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Star Trek S.C.E. 15
Past Life

by Robert Greenberger

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ONE

David Gold, captain of the U.S.S. da Vinci, liked his morning routines. Hed pamper himself a little as he got out of his bed and prepared for the new day. He would always make sure to check his computer for official communiquis then personal notes as he sipped a hot cup of coffee, usually humming a little something. Most mornings that meant there was something from home. After all, with a wife, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, someone was usually sending him a note to stay in touch.

Everyone seemed to be leading such busy lives; he longed to be beside them all, especially his wife, Rachel.

There was also the thrill of command and profound responsibility that came with it. It gave him a thrill and fulfillment like nothing else. When people questioned the long-distance marriage between him and the Earth-based rabbi, he explained that it was both his family and his command together that made his life worth living. He couldn't imagine life without both.

The last part of the routine, and in some ways the best, was the short walk from his cabin to the bridge, accompanied by his first officer, Sonya Gomez. He was not sure how this developed but it pleased him that it has continued mission after mission. She was shorter than the captain and her smile seemed to make the corridors a little brighter.

As usual, she was promptly by his door and greeted him with that electric smile. He always returned it, good nights sleep or not. He gestured for her to enter his small cabin as he shut down his desktop screen. Chatter from the fleet looked light today, he commented.

Calm before the storm, Gomez said with a shrug.

Oy, I hope not, he continued. We've got an overdue shore leave coming up in two weeks.

And you're having that big family gathering, right?

You bet, the captain said, warming to the notion of going home. But first, we have quarterly roster review coming up and I was hoping to use the lull to spend a little more time with the crew. For example, I've barely talked to Hawkins since he returned from shore leave.

Sir, that was just two days ago, Gomez said. She stood expectantly, and Gold was obvious in his hesitation.

Gold considered that Vance Hawkins, of all his personnel, had been the most banged-up, complete with various wounds and concussions, the last on the Ferengi vessel *Debenture* which earned him the much-needed shore leave. But he was merely stalling and finally turned to his first officer.

Which reminds me, the captain said, trying to sound casual. I've been meaning to ask you how Dr. Lense seemed all right to you?

She knitted her brows together in thought. It lasted only a moment and then she shook her head.

Elizabeth seems fine to me. Why?

Now it took Gold a moment before commenting. Such talk always made him uncomfortable, especially without hard facts. I'm not sure. But, she seems awfully reliant on Emmett these days.

Sometimes we do get busy and isn't that what the EMH was for?

Perhaps, he replied, clearly unhappy with the notion. Emergency Medical Hologram or not, the captain was certain Lense had a problem.

Then he shook his head. Never mind, Commander, let's get underway. He gestured toward the door and she went through first. Together, in companionable silence, they wandered toward the turbolift.

You should know that we did receive one note that Starbase 92 intercepted a squad of Nausicaan raiders trying to stop a Cardassian relief convoy.

Gold slowed and looked in surprise at Gomez.

That wasn't in the official report, this morning. How did that wait, Starbase 92?

They stepped into the turbolift and Gomez nodded in confirmation. Right, the one where Anthony is stationed.

So we know this from Lieutenant Commander Mark, not official channels?

Right. Anthony was heavily involved in the mission and sent off a note to Bart last night.

Nice to have boyfriends in all the right places, Gold said with a smile. Is he all right?

A little shaken to see such heavy action after a long lull, she replied. But Bart says he's fine.

The doors snapped open and Gold hurried to his chair, eager to see what the day held. As always, and despite Gold's best efforts to get him to stop, his by-the-book tactical officer David McAllan said, "Captain on the bridge."

Good morning all, he said as he settled into the command seat. Alpha shift was in place and all seemed serene on the Saber-class starship's bridge. A flurry of replies came his way and then mostly silence.

Minutes later, a beep behind him indicated an incoming transmission. Be careful what you wish for, he

reminded himself before swiveling about to face McAllan. He cocked an eyebrow and looked expectantly at the lieutenant. McAllan looked directly at him, his brown eyes intense. It's Admiral Ross, sir.

Most of their communications came directly from Montgomery Scott, the Starfleet Corps of Engineers liaison to the admiralty, so having an admiral call was unusual. Gold straightened himself in the chair and signaled for the main screen to be activated. In seconds, the hangdog face of Admiral William Ross faced him. Ross was an excellent commanding officer, with one of the best reputations at command. In the wake of the Dominion War and the Iconian gateways incident, Gold had hoped Ross would get a break, but apparently not. Although the captain was older, Ross seemed the more worn down, but the admiralty could do that to anyone, Gold thought.

Good morning, Admiral, Gold said with a smile.

Captain, its nice to see you again, Ross replied. Gold had last seen the admiral during the aforementioned gateways crisis, when the da Vinci had dropped off some Wadi refugees on Starbase 12. I need to divert you to Evora, which is approximately half a day from your position.

I cant place the world, Gold admitted.

Its a protectorate, brought in toward the end of the Dominion War. Theyve had warp capabilities only a few years and are still getting to know their galactic neighbors.

How can we help?

Their society has been through a lot in a short time, Captain. First, they discover they are not alone in space. Then, they come to us for protection during a rather bleak time. Now, their faith has been shaken. Golds eyes narrowed at the word faith. So much good and so much evil has been done in the name of faith. Missions were always complicated when any sense of theology entered the picture.

A few days back, one of their archaeological digs came across something high-tech but dating back over one hundred thousand years. Its clearly not from their world. Its got some of them scared and the Regent, a woman named Cuzar, has asked for our expertise. Youre the closest in the sector so youre up. Tread gently here, David, depending upon what you find there, it could rewrite their history.

Of course, Admiral, well be careful. Well study them en route to be prepared.

Theres not a lot documented, Ross admitted. Once the war ended, they kept to themselves and weve been stretched so thin that we havent had time to send another envoy ship. That is, until now.

We wont disappoint you, Gold said by way of closing. Ross nodded and cut the transmission from his end. The main viewer reverted to an image of the streaking stars as seen in warp space. The captain looked around the bridge to see that Carol Abamowitz, the ships cultural specialist, had joined the normal bridge complement. He presumed Gomez had summoned her the moment the mission became clear. The trim, dark-haired woman turned her attention from the viewscreen to the captain.

Hes right, sir, she began. The computer has little more than technical specs. The only Federation personnel to actually meet with them were Captain Picard and the Enterprise, right after their induction a year and a half ago. Even so, it was a very brief meeting-the Enterprise had to cut the ceremony short for another mission. Everything prior to that was handled via subspace.

Okay, one thing at a time, Gold said. "Mr. Wong, set course for Evora, warp six."

"Aye, sir," said the conn officer.

"Gomez, put your team together."

"Sir," Abramowitz said before Gomez could speak, "I recommend you be on the initial team. The Evorans are big on protocol, and I think the captain should be present for the first meeting."

Gold looked at Gomez and smiled. "Think Duffy's ready for the big chair again?"

"Im sure he'll be fine," Gomez said, returning the smile. Kieran Duffy, the da Vinci's second officer, had been left in charge of the ship during what should have been a routine salvage mission that almost turned into a war with the Tholian Assembly.

"Good. Have Corsi send someone from security-but not her. With you and I both off-ship, I'd rather she stay on board with Duffy."

TWO

In a matter of hours, his crew had prepped themselves as best they could on the race. Gold asked Abramowitz back to the bridge for a briefing. She reported quickly, padd in hand.

World population is only three hundred million, sir, she began. They are not a long-lived race, life-spans seem to reach only into the fifties or sixties. From what we can tell, they have been unified for at least three generations. Oh, and they're vegetarian by nature. They have ritualized greetings but beyond that, seem fairly casual.

Interesting, Gold said, watching a small orb grow in size as the starship hurtled toward its next stop.

Level of technology?

Not terribly advanced, maybe the equivalent of twenty-second century Earth.

Without the recovery from global war?

Carol shook her head, her hair never moving so much as a strand. No sense of their history, sir. From all indications, they were rushed into the fold to keep them from the Dominion. I gather we were looking to protect as many races as possible while building out strength along the edges of Federation space.

Too true. Gold thought back to those dark days. He was busy during the war, concerned on more than one occasion that the Federation might not be recognizable when the conflict finally ended. In some ways, those were heady times. In other ways, he's amazed he escaped intact at all. And of course, some of us didn't, he thought, remembering good people like Chan Okha and Commander Salek, who were killed in action.

Evora coming on screen, Ina Mar, the Bajoran operations officer reported. Gold, Abramowitz and the others immediately looked up. Evora was a small brown-green world, denser than Earth with a slightly heavier gravity. Interestingly, the da Vinci was the first starship to orbit the world-the ceremony on the Enterprise was held in interstellar space-so Gold assigned Ina and Duffy the task of making a thorough survey of the planet for Starfleet.

As they began their work, Gold headed off for the transporter room. On the way, he encountered Bart Faulwell. The captain slowed his gait and greeted the linguist. Is Anthony all right?

Bart blinked at the question but smiled and nodded. Yes, he is, sir, thank you for asking.

Nausicaans are a pretty brutal bunch, so if he got away without physical injury, he can consider himself lucky.

He sounded that way in the message, Bart said, sounding happy albeit a little distracted.

Give him my best the next time you write, the captain said. Bart smiled and resumed his path while the captain turned back toward the transporter room.

Present in the small room were Gomez, Abramowitz, and Hawkins, as well as Transporter Chief Feliciano and Corsi, who was there to see them off. She seemed to be fretting over being left behind.

However, Gold was not surprised that she had tapped Hawkins. After all, he was just back from leave, so that would put his name at the top of the duty roster. To the broad-shouldered guard, the captain said, Had a nice trip?

Hawkins blinked in surprise at the question then nodded. "Very good, yes, sir."

"Good."

Abramowitz walked up to him. The Evoran greeting is yew-cheen chef-faw.

Gold practiced it twice and nodded. Carol made a face at him and Gold cocked an eyebrow in her direction.

The emphasis should be on the faw, she told him.

The captain made a face of annoyance but practiced it twice more, each time looking at his cultural specialist for approval. She smiled, indicating he got it right.

All right, then. I expect this first meeting to take no longer than an hour, Gold said to his security chief.

She nodded, a look of intensity remaining in her eyes. Although Duffy was left in command, Corsi would no doubt be ready to fire phasers at the first sign of trouble. Well see if we can bring you back a souvenir, Gold added as he, Gomez, Abramowitz, and Hawkins took their positions. With a nod to Feliciano, the crew beamed to the surface.

The air felt heavy, damp and humid, to Gold, who shrugged his shoulders to adjust his uniform. Evoras

sun shone bright and hot, seen here and there through some wispy cumulous clouds. Still, Gold smiled. His missions of late rarely allowed him to get planet-side and he had trouble recalling the last time he had got a chance to be one of the first to visit a new world. The beam-down point was in a courtyard set before a low, massive building that had several archways decorated with sculptures of what the captain assumed to be native bird life. The birds had long wings, designed for maximum thrust, which made sense given the gravity.

Moments after the team materialized, one of the doors swung open and a delegation came out to greet them. Gold had seen pictures on screen but looked appraisingly at the Evorans. They were a short people, with none topping four and a half feet tall. He estimated they had a greater bone density and were possibly half-again as heavy as an average human at that height. Each had dusky skin, with a large, two-lobed protrusion at the rear of the skull, mottled similar to Trill markings. Their ears were pinned against the sides of the head with large, triangular lobes. The Evorans were mainly covered in robes or gowns that were ornately decorated, the men moreso than the women. They wore head coverings that were not quite hats, not quite hoods.

Yew-cheen chef-faw. I am Captain David Gold of the U.S.S. da Vinci, he said stepping forward. There was a brief moment as the delegation visibly winced and Gold realized he must have botched the greeting. In some cultures, that slight would have ended the meeting, started a war, or earned him a round of laughter. He was relieved to see they simply avoided comment on the gaffe. The most decorated one of the group strode toward him, nodding her head in acknowledgement. I am Vice-Regent Ilona, she said with a soft, melodic voice. Regent Cuzar will join us in the conference chamber in a few minutes. Please follow me.

Ilona led the group through the main archway and into the building, which the captain guessed was a main government building. Inside, the walls were a light color, maybe beige, but hard to tell under harsh yellowish light. Every few feet there hung huge paintings of wildlife, none with people in them. The floors were a highly polished wood which reflected every boot click from the Starfleet personnel, filling the hallway with noise. The Evorans must have worn something soft-soled since they moved noiselessly. After a few turns, Ilona grasped two iron rings that hung on double-doors and pulled. Silently, the doors opened and there was a room with a large round table within. A semi-circular device was set in its center and the seating was a cushioned short-backed chair on wheels. Again, the walls were covered with drawings, paintings and even holographic images of various fauna, set against the usual variety of natural environments.

Gold looked at the pictures and shot a questioning look to Abramowitz, who had been deeply studying everything with just her eyes. No doubt, she wished she could use her tricorder but needed permission first. Abramowitz followed Golds gaze to the walls and back again and she just shrugged. He took that to mean his cultural specialist had no idea regarding the significance placed on the animals.

Ilona gestured, indicating the seats, and took her place at what looked to be her regular place. The others clustered around her, leaving one chair empty. Gold chose to take the chair directly opposite the open spot and winced as he tried to get comfortable in the wrongly-proportioned seat. He chuckled to himself as the more massive Hawkins had an even tougher time sitting. On the other hand, Gomez and Abramowitz seemed to gracefully slide into their chairs.

Another Evoran entered the room, all by herself, and Gold studied her. She was older than the others, her eyes tired by his standards. Her outfit matched Ilonas in ornateness which he took it to mean she was Cuzar, their regent. He liked that she was traveling without entourage or beefy security.

Unsure of the cultural protocol, he fell back on good Earth manners and rose, which prompted the rest of his crew to stand as well. The seated Evorans remained in their chairs, watching with interest.

Yew-cheen chef-faw, Regent. Once more there were winces from behind the Regent, but she seemed not to hear the mis-pronunciation. Gold felt awful about the slight but kept silent. He had to be better prepared next time he tried one of these missions.

Captain Gold, I am so glad to meet you, Cuzar said, walking directly to him. Already, he liked her for not reacting to the error. She held out a hand with a smile on her face and Gold shook it, noting its dry feel but firm grip. She was definitely older than the others with wrinkles and a pronounced wattle under her

chin. Her robe had a high collar that rose to two points, framing the squarish face. Gold made a quick round of introductions but Cuzar did not reciprocate or even acknowledge those seated around her table. Thank you for coming with no notice. Unlike Ilona, her voice showed its age and lacked any sense of melody. It also sounded stressed.

Were happy to help. Do you have more details for us to work with?

Cuzar rounded the table and took her seat, at which point the Starfleet personnel also sat, with Hawkins making an audible sound as he struggled to be comfortable. The device was left where it was found but we do have additional graphics, the Regent said. Reaching under the table, she pressed something which activated the globe in the table's center. At first it glowed softly and then above it emerged a hologram of a charred, cracked something. Gold craned his neck for a look and noticed Gomez was ducking hers to see underneath the item.

Captain, this device pre-dates our civilization by approximately fifty thousand years. At the time this was supposedly placed on the ground, Evora was filled with nothing but unevolved animal life—mostly reptiles and birds. It dates to a time when one entire species of animal life was mysteriously wiped out. Our scientists have been studying remains and geological evidence to better understand how our planet developed and how our life rose.

What is it made of? Gomez asked. Gold detected the unbridled curiosity in her voice.

A metal compound totally unfamiliar to us, Cuzar replied. It has an iron base, but there are other elements not currently found on our world.

Then some alien life must have visited Evora, the engineer said.

Before Cuzar could reply, there were audible gasps from the previously silent Evorans. None looked at all pleased by the comment, especially one of the bulkier males. Gold noted Cuzar slowly closed her eyes and breathed deeply for a moment.

That's the conclusion Rujan, my chief archaeologist, also came up with, she said slowly. Understand, Captain, all our religious beliefs hold that after several great cataclysms and cleansings, we were chosen to thrive and develop as a species as a people. All previous life had been found wanting and removed to allow us to flourish. Never before had the notion been made that other intelligent life had been here before us. This has a great many people concerned and even fearful.

As she spoke, Gold glanced over toward Abramowitz, who was absorbed in the conversation but she was also looking concerned. He could tell this was serious as her eyebrows dropped and she barely blinked. This mission was getting more curious and more delicate by the moment.

I don't want to be an alarmist, Gold began, hesitating to catch Cuzar's reaction. She blinked once but seemed ready for anything. What would happen if we determined the artifact did come from a sentient race prior to the Evorans' evolution?

The Regent looked out at Gold, and scanned her retinue before commenting. Her eyes seemed to be searching for something. Finally, she regarded Gold and answered, There are still some among my people who feel we have no business mixing with races not from Evora. They prefer things to be simple and as uncomplicated as possible. We have some religious sects that still do not believe we have truly left this world for the stars. Telling any of them that aliens had been here before us could create schisms that might lead to civil war.

Gold swallowed hard, his eyes glancing at Abramowitz, who nodded once. Fear of the unknown is universal, Regent, he said slowly. Fear of change is also widely known throughout the galaxy. Our training, though, makes us sensitive to those concerns and we will follow your lead. Now then, how would you like us to proceed?

I would like your people to go to the dig and examine it for yourself. Once you can tell me exactly what has been found, I will take your advice on how to proceed. She paused, looking at her own people. Her voice hardened as she concluded with, Hiding this from my people, though, will not be an option.

Gold rose, nodding towards his crew. Very good, Regent. I'll return to my ship and get out of the way. If you think I can do anything to further to aid you, let me know.

Cuzar nodded toward him but did not rise. Having you here is a boon, Captain Gold. I wish we had no need for you or your services but we must. Thank you again.

THREE

A short time later, a small four-winged craft left the capitol, taking the Starfleet crew to the site. Cuzar left the meeting chamber, her steps slow and measured. Security Provost Helanoman watched her with hatred burning in his eyes. Once the regent was out of sight, he turned to the others in the room.

See? She would encourage more contamination from off-worlders. Her search for this truth will bring curiosity seekers or fortune hunters or who knows what else. Evora will no longer be just our world but one we must share!

And what do you suggest the Onlith do? This from Ilona, who remained in her seat, while Helanoman strode the room, his short red cape fluttering slightly in his wake. She is our regent and we are pledged to follow her rule.

The Onlith have opposed all contact beyond our solar system and that remains a perfectly attainable goal. There are enough people who share our beliefs that we hold almost a majority within the council. Our opinions need to be heeded. We have no desire to be visited or trade with others. Our planet is just bountiful enough without foods or gems from distant races.

And the technology they offer without price? Or their protection from others less benevolent?

Shira, you ask good questions but imagine our world at peace. We have nothing unique they want, were not near any of their boundaries with hostile races. Evora can be left alone and that is as it should be.

The other woman, seated by Ilona, frowned. What about the artifact? What if it tells them something that changes that?

Helanoman whirled about, slamming an open hand atop the table, startling the four others in the room. It cannot be true! If it is, then more will come and ruin our way! And that means the Federation must learn nothing. They will go away and we will exert our influence over Cuzar. I have people there and if it becomes necessary, the item will be destroyed.

You would hide the truth? Shira seemed very disturbed by the notion and Ilona was shaking her head in agreement.

If this truth brings more contamination, then yes. Maybe we don't always need to know the truth. Instead, we have taken a dangerous path and we might be forced to act and correct that course.

You think we can successfully defy the regent and her majority?

Shira, dear, the margin between them and us is under ten percent. If we can show how the Federation ridicules our core beliefs, the numbers will change and we will be the majority. You'll see.

He also knew he had enough followers in the building that his other plan would be launched at the same time. His fellow council members had enough doubts to not stand in his way but he was shrewd enough to know not to count on much support from them.

FOUR

Menali, a young Evoran male with one of the more brightly colored outfits Abramowitz had seen so far, was obviously enjoying playing tour guide. Every few moments, he would veer from one side of the narrow flitter to the other, excitedly describing natural and Evoran-made sites. His pride in the planet was clear and his smile infectious.

Next to her, Gomez proclaimed the planet was a pretty one, and Abramowitz had to agree. The architecture emphasized shorter buildings, allowing for the distant mountains to act as backgrounds. She noted the cleanliness of the streets, towns, and waterways leading her to believe they had long ago made land management a priority. When she asked, Menali breathlessly explained how the power plants were mostly thermodynamic and kept either underground or deep within mountain ranges with microwave technology beaming the energy to the farms, towns, and cities.

The cultural specialist made notes on everything he explained, planning to add it to the cultural database when the mission was complete. She marveled that the Federation truly knew very little of these people and their ways, yet felt secure enough to make them a protectorate. She'd never understand the Diplomatic Corps. Regent Cuzar seemed very concerned over civil war. Were they common on your world?

Seft, no, he said. Not this century anyway. We used to have a lot of them and they took their toll. In conitik school we were taught that we didnt reach the stars for so long because we were so busy building weapons and defenses against those weapons.

Abramowitz nodded sympathetically, interested in how that might compare with the history of other Federation worlds. What made them finally stop?

We finally built high altitude fighters to intercept the missiles and some of those older pilots formed a political party determined to show us once and for all we were just one world and needed to look out for each other rather than fight.

To Abramowitz, that sounded too idealistic to be true, but she also knew it was how it must have been taught in the schools. Shed have to do further research to see the events in their true context. That is, if they allowed public access to such documentation.

Menali, she asked, are there histories I can read to learn more?

Regent Cuzar announced recently that were going to improve our libraries. I guess we werent very good record keepers during all those fights, he said with a shrug. Gomez shot her a questioning look and Abramowitz tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. It would make their studies and research harder, she tried to tell the first officer. Whatever this mission promised, it would be more complicated than usual. She stopped and asked herself, When ever are these missions easy?

In his security alcove, Helanoman sat at the huge semicircular master station and signaled several of his colleagues, positioned throughout the city. All the signal contained was a time. Within seconds, each recipient signaled back with a single word ready.

He then turned his attention to the worldnet and its observations of the da Vinci far overhead. Captain Gold seemed like a veteran, albeit soft, used to ferrying these engineers around. He showed Cuzar more sympathy than mettle-but he also knew of Starfleets reputation. When the Onlith acted, they would have to do so in such a way that Gold and his ship would not be a factor. Indeed, when they took control of the government, Helanoman would simply send the ship away and they would leave out of respect for the new administration.

His administration.

The flitter landed with a cloud of dust being blown about in the hot air. It was a smooth ride, Gomez, admitted, and she did like the chance to see the world rather than just transport to the archaeological site . Sometimes the old-fashioned ways were still good ones. Menali certainly provided them with a great deal of information, much of it more interesting than useful but one never knew. Her experiences with the S.C.E. proved that time after time.

Four people approached the craft with one clearly the senior leader. Menali said this would be Cuzars Chief Scientist, Rukan. She seemed so much older than the others, so Gomez asked Menali about her. Rukan lives and breaths research, he explained. Shes just over fifty and most of our people are retired by then, doing spiritual service and the like. Rukan, they say, will never give up and will be entombed with her microscope.

Abramowitz looked up at that and asked, How long do your people live, Menali?

Our oldest living person is sixty-three, and he claims its the high altitudes of his mountain home.

Abramowitz turned to Gomez and commented, We need to know if their short life-span is natural or a result of all their wars.

Thats not why were here, you know, Gomez said.

I know, she said with a sigh. I wish we could get Elizabeth down here to give them an exam.

Gomez shook her head. Menali notwithstanding, they seem so private that I suspect that would never happen. But now that you mention it, the captain was asking me about her this morning. She seem okay to you? Abramowitz and Lense were not especially close friends, Gomez knew, but the captains question had been on her mind.

I guess so. Why?

Never mind, theyre here. The flitters doors opened and Menali led the officers onto the sun-hardened

surface. He made the introductions and Rugan smiled briefly at each one, but Gomez suspected she'd rather be digging than making nice to a bunch of people from Starfleet. Still, they were here to help and she was beginning to get fidgety herself.

The item is this way, Rugan said in a rough voice and abruptly turned, expecting everyone to follow at her pace. While she had shorter legs than the officers, the planet's higher gravity slowed them down so keeping pace was more involved than Gomez expected. As they walked, she saw tents, some prefab constructs, and lighting equipment, little different than what she had seen on a dozen other worlds. No doubt Rugan drove them day and night.

After five minutes, they arrived at an area that had been opened like an incision, long and deep but not especially wide. The sides of the dig were smooth with mounds of sifted, light tan dirt lining the dig. No one was working within the hole at the moment although Gomez saw several varieties of insect lifeforms, all slimy, long-legged, and with pincers. Several were crawling atop the reason for their visit.

The item looked like a round, fat blob. It was a dusty uniform purple color and connected to piping that vanished within the crust. There were bulbous protrusions all around the object that seemed to be controls of some sort.

Gomez took out her tricorder and began scanning the item from above. The readings were coming back as a metallic compound, matching what the Evorans had already told the crew. The age estimate also seemed to match. However, the more sophisticated device could tell there was still some form of power running through it, low-level but steady.

She crouched for a better look, ignoring those around her. In fact, if anyone was talking, she didn't notice, fascinated as she was by the item. Its design defied identification and if that was a language scrawled on the sides of the pipes it was not at all one she or the tricorder could identify. For a moment she stopped to wipe sweat from her forehead and realized she was genuinely excited by this prospect. It didn't seem to be threatening—and she knew from threatening alien technology.

Carol, this thing is amazing, she finally said, standing and brushing herself off. It's everything Cuzar told us it would be and more. It's obviously connected to something else and I think it's still active.

Rugan hurried over, an unhappy look on her lined face. What do you mean still active? What is it?

Clearly it's old. Beyond that, I don't know yet, Gomez admitted. And I think that's writing on the pipes. Do you recognize it?

It's not remotely like any Evoran writing I've ever studied, she said with distaste.

Gomez tapped her communicator. Gomez to da Vinci. Captain, we're at the site and sure enough, that thing doesn't belong to the Evora. There's some writing on it we can't place. Can you spare Bart for the mission?

I think we can, Gold said, a touch of amusement in his voice. Anything else you've seen?

We've only been here a little while, but no. Carol has been talking to their chief scientist, Rugan, and Hawkins, well, he's looking a little lost and bored.

If it's all the same to you, I want to leave him with you and Carol.

No problem with me. Gomez out. She turned to Vance, who did indeed look out of place and restless. Sorry, Hawkins, but you've got to keep me safe.

I can handle it, he said with a smile. Might be the first time I hit planetside without winding up in sickbay. Rugan, Carol said, returning their attention to the dig. Have you considered widening this stretch to see where these pipes lead?

No, Dr. Abramowitz, she said unhappily. Once we cleared this off and realized what it was, no one wanted much to do with it. Many of these locals we use are strictly religious and they don't know what to do with this new information.

Well, Gomez said, to better understand this, we need it widened. If there's another of these nodes we should try and find it.

Rugan tugged at her chin with a wrinkled hand. Wouldn't digging risk damaging it? If there's power running through it, that could be trouble.

Abramowitz hadn't considered that aspect and she shot a quick glance at Gomez. The first officer shrugged, uncertain herself at this point. Abramowitz turned back to the widened scientist.

Without digging further, we might never figure out what you've found. Starfleet is good, but even we need more to work with.

The scientist nodded and turned to talk to several of the nearby laborers.

"Feliciano to Gomez."

Surprised to be hearing from the transporter chief, Gomez tapped her combadge. "Go ahead, Diego."

"Commander, I can't beam Mr. Faulwell directly into the dig site. There's some kind of interference. I also don't have a positive lock on the away team."

Gomez took out her tricorder. "The power emissions from the item must be interfering with the transporter. Beam him down as close as you can."

"Acknowledged."

Seconds later, Bart Faulwell materialized about twenty-five meters from where they stood, unnoticed by all save Gomez and Hawkins. He apparently had been paying attention to the reports and tricorder readings because in addition to his own equipment, he was wearing a bright blue hat.

Over here Bart, Gomez called. He ambled over, smiling and nodding at the locals but keeping his distance. Once he joined Gomez and Abramowitz, he leaned over the hole and stared at the item. She laughed when he made a face at its odd shape but she also noticed his eyes went right to the writing and his lips began moving.

I was checking the database and this doesn't seem to match any of the races

that we know were in this sector one hundred thousand years back, Faulwell noted. Gomez appreciated his preparation even though he was not slated to be part of the away team. Still, it made sense he might be needed and no doubt he knew that.

Carol, is there anything you've learned that I should know about?

Not yet, she said, coming closer and leaning over the edge. You'll have to crack this one without a clue. Swell."

"Hey," Abramowitz said, "you're the one who says you like challenges."

Faulwell smiled. "Good point"

FIVE

The time had come. Flanked by three heavily armored followers, Helanoman walked with purpose down the stretch of corridor connecting his security alcove to Cuzar's private office. As head of security, he certainly knew of any escape routes and had people posted at all five exits.

A glance at his tactical gauntlet told the Onlith leader that his people were also positioned by the public entrances and exits with still more by the vehicle bay. He had planned long and hard for the moment, drilling his most faithful followers, all waiting for the signal to assemble and reclaim the government for the Evoran people.

Helanoman didn't necessarily dislike the offworlders he had met but they had nothing to contribute to his way of life. He did see, though, the contamination they would bring with them and the changes to the orderly, peaceful, and spiritual life they led. Nothing in his religious studies showed any hint of being accepting of life other than that which naturally occurred on his homeworld. The others had agreed with the teachings that the Evorans had earned their planet by surviving the cleansings that eradicated the other life that tried to rule the world.

With a silent gesture, he positioned the followers to protect the entrance, letting him enter the office alone. The door opened silently and he could see Cuzar at her writing table, stylus in hand, otherwise alone. Monitors behind her showed a parade of news digests, fed to the regents office from around the globe. There was more than enough to occupy a planetary leader around the clock.

Cuzar looked up, saw the security officer and her eyes had a glint of recognition. She remained still, unmoving. So, she said softly, this is the way it is to be?

The Onlith have warned you and the government often enough. Helanoman entered the office. He looked around, mentally rearranging the furniture to a pattern more his style.

Your party has seats in the Council. We hear you and have acted with respect to your beliefs. Why this way?

Because of what you found, he answered. Because of the ship in orbit. Everything we warned you about is coming to pass. He walked to the desk, trying to loom over Cuzar and intimidate her, but she remained still. With a short bark, he summoned one of his followers who systematically searched the room for weapons. Finding none, he was sent back out of the room. Cuzar sat motionlessly during the entire time, flickering images reflecting off her weathered features.

What now Helanoman? Public beheading? Bloodletting?

He smiled coldly. Nothing of the sort, Regent. We want this to be orderly and will do nothing to turn you into a martyr to rally your own followers. Instead, you and I shall stay here while we take possession of the media. We Onlith have already seized the travel centers so no one can come to your aid. Evora will be at peace once again.

An hour after the crew began digging again, enough dirt had been cleared away to expose a three-meter stretch of the pipe. Abramowitz and Gomez used their tricorders to further examine the alien artifact, but neither one seemed to learn anything new. There were, though, more of the alien characters, which excited Faulwell. Gomez sighed and stepped back, letting the eager linguist study at length.

As Faulwell did his work, Rukan came up to Gomez and asked about progress. She had a look in her eyes not dissimilar to the one Bart had, which intrigued Sonya.

There's some organic residue on one stretch of the pipe and we'd need to take actual scrapings to better learn from it, but my initial readings confirm it is not native to Evora. Since you don't recognize the writing, everything leads to the conclusion that whatever this was, came from another culture.

Careful as she was to modulate her voice to sound sympathetic, Gomez was afraid of a negative reaction. Instead, Rukan kept looking at her with interest, expecting her to continue.

You're taking this better than I expected, Gomez added with a grin.

My dear, I am a scientist first and always, she said, her voice strong. Once we learned there were other races among the stars, I began wondering about our own little world. Had we been visited? I admit, it's not a popular thought, but it has been the stuff of our fiction lately.

Will this really bring about civil war as the regent fears? This from Abramowitz, who wandered closer.

Maybe, the scientist answered. I hope not, but so much has been discovered in just this generation. I hope I live another decade or two to see what else we can find, but I doubt that will happen. These old bones are already wearing down.

Gomez smiled kindly. You seem one-of-a-kind.

Rukan nodded, her time-worn face showing concern. Would that I were not.

With their attention directed toward the dig, none of the Starfleet personnel noticed that several of the local workers and some of the science staff had been moving away. They had been backing up, toward the tents.

Hawkins caught some movement from his left side and whirled in time to see three people emerge, carrying weapons that were strapped to their arms. He reached for his own phaser, moving toward the people and away from his colleagues. One raised the weapon, clearly some energy-discharging gun, and took aim. Crying a warning to the others, he leapt to his right and fired off a quick burst. The shot went wide, but so did the one from the Evoran weapon.

The sound of weapons being fired alerted everyone and there was a scramble to find protective cover.

Gomez swore out loud at not being armed but there had been nothing to lead her to believe anyone but Hawkins would need a phaser. Now she regretted the act and crawled to get behind one of the dirt mounds. It would offer scant protection, she knew, but it was better than nothing until she could assess the situation. Abramowitz had leapt into the dig, seeking cover with Faulwell, while Rukan merely ran.

Quickly, Gomez scanned the area and determined they were out-gunned and out-numbered. They were also pinned down here in the dig site, so the da Vinci wouldn't be able to beam them out this close to the item. For now, at least, they had to stay put and see how this played out. At least she could notify Captain Gold and she tapped her combadge. Briefly, she told the captain what was happening and kept the channel open.

Hawkins had managed to keep up a barrage of fire that disoriented the clearly untrained Evorans. He

worked his way to Gomez, trying to provide protection while waiting for orders.

Before she could give any, though, one of the scientists managed to come up from behind and hurl a huge rock at Gomez, stunning her. As Hawkins turned to fire, three weapons discharged and two beams struck him, rendering him unconscious. With the lone defensive weapon silent, the Evorans swarmed over the area, with several pointing their weapons into the dig site, keeping Abramowitz and Faulwell trapped. The Onlith were now successful both at the capitol and at the archaeological site.

SIX

Gomez! Gold repeated the commander's name several more times before giving up. Clearly, his crew was in trouble, trapped by hostile forces.

Kieran Duffy stood silently beside the captain, lending moral support since there didn't seem to be much more he could do. McAllan was already running scans of the planet while Ina was checking the planet's broadcast signals. Gold began pacing the small bridge, unhappy that he could merely stand around. He had done it often enough to accept it, never to like it. Unfortunately, it was all they could do for the moment. The best tactical option—beaming them out—wasn't available as long as the away team was still in the dig site.

Captain, Ina called from her ops station, I'm picking up a series of media reports from all continents. It sounds like we're being accused of some form of alien contamination. They sound angry about it, not scared.

Gold began a reply before McAllan spoke up.

All weapons fire has stopped, the tactical officer reported.

That's something, Gold said. Lifesigns?

All present and accounted for, McAllan crisply replied. "But the placement of the away team's combadges doesn't match the location of the three human lifesigns. They've probably been removed."

Not surprising. Get me Regent Cuzar.

McAllan nodded once and began tapping at his controls. After a few moments he looked at the captain and said, No response from the capitol. We're getting through but they're choosing not to answer.

Gold paced some more, this time joined by Corsi, who had just arrived on the bridge. She kept pace while asking for an update. Once Gold finished, she asked, Shall I assemble an assault team?

The captain slowly shook his head. Not until we know something for certain. There are too many unknowns before we risk more crew.

Our reports indicate they have several star-worthy craft. We can outfly and outgun them, but can they outnumber us?

Duffy shook his head. All scans show there are no hidden starships or additional weapons depots."

Gold added, "Cuzar has been scrupulously honest with us since we arrived. This is something way beyond her control.

Corsi looked at Gold with a penetrating stare, one she usually used on interrogation subjects. Then whose in control down there?

I wish we knew.

Gomez groaned as she rolled onto her right side. Whatever was thrown at her clearly damaged a rib or two. Once she figured this situation out, someone was going to pay. First the monster shii tore open her torso on Sarindar, then the monster "Nat" had cracked a couple of ribs on Maeglin, now this.

First things first though; she was in command of the away team and needed to assess the situation.

Opening her eyes to slits, she looked about without moving her head more than a degree or two at a time.

The armed Evorans had a small group of fellow citizens sitting in a small cluster near a storage unit.

Guards were posted between her position and the dig. Abramowitz and Faulwell had been brought up to the surface and were seated by the still unconscious Hawkins, who of course did not have his phaser.

None of them had their combadges, either. Interestingly, Rujan was seated between her and her fellow da Vinci crewmates.

What's going on? she croaked through dry lips.

Rugan leaned over, passing along a small bottle of water. Gomez wet her lips, which hurt from the sun, and took several small swallows. The cool water made her feel better and she began to slowly sit up. She smiled at the relieved looks on her crewmates' faces.

I knew the Onlith were serious about avoiding cross-cultural contact, the scientist said sympathetically. I just never knew they would act like this, like barbarians.

Who are the Onlith?

A faction that has wedged its way into our government. They've opposed every step we've taken off this world which is why we have not been better neighbors. The Onlith have been very persuasive to our masses, indicating that our every way of life was going to be irrevocably changed if the Federation or worse, some of the other races we've encountered, came to stay.

Gomez nodded, having heard such fears before. With each passing minute, her head felt better and she was thinking clearer. Not that this meant any immediate plans came to mind, but at least she was alert. I know your people have preached how you respect the way of life for each world, Rugan continued. I saw that when I toured your Enterprise. But it's hard to communicate that to three hundred million people, a good number of whom are scared to death of change. Me, I always want to know the truth, to understand our place in the galaxy.

The two sat in companionable silence for several minutes, just looking out at the Onlith followers. During that time, Hawkins roused and was allowed some water by a guard. He was slow to sit up but once he did, he winked at Gomez, so she was glad he was not concussed once more. One of the Onlith seemed to be in communication with a leader elsewhere and when the conversation ended, she signaled to three people by the storage unit.

In short order, several small devices were removed and carried toward the dig. Gomez watched as Rugan stiffened and let out a small cry. No, no, please don't she whispered but received no reply.

Are they going to?

Yes, my dear, they want to destroy that which they do not understand.

Two guards gestured to the Starfleet crew and the Evoran scientist to move away, forcing them back several meters. Keeping their weapons trained on them, the guards seemed to be fearful of what was about to happen behind them, but Gomez saw no way to exploit that. She would have to continue to wait for time and opportunity. Gold, she imagined, was doing the same from orbit.

There was a muffled sound as the devices exploded, showering the area with clouds of dirt that hung in the hot, still air. It was clear to Gomez that the pipes underneath the ground were intact beyond the dig, which meant the alien presence continued on Evora. She wondered if these Onlith would try and remove all evidence of previous contact.

Sir, there's been an explosion at the dig, Ina called out, her voice high and excited.

Duffy was peering over as the operations officer's shoulder. It seems localized, at the exact spot where the artifact was located.

All life signs accounted for, Ina added.

Gold sighed with relief. Destroy what you do not understand, he muttered, understanding the nameless fear that seemed to grip a world.

Message from the capitol, sir, McAllan said quickly.

Standing up, Gold turned to face the viewscreen and nodded once for contact to be established. He was not overly surprised to recognize the face as one of the people from the meeting chamber. In fact, he was more than a little disappointed to see it was the head of the security forces. To him, it was too predictable, but time after time, it made a sick sort of sense to him.

Captain Gold, I wish to inform you of a change in government here on Evora.

A coup d'tat? Why am I not surprised?

Helanoman blinked as he tried to comprehend the French phrase but it was not translating properly. You expected this?

Fear can be translated into rash actions more times than I can count, the captain replied, trying to keep things conversational and not confrontational. If this was to be the new leader, he had to tread delicately.

My people. Are they unharmed? And your regent?

Your crew are fine although in my custody, as is Cuzar.

What next? Try her for crimes against the people?

The Onlith leader shook his head. She did what she thought was best for the people. The people think otherwise.

So you know what the people want better than Cuzar does? How so?

We listen to them, Captain. We hear them in the schools, in the workplace, in the home. She is so enthralled by the life among the stars she is deaf to her own kind. I hear all and have acted to preserve our way of life.

Gold whirled back to the screen. And that includes obfuscating the truth?

I did what needed doing and will continue to act in the interests of Evora, Helanoman said. His expression grew colder. Pledge the Federation will leave Evora alone and not return. Do so, and I will release your people.

You realize that I do not act entirely on my own. I must consult with Starfleet Command and they must speak with the Federation Council. This may take some time.

The Evoran looked appraisingly at the captain and Gold knew the man was shrewd. He was weighing the facts, imagining how he would act were positions reversed. Was Gold merely stalling or was he truly unable to commit on behalf of the United Federation of Planets? Meantime, Gold took the pause in dialogue to look around the bridge. P8 Blue had arrived, and was looking at him intently. She clearly had something to share.

Either way, Helanoman, I need time, as I suspect you do, too. Arrange to bring my people to the capitol while I speak with my government. Gold out.

No sooner did the screen switch back to the planet beneath the starship than the captain began giving orders. McAllan, send that conversation and my last three log entries to Starfleet. Send a separate signal to the Federation Council.

Same message?

It doesnt matter, Gold said tersely. We just have to look like were holding up our end of the deal. Blue, what did you find?

The insectoid engineer said, Sir, their equipment checks out as significantly inferior to ours. They may not be able to track our signals or even tap into them to verify the content. And, they may not be geared to scan for transporter activity.

Gold nodded and looked at Duffy and Corsi. Good. Lets make plans.

Gomez managed to move over to where the others sat. Hawkins had regained his alertness and was watching the area with keen interest. Abramowitz was trailing fingers in the dirt and Faulwell seemed to just sit and stare.

You okay, Bart?

You never can expect it, can you?

What do you mean?

Violence. Destruction.

She thought about it a moment and then realized he was in danger just hours after his partner was in a similar situation across the quadrant. Its always been a part of the package, she said gently. We take the oath knowing we might face such dangers. Our lives are on the line every time we undertake a mission. Its no different at a starbase.

I understand that, Commander, but it seemed to rattle Anthony more than Ive ever seen before."

"Didn't you two meet during the war?" Abramowitz asked.

"Yeah, when I was doing crypto work on Starbase 92. But that wasn't exactly the front lines. Anyhow, I have some leave time coming, and I was hoping I could visit him to helpbut now Im stuck here with a bunch of fanatics.

This? This is nothing, Bart. Ive faced down the Borg, Captain Gold fought back a Romulan incursion once, and heck, McAllan nearly lost everything during the Proxima Beta incident.

Faulwell snorted derisively at the incidents since after all, that was then and now, well, now things did look a little less than wonderful. He needs me, Sonya.

Im sure he does, Bart, she said sympathetically. And you will be there for him. And if not, then its because you were doing your duty. Look at Soloman and how well he has adjusted to losing his life partner. Were survivors. And were fighters. I have no intention of sitting here until the Onlith decide to make examples of us, or put us on trial or whatever stupid thing they think of. Right now, put Anthony out of your mind and let me figure out the next step. We wont be idle for long.

Faulwell thought a moment and with a slight smile, added, Thank you.

Dont mention it, she replied and turned her attention to the movements of the Onlith guards.

Bart sat silent for a few more moments and while she felt for him, Gomez certainly didnt want him needlessly distracted when she needed everyone focused on their current predicament.

Look, if Im going to have to sit here, can I at least use my tricorder?

Gomez watched with interest to see how the Evorans guarding them reacted to Faulwells request. The dirt settled a few minutes ago, coating everything with a thin film of brown. Whatever that item had been, it was now gone for good.

The three Evorans exchanged blank expressions and shrugs. Finally, the one closest to the linguist nodded and then settled in a chair to watch. Faulwell looked over to Gomez and shrugged also, then turned to his tricorder. He must have carefully recorded all the alien writing on the artifact and was looking it over.

Gomez looked around the area, figuring there might be an opportunity coming, especially if one of the guards was paying close attention to one of them. She continued to watch each Evoran, wondering if the trapped workers would fight alongside her if she broke free. She couldnt begin to guess and it was then she missed having Corsi around for help. While Gomez could diagnose and fix just about any mechanical problem, tactics were not her strong suit. With a wry smile to herself, she realized that, after her chat with Faulwell, she might, at least, make a halfway decent counselor.

She continued to consider options but found it troubling to concentrate now that she noticed Faulwell was humming quite contentedly to himself. At least one member of the crew was able to work on the original mission.

Abramowitz was also looking over Faulwells shoulder, nodding every now and then. Then her expression changed her eyes went wide, her head cocked to one side, and her expression was one of revelation.

Bart, that humming, its reminding me of something. I need to check in with the da Vinci.

Fat chance, Faulwell said with a smirk. What do you recall?

Before she could reply, there was a low rumble which built quickly into a full-scale tremor. The Evorans seemed especially surprised and looked from one to another for guidance. As it rapidly built in intensity, Gomez determined that thered never be a better time for action.

Vance, now! was all she managed to say before tumbling to her knees and then rolling to her sore side.

The earthquake was causing everyone to fall, and it was intense enough to bring down the storage units.

She could hear the cries from scared or injured people.

Still, she hoped it would end and was determined to have the upper hand when that happened. Struggling to her knees, despite the heavy gravity, she saw that Hawkins, better trained in these circumstances, was already wrestling with a guard to grab her weapon. He kicked twice, stunning the smaller Evoran, and ripped the weapon from the straps to her arm. Hawkins hefted it in both hands and shoulder-rolled to avoid two charging Evorans.

Find the combadges! Gomez yelled. She struggled to her feet, noticing the quake was beginning to subside.

Where did that come from? demanded Gold.

McAllan and Ina were feverishly working their stations, checking incoming data. Its registering 8.92 on the Richter Scale, localized to a nine square kilometer range, McAllan called out.

Media reports sound panicked, Ina added. Its like theyve never seen one before.

Scan the planet. Are there any other incidents? Then scan deep, I want a geologic picture of this place.

Hed be damned if he was going to respect protocol when his people and possibly the planets population was threatened.

His people worked quickly but it was not fast enough for the captain, who remained frustrated that his people were out of touch and that a fanatic seemed to be controlling the planet. But he was not entirely helpless. He looked over his shoulder and nodded at Corsi, who returned the gesture and turned for the turbolift.

As soon as she was gone, he signaled below. Soloman, get cracking on the transmitted tricorder readings. See what you can learn. As the Bynar acknowledged the instruction, Gold got restless with the waiting.

SEVEN

Why arent you doing something?

Cuzar looked at Helanoman with unconcealed contempt. She always feared some loss of power, but had hoped it was through democratic means, not a coup. Her desktop screens flashed with information showing the devastating results of the earthquake. In all her life, she had never experienced one, never had to govern through one—she only knew of the term from the cultural information exchange they had had with the Federation.

The man who would be her successor looked equally inexperienced. And Cuzar was sure that he had not availed himself of the Federation database that would have at least given him a name for the phenomenon that wracked their world.

I cant stop the planet from shaking, he shouted at her. What would you have me do?

Help the people, she said quietly, refusing to let her emotions let this escalate into a screaming match.

Dispatch your troops to render aid, fly out medics, see what supplies are needed. If weve lost power, as I fear, youll need engineers.

I should risk more lives? He seemed out of his element, capable of fighting wars but not governing and this, strangely, brought her a sense of satisfaction.

Its over, she pointed out. Go help the people you are trying to preserve from alien contamination.

Helanoman glared at her and then removed his portable communications device from the ornate belt he wore. Quickly, he barked orders that were almost word for word what the Regent had suggested. She smiled but remained still at the desk, studying the telemetry reports. A flashing light to her left caught her attention.

The da Vinci is trying to make contact.

Ignore them, the security officer demanded.

Hard to negotiate with them when you wont talk to them. She folded her hands and watched him, feeling more serene by the moment.

I have a planetary crisis to tend to, the Federation can wait. He paced a bit, barked some more orders to his troops and then walked behind Cuzar and she instinctively flinched. He chuckled mirthlessly and leaned over her right shoulder, looking at the screens. His fingers tapped with nervous energy against the desktop and although annoying, quietly pleased the woman. If he wanted to run a planet, so be it. Theres more to it than private rooms and having people curry favor. Hell learn, she thought.

Her thoughts darkened. But would he learn before another quake occurs?

Instantaneous was not fast enough for Corsi. She desperately wanted to free her colleagues and get them off the planet. Bad enough a coup broke out, but severe tremors were another thing. People she could beat; entire planets were something else. Even for her.

The transporter beam released her and the phaser rifle was already swiveling back and forth, seeking the first target. Corsi took aim at three figures near her colleagues, thumbed an adjustment to widen the beam and then pulled the trigger. The bright amber beam was filtered through the dust still hanging thickly in the air and it looked odd to the security chief.

As the figures dropped, she waved to Gomez and then pivoted to her right, taking aim at approaching Onlith followers. Two quick shots dropped the nearest attackers and she grunted in disbelief at how

poorly armed they were.

Wheres Hawkins? she shouted above the noise.

Behind you, he replied, strolling with a big grin on his face and his left arm cradling the combadges, his own phaser gripped in his right hand.

Status, she demanded.

You shot the last of the followers. No one is seriously hurt although they did manage to destroy the artifact before Commander Gomez could suss it out.

Corsi looked at Hawkins and was surprised by how calm he seemed, and how in control of the situation was. No doubt, had she not beamed down, he would have been able to take out the poorer-trained threat. So, are you saying you didnt need any help?

Not especially, but its awfully nice to have you here, he said, still smiling. When he saw her we-are-not-amused expression, the corners of his mouth dropped.

If its all the same to you, Ill remain here just in case.

Wouldnt want it any other way, Commander.

The two walked to where Gomez, Abramowitz, and Faulwell were dusting themselves off. Corsi thought it a futile gesture given how much dust lingered in the air. She didnt bother, although she cradled the rifle so as to minimize contact with the air.

Is anyone seriously hurt? she asked to be safe.

Scrapes, but nothing that requires Dr. Lense, Gomez replied.

Faulwell turned to Abramowitz and asked, Now where were we?

Your humming, she said.

His humming? Corsi asked, wondering what kind of work was being done.

Tone Deaf over here was humming as he reviewed the scans of the artifact. The sound, while annoying at first, got me to thinking. If we cant match the symbols to letter, it might be tones.

Faulwell snapped his fingers and brightened. Sure, several known languages are musical not written as we know it. In fact, certain regions of the galaxy have more language written that way than in cuneiform.

Why didnt I see that?

Perhaps the Onlith holding weapons on us? Gomez offered.

Or the earthquake, Hawkins suggested.

My friends, Faulwell with a combined snarl and grin. Quickly, he reopened his tricorder and called up the images he had been studying. Corsi, just mildly curious, peered over a shoulder to see what the artifact had looked like.

Damnedest notes Ive ever seen, she muttered.

Thats because they werent written by Earth composers, Faulwell said absently. He hummed various notes, thumbing his tricorder to begin recording his voice. The pitch rose and fell and in a short time, Corsi came a conclusion.

Faulwell was indeed tone deaf.

She gestured for Hawkins to follow her and together, they began moving the still-stunned Onlith bodies into one place. One of the Evorans offered to help, but given the size difference, Corsi shook him off.

Stay here and keep an eye on them, she ordered Hawkins.

I dont think theyre smart enough to try again, but one never knows with fanatics, he said.

Is that what they are?

The Onlith seem to believe the planets destiny is to stay isolated, he explained. So they mounted a coup and forced the planet to cut ties with the Federation. They won't even consider the alien nature of that doohickey.

Corsi nodded and Hawkins seemed glad she didnt ask any follow-up questions. Without knowing more about the artifact or the details of the coup, they were all uncomfortable with the situation. It remained too volatile for Corsis liking and she couldnt figure out the best way to be prepared for what may come next. All of her training told her to be ready, to stay several steps ahead of your opponent. She had also learned to know the opponent as well as he knows himself. In this case, she could not do so and it grated against her.

P8 Blue was using the sensors at one of their most powerful settings to study the spot where her colleagues were. Rarely had she needed to so often refine the controls, adjusting the sensors to screen out anomalous elements. It was also slow-going work, learning a planet's geology at the same time as tracing the exact nature of the unearthed piping.

It was important work, and she liked being able to make a contribution to the mission, but still she disliked the pace.

However, several hours after starting the scans, the Nasat thought she had enough information to make a proper report to the captain. Gold had not allowed himself to sleep, but had taken a few minutes to retrieve some food from the mess. No sooner than he entered the bridge, which caused McAllan to dutifully call out his presence, Blue gestured to get his attention.

What do you have, Blue? He was holding a plate full of fruit in one hand and a glass of something dark in the other. The fruit was ripe and fresh, and the very smell of it almost made Blue ill, but she managed to control her reaction.

Sir, the pipe work Commander Gomez found seems to be a network. From what I can tell, it is under the entire planet.

Gold put down his plate and studied the schematic on the screen closest to the science station the Nasat was using. Are you saying it's under every continent and ocean?

Yes. The metallurgical analysis is incomplete but I have to agree that it is not native to Evora.

The two studied the slowly revolving image of the planet and saw the complete network, like an ill-shaped spider's web, ring the world. Gold asked about the slowly changing colors of the web.

It seems the network is giving off a very steady low-level form of harmonic vibrations. The color shift shows the change in frequency.

What is the harmonics purpose? Gold took a bite from the banana and continued to stare at the screen.

Captain, the node they found is also seen throughout Evora. They seem to be located where the tectonic plates meet or overlap. This entire network seems designed to prevent earthquakes from occurring.

And when the Onlith destroyed the node, the next thing you had there was an earthquake.

Blue nodded vigorously and added, With one node out of commission, the others are trying to compensate, hence the change in frequency.

Keep checking the plates, Gold ordered. Figure out if the node needs to be replaced and if not, what happens next.

Yes, sir, Blue said, chiming with her dedication. My geology's a bit rusty, but I should be able to figure it out.

How long have you been up here without a break? Maybe you should have some food—that's always good for the soul."

Chiming with amusement, Blue said, "I'd better not, sir. Remember what happened the last time I ate on the bridge?"

Gold wrinkled his nose, which indicated to Blue that he did remember. Humans had such sensitive olfactory senses—couldn't even bear a small rotting greela. Since that unfortunate incident, after which half the bridge crew grew ill, she ate by herself.

She turned back to the problem at hand, while Gold took his fruit back to the command chair.

Five minutes after he settled in his chair after getting Blue's report, Gold got a signal from the capitol. Helanomans unpleasant visage graced the main viewer shortly thereafter.

What does your Federation have to say?

Well, he wasn't wasting any time. The man looked more intense than usual, and maybe a little stressed.

First, how is the Regent?

Unharmful. Now tell me.

Second, you do know there was an earthquake on your world.

Of course I know that.

Do you require assistance?

Not from you! For all I know, it was your people that triggered the tremor to spread fear and dissent. I doubt you needed any help from us to do that.

The mild rebuke startled the Evoran for a moment but he quickly recovered, resuming his bluster. Maybe it was the artifact that caused the problem. Uninvited alien interference that could bring about our own destruction.

Want to hear another interpretation?

Not from you.

Very well. No, I have not heard back from my government. Gold was beginning to enjoying playing with the man, clearly out of his element as a planetary leader. He could only imagine what Cuzar thought listening to this buffoon.

You may still leave.

Not before we see to it you world is spared further trouble.

What do you mean?

You didnt want to hear it before.

Hear what?

Oh, this was getting too easy for the captain. The truth.

And I am to believe this truth?

Truth is truth, Helanoman, Gold said, taking on the tone of a teacher. The sun rises in the morning. That is the truth. Your very world is in grave danger. That too is the truth.

Helanoman let out guttural noise and cut the signal.

Gold leaned back and smiled. He knew the Evoran would be calling back, but he hoped it was before the planet was in more trouble.

Blue stepped forward. Sir, left alone, that network would have kept working, untouched by anyone.

However, destroying the node has exposed the systems age-it cannot compensate to prevent another quake.

Is one building up?

The aftershocks of the first quake will begin any moment, she said sadly.

Theyll be bad, eh?

Yes, sir, and I suspect numerous. The planet has not been allowed to naturally adjust itself for millennia.

It may be just getting started.

And if we replace the node?

We put the world back to sleep.

Without hesitation, he signaled Gomez and briefed her. As tersely as possible, Gold covered the situation and finished with, You may have as little as thirty minutes before the aftershocks. Are you free to work?

Hawkins is watching the troublemakers, his chief engineer replied. Have Pattie send me her research and Ill tell you what supplies will be needed. Better start with a portable replicator so I can make my own magic.

Godspeed Gomez, Gold said gravely.

You know what he was trying to tell you, Cuzar said.

What? That aliens shoved their technology under the ground to save us?

Something like that, yes, she replied. She needed to stay clam to avoid inciting him further. He wasnt stupid, she knew, but already she could tell that the strain was getting to him because if Golds truth was accurate, then the core beliefs Helanoman held were being shaken. Perhaps worse than the quake.

Everything was fine until the starship arrived, he said more to himself than anyone.

Not really, and you know it, she said. They arrived because of what we found. It was here first.

Not before us! he yelled and clenched his hands, trembling to avoid striking her. He was struggling with his control of the planet and of himself. She needed to guide him carefully before she or he got hurt.

It was our people that discovered the thing and it was our people that dated it to before our race existed on the planet. Not the Federation.

A trick, he said, sounding firm despite the preposterousness of the statement. Cleverly planted to force us

to be more closely linked to them. No doubt that insane old woman Rugan was part of the conspiracy. Cuzar sighed and settled back. She had pushed him far enough. She then began asking about the relief and repair efforts, focusing him on concrete, productive issues. He began to calm down and she sighed in relief, but knew the situation was far from settled.

EIGHT

Carol Abramowitz completed a second set of scans of the exposed pipework and its frayed, splintered wires. With the touch of a control, the tricorders databanks were shared with the da Vinicis computers. Touching her restored combadge, she called to the starship. Abramowitz to Soloman.

Go ahead, Carol, the Bynar said.

We dont have a lot of time so Id like you to run the alien writing through the cultural databanks, looking for musical matches. We suspect its more of a tonal than written language.

Understood, stand by. He cut the signal and Carol let out a sigh. She had done what she could for the moment. The Evorans were an intriguing people and she wished there was sufficient time for her to do a proper job. Everything had been determined based on the most surface of impressions. Shed need a few weeks, totally without incident, to get a real feel for the people. So far, her training and instincts had helped her but she had come to an end. Without more facts or time or both, there was little left for her to do.

Times like this she wished she was one of those geniuses that could master many disciplines. From here on, it would fall to Sonya to salvage the situation. Understanding the language was nice, but right now, they needed a working power node to interface with the rest of the alien technology to keep the planet from shaking apart. She'd been through something similar on Keorga only a few weeks ago. She, Bart, and Soloman had managed to pull a proverbial rabbit out of their hats then-she could only hope that history repeated itself.

She glanced over to see Sonya testing some of the exposed wiring to better understand the harmonics frequency and power emissions. The commander seemed totally enthralled by the work but she also saw the perspiration running down her cheeks. It showed just how tense the situation was becoming.

Bart, to his credit, was continuing to look at the rest of the exposed pipe, touching the raised letters-or notes?-and continuing his research. He seemed possessed, ignoring his personal fears and concentrating on the job, just as Sonya had advised. But then, once Bart started sinking his teeth into a linguistic conundrum, he could focus with the best of them.

Hawkins was studiously watching the now-recovered Onlith. As for Core Breach herself, Corsi was taking a perimeter walk of the encampment to make sure there would be no other surprises.

It was becoming a waiting game and she was not good at waiting under circumstances like these.

Within ten minutes, though, she was signaled by the ship. Soloman began, without preamble, Theres an amazing mathematical progression in the structure so it took me longer to decipher than I thought.

Carol laughed but encouraged Soloman to continue. Only a Bynar would think ten minutes was too long to decipher an unknown alien language.

You were wrong though, he continued.

What do you mean?

Its not musical notes in lieu of a written language. This is a blend, one I would think is most elegant.

Theres not quite enough of a sample to fully understand it all but it matches no known Evoran language nor any in our own databanks.

Anything in it that can help the commander?

Maybe. Im transmitting the best approximation of the translation and she can decide for herself.

Thanks, Soloman. Abramowitz out.

Within seconds her tricorder beeped, signaling the transmission was complete and she walked it over to Sonya, who was feeding instructions into the replicator.

Read it to me, Ive got to keep on this, she said with a small plea in her voice.

Carol dutifully read the translation which dealt with amps and frequencies, all the while Gomez was bobbing her head up and down. It was almost comical to Abramowitz to watch her bob in rhythm with

her reading.

Bart caught on and laughed out loud, but one look from the commander put an end to that.

As Sonya worked, Rukan had been inching closer to the group, her curiosity clearly getting the best of her. At one point Hawkins turned his phaser toward her, but Carol shook him off.

Damnedest thing Ive ever seen, the scientist said.

Well, its new to us, too, Carol said.

You see something for the first time and in hours manage to decipher the language and even figure out how to repair it. I didnt even know what I was looking at.

Its just the difference in technology, Carol said in a warm tone. She liked the scientist and didnt want to overplay the Federation s role. Had you the same equipment.

No, I dont think so, Rukan said dejectedly. I havent a team like yours. I work with people scared of their own shadow. Most would rather keep their heads in the ground like the sellow birds.

There must be more like you.

Only if we can get the teachers to adopt new ways. So many young minds remain closed, so much waste.

When this is over, and your people discover the truth, that may be the spark they need. Dont give up on your own people.

I try not to, but they disappoint me so often, Rukan said, moving over to get a closer view of Sonyas activity.

Of course, Gomez exclaimed at that moment, startling the scientist. She quickly reprogrammed some numbers into the replicator and then activated it. Within seconds, a housing similar to the destroyed node appeared. If anything it was less appealing to look at than the original. Then she called up to the ship and asked Pattie to help supply her with various pieces of equipment.

Want to explain whats going on? Bart asked after a burst of activity.

What? Sonya looked up, almost as if she had forgotten her crewmates. She shook her head a moment.

These nodes seem to be the regulators. As the tectonic plates try to shift, the nodes draw power from the network and use the vibrations to either smooth the plate edges or disperse the vibrations from the actual shifts.

Sonya stopped to collect the equipment that had materialized by her side. Carol, fascinated, went over and began handing her the items, to move things along. The node was destroyed so there was nothing drawing power to stop the plates. Without the stress relief, the plates were free to move and took advantage. I need to confirm this, but my guess is Evora is one of the most unstable planets to sustain life. And the only way to sustain that life was the network, Carol ventured.

Right. Sonya sighed. How do we explain to Helanoman that his entire race owes its very existence to some other, more benevolent race?

Carol shook her head. You dont. I dont think you can get through to him. If anything, we need to take this directly to the people.

Let's get the situation under control first, Gomez said and returned to her work. I need to build and calibrate this before the aftershocks throw more of this network out of whack. We've only got about twenty minutes?

Im going down there, Gold said aloud as he stood up.

Is that wise, sir, Duffy asked.

Wise? Probably not. But Im not going to solve this by sitting on my tuchas. I need to be in the same room with that lunatic. You have the conn, Duffy. Whatever Gomez needs, she gets.

Of course, Duffy said in a rush. Shouldnt I try and talk you out of this?

Gold paused and smiled. You're welcome to try."

Duffy smiled back. "The captain shouldn't put himself in danger. Besides, the last time you left me in charge, I almost started a war with the Tholians."

"But you didn't, and that counts for a lot, Duffy. Objection overruled. Take the conn."

"Yes, sir," Duffy said, moving the command chair without hesitation.

Within moments, Gold was emerging from the turbolift near the transporter room. He stopped long enough to grab a phaser and then stood on the platform. His lessons at Starfleet Academy and his experience over the years showed that yes, in many-hell, most cases, it made sense to keep the captain out of harms way. But he also knew that there came a time the captain had to insert himself into the thick of it-and this definitely qualified.

Any interference from the network near the capitol?

Feliciano checked a readout and shook his head. "No, sir, we're all clear."

Very well, beam me down right outside the regents office. Energize.

Moments later, the captain was standing before the small, polished wood door. Three very startled Evorans were looking up at him. We can do this the easy way or hard way, Gold said to them. I either stun you into submission or you let me stroll into the office.

The Evorans stared at Golds phaser and then his imposing figure. Then back at the phaser. Within seconds they began to back down the corridor, refusing to turn their back to Gold but also not challenging him.

To keep Henaloman guessing, Gold merely reached for the handle and pushed the door open.

Sure enough, Henaloman was communicating in agitated tones to some subordinate and barely reacted to the doors sound. Cuzar, though, looked up immediately and her face ran through a variety of reactions that amused the captain. Finally, she settled on a look imploring him for help and he nodded, giving her a reassuring smile.

I thought Id bring you the truth myself, he said in a calm tone.

The Onlith leader whirled about in surprise. He reached for his own weapon, but Gold had already crossed the room without fear. At no point had he reached for his own weapon, and he certainly did not want to invite trouble. Standing barely two feet from the Evoran, Gold looked down and shook his head warningly.

Understand me if I wanted to, I could have brought a security detachment with me and you would be in custody. But I do not wish to interfere with a planets sovereignty any more than I have to. You and Cuzar can wrestle for the title of regent when this is over-or better yet, put it to a vote, since you seem so sure that the people are on your side. But right now, you must listen to reason.

Henaloman was seething but Gold spotted the fear in his eyes.

That node you destroyed allowed the quakes to begin. I have people there now trying to stop more from arriving. Your blind arrogance has put the people you hope to lead in danger.

You put that device there to make us beholden to you!

If you believe that, fine. When this is done, if you remain in power and want us gone, well warp out of orbit. Right now, though, you're a Federation protectorate and I am here in response to your peoples call for help. Want it or not, you will be receiving that help.

Gold walked over to an empty chair and dragged it to Cuzars desk. He went and got a second one, exposing his back to Henaloman, letting the man know that there was a certain amount of trust being placed in him-though he supposed Henaloman might have viewed it as an insult, as Gold not believing that the man who would be regent was truly a threat. The captain settled in the second chair and gestured to Henaloman to take the other one.

While my people work, shall we discuss resolving this power struggle?

NINE

Dammit, the flux capacitor wont fit!

Gomez wiped at her damp forehead with her sleeve and bit her lower lip as she tried to figure out how to cram all the technical equipment needed into the node. Had they managed to crack it open earlier, shed have been able to check the level of miniaturization involved. Right now, she was still guessing at what was needed to modulate the tremors. She was also fearing the imaginary clock in her mind, the one that was continuing to tick down until the first estimated aftershock. If Pattie was right, it was going to be a rough ride, enough to possibly ruin her work.

Under other circumstances, she'd ask for additional help-Pattie, Kieran, an entire team-but the node was

so small that more than one person working on it was impractical.

She slowed her breathing and forced her racing mind to focus on the single task in front of her. The capacitor needed to handle input and output feeds, both of which might be trimable. Reaching into her equipment case, she pulled out crimpers that neatly cut the input feed. Sonya again tried to fit the capacitor into the new node and it was still not fitting. This time, rather than curse, she trimmed the output feed and refitted the device.

Much better, she said to herself. It didn't matter to her if she spoke out loud or not, what mattered was that she maintain her cool. Focus was required and that meant ignoring whatever else was happening. She had to trust Corsi and Hawkins to maintain order, allowing her to do the work required. Her life may have been on the line but she had learned over her months on the da Vinci that she would not have it any other way. The S.C.E. afforded her more challenges than any work on a starship, even more than on the fabled Enterprise. And working on the da Vinci gave her a chance to also be in a command position. Her career had certainly taken some interesting twists but there was nothing to complain about. Personally, she had even managed to rekindle her relationship with Kieran. What did she have to complain about? Evora chose that moment to move rather violently by way of answer.

Gomez tumbled to her knees and her arms went reflexively over her head. She cursed herself, figuring she needed to protect the node first. A moment later she felt Rukan tumble into her; the scientist was leaning in close, watching the repair work and staying silent. Gomez held on to the old woman for a moment, making sure she'd be safe. As aftershocks went, this was pretty mild, lasting a handful of seconds and nowhere near as severe as expected.

You okay down there? It was Abramowitz, who seemed fine herself.

Peachy, she answered, looking over to the Evoran scientist, who nodded just once. Gomez turned her attention back to the node. With the capacitor now in place, she could concentrate on the phase modulator. But first, she was still a commander with a team.

How's everything topside?

Peachy, Carol replied with a grin. Everything's under control so just worry about the network.

Another aftershock rolled across the land and this time Abramowitz fell forward, tumbling into the pit and landing hard beside the node. Rukan herself was thrown into the makeshift device, cracking a connection to the pipe network. Gomez had tucked herself into a ball, letting bits of rock and silt cover her back and shoulders.

This one lasted longer than the first one, and seemed more violent. Gomez gritted her teeth and stood over Abramowitz's prone body. She'd be black and blue for days after all this but conscious.

Im fine, she said, as she spit out dirt.

Rukan indicated she too was fine and was extremely apologetic for breaking Gomez's work. The engineer looked at the cracked connection, shook her head and swiftly reached into her kit and grabbed a hydrosprayer. There had better be a breather before the next shock if she expected to complete her work and even have time to test the unit.

Five minutes later, she had everything reassembled and it all fit together. It was ugly as sin, twice as bulky as the original node, but ready to work. There was just the one tiny matter of determining the right frequency.

Bart, she called. In moments, Faulwell's cheerful face hung over the lip of the excavation.

Did that translation from Soloman contain the original frequency?

Faulwell blinked and then consulted his tricorder. He frowned, thumb the read out up and down and Gomez began to fret. She needed to set it at something and she'd much rather not guess.

Nothing here, he finally said. He frowned. It might be built into the language itself. If it's at least partly musical in nature, then it's set at a certain pitch.

Gomez shrugged; it made some sense. She looked at Soloman's translation and then compared it with the vibrations Pattie had managed to record from orbit. Sure enough, they were close enough for her to make a very educated guess. She began inputting the instructions.

What makes you so certain this will work? Rukan asked.

Well, I've had plenty of experience with repair work, and my instincts tell me we're on the right course.

Am I absolutely certain it will work? Of course not. Its alien technology and that brings lots of unknowns with it. But right now, I've got to go with my instincts. Here goes nothing, she said. With that, she pressed two studs protruding from the new node housing. Ruby lights blinked on and everyone could hear an audible whine build before surpassing human hearing.

Gomez tapped her combadge and called the da Vinci. Pattie, what do the sensors read?

Just a moment, Commander, the Nasat replied. The moment stretched to several and Gomez paced her small trench, eager to get up top and away from the dig entirely.

Abramowitz and Rujan were standing side by side, silent. Gomez looked up to see Faulwell and Corsi peering down from above.

The frequencies match, P8 Blue announced. The patch is working and the network is no longer straining. Is it enough to stop the aftershocks?

Probably mute them but stop them, no, P8 said.

We'll stay here to see that the equipment holds during the next shock, Gomez said. Out. With that, she reached up and happily, got pulled to the surface by her colleagues.

My ship informs me a replacement device has worked successfully, Gold told Cuzar and Helanoman. They had been sitting around the desk, letting the Onlith leader bluster on about all of the Federations many mistakes. He had to suffer them in silence, letting the Evoran man have his say so when Gold finally spoke, Helanoman might actually listen.

Are you certain this will stop more earthquakes?

Regent, until something occurs, everything is merely speculation.

We did record one aftershock already, she pointed out, clearly hoping she was wrong. Gold admired the woman and liked her quiet style.

Of course that was before activation. We just have to wait and see.

I hate waiting.

Part of being a good leader, Helanoman, is being able to wait without losing ones mind, Gold answered.

The smaller man had nothing to say in response. He seemed to ignore the comments and just sat. Cuzar shrugged her shoulders in a universal signal.

Gomez to Gold.

Go ahead, Commander. Is everything fine at the dig?

Waiting on the next shockwave, but Im optimistic. I wanted to come make my report in person.

Good thought. If Helanoman does not mind. The captain looked over to the Onlith leader, who just stared.

I dont think I want to wait that long.

Oh, thats not a problem. Go ahead, Commander.

Moments later, Gomez materialized in the Regents office, which was beginning to feel crowded. She was covered with dust, dirt and something that he suspected was a lubricant. Her hair was a mess but there was no denying the triumphant look in her eyes. Helanoman just stared at her more with surprise than anger. No doubt this further proved his point that contamination was continuing.

Report.

While we've translated some of the language, we have no idea who built the network, Gomez said.

Abramowitzs best explanation is that they were a benevolent race, similar to the Preservers, and they. Preservers? Cuzar asked.

Gold explained. An ancient race, long gone; but they built protective devices on many worlds we have discovered. We know very little about them, actually. Helanoman seemed pleased by the lack of knowledge.

Sensor readings from the ship seem to indicate Evora is a very unstable planet, Gomez continued, pausing then to check for reactions. The captain appreciated the gesture of respect. Neither Evoran seemed to know how to handle the information. He nodded for her to continue.

The geological readings Rujan took at the dig help confirm the hypothesis. This planet has undergone major geologic upheaval since it was formed. Thats why entire species were wiped out in a seeming blink

of the eye.

And this mystery race they built the stabilizers?

Yes, Regent, Gomez said softly. Some millennia back, after the last quake wiped out the animal life, they undertook the task. By stabilizing the planet, life was finally allowed to flourish and endure. Until now, your people barely experienced a tremor thanks to their ingenuity.

How does the system work? Gold asked.

That, I'm less sure about, his engineer answered. Clearly, we believe the planet's core is providing the power source. How it knows to emit the right harmonics is beyond me. What went unsaid was her desire to find out how but he knew that would be impossible without compromising the ancient system.

Cuzar sat, staring blankly at the screen in front of her. Helanoman also seemed to be staring into space and for a moment, Gold actually felt some sympathy for him. His entire belief system was challenged and found wanting. He would now have to live with the notion that the Evoran people did owe their very existence to another race.

Whatever race chose to do this, did so without asking for a price. They did it because it was the right thing to do. It could be the biggest mitzvah I have ever witnessed, Gold said. This doesn't change anything. All of your accomplishments, like developing warp drive, are entirely your own doing. The aliens' work ended millennia ago so there's nothing to be ashamed about, Helanoman. Yes, it'll take time to adjust and the Federation can send teachers or historians to help with the adjustment-or not, if that's what you prefer. Nothing will be easy, but life wouldn't be interesting if it was.

I knew we were right to seek an alliance within the galactic community, Cuzar said. When we took that first warp flight two years ago, I hoped we would find friends, not enemies. What shall we do now Helanoman?

The man continued to sit, his eyes staring and his expression unreadable. The regent gave him time to gather his thoughts and wits. Gold and Gomez looked on sympathetically, but remained where they were. This was not their affair, the captain recognized, so it required patience.

Helanoman?

Finally, the more massive Evoran blinked and shrugged his shoulders, a statue coming to life. He turned his head to the regent and simply said, You win.

This isn't about winning or losing, Cuzar said, showing her grace. Our people made a collective decision to join the Federation family and your followers seek to undermine that. Now that we know the truth, what do you intend to do?

I will ask my people to stand down and let the planet function as it has, he said. I will then submit myself to you for punishment.

Cuzar let that hang in the air for a few moments and Gold was curious to see how she would handle this. She didn't seem to be milking the moment for pleasure so he was pleased by that.

There needs to be some punishment, yes. We can't have people leading coups without any consequences. Still, you acted based on your beliefs, not because you sought power in and of itself. We shall let the judiciary review and make a decision. Please, give the word to the Onlith, tell them it's over.

Yes, he said sadly. It's over. He turned away and began speaking into his communications device.

Cuzar finally rose from her chair and approached the captain. She moved gracefully and with purpose. I cannot thank you enough, Captain. You and your crew saved my world.

We fix things, Gold said, smiling. Usually, it's just equipment but it seems we may have helped repair this rift among you. If you'd like, I can stay and help with the restoration of your control.

No thank you, Captain, Cuzar said proudly. We have made do on our own long enough that this will not require any additional help. While I welcome our place in your family, I remain committed to the Evorans finding our own way. The Onlith and the rest of the government have other issues that need resolving before we can consider this finished. You did more than enough just getting these discussions started.

Good, Gold. I'll have my crew return to the ship and well prepare to leave orbit.

Will Rukan be allowed to continue her work at the site? Gomez asked.

Oh yes, Cuzar said. There's too much to learn about our world. In fact, captain, we may invite experts from the Federation to observe or help later. Maybe we can repay your kindness with a discovery about

this race that helped us.

Gold smiled at the notion and considered the matter well on its way to be resolved.

Yew-cheen chef-faw, Cuzar said.

Yew-cheen chef-faw, Gold replied, pleased he got the pronunciation right at last.

NINE

I hate mysteries, Corsi said as the away team returned to the da Vinci.

Yeah, just as we solve one thing, theres a new wrinkle, Faulwell added. Doesnt seem right.

The universe is a big place, well never understand it all and the sooner you accept that, the better you will sleep at night.

Thank you, Carol.

Dont mention it.

As they stepped off the platform, Gomez entered the room and greeted her team with a smile. Well, how badly did we bang you up this time Vance?

Not too badly at all, he said with a grin. Wont even need to see Emmett this time. Which is kind of a shame, really, since we were just getting to know one another.

You can tell this guys been banged around too much if hes starting to build a relationship with the EMH, Faulwell quipped.

Captain wants your logs and reports by 1000 tomorrow morning. Right now he suggests you get cleaned up and have some rest, Gomez said, slipping into command mode.

As they group started to leave the room and spill into the corridor, Gomez sidled up to Corsi and said in a low tone, I dislike unresolved issues, too, but its just something we have to live with.

Just not something I have to like.

Of course not, Gomez said. The group headed towards the door but she stopped them by saying, You all did good work down there. Im proud of you all. Now, go freshen up and meet me in the mess. I want to tell you all about this report I just read about how they stopped the uprising on Rigel II.

Now thats more like it, the security officer said. A problem and a solution.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Greenberger is no stranger to Star Trek, having edited the comic book version for eight years while at DC Comics. During his time there, his work included the graphic novel Star Trek Debt of Honor, which earned several industry awards and was named one of the best Star Trek comics of all time at PsiPhi.org.

Bob has also written numerous Star Trek books, several in collaboration with Peter David and/or Michael Jan Friedman. On his own, he wrote The Romulan Stratagem and most recently, the third installment in 2001s Gateways crossover series Doors into Chaos. He also wrote the final chapter, The Other Side in the concluding volume, What Lay Beyond. Bob shares some the credit (or blame) for conceiving the event with editor John Ordovery.

He has also written a small number of shorter works ranging from biographies of Wilt Chamberlain and Ponce de Leon to original fiction. His next work sees print in Oceans of Space, from DAW Books this spring.

A die-hard New York Mets fan, he finds he has to keep his opinions to himself when working with S.C.E. editor Keith DeCandido, given his misplaced affection for the New York Yankees.

During the day, Bob serves as Director - Publishing Operations at Marvel Comics. He makes his home in Connecticut with his wife Deb, and children, Kate and Robbie.

COMING NEXT MONTH

Star Trek S.C.E.

16

OATHS

by Glenn Hauman

Dr. Elizabeth Lense has had a fine career. First in her class at Starfleet Medical-beating out the genetically enhanced Julian Bashir-a hero during the Dominion War, and now the doctor on the U.S.S. da Vinci. But Captain David Gold has noticed that her performance has not been up to snuff. She's been listless, stressed, and fobbing off most of her responsibilities on the da Vinci's Emergency Medical Hologram.

Her malaise couldn't possibly come at a worse time, because a virus has erupted on Sherman's Planet-and the planet's entire population as well as the crew of the da Vinci is now marked for death by the virulent plague!

Can Lense find her way out of depression to determine the cure? And will the cure be worse than the disease?

COMING IN MAY FROM POCKET BOOKS!