he cornered me. I thought that was it... but it seems the attack didn't affect me as it did your dark-skinned friend. I was linked into the whole 'Milia' harmony briefly, then shook free. I took to hiding-"

There was a sound by one of the other access points in the room. Everyone looked around; Corsi raised her useless phaser rifle at the approaching figures. Damn, she thought, we're completely cornered and my only backup is either unconscious or has woken up and is living out a Ferengi spree of wanton indulgence in an alleyway...

Forg then walked past her, waving for her to stand down. "Don't worry-I know those footfalls." He shouted ahead. "Hey! It's okay, they're here to help us!"

Two Ferengi cautiously walked into the storeroom, warily checking out the Starfleet people.

Forg introduced them. "These Ferengi are brothers, Ainoc and Aylai. Like me they seem to be immune to the Adjusters' beams. We have to hide out here, while the madness of Bacchanal passes."

Ainoc looked sheepish.

Forg stared at him. "What did you do?"

Ainoc grinned. "Well, as they were all wrecking their stalls and generally treating property in a vile and disrespectful manner, so we carefully re-allocated resources within our portfolio."

"Much as I hate to interrupt the financial report," Gomez said tightly, "we have a situation here, and you're the only people who can help us. We have to find the computer core of this ship, and disable it."

Aylai nodded emphatically. "That's fine with us. If I never see Milia's smiling face again"

"This Milia," Abramowitz said-and the three Ferengi shuddered at the name-"is some kind of, what-prophet in Ferengi history? I've never heard of him."

"No reason you should, human," Aylai said. "He was a deviant who proposed cooperation-exactly the type of society that is breaking out here like some kind of disease."

Gomez nodded. "So when the system went on line, it did as Landru had before it looked for an ideal situation in your databanks and created a symbol of that 'best' time, taking on the personality and appearance of Milia himself."

"It's doing more than that," Ainoc said. "Apparently we won't be alone in this 'joy.' The Adjusters are taking the ship to Ferenginar-and they plan to 'convert' all the ships they meet along the way."

Corsi cocked the useless rifle-an instinctive gesture, but one that made her feel better nonetheless. "So this is the situation in a nutshell your DaiMon purchases a hundred-year-old computer to run his ship. Said computer proceeds to take over the ship, in the process re-creating a Ferengi heretic who preaches a commune mentality subservient to his computer-driven idea of 'the Whole'. Said prophet is now determined to convert the whole galaxy to this system of belief-probably starting with the da Vinci, if you're right about them converting any ship they meet along the way. And he has a cloaked vessel that can strike anywhere in the Alpha Quadrant to do this."

"I'd say that sums it up," Gomez said grimly.

"And we're here to seek an engineering solution to all this?"

There was a pause, then Gomez smiled. "Actually, I believe Captain Kirk's solution on Beta III a hundred years ago was a classic engineering solution."

"Which was?" asked Forg.

"Pull the plug."

Chapter Eleven

The face of Captain Montgomery Scott came into focus as the Starfleet logo faded on Captain Gold's personal screen.

"You have a wee problem, David?"

"Afraid so, Scotty. Looks like we dug up another one of your old adventures. Remember Landru?"

Scott sighed. "Aye, I remember bein' stuck on the Enterprise, while the bloody computer shot heat beams at us. If Captain Kirk hadna defeated Landru, our ship would have been sliced into charred strips."

"Well, Landru just resurfaced-on a Ferengi ship." Quickly, Gold filled Scotty in.

Shaking his head, Scott said, "Unbelievable, those Ferengi. Although I will admit that it's odd that you of all people came across it, considerin' that the S.C.E. as we know it today came about in the aftermath of that old mission to Beta III."

"I remember," Gold said. The team that had gone in to put Beta III back together after Landru's deactivation was a prototype of the current model for the Starfleet Corps of Engineers.

Gold continued. "Unfortunately, I can't get at our computer logs right now. It's all Soloman can do to keep us from being taken over. So I need to know how Captain Kirk dealt with the computer back then."

Scott smiled. "He reasoned with it. He an' Mr. Spock convinced it that its very existence was contrary to its programming. The bampot machine then upped and destroyed itself."

Gold raised an eyebrow at this. "They talked it to death?"

"Somethin' like that, aye. It believed itself to be the embodiment of its creator, the original Landru. When it realized it had so violated his intentions in creating a peaceful society, almost out of shame it shut itself down. I don't know if that'll work here, though."

The Bacchanal had passed; the streets and avenues of the Debenture were littered with wreckage and detritus. Walking through the Boulevard of Nectar and Sustenance (a varied collection of restaurants and bars, the wares of which were spilt and spoilt across the broad avenues of the ship) the away team and their Ferengi companions, nodded and acknowledged the now-calm followers of Milia.

Speaking as softly as he could, Forg said, "It won't be long before Milia realizes what we're doing. There are about two thousand Ferengi on this vessel. What do you think about those odds?"

"I think that we'll deal with that if and when we have to." Gomez tapped her combadge. "Gomez to da Vinci."

The captain's voice sounded full of relief. "Good to hear from you, finally, Gomez."

"Good to be heard, Captain. We've been stuck in a shielded area. I think you should know what's been happening here-"

"Phug was finally forthcoming about that. He told me all about Landru."

"Tell Phug he has the lobes of a female!" commented Forg.

"Who's with you?" asked Gold as Corsi shot Forg a look.

"We've found a few who aren't followers of Milia, sir," Gomez said. "They kept us safe when the Ferengi version of the Red Hour hit."

"Good. Status?"

"We lost Hawkins to the Milians. One of the Ferengi knocked him unconscious. If we're lucky he'd stay out of it until we can resolve the situation. They also don't intend to limit the return of Milia to just this ship."

Gold replied, "I know. As it happens, we just heard from Ferenginar. Apparently this 'Milia' has told them he's on the way-they're none too happy about the prospect. We need to resolve this situation swiftly."

"We're on it, sir."

In the Halls of Commerce on Ferenginar, on the Atrium of Announcements, the babble of voices had hit a higher pitch than had been heard since the legendary dark days of the Great Monetary Collapse.

"Silence!" shouted Senior Adjuster Brumm, a middle aged Ferengi with fine, wrinkled lobes.

He had been dragged from having these fine lobes massaged by a group of diplomatic handmaidens from Wrigley's Pleasure Planet. They were currently visiting to negotiate trading and vacation rates with the Ferenginar Alliance. This was his own personal economic project to promote Ferengi interests on worlds of particular sybaritic interest. Pleasure and commerce were forever linked in Ferengi culture.

Forever, he thought mournfully. Won't be much longer when Milia comes here...

Finally the hubbub quietened down. They looked up at the dishevelled Adjuster. "Thank you."

"Tell us it's not true!" yelled Bromidge, an elderly Ferengi. Brumm knew that Bromidge's interests included hard-fought spice and herbs routes into the Gamma Quadrant. Those deals had drained three of his sons' fortunes—a detail that Bromidge had kept from his offspring, and of which they would remain unaware until the Great Audit took their father away—until this horrific turn of events had occurred and threatened the death knell of Ferengi culture.

Unfortunately, the Senior Adjuster was not in a position to give succour to the massed hordes of Ferengi businessmen gathered before him.

"It is as we have all seen on our screens. The great heretic Milia is returning. These are not some aberrant broadcast of a cunning plan to undermine Ferengi stocks and create a rash of panic selling." He paused, wondering why he hadn't considered this idea himself, as did most in the hall (apart from Bromidge who was no doubt calculating how thinly he'd have to be sliced to pay off his sons). Brumm continued.

"Deplorable as that would be. No, it really is a re-creation of Milia. And he's coming here."

The gasp rang through the hall. The chattering and swearing came louder than before, then the accusations started flying.

"It's a judgment! If we hadn't gone down the path dictated by Grand Nagus Zek, this would never be happening!"

"Women in clothes! It was a sign of the Great Liquidation!"

"Our latinum is water, our gold is mud! We've strayed!"

"Ahem."

They all turned to see the two figures that now stood next to Brumm. One was Rom—a quite ordinary looking Ferengi wrapped in the robes of the Grand Nagus, and still not looking comfortable in them even after several months in the role. Next to him stood a statuesque Bajoran female his wife Leeta, no less stunning for being completely clothed. Brumm, still with the memories of the ambassadors of Wrigley lingering in his mind, had to admit they'd have a ways to go to match her presence.

"Pray silence for your Grand Nagus, Rom!" he cried.

Rom stepped forward. "Uh, hi, everyone. I just thought you all should know that I've spoken to my friends in the Federation and they've sent out a starship to deal with this situation."

There were a mixture of cheers and mumbling. The Federation and Ferenginar had always had a strained relationship, with confusion, duplicity and outright double-dealing making up so much of the history between them. One voice cried out, attempting to rally them.

"I bet they've sent the Enterprise! The human Picard has proved a worthy adversary to Ferengi in the past! He's the one to stop this heretic!"

There were more cheers, the Ferengi warming to the theme.

"Uh, no, actually," admitted Rom.

The same kibitzer-Brumm finally recognized him as Quinton, a young idealistic Ferengi who'd idolized Zek, and saw links with the Federation as the way ahead—thought for a second, as the worried mumbling returned, then brightly exclaimed "Captain Sisko and the Defiant! He is our champion!"

More cheers responded to this, though Brumm knew that Sisko had, in fact, disappeared after the Dominion War ended and his space station was now run by a Bajoran female who was not (in Brumm's opinion) nearly as stunning as the Nagus's wife.

Rom replied, "Uh, no—Captain Sisko is, uh, unavailable now. But it is a great leader and a fantastic ship! Captain Gold of the da Vinci!"

Quinton looked baffled by the name, then thought better of his confusion and so cried out, "Hooray for Captain Gold!" Other Ferengi joined in. The cheering rallied them.

Brumm turned to Rom, and in a soft voice asked, "Who?"

Rom smiled, a warm generous grin. "My son liked him. He said he seemed like a very nice man."

Brumm blinked. "Oh. Well, there we go."

Rom raised the Cane of the Grand Nagus. "Carry on trading! Everything will be all right!"

Rom and Leeta left, waving to the amassed businessmen. Brumm gave a polite nod, and headed back to

his chambers. We're entrusting the whole future of our civilization to a human the Grand Nagus's son thinks is "nice." We're doomed

## Chapter Twelve

The away team and their Ferengi hosts found themselves up against stacked boarding and detritus, completely out of keeping with the layout of the surrounding boutiques and clothing stores on the Level of the Golden Measure.

"Now that looks promising," Corsi muttered.

Gomez scanned with her tricorder. The Ferengi who had fallen into the Way of Milia paid her no mind now that the Bacchanal had ended.

"There's something beyond all this debris," she said. "A very powerful energy signal."

Corsi started pulling off boards and other objects, which Gomez recognized as various pieces of shop displays-garment racks, book display stands, tables.

As she dismantled, a familiar voice said, "Health to us all, fellow of the Way of Milia. What are you doing, citizen?"

The da Vinci security chief turned to see Vance Hawkins, still with the remains of the trash he'd fallen into hanging from his uniform. On his face was the biggest grin Gomez had ever seen-and, given how much time she'd spent in Kieran Duffy's company, this was going some. Vance was usually a quiet, reserved sort; when he did smile, it was a small, pleasant one, and his eyes generally betrayed a certain intelligence. This grin, however, was eerie, the eyes above it dead.

"Knitting fish," Corsi replied, and Gomez nodded with approval. Kirk and his crew had confused Landru's minions by giving inappropriate responses to requests, and Gomez had ordered them all to try this when challenged.

It seemed to have the desired effect-Hawkins blinked twice at the non-sequitur, looked into the air as though responding to some unheard voice. He turned back to Corsi. The grin was still there, but it now looked forced and uncertain.

"Is this the Will of Milia? I do not think you are acting in the best interests of the whole."

"Cheese gets soft in Norway," Gomez said. She turned to Abramowitz, hoping she'd get the idea.

She did; unfortunately that wasn't the problem. Carol Abramowitz, an academic without equal, froze at the thought of speaking in nonsense.

"I-I-I-dictate in Spanish wh-when underwater." She shot Gomez a panicked look. Is that okay? she mouthed.

Gomez nodded encouragingly. Confused the heck out of me, she thought.

Hawkins looked among the three women. Whatever voices were talking to him were obviously debating hard. Abramowitz took the moment's delay to reach into the emergency medikit to ready a hypospray.

She slowly walked behind the guard, ready to send him back to sleep.

Before she could react, his arm struck out behind him, sending her sprawling.

"Carol!" cried out Gomez, running to her side. Hawkins turned to follow her, obviously intent on carrying on the Will of Milia with extreme prejudice.

Corsi stood poised with a heavy metal stand obviously designed to show off Ferengi Head-Skirts to best effect. Balanced on her left foot, she swung the display smashing her subordinate clean across the face.

He fell solidly like an oak.

"Nice to see the subtle approach still works," she muttered under her breath. She went over to help Gomez assist Abramowitz to her feet. "If you want to try that hypospray again, I think you'll find your patient's a little more sedate."

Ainoc started spluttering, "Starfleet! Starfleet! We've got a problem!"

The three turned to see the shopkeepers and customers had started to take notice of them. The placid Ferengi started picking up the bits of rubble discarded by Corsi. There were dozens of Ferengi, and they weren't going to stop. The remaining rubble and shop display detritus blocked the only route out.

In the air in front of them, the figure of Milia appeared again, a pained expression of reproof on his face.

"You seek to harm Milia. To harm the whole, the way of Milia. This cannot be allowed."

Gomez steeled herself. There has to be a way out of this, she thought. Her engineer's mind refused to accept that they couldn't think their way out of it.

Then Corsi tapped her on the shoulder. To Gomez's abject shock, the no-nonsense, by-the-book security chief had a smile on her face.

"I have an idea, Commander. Trust me?"

Gomez mulled for half a second. She'd served with Corsi for many months now, and had indeed learned to trust her instincts. Bereft of any ideas of her own, she nodded, wondering what Corsi had in mind.

Corsi walked up to the holo-image, and did the last thing Gomez expected to see.

She bowed deferentially and said, "Great Milia, we surrender."

Gomez shot Corsi a look of surprise-the Ferengi and Abramowitz did likewise, but they were in complete shock.

"We are part of a mighty vessel," Corsi said. "It has many who would benefit from the joining with your Way. Take us into your presence, that we may bring forth our crewmates!"

Gomez smiled, finally getting it. Let's hope we live to see this through, she thought. She gave Abramowitz and the Ferengi a reassuring nod. Carol looked placated, the Ferengi somewhat less so, but they made no move against them, either.

Milia beamed beatifically. "Then let it be so." He gestured for the Ferengi to dismantle the rubble wall. They made short work of it.

Total hive mind, thought Gomez. Their individual identity subsumed to the whole. Almost Borg-like. Ferengi Borg. There's an image I didn't need

Within minutes, the wreckage was removed, the path to the core cleared. Gomez didn't know the Rules of Acquisition, but she did know one of Corsi's other handbooks The Art of War by Sun-Tzu. Right now they were on what Sun-Tzu would call "entangling ground." If the enemy was not prepared for you, you would win-if the enemy was prepared, though, and you failed to defeat him, disaster would ensue.

The path opened out into a vast computer hub. The systems that had once been independent of the Landru mechanism were all linked now through conduits and system carriers. Some Gomez recognized; some she was at a loss to explain how they could still operate. The actual computer unit was an unprepossessing gray block, adorned with chip blocks of reds, whites, and yellows. The technology was so outdated, she half-expected there to actually be a cable running into a wall socket-or maybe a hamster on a wheel powering the whole thing.

The holo-image of Milia that had lead them and their entourage of at least fifty Ferengi into this hall turned to the away team. On either side of the team stood diminutive Adjusters, their cloaks darkening their faces.

"Here you stand within the proud beating heart of the Way of Milia. This vessel will reach Ferenginar and all races throughout the galaxy, bringing them to the family, to the Way itself." He gestured toward Corsi.

"It is your honor to be the first ship to go with joy."

Corsi nodded respectfully, stepping forward, her hand reaching out to the ancient computer core. She tapped it gently. "Milia is good" she said.

"Step away from the holy sepulchre, citizen," intoned the deep voice from the nearest Adjuster.

She bowed deferentially. "I meant no disrespect."

Never thought I'd live to see this, Gomez thought with an internal smile. I just hope I've read her intentions right

"Gomez to da Vinci."

Kieran Duffy had never been so relieved to hear Sonnie's voice in his life. Well, okay, there was when I found her on Sarindar, but this is a very very close second.

There was, however, something odd about her voice

"Da Vinci here," Gold said. "Report."

"We have decided to follow the Way of Milia, Captain, and invite you to join us in this holy, joyous path."

Duffy felt his world spin away from him. Sonnie had somehow fallen under the power of this millennia-old device. He felt a sickening feeling that they'd just lost.

At the back of the bridge, Phug started cursing and spluttering. "Stupid humans! Pwagh! You have failed! You have doomed us all! I told you! I told you!"

"We want you, your wife Rachel, and everyone else on the ship to join us in the Way, Captain."

Duffy's world spun right back into place. Sonnie knew quite well that Gold's wife was back home on Earth. Someone under the influence, so to speak, wouldn't have been able to lie. He grinned at Gold, who grinned right back.

"I shall take your generous offer under advisement, Commander," Gold said. "Tell me where might we find you currently. Your signal's coming an area we're having problems getting a fix on."

"We are here in the very heart of the Way, sir. Standing side by side with Milia himself."

"Aha. I see. How do you suggest we proceed?"

Gomez looked around the room, all eyes expectantly on her. We're going to have to time this just right, she thought, or we'll all become Milians for real.

"Captain, can you operate transporters yet?" she said in the languid voice she'd adopted for the purpose.

"No-the computer worm is still blocking that and all defense systems."

"Then, tell Soloman to stop fighting it, sir. Allow the da Vinci to become one with the mighty Milia."

There was a second's pause.

"Are you sure about this, Gomez?"

"Yes, sir!" She grinned wildly, looking at the approving grins on all the Ferengi around her. "Think of it as ...Masada. You know, that great tale you told me, of personal sacrifice?"

"Masada? But-one second, Commander."

Another pause. The Ferengi, continued to grin beatifically. Milia turned to Gomez. "Why does your captain delay?"

"I think you'll find he needs you to show your openness and all embracing love. Let his ship sense where we are. Diminish your shields slightly. It would be a noble gesture."

"It shall be so."

Ina's displays lit up, identifying the position of the away team. "We've got a fix on them, sir," Duffy said, standing over the Bajoran ops officer. "Now what?"

"Open hailing frequencies again. I think I know what they're planning, but I need to be sure."

"Dead dead dead," muttered Phug.

"Gold here, Commander. We've considered your invitation. I need more clarification on the 'Masada' analogy...who amongst you is to carry out this great deed?"

Gomez hoped the relief she felt didn't show on her face. He got it. They still needed to play this carefully though.

"Lt. Commander Corsi, sir. When you're ready."

Gold gave a throat-cutting gesture to McAllan to end the transmission, then tapped the intercom on his chair. "Transporter room, lock onto Lt. Commander Corsi and energize on my mark."

From the transporter room, Chief Feliciano said, "Aye, sir."

Gold then got up and walked to Soloman's station.

"What are they planning, sir?" the Bynar asked.

Phug responded before Gold could. "That we're all going to be sold into slavery, to the brainless ways of the joy brigade down there!"

Gold smiled calmly at the Ferengi. "Watch and learn, DaiMon Phug." Turning back to the Bynar, he said, "Soloman, prepare to put your king into checkmate."

"Sir?"

"We'll have a split second when the system becomes completely invaded, but before we lose control,

when we can carry out Gomez's 'Masada' play."

The look on Milia's face took on an even more beatific aura. "They are stopping the fight! They are allowing the love and joy of Milia to-"

He never got to finish. Behind the crowd, the familiar whine of a transporter beam could be heard. On the da Vinci, they had locked onto Corsi-or, more precisely, Corsi's combadge-and energized. Except, of course, Corsi's combadge wasn't attached to her uniform, as she had placed it on the computer that thought of itself as Milia moments earlier.

The holo-image vanished as the physical machine disappeared. The massed Ferengi initially stood stunned, then started looking warily around at each other, backing away from the group.

Forg ran up to Gomez and Corsi. "What did you do?"

"Well, I didn't think we could beat Milia with weapons," Corsi said, "so we had to come up with a different approach."

"And one worthy of a Ferengi!" gushed Ainoc. He and his brother had come to join the group. "So devious, so sneaky! To convince the customer you're buying his goods, when in fact you plan to steal his whole warehouse!"

Aylai strummed his fingers against his uneven, green teeth, "Now which Rule is that?"

Gomez raised a hand. "Please. No more Rules." She tapped her combadge. "Status, Captain?"

"Feliciano beamed the computer core into deep space. As soon as we did, the worm ceased trying to take over the ship. Good plan, Commander."

"It was Corsi, sir. I just followed her lead."

"And it's good to know you actually listen to the ramblings of a doting grand-father...that whole 'Masada' conversation we had this morning."

"Yes sir, I thought you'd appreciate the 'sacrifice rather than fall to slavery' idea."

"Only here, you 'sacrificed' the enslaver."

She nodded happily, as the first fights broke out amongst the Ferengi behind her.

Five long days passed. The now core-less Debenture was been dragged by tractor beam to Starbase 96. The powerless computer core was held in stasis, under guard in the da Vinci's cargo hold.

The vast clean-up operation had begun-there were many shop owners who found they'd carried out transactions for weeks in a fair and equitable way, and consequently were low in resources. DaiMon Phug had sold his controlling share in the vessel to Forg. Under Ferengi law, leaving the vessel as he had was tantamount to abandoning control, and therefore making it open to salvage rights. In a lingering nod to the spirit of Milia, he had allowed Phug to keep his wardrobe of fine silks (none of which fitted the taller, less rotund Forg).

The crew of the da Vinci had been over to assist in maintaining life-support systems. Fabian Stevens had noted that the systems were of a type that wasn't supposed to be on the market-indeed, that both the Romulans and the Klingons considered possession of those systems to be tantamount to a declaration of war. Consequently, they were impounded and stored in the cargo hold along the Landru/Milia computer, pending an investigation-one that Phug was not looking forward to. Already, he was trying to figure out ways to make Forg responsible for it.

Hawkins was taken off duty for a few days, recovering from a severe concussion. He announced to Emmett, who treated him, and to anyone else who came into sickbay that in the past few months he'd been shot twice, and now clubbed on the head twice while acting like a lust-filled savage, and he was, dammit, taking some shore leave. Corsi-who did not apologize for being responsible for half of the concussion, having viewed it as simply doing her duty-granted the leave.

Gold sat in his ready room, the diminutive Klingon language teacher pacing back and forth on the desk. "Again!"

Gold looked down. "Hmm?" He realized he hadn't been listening. He'd been too busy mulling over the events of the past few days. How the saga of his people from ancient history still had lessons in life today.



Of how it was all too easy to listen to a machine, and follow the path of least resistance.

"Well?" the Klingon had his hands on his hips, glaring up at Gold.

"If I want to talk Klingon, I'll do it with a real one," he announced, cancelling the program.

As the Klingon disappeared in a puff of photons, he called the bridge and had McAllan put a communication through to Esther on Qo'noS. He would tell her how she'd indirectly inspired his crew, and ask her how it was going with Khor...

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ian Edginton's first collaboration with fellow West Midlandser Mike Collins was on Marvel Comics' Star Trek Early Voyages series. A comic book writer of long standing, Ian has worked in the industry for well over a decade and has written for most of the popular mainstay comic book characters such as Batman, the X-Men, Blade, X-Force, and Spider-Man. He also specializes in working on licensed film and television characters including amongst them Xena Warrior Princess, Star Wars, Star Trek, and The Terminator. Most recently he has written the comic book sequel to Tim Burton's re-imagining of the Planet of the Apes franchise. However Ian's most substantial body of licensed work is in relation to the Aliens and Predator films where he has contributed to both movie canons.

A fifteen-year plus veteran of comic books, Mike Collins has worked as writer and artist on many iconic characters including Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, Judge Dredd, and the X-Men in both U.S. and British comics. However, Mike has been happiest writing and drawing Star Trek comics for the past eight years for Marvel Comics, WildStorm, and the British comics weekly TV21. Outside of comics, Mike works in animation as a designer and storyboard artist, has contributed towards Oxford University Press' English as a Second Language Book division, and various other educational based graphic projects. He is currently writing and designing a major graphic novel (the first in Welsh) for the Welsh TV/Movie Company S4C, to accompany their film adaptation of the Welsh myth cycle The Mabinogion. He has also provided the covers for all the S.C.E. eBooks since Interphase Book 1 and for the two paperback collections, Have Tech, Will Travel and Miracle Workers. He lives in Cardiff, Wales with his wife and three daughters, two cats and a dog, and a lot of Star Trek stuff.

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Star Trek S.C.E.

15

#### PAST LIFE

by Robert Greenberger

The Evorans, a new Federation protectorate, have made a fantastic discovery on their homeworld a device that predates their civilization and proves that aliens visited their world in the distant past. The U.S.S. da Vinci is sent to investigate the device and find out its true nature.

But disaster strikes when a radical isolationist faction wishes to destroy all evidence that their world was once visited-and wipe out the da Vinci crew as well! And when the true nature of the device is revealed, it will take all the ingenuity of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers to save Evora!

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