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eISBN: 0-7434-5672-6

First Pocket Books Ebooks Edition June 2002

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## FOUNDATIONS

### Part One of Three

Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore



POCKET BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore

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First Pocket Books Ebooks Edition June 2002

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# Chapter

# 1

## Stardate 53675.1

As he sat in the center seat of the *U.S.S. da Vinci*'s bridge, the young officer knew all eyes were on him. The bridge personnel had turned from their flashing consoles and even away from the main viewer to focus their attentions on the "big chair." Their hands were stayed from taking action as they awaited his next words. Silence hung in the air.

The officer smiled. Above all else, Kieran Duffy lived for a captive audience.

"So there we were at the bar, the three of us, and for whatever reason, the Andorian woman's face turns this almost royal blue color..."

"It couldn't have been that she was embarrassed," said Ensign Robin Rusconi, seated at the *da Vinci*'s conn for her usual gamma-shift duties. "I can't imagine your open speculations about an Andorian wedding night would have upset her sensibilities."

Duffy looked to the conn officer and knit his brow. "What, you're not curious?" He smiled, letting his eyes drift up to the viewer and the comforting stream of streaking stars it provided as the ship traveled at warp speed. "Ensign, I wasn't trying to pick a fight. I was trying to initiate a cultural exchange."

"You're lucky you didn't get your chronometer cleaned," Bart Faulwell said from his seat at the bridge's communication station. Duffy laughed a bit, knowing that Faulwell had sat through his rendition of this particular encounter maybe a dozen times. While he'd always been indulgent, Duffy was pretty sure that the linguist had not volunteered for a late-night turn of duty on the bridge just to be regaled by tales of the crew's extracurricular antics.

"Okay, okay, forget the Andorian," Duffy said, trying to regain his listeners' focus. "This is where it gets good. In walks this pair of Tellarites, and Fabian perks up in his seat. Don't ask me why, but the guy finds Tellarites endlessly fascinating. You know he can even speak some of their language?"

Faulwell laughed this time. "One of their languages, anyway. Ever since our last trip to Maeglin, I've been giving him lessons. And he makes me listen to him in our quarters, usually when I'm trying to sleep."

A look of understanding spread across Duffy's face as he regarded Faulwell. "Ahah! So that's why you're up here tonight. You're trying to ditch your roomie."

"Not in so many words," said Faulwell. "But I am glad to be here if only so I may report back to Fabian that you succeeded in relaying this story to each member of the *theda Vinci* crew."

"I'm goal oriented," Duffy replied as he turned back to his audience. "So Fabe launches from his stool and says, 'Watch this.' He walks up to the pair and, well, grunts out something. Carol, who's next to me, can only sit there stunned at the whole thing. She just can't believe it's not me doing something dumb in front of the Tellarites."

Faulwell laughed despite himself and shook his head. "He'll never get the hang of declining his verbs properly. And people ask me why I dislike first contact missions so much."

"So time just freezes. Then the bigger Tellarite—"

A sudden blaring klaxon cut Duffy off, jolting everyone on the bridge. Rusconi's eyes glared wide as she spun toward the console and others on the bridge followed suit. Forgetting all notions of finishing his story, Duffy straightened in the command chair.

"Report!"

Ensign Joanne Piotrowski, the gamma-shift tactical officer, called out over the alarm without looking up from her console. "Long-range sensors have detected a vessel, approaching fast. Estimated speed is warp eight-point-eight and it may be climbing."

Duffy turned to face her. "A ship? What kind?"

"It doesn't match anything in the ship-recognition database. Whatever it is, it's not very big, probably only large enough to carry a few dozen humanoids." Studying her tactical displays for several more seconds, Piotrowski added, "There's no indication they're doing any scanning of their own, or that they've locked onto us as a target. But there's no variance in its heading." She tapped a command into her console. "Its speed is definitely increasing, but minutely."

Duffy saw Faulwell sweep up a Feinberg receiver from the communications console and slip it into his left ear. Though it was a throwback to Starfleet technology almost two centuries old, Faulwell was one of the few Duffy knew who still used the tiny tuner consistently. It seemed to help focus his attention on transmissions intercepted by the *theda Vinci* while filtering some of the noise from elsewhere on the bridge.

"I'm picking up a signal from the ship, Commander. It will take the UT a bit to sort this out, though. It's a language I've not heard before."

If Faulwell had never heard this alien tongue, Duffy knew that posed a new set of variables. Given his background as one of Starfleet's premiere cryptographers, let alone his linguistic training, Faulwell had been exposed to the languages of countless races across two quadrants. Duffy wouldn't have been surprised if Faulwell doped the language out before the Universal Translator.

"Well, I doubt anyone would announce a sneak attack," Duffy said. "Thanks, Bart." He settled a bit back into his chair. "And would you mind turning off the alarm before it wakes up everyone on the ship?"

Faulwell regarded Duffy with an amused expression. “Isn’t that the point of a red alert?”

“Sure, but this isn’t anything gamma shift can’t handle on its own.” The klaxon went quiet, allowing Duffy to once again hear more typical bridge sounds: chirping consoles, the chatter of shipwide communications, the hissing door of the turbolift. “No reason at all to disturb the beauty sleep of our shipmates.”

“So the lieutenant commander thinks my appearance would benefit from some shut-eye?”

Duffy snapped up in the center seat, instantly recognizing the voice. He spun to face Captain David Gold, who stood at the entryway of the bridge appearing ready for anything.

Or at least as ready, Duffy thought, as a beige textured-cloth bathrobe and slippers allowed a commanding officer to appear.

“True beauty, Mr. Duffy, is reflected in the soul.”

“Captain!” Duffy cleared his throat a bit, hoping to suppress the giggle he so wanted to release. “There’s a ship of unknown origin on a course intercepting ours. Sensors recognized nothing about it, so the alert sounded.” He tried to talk around that giggle, but failed miserably. “It doesn’t appear immediately threatening, sir, if you’d like to head back to bed.”

Gold narrowed his eyes at Duffy, a signal that he was there strictly for business and not for a crack at his expense. “Just when will we cross paths with this vessel?”

Duffy looked to Piotrowski, who was ready with the information. “Unless we alter course, about twelve minutes, Captain.”

Gold looked to Faulwell next. “And we haven’t made contact with the vessel yet?”

“No, sir,” Faulwell replied, two fingers helping to keep his ear receiver in place. “I’m still working to sort out its transmissions. Whatever the message might be, it appears to be running on a repeating loop. It may be steadily broadcast or programmed to sound whenever something enters that ship’s sensor range.”

The captain nodded and smoothed the front of his robe as Duffy rose from the command chair to make room for him. “Oh no, Commander, keep your seat. It’s about time that something interesting took place during one of your quiet gamma shifts. I’d suggest you risk disturbing a few more of your shipmates, though. Abramowitz and Stevens in particular would be helpful.” To the rest of the bridge crew he offered, “We may have a first contact situation this evening, folks, so let’s put on our best faces. I’ll rejoin you in a few.”

Duffy’s verbal impulses finally got the best of him. “And we can’t have our new friends greeting the captain in his...um...*babushka*.”

“Leave the Yiddish to the experts,*boychik*.” The captain allowed a smile as he reentered the turbolift and let the doors close behind him.

A loud sigh escaped from Faulwell’s lips, catching Duffy’s attention. The linguist shook his head and turned to the communications console. “Splendid. My favorite. A first contact on the late shift. I thought working gamma was supposed to be relaxing.”

As the rest of the bridge officers worked at their various stations, Duffy could do nothing except look to the main viewer and wait for the situation to develop.

“Guess the Tellarite story will have to wait.”

\* \* \*

It took less than five minutes for Captain Gold to return to the *theda Vinci*’s bridge, this time properly groomed and wearing a more familiar Starfleet uniform. Duffy rose from the center seat and the two officers exchanged silent nods as he walked to the bridge’s engineering station. From there, he could monitor the *theda Vinci*’s propulsion and other systems as events warranted.

While not the ship’s chief engineer, Duffy took personal pride in the efficient and smooth operation of the warp drive on the *Saber*-class vessel. Chief Engineer Jil Barnak never got territorial over his habit of wandering into main engineering just to fine-tune intermix ratios or tweak frequencies of fields within the ship’s warp core. As he often noted to his fellow crewmembers following his transfer from the *U.S.S. Enterprise*, taking the boy out of engineering rarely translated to taking the engineering out of the boy.

“Duffy,” Gold called out from the center seat, “what can you tell us about our friends out there?”

Turning back to face his captain, Duffy replied, “It’s not like anything with a Federation registry, that’s for sure. Its outer hull appears to be electrically charged, very similar to the way our older ships used to polarize hull plating before we developed shield generators.” It was a means of ship protection that recalled for him the twenty-second century and the beginnings of deep-space exploration for the people of his world. “We’re not picking up any kind of sensor capabilities, either.”

“What about propulsion?”

“Looks to be driven by ion reactions, Captain. Their drive system appears to use magnetic fields and electrically charged gases rather than one fueled by mixes of matter and antimatter.” Ion drives in Duffy’s experience were connective technologies; ones that races used until finding something superior, as did the Jem’Hadar, if his memory served. Technologically, this race looked to be far inferior to most others encountered by the Federation, he decided.

That didn’t change the fact that they were now a few minutes from intercepting what appeared to be one of the fastest space vessels they had ever encountered.

“So how can that thing be traveling so fast?” Duffy had spoken aloud without realizing it, and he looked up sheepishly. Maybe no one had heard him, he thought, until he saw the smiling face of Carol Abramowitz as she worked at the nearby communications station with Faulwell.

“I don’t know, Commander. Maybe they got a push?”

Duffy gave her a friendly smirk. “Don’t you have a call to make?” He was well aware that Abramowitz had been tasked with contacting the craft once Faulwell and the computer’s linguistics banks had cracked the language barrier. The endlessly repeating series of calls had been found to be cries of distress, but few other details were to be had.

“Don’t start on me, mister,” she said. “I’m not even supposed to be here today.” They shared a quiet laugh as she turned back to her console. “They’re not responding to our hails, anyway. I’m hoping it’s a

matter of their communications systems and not because we've been rude."

Considering Abramowitz's expertise as a cultural specialist and the starship's best liaison to other races, it did not surprise Duffy that she would be concerned with the aliens' issues of perception. Abramowitz worked hard at understanding even the subtlest nuances of behavior or voice inflection that might inadvertently belie one's actions and intentions toward others. Her poise and politeness on duty frequently made Duffy smile, though given her usual behavior when he "got her out of the house" as he called it when they laid over at the occasional station or starbase, she tended to be a different person.

*Certainly those Tellarites would agree.*

A rise in Gold's voice drew his attention back to the situation at hand. "Abramowitz? Any luck in contacting the ship?"

"None, Captain," she answered. "Still working on it."

"I know that you are, and I appreciate your persistence." Gold then looked at the second officer. "Duffy, we've plotted the other ship's likely course and I aim to bring us alongside her as she passes. Are the engines up to sustaining the speed we need to do so?"

"Yes, sir," Duffy replied. "It shouldn't pose any problems for us to shadow them. My readings have their speed at just a shade below warp eight-point-nine. We can maintain that level for twenty hours or better."

"Good." Gold nodded firmly as he settled into the center seat. "Let's get moving, then. Rusconi, start along a course parallel to our projections and let's get our speed up to warp eight...oh, let's say point three."

Rusconi attended to Gold's orders as Duffy again watched over the fluctuating graphic displays at the engineering station. *Theda Vinci* smoothly came to speed and he allowed himself some inner satisfaction as the gauges did not waver from tolerance levels.

A flash from the viewscreen made him snap his attention forward. A blip of speeding light had shot from the viewer's left side, and it now was tracing a path toward the center of its star-streaked image.

Piotrowski indicated the screen with a nod of her head. "Captain, the ship just passed us."

"Then let's catch up," Gold replied. "Match course and speed."

In a matter of moments, the streak of light took shape in the main viewer as *theda Vinci* came alongside the alien vessel. The silvery, wedge-shaped craft sported small, swept-back wings that appeared more aesthetic than functional. Several window ports peppered the outer hull of the ship, and its sleek skin looked to Duffy as though it could almost be cast from liquid mercury. He appreciated their approaching from the ship's aft as the view allowed him a lingering look at its engines, which appeared to be exhaust ports rather than nacelles.

*Whatever is coming from those ports, he thought, had to be more than this ship was built to handle.*

Abramowitz spoke to break the silence on the bridge. "Captain, I'm getting a hail from the ship. It's coming in on a low-frequency audio band. Maybe they couldn't respond to our subspace transmissions."



“Maybe so,” Gold said, his eyes not leaving the viewer. “Put them on, Abramowitz.”

Speakers on the bridge crackled a bit as static filtered in and out of words translated by the *Vinci*’s computers. “*Greetings, unidentified vessel. This is Daltren. We are of the Senuta. We are in great need of assistance and we hope you are here to help us.*”

Gold tipped his head up to the ceiling of the bridge, as if that might make him better understood. “We certainly are here to help, Daltren. I am Captain Gold from the United Federation of Planets. My crew is ready to assist you with whatever you need. Can you tell us what the trouble is?”

“*We cannot stop.*”

Duffy sat and laced his fingers. *That surely would pose a problem, he thought, but one that they should be able to solve without breaking a sweat.* Seeing Gold’s questioning glance, he nodded in response. “We’re on it, Captain.”

Satisfied with that, Gold turned his attention back to the main viewer. “My crew is already examining your situation, Daltren, and we should have a solution in short order. We’ll need some information about your ship and its technology. Can you arrange that?”

“*We will have to awaken Bohan, and he has been ill, but it will be done.*” The voice paused, but as Gold drew breath to speak, it continued. “*Thank you, Captain. We have needed help for far too long.*”

Puzzlement crossed Gold’s features. “Just how long have you been unable to stop, Daltren?”

“*We have traveled this way for forty-seven of our cycles, ever since we encountered what we think was some form of electromagnetic storm.*”

Duffy swallowed hard at hearing those words. After moving at close to warp nine for that time, he guessed the ship could be a dozen sectors from its homeworld. Such a journey would be of little consequence for a Starfleet vessel with the latest that twenty-fourth-century technology had to offer, but who knew what kind of effect such a trip would have on the Senuta ship?

Daltren continued. “*Our supplies are nearly exhausted, Captain. Our computers have locked us out of many functions. My people are ill from the journey. Three have died. We need your help.*”

“Count on it, Daltren,” Gold said. “Get us your information as soon as you can.”

The bridge crew worked in silence as they awaited the Senuta transmission. Before long, Abramowitz noted its reception and Gold waved a finger to indicate he wanted it all transferred to Duffy’s workstation.

Calling the information to his console, Duffy instantly disliked what he saw.

“Captain, this just isn’t good. Their engines are built to travel at about half of the speed they’re moving. I don’t know how it’s even holding together with its low-end structural integrity system.” He paused as he read more. “They don’t have replicators or transporters to speak of. They don’t even have inertial dampers; they use acceleration couches when they travel. No wonder they’re sick. Just moving about the ship during high warp must be hell for them.” He shook his head. “If we’re not careful, any sudden deceleration will turn these guys into paste.”

“*Oy gevalt*,” Gold muttered, and Duffy could tell that his choice of words had been poor when he saw the glowering expression on the captain’s face. “Then I suggest you start scouring the computer library for ideas if you have none of your own, Commander.” Duffy’s own expression must have revealed too much, because Gold added with a wry grin, “Oh come now, Duffy. Gomez tells me you love research.”

“Oh, yes, sir. I’m your man.” As Duffy began tapping into the ship’s library computer, a thought struck him. “Carol, ask Mr. Daltren to send over ship’s logs or any sensor readings they have on that storm he mentioned. I’ve got a hunch about something.” As he browsed the library, Duffy let his mind wander.

*Ion-charged engines thrown into hyperefficiency...locked-up computers...a lack of shielding on the ship...this has to be the result of an ion storm, and a powerful one at that.*

He let that idea roll around in his mind as his console blinked to indicate Abramowitz had sent over the Senuta ship’s latest report.

“Their sensors detected ion bombardments at levels that would have wreaked havoc on even a shielded vessel,” he said aloud. It was a storm that experienced space travelers would have done their best to avoid. In this case, sheer misfortune had resulted in the Senuta being flung far from home and powerless to do anything about it.

“Give me a few minutes, Captain,” Duffy said, not bothering to look up from his console. “I think I’m on to something.”

“Good,” Gold said as he moved toward the turbolift. “It’s time to get Gomez out of bed. Once we get this ship stopped, I’m sure she’ll want to beam over and have a look at things for herself. Shall I tell her you’ll have your plan ready for us in, say, twenty minutes?”

“Give me fifteen, sir,” Duffy said. “These people have been at warp long enough.”

“That’s the stuff, Commander,” Gold said, smiling approvingly. “Carry on.”

Duffy turned his attention back to the computer’s library files on ion storm encounters, hoping that past experiences of Starfleet’s finest engineers might spur his thinking. He scanned past more recent entries, dismissing accounts of ships with more advanced shielding than that employed by the Senuta. Before long, the log records began to bear twenty-third-century timestamps and four-digit stardates...and the signatures of someone very familiar to him.

“Well, I’ll be...Montgomery Scott.” Duffy again found himself speaking aloud to no one in particular.

“Captain Scott? Did you call this in?” Abramowitz asked, again tuning in to Duffy’s spoken voice. Members of any of the S.C.E. teams welcomed any contact by Scott. As chief liaison officer for the Starfleet Corps of Engineers, he was the man responsible for assigning their missions and keeping them from running afoul of Starfleet brass when their means of accomplishing those missions turned to the unorthodox.

“No, Carol, sorry about that,” said Duffy. “But I have a feeling that Captain Scott is going to help us out of this jam without his even knowing about it.”

And voices from the past began ringing in his mind...

# Chapter

## 2

### Stardate 1197.6

*"Mayday! Mayday! This is Outpost 5!"*

As the distress signal began to repeat, Commander Alicia Burke touched a control set into the top of the conference room table, silencing the recorded message. Several seconds passed as the group of fifteen Starfleet officers sitting around the table regarded one another silently.

*The plot thickens*, Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott mused to himself. It was a mystery that had begun when, instead of receiving official word of his promotion to chief engineer of the *U.S.S. Enterprise*, he'd been given orders to board the first transport bound for Starbase 10. No reason had been given for this abrupt change of assignment, one Scott had been assured was temporary. Only now, after being ushered into this room had everything finally started to become clear.

"There you have it," Commander Burke said, rising from her chair at the head of the table and beginning to pace around the room's outer perimeter as she addressed the group. "The ion storm swept across the Neutral Zone, enveloping several of our outposts stationed along the border." The observation outposts had been placed along the Federation side of the Zone more than a century before in the years following the Earth-Romulan War.

In accordance with the treaty that had been enacted to end that bitter conflict, they had served as the first line of intelligence gathering and warning for Starfleet since then. Drifting silently in the void, the outposts watched and waited for the day when Romulan forces attempted to abrogate the treaty by crossing the Neutral Zone into Federation space. So far, no such attempts had been made and in fact there had been only isolated contact with any Romulan vessels in the decades since the war's end. However, there were those in Starfleet, especially those with relatives who had fought and died in the war, who believed that the Romulans would one day return.

"As tough as those outposts are supposed to be," Scott said, "that storm must've been packin' quite a wallop."

Burke smiled, though there was no humor or amusement in her expression. "An understatement, Mr. Scott. Six of the outposts have suffered varying degrees of structural damage as well as a wide variety of onboard systems failures. There have been several injuries but no deaths, fortunately. However, those outpost crews aren't really equipped to handle this type of recovery and repair operation." Indicating the assembled group of officers with outspread arms, she added, "That's why we're sending you."

Murmurs of approval greeted Burke's pronouncement, and Scott could feel the air of pride and confidence filtering through the room. Everyone here, he had learned, was a Starfleet engineer just as he was. A few of the faces were familiar; people with whom he had served on other ships or, in one case, hadn't seen since his days at the Academy. Also, like him, these people were accustomed to being given all manner of seemingly impossible tasks to accomplish. With Starfleet sending more ships than ever before farther out into unexplored space, those ships needed crews capable of operating for months and even years without outside assistance.

Engineers, especially those posted aboard long-range exploration vessels, often viewed themselves as the epitome of such talent and self-reliance. Scott would admit, if asked, that such attitudes could be perceived as arrogant, but he knew it was nothing more than assurance in one's own abilities, honed through experience and, on unfortunate occasions, adversity.

"Luckily for us," Burke said, "you in this group were available when we needed you. Most of you will be transported to the various outposts to help carry out repair efforts." She paused, her eyes scanning the engineers for a moment before finally coming to rest on Scott. "However, there is an additional problem requiring our immediate attention."

*Uh-oh, Scott thought. Here it comes.*

"Outpost 5 has been hit especially hard by the storm," Burke continued. "Maintaining contact has been next to impossible, but we do know that the station's primary PXX fission reactor has suffered damage. We've since lost communications with them, so we don't know how bad it really is. If the situation is critical, then our problems are only just beginning."

"The subspace relay?" asked another of the engineers, a female Alpha Centauran who had introduced herself to Scott as Lieutenant J'lenn.

Burke nodded. "Correct, Lieutenant. Outpost 5, for those of you who do not know, serves as the subspace communications relay center for that region. Without it, our long-range sensor and intelligence-gathering abilities will be crippled for the entire sector." Looking about the room, the commander's eyes came to rest once more on Scott. "Mr. Scott, as you're the most experienced engineer in this group, you will be on the team going to Outpost 5, along with Lieutenant J'lenn. That reactor must be repaired at all costs."

"Aye, Commander," Scott replied. "That we will."

J'lenn leaned forward in her chair. "I've been to those outposts before, when I was serving aboard a border patrol ship. Outpost 5's reactor is two kilometers beneath the surface. If the station's been as badly damaged as we think, just getting to the reactor might be difficult."

Scott added, "As I recall, the composition of those asteroids interferes with transporters. Ye can't beam more than a few hundred meters down before the signal is corrupted." While there were those who had felt uncomfortable with the notion, the outposts had been deliberately designed with transporter inhibition in mind. At a time when humans were only just becoming used to the idea of having their bodies converted into energy and transmitted across vast distances in the blink of an eye, it was also known that other races were much more accustomed to the process.

More strategically oriented minds in Starfleet saw the tactical advantages transporters could bring, and had therefore decided that any means of defending sensitive installations from attacks by enemy soldiers materializing out of thin air should be employed. This thinking had extended most especially to the isolated and vulnerable observation outposts such as those along the Neutral Zone, and Scott tended to support such practical planning.

"So we'll have to use turboshafts and access crawlways," J'lenn said. "There may be damage in those areas as well. We could find ourselves digging our way down to the reactor."

"We've thought of that," Burke replied. "In addition to those of you in this room, we're also sending

along contingents from the Corps of Engineers. They've got the type of heavy equipment that could be needed."

Scott nodded in approval. "Aye, that's the ticket." Though he had never worked with anyone attached to the organization, he'd heard more than a few stories about the Corps of Engineers. These were the people who usually found themselves in such hazardous situations as providing life-support habitats on otherwise inhospitable worlds, or creating the types of underground facilities found on asteroids and lifeless moons throughout the Federation. In fact, it had been the Corps who had originally devised and constructed the line of outposts that Scott and the other engineers in this room were discussing at this very moment.

Corps engineers also had a reputation for approaching their dangerous duties in a much more relaxed fashion than their more "spit-and-polish" contemporaries who served aboard starships and starbases. It was something Scott found almost completely incongruous with the nature of their dangerous and demanding assignments. Part of him was looking forward to seeing the contrast in styles between the Corps and what he considered to be more traditional Starfleet methods.

"As you can imagine," Burke said, "security on this operation is very tight. If the Romulans find out that we have a potential gap in our communications and sensor network along the Zone, they won't hesitate to exploit it. We haven't heard from them in quite a long time, but you can be sure they're waiting for an opportunity just like this one, and we don't want to simply drop it into their laps."

Scott sighed. *As if we won't have enough to worry about.*

\* \* \*

Starbase 10's officers' lounge was a hive of activity, with the changing of duty shifts allowing personnel from all over the station to congregate here and unwind after their workday. Judging by the crowd of people at the bar and those populating the other tables in the room, it was obvious to Scott that this was one of the facility's more popular gathering places.

*And with Scotch such as this,* he thought as he raised his glass to his lips, *it's easy to see why.* The vile brew that had the gall to pass itself off as Scotch on most starships and bases wasn't fit to lubricate the fittings on a shuttlecraft's impulse engine, in his opinion. But the rich, satisfying drink he'd been served here was nothing short of nectar of the gods. In Scott's eyes, whoever was in charge of requisitioning for this station's lounge was deserving of a medal.

In addition to the fine refreshments and cozy, welcoming atmosphere, the lounge also afforded a wondrous view of the surrounding space. Just from where he sat, Scott could see a brilliant, multihued nebula, the storms roiling within it giving the spatial phenomenon a savage beauty that he had rarely seen in his travels.

*That's likely to change, however,* he told himself.

Though he had spent several years in space aboard nine different vessels during his Starfleet career, none of those assignments had offered the opportunities for exploration and discovery that his next post promised. Indeed, the years he would spend aboard the *Enterprise*, if what he'd heard about its proposed mission were true, could potentially bring him into contact with sights and wonders that would make the nebula he was observing now pale in comparison.

Not to mention, it would be his first assignment as a chief engineer.

Unlike many of his friends in Starfleet, including Academy classmates, Scott did not aspire to command a starship. His goals had always pulled him in a different direction. Since his childhood, he had been fascinated with the inner workings of spacefaring vessels, from the earliest fragile craft to leave Earth's atmosphere to those of Vulcans, Andorians, and the other races humans had encountered since first venturing to the stars. Even at a very young age, Montgomery Scott knew that he would never be happy, never be truly fulfilled, until he became the chief engineer of a spaceship.

No, *astarship*. And at last, his lifelong dream was about to come true.

*But*, he reminded himself, *there's one last job to finish*. This emergency at the Neutral Zone had to be secured first, but he knew that the *Enterprise* would still be waiting for him when his work there was done.

"May I join you, Commander?"

The question broke Scott from his reverie, and he turned to see Lieutenant J'lenn standing before him, holding a glass filled with an electric-blue liquid that he did not immediately recognize. He did notice, however, that it possessed the same luster as her eyes, which were at this moment studying him as she waited for an answer to her question.

"Oh," he said, rising quickly to his feet. "Aye, lass, please." He indicated the other chair at the table. "Have a seat. And please, call me Scotty."

As they settled into their chairs, J'lenn indicated the row of windows. "Beautiful view, isn't it?"

"That it is," Scott replied. "I'm not usually one to spend time starin' at the stars, but it's so peaceful here, I couldna resist."

J'lenn nodded. "It certainly is captivating." She took a sip of her drink before continuing. "It reminds me, oddly enough, of the Neutral Zone. When we were on patrol, we'd go for weeks without seeing another ship. There'd be an occasional run-in with pirate vessels or the odd Klingon ship, but usually it was just one of our own. Other than that, it was just us and the stars." She sighed a bit. "Sometimes I miss that duty."

"Which ship were ye on?" Scott asked.

"The *Chandley*, a frigate. Not the most advanced ship in the fleet, and it didn't have a lot in the way of creature comforts, but it was quite the tough little ship in a fight." She shook her head as if momentarily lost in thought, before adding, "Given what they're sending us to the Neutral Zone with, I'd love to be on the *Chandley* right about now."

Scott chuckled at that. "Oh come now. I dinna think the Corps of Engineers would be usin' the *Lovell* if she wasn't a capable ship."

Thinking about that for a moment, J'lenn finally shrugged. "Maybe, but a *Daedalus* -class? Those have been out of service for seventy years. Why would they opt for something so old when there are newer and faster ships available?"

"Available for things like deep-space exploration and border defense," Scott countered, "but the Corps has never really been a priority when it comes to dolin' out new equipment, especially ships." Scott knew

that the Corps of Engineers had been given authorization to retrieve its choice of decommissioned vessels from one of the several storage depots maintained by Starfleet, including the facility at Qualor II, in order to transport its heavy equipment from assignment to assignment.

“It’s not surprisin’ that they picked three *Daedalus* ships,” he said. “In their day, they were Starfleet’s workhorses. They were durable and reliable, and given the right bit o’ care, there’s no reason they couldna all still be in active service today.”

“True, and with a shipload of engineers to tend to it,” J’lenn replied, “the *Lovell* should be quite the sight to behold.”

“*Attention, all personnel,*” the starbase intercom system called out, interrupting Scott’s thoughts. “*The U.S.S. Lovell will be docking momentarily. Lieutenant Commander Scott and Lieutenant J’lenn, report to Docking Port 7 immediately.*”

Movement beyond the viewports caught Scott’s attention, and he turned in time to see a ship, still several dozen kilometers away, slowly approaching the station. Though he had never seen such a vessel outside of textbooks or a museum, his practiced eye immediately recognized the large, spherical primary hull and squat, cylindrical engineering section as that of a *Daedalus* -class ship. It was moving fast, approaching the starbase at what Scott judged to be full impulse power. As it drew closer, he also noticed other things about the vessel.

“What the...,” he began, but the words faded as he rose from his chair, studying the dull, pockmarked paint that only partially covered varying-size areas of otherwise bare metal. Visible dents in the hull plating along with a port warp nacelle that looked as though it might shear away at any moment added to Scott’s rapidly escalating sense of dread.

“Well, look on the bright side,” J’lenn said, her own expression one of near shock as she too beheld the vessel. “We won’t have to worry about the Romulans coming to kill us. That ship will blow apart long before we get to the Neutral Zone.”

Scott’s only reply was to drain the contents of his glass.

## Chapter

# 3

The unease Scott had felt upon first seeing the *Lovell* certainly wasn’t helped when he got a close look at the ship. In all his years in Starfleet, he had never seen a vessel in such deplorable condition, save for those that had been in combat.

*Aye, and along with a few that had crashed into planets.*

Eyeing the *Lovell* through the viewing ports near where it had docked with the starbase, Scott could see that the struts supporting the warp nacelles were not even of the type normally used on *Daedalus* -class ships. He wasn’t sure, but he thought that the struts could have come from an even older model of vessel, perhaps even one of the first deep-space exploration craft Starfleet had ever deployed.

“It certainly isn’t much to look at, is it?” J’lenn asked.

Scott shook his head in disbelief. He could see the weld lines where the sections of hull plating were joined, and Scott could scarcely believe that the ship was capable of withstanding the stresses of interstellar flight.

“What in God’s name is holdin’ that ship together?”

From behind them, a voice answered, “A little luck, a lot of tender loving care, and the best crew of engineers in the fleet.”

Scott and J’lenn turned to see a human male, looking to Scott to be of Middle Eastern descent and sporting a wide, knowing smile. The man’s dark hair was an unruly mop, uncombed and definitely longer than regulation. He appeared to carry himself with a relaxed, almost lackadaisical air that seemed out of sorts with his Starfleet uniform.

“I’ll admit she’s an eyesore,” the man continued, “but she gets us where we need to go. Cruising speed of warp seven, and she’ll even make warp nine when we really need it.”

Unable to conceal an expression of doubt, Scott regarded the newcomer warily. “Warp seven, ye say? That’s quite a feat, lad. After all, *Constitution* -class ships are only rated for cruising speeds of warp six or so.”

The smile on his face fading not one iota, the other man nodded. “The difference between ships of the line and us is that we have more time to tinker. Idle hands and all that.” Extending his hand in greeting, he offered, “Lieutenant Mahmud al-Khaled, Corps of Engineers.”

Scott returned the man’s firm handshake, making the introductions for himself and J’lenn. With that accomplished, he indicated the *Lovell* with a nod of his head in the direction of the viewport.

“I dinna mean to offend ye, lad. It’s just that, well, I hafta admit she’s quite a sight compared to what I’m used to.”

Waving the apology away, al-Khaled chuckled. “It is forgotten. We’re used to the looks she gets, but you’ll change your mind when she goes to warp. I’ll bet you dinner on that.”

“Throw in a bottle of Scotch and Denevan whiskey,” J’lenn countered, much to Scott’s appreciation, “and it’s a wager.”

Al-Khaled’s smile widened and he nodded enthusiastically. “Agreed. The whiskey might be hard to come by, but I have this feeling it’s really not going to matter.”

\* \* \*

“Three root beers, please, and be sure to put them on Commander Scott’s tab.”

As the beverage dispenser in the *Lovell*’s mess hall processed his request, al-Khaled directed the latest in what Scott was sure would be an ongoing series of triumphant grins in their direction. Scott could only look at J’lenn as both engineers shook their heads in mock defeat before turning to look through the room’s viewport once more.



Beyond the plexisteel barrier protecting the room's occupants from the harsh vacuum of space, stars streaked past, dilating and stretching into multihued arcs of light as the *Lovell* traveled rather effortlessly at warp seven toward the Neutral Zone.

Not that it had been uneventful reaching that speed, of course. The *Lovell* had departed Starbase 10 within moments of Scott and J'lenn's boarding, while al-Khaled was giving them a guided tour of the ship's engineering section. The order to engage the warp engines had come from the bridge, and Scott had felt everything from bulkheads to deck plating rattle and threaten to come apart.

"I thought my bloody teeth were gonna shake themselves outta my head," he declared as he and J'lenn seated themselves at one of the tables near the viewport. "But I must admit, she seems to be runnin' just fine now that she has her second wind."

"She can be a bit grumpy at first," al-Khaled said as he arrived at the table bearing a tray with three tall glasses of root beer, Scott and J'lenn's penance for losing their friendly wager. "But once she gets up to speed, I'd bet against any ship in the fleet catching us." As he took his own seat, he indicated the other occupants of the room with a wave of his hand. "Remember, just about everyone aboard is an engineer of some sort, and we spend a lot of time traveling between assignments."

"Naturally there are plenty of opportunities to refine or enhance your onboard systems," J'lenn said.

Al-Khaled nodded, his smile almost mischievous. "Practically everything from the engines on down to the toilets operate above normal efficiency levels."

Scott could see that al-Khaled was an intense young man who took extreme pride in his work, the hallmark of any Starfleet officer, to say nothing of an engineer. In fact, he had gotten that same feeling watching other members of the *Lovell*'s crew from the moment he and J'lenn had stepped aboard. While such positive attitude and work ethic could be found on any worthwhile ship or station in the fleet, Scott felt that there was another intangible quality permeating the atmosphere here. It was as if these people knew they weren't the garden-variety type of Starfleet crew and relished that fact as they performed their duties in an exemplary, if somewhat unorthodox, manner.

His attention was drawn to the doors leading from the mess hall into the corridor, which parted to admit a short, stocky human wearing the tunic and rank insignia of a Starfleet captain. To Scott's surprise, the officer's arrival was acknowledged by a series of informal greetings by various members of the crew, many of whom did not even bother to rise from their seat at their captain's approach. The casual, almost familial way in which pleasantries were exchanged was in stark contrast to what Scott had grown accustomed during his own career.

When he realized the man was making his way deliberately toward their table, Scott rose quickly to his feet, with J'lenn closely following suit. The captain's response was to smile broadly and wave them back to their seats.

"Please, please, as you were," he said as he stuck out a meaty hand to Scott. "Daniel Okagawa, captain of the *Lovell*." Following introductions, Okagawa took the invitation to join the trio of engineers, dropping into an empty chair next to al-Khaled and asking a passing crewman to kindly bring him a cup of black coffee should he be on his way to the food dispensers.

"So," he began as he turned his attention back to Scott and J'lenn, "you're the lucky ones accompanying Mahmud and his team down to the outpost to help us with our little problem."

“Aye, sir, that’s the plan,” Scott replied, not sure how to handle Okagawa’s apparently easygoing demeanor. The *Lovell*’s captain possessed an almost boyish twinkle in his otherwise dark brown eyes that belied the lines in his weathered face. Unlike many of the crewmembers Scott had encountered since coming aboard, Okagawa looked to be every bit a Starfleet officer, judging by his polished boots, impeccably tailored uniform, and exacting regulation haircut. The liberal peppering of gray in his black hair only contributed to the man’s distinguished appearance.

“I’ve read both of your files,” Okagawa continued. “Your expertise will come in handy, Commander Scott.” Looking over to J’lenn he added, “And your knowledge of subspace communications systems may well be our ace in the hole if the outpost’s relay equipment has damage, Lieutenant.”

Nodding appreciatively, J’lenn replied, “Thank you, sir. Let’s hope the damage is not as severe as Starfleet thinks it is.”

Clapping al-Khaled on the shoulder, Okagawa said, “Well, with the two of you and Mahmud and his team, I imagine that old outpost won’t deal out anything you can’t handle. Our little team may not be inspection-ready if an admiral drops by, but we’ll certainly get the job done.”

Looking around the interior of the mess hall, with its variety of mismatched bulkheads, some of which hadn’t even been painted, and its unpolished deck plates, Scott couldn’t suppress an involuntary chuckle. It had been the same in other areas of the ship, including engineering, of all places. The insides of the *Lovell* most definitely fit in with the ship’s disarming, dilapidated exterior.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Okagawa said, a smile on his face as he read Scott’s own expression. “We’re not exactly a ship of the line, are we?”

Working to school his features in reaction to the captain’s blunt question, Scott stalled for an additional few seconds by clearing his throat, an action that only made Okagawa’s smile grow wider.

“Far be it from me to question any ship captain’s methods, sir,” Scott began, but Okagawa only laughed, dismissing the reply with a playful wave of his hand.

“Don’t worry, Commander. Believe me, when I first came aboard this old tub, I was just as stunned as you two probably were. I thought I was going to blow a power coupling when I saw just what Starfleet had handed me.”

Making a show of covering his mouth and coughing, al-Khaled cast a sidelong glance at his captain. “That’s putting it mildly, sir.”

Okagawa ignored the remark. “But it didn’t take me long to realize that when it came to the Corps of Engineers, I simply couldn’t run this ship like I had my previous commands.” He spread his arms, indicating the other patrons of the mess hall. “These people aren’t regular Starfleet. Hell, some of them aren’t any kind of Starfleet. Half of my crew is comprised of civilian specialists, Commander. They humor us by wearing uniforms, but they’re about as regulation as my goldfish. You can’t treat them like regular starship personnel. I’ve learned, through no small number of mistakes and a few occasions where I’ve made a complete ass of myself, that these people do what’s needed, when it’s needed, every time they’re asked.” Shrugging, he added, “The difference between this group and the crew on the science vessel I once commanded is that the scientists didn’t blow off steam by rigging the transporter to beam someone up without their clothes.”

J’lenn had the misfortune to be taking a long drink from her root beer as Okagawa spoke. The engineer

couldn't stifle her own laugh, and instead inhaled a good portion of the beverage, coughing and snorting violently as she blew carbonated liquid through her nose and onto her uniform, the table, and even Scott's sleeve.

"Ah," the captain said, "someone else who appreciates that kind of jocularly. Wonderful." Looking to al-Khaled, he added, "More converts for your flock, Mahmud." Everyone at the table waited until J'lenn got her breathing under control, after which an embarrassed smile crept onto her face.

Seeing that she was all right, Okagawa continued. "So you see, commanding a crew like the *Lovell*'s carries with it an obligation to be flexible, and to see beyond the strict parameters of the so-called rule-book."

The more he thought about it, the more Scott could appreciate the advantages of what Captain Okagawa had provided on the *Lovell*. "'Tis a fine idea, Captain, and my hat's off to ye. Still, I must admit that I don't see myself thrivin' in such an environment. For better or worse, I suppose I'm regular Starfleet through and through."

"Oh, I don't know, Commander," al-Khaled replied. "You'd be surprised at the types of problems we have to deal with from time to time. No two days are alike, I can tell you that. Sure, some of the jobs we get would be boring to a lot of people, but each new assignment brings its own unique set of challenges."

"It's similar aboard a starship," J'lenn countered, "especially with the push for more exploration into uncharted areas. In fact, I'm surprised they didn't send a starship or two to deal with this problem at the Neutral Zone."

Al-Khaled nodded politely. "Fair enough, but just as there are purely medical and science vessels in the fleet, so too are there dedicated crews specially trained to deal with unusual engineering problems. There are some situations where it's impractical to divert a ship of the line, but for which the *Lovell* is ideally suited."

Wiggling his eyebrows impishly at the pair of engineers, Okagawa added, "Wait until you see them in action, Mr. Scott. You just might change your mind."

## Chapter

# 4

As he felt the tingling and even chilling effect of the transporter's reintegration process release him, Montgomery Scott had to wait a few extra seconds as his eyes adjusted to his new surroundings. The lighting here was noticeably dimmer than the standard levels aboard Federation starships and starbases. His ears quickly tuned to what was an uncharacteristic silence for a small, self-contained facility as Outpost 5, nestled as it was within a rocky crevasse of an otherwise barren asteroid.

Then he drew a breath.

Reports from outpost personnel had already notified the *Lovell* crew that the station's life-support systems had been compromised by the ion storm, but he recognized the poor quality of the atmosphere he was breathing. The air felt almost textured in his mouth as his lungs worked to fill themselves with

oxygen, and a sticky tang that was the most unpleasant aspect of poorly recycled air swept across his taste buds. Instinct and experience told him that the damage to the outpost's environmental systems was probably more severe than originally reported, and had to be operating at the lowermost limit of humanoid tolerance. The engineers would have to work quickly to get the systems restored.

The chamber they had beamed into was the closest thing to a reception area that Outpost 5 possessed. It was in actuality just a cargo hold that had been converted into an exterior-activity dressing area, dominated by lockers containing environmental suits and other accessories for use by outpost personnel when working out on the surface. At one end of the room was an open hatchway revealing a sparsely lit corridor that lead to the rest of the outpost. Scott could see where plastisteel wall panels had been installed at points along the passageway, covering up the bare rock of the asteroid from which the tunnel had been carved. Even in the muted illumination of the room Scott could make out the stout, heavy hatch of the chamber's main airlock at the room's far end, which led to the airless exterior of the asteroid itself.

"Not very homey, is it?" he asked.

Standing next to him, al-Khaled shook his head. "These border outposts are strictly no-frills affairs. This close to the Neutral Zone, you can imagine the day-to-day tension level, even if no one's heard from the Romulans in years. Combine that with a lack of real recreational facilities or the ability to travel to very many places for R&R, and you can see what a hardship posting this is. That's why they rotate personnel out of these stations every six months." Taking another look around the stark chamber, al-Khaled exhaled audibly. "It's not at the top of my dream duty list, that's for sure."

The sound of labored breathing attracted Scott's attention and he turned to see Lieutenant J'lenn bent over at the waist, her hands on her knees as she gasped for breath.

"Are ye all right, lassie?" Along with al-Khaled and the other members of the landing party sent down from the *Lovell*, he moved quickly to the young lieutenant's side.

"Air's...thinner than I thought...hard to...breathe," J'lenn managed to force out between ragged breaths. It didn't take Scott long to realize what was causing the woman's difficulty. On her home planet in the Alpha Centauri system, J'lenn had grown up breathing an atmosphere richer in oxygen than that found on Earth. She and others from her native world could breathe in the somewhat thinner atmosphere found aboard primarily human-dominated ships and starbases. The differences in her physiology, however, also left her more susceptible to the compromised environmental conditions in which the landing party now found themselves.

With that in mind, Scott realized that the last thing J'lenn needed was a crowd of worried comrades competing for the already depleted oxygen around her as they all moved to offer her assistance.

"Let's give her some room, lads," he said. Putting a hand on J'lenn's shoulder he added, "Slow deep breaths, Lieutenant. We'll get ye somethin' to help ye breathe easier."

Footsteps echoed in the corridor and Scott looked up to see a haggard-looking man jogging into the room. He wore a red standard-issue Starfleet utility jumpsuit that was sullied by sweat, grease, and grime. Scott could tell by his gaunt features that it had been days since the man had enjoyed anything even resembling a decent night's sleep. Given the situation here, he was sure that all of the outpost's personnel were feeling the same way.

"You have no idea how great it is to see you," the man said, a smile breaking out onto his tired face. Running a hand through his thick, dirty-blond hair, he said, "I'm Celine...Evert Celine, chief of

operations. Commander Thompson got trapped below during our last cave-in, so I'm in charge up here for the time being." Noticing J'lenn's difficulty, he asked, "Is she okay?"

"This air's too thin for her," Scott offered. "She's Alpha Centauran, so it's a bit rougher on her than the rest of us. Do ye have a rebreather or some tri-ox compound handy?"

Celine nodded. "The rebreathers we have left are being used by other station personnel, but I can get the doc up here with some tri-ox." Retrieving a portable communicator from a pocket of his jumpsuit, he opened the unit's antenna grid and adjusted the frequency knob. "Celine to Dr. Hoyt. Doc, I'm in the main EA prep room and I need some tri-ox compound for one of our guests. Can you get up here?"

A gravelly voice, sounding every bit as exhausted as Celine's, answered seconds later. "*On my way, Chief. Have the patient lie down and try to relax until I get there.*"

"Roger that. Celine out." Returning the communicator to his pocket, Celine regarded the landing party. "Main communications are down, so we're stuck using portable comm until we can get it fixed. One of the many items on our things-to-do list, I'm afraid."

Scott nodded in understanding. "I can only imagine how hard it's been to hold this place together since the storm."

Letting a small laugh slip out, Celine smiled wearily. "There isn't a system on this entire rock that isn't compromised, jury-rigged, cross-connected, or just plain fried. We've been running between circuit panels and crawling through access tubes for days."

They were interrupted as another man entered the room. Noticeably older, he was bald except for gray stubble on the sides and back of his head. He wore a blue jumpsuit and carried what Scott recognized to be a field medical pouch. The man's shoulders were slumped as he walked, and whether it was due to age, fatigue, or both was anyone's guess.

"Somebody call a doctor?" Hoyt asked, a tired smile crossing his weathered features.

"Over here, Doctor," Scott said, waving the other man over to where he had made J'lenn lie down on a bench near the prep room's dressing area.

Moving over to kneel beside the young engineer, Hoyt gave her a quick look as he drew a hypospray from his medical pouch and affixed a liquid-filled ampule to one end. Pressing the hypospray to her shoulder, he said, "This will help you. Just give it a second to kick in."

At the hiss of the injection, J'lenn closed her eyes and bit down on her lower lip as she focused on inhaling deeply through her flared nostrils. After a moment she nodded as her breathing slowly began to return to normal. "That's much better now." Smiling up at Scott she added, "I'm okay now, Scotty. Thank you." She made an attempt to raise herself to a sitting position, but Hoyt restrained her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"You just stay right there for a few more minutes, young lady," the doctor said, his voice gentle yet firm like that of a trusted grandfather. "That tri-ox compound will help you for a few hours, but you'll need booster shots. Between the two of us, what say we keep track of the time, all right? I know you engineering types like to run yourselves ragged, but try to call me *before* you pass out, okay?"

J'lenn laughed a bit, nodding in agreement. "No problem, Doctor. Thanks."

Scott sighed in momentary relief. It was tempting to hope that all of the problems they would face in restoring the station to normal operations would be solved so easily, but he knew that such hope was misplaced.

Turning back to Celine, he said, "Chief, ye know best where ye need us first." Indicating the rest of the landing party with a nod of his head, he added, "The sooner we get to work, the faster we can get this place back up and runnin'. So, where do we start?"

In response, Celine reached for the tricorder hanging from his shoulder. Activating the unit, he adjusted its controls before passing it to Scott. "Our first priorities are life support and the main reactor. The life-support system repairs are pretty straightforward, but we have no way to get to our maintenance section for the replacement parts we need."

"We'll get whatever we need from the *Lovell*," al-Khaled replied. "No problem there."

Celine nodded in appreciation before continuing. "The reactor is the major concern, though. That ion storm showered the fuel core with energy spikes that were off the scale. Fission balances are completely out of line, and unchecked power surges are overloading systems all over the outpost as fast as we can repair them. All in all it's a great big mess."

Almost on cue, a resonating hum filled the air and the room's lighting grew brighter. One overhead fixture popped and sparked, sending wafts of smoke across the room's ceiling. Rushing to a wall control, Celine slapped it with the palm of his hand and the entire room was plunged into darkness for several seconds until emergency backup lighting was activated.

Scott closed the tricorder's flip-top cover as the hum of the power surge subsided. Turning to al-Khaled, he said, "We should split up, Mahmud, and go after the reactor and life support at the same time." He looked over at J'lenn, who by now had pulled herself to a sitting position. "You know your way around these outposts. Think ye can find your way to the reactor core?"

"Just follow the glow, right?" J'lenn offered with a wry grin.

"Not exactly," Celine replied as he activated the room's main lighting again. When the lights came back on, they were even dimmer than they had been when the landing party had first arrived. "We can't get to the reactor chamber from up here. The passageway on that level between that area and the turbolift is partially collapsed from a cave-in. If we're going to get to it, we're going to have to dig."

Scott nodded in understanding. The asteroid's mineral composition, featuring huge amounts of elmyracite, idrenium, and a whole host of other trace elements all combined to make transporters and sensors useless beyond a few hundred meters.

"We have a whole host of portable drilling equipment aboard the *Lovell*, including a few Mark III laser-drilling packs," al-Khaled said. "They should handle this job quite nicely."

Scotty nodded his approval. Those drills were used to create the very type of subterranean networks common to outposts like these, to say nothing of facilities and colonies on otherwise inhospitable planets.

"And guess who got herself rated on that particular model just last month?" J'lenn replied.

Al-Khaled smiled. "Excellent. You're hired." Indicating one of the engineers who had beamed down

with them from the *Lovell*, he added, "I'm sending Kellerman with you. Those are his babies." Looking to the remaining members of his team he said, "Anderson, O'Halloran, you're on the life-support detail."

"I'll send one of my people with them," Celine said.

Scott nodded his concurrence with the plan of action. Al-Khaled was certainly demonstrating his mettle as both an engineer and a leader, he decided. The younger man had analyzed the situation confronting them, and he had quickly and decisively issued orders and gotten his people to work. Within the ranks of the Corps of Engineers, opportunity for taking charge presented itself at every turn, Scott was discovering. These creative and resourceful minds rarely waited to fly ideas past their commanding officers, a function of the necessary speed of their work. An axiom for any engineer, Scott had learned, was that oftentimes it was easier to request forgiveness than to obtain permission. That line of thinking was proving to be quite applicable in the Corps as well.

"And what about you three?" J'lenn asked, a teasing smile on her face. "It's nowhere near happy hour yet."

Scott could not suppress a chuckle, relieved to see that the young engineer was obviously feeling better and had regained her sense of humor. "The drinks'll be on me when ye cut us a path to the reactor."

"Is it possible to get a report on the reactor's current status?" al-Khaled asked. "I want to make sure it's stable before I send anyone down there, and I want to see the path they'll have to take."

Celine nodded. "The main operations center was heavily damaged during the storm, but we've converted the environmental-control room to work out as a substitute."

"Then that's where the party is," al-Khaled replied.

\* \* \*

*On the grand scale of control rooms, Scott thought as he looked around the one governing Outpost 5's environmental systems, this one ranks just above my dear mother's tinkering shack back in Aberdeen.*

In fairness, Scott could see that the small room had been hastily reconfigured in order to function as the outpost's nerve center. At least a dozen extra display monitors and computer workstations had been added to the room's already cramped array of consoles. Wiring and exposed circuitry littered the room and there was very little in the way of floor space.

"We've spent hours routing network paths to this place, so it's not the most tidy of working environments," Celine said almost apologetically as he stepped over a bundle of cables taped to the floor. "But you'll be able to access just about any information you might need. We've transferred the entire workload to a backup power supply, so even if the reactor goes down we'll still have some control over most systems for a time."

Scott nodded as he surveyed the cramped quarters housing cobbled-together control panels. Many of the stations were dominated by older models of monochromatic display screens, the same type of nearly obsolete models supported by telescoping rods from the ceiling and the slightly slanting bulkheads that were likely being replaced aboard his new posting, the Starship *Enterprise*, at this very moment. "No, Chief, this place'll do nicely. I daresay ye couldna done better with a week's notice."

Al-Khaled found a place in front of one set of display screens and turned one of the monitors toward him for a look. “Are these the readings for the reactor?”

Celine stepped beside him to see the viewer for himself, reaching across al-Khaled and toggling a few switches. “They are now. We’ve set things up so that we can monitor every system from each seat.”

“Aye, lad, that’s mighty convenient.” Scott seated himself at another station and peered at the bank of displays. Mimicking what he had seen Celine do, he scrolled through a series of data images until he found what he was looking for. “And this’d be a map of the corridors to this place, yes?”

Seeing what the engineer had called up, Celine nodded. “Yes, sir. The highlighted paths indicate clear passageways.”

Scott surveyed the map before him. The crisscross of red lines showed a number of dark gaps preventing them from connecting. He knew that each gap represented clots of rock and debris that blocked portions of various passages. Whole sections of living quarters and work areas were darkened, as was a stretch of the outpost’s main corridor that must have represented a collapsed area hundreds of meters long. It was that section of the station that was keeping them from reaching the now failing fission reactor, a failure that soon could spell death for them all if left unchecked.

“We’ve definitely got our work cut out for us,” he said, shaking his head. J’lenn and Kellerman had already been dispatched into the outpost’s lower levels. There, with the portable drilling equipment transported down from the *Lovell*, they would confront the collapsed passageway separating the reactor room from the rest of the station.

Al-Khaled shifted in his seat. “According to these readings, it doesn’t appear that the reactor has been damaged so much as it seems to be overheating. The readings in the last two hours in particular show a massive rise in internal operating temperature. If I had to guess, I’d say that the coolant regulator system was damaged. We might get away easy after all.”

Scott wasn’t so sure. “There’s an awful lot of rock separatin’ us from that room, lad. It won’t matter what’s ailin’ that beastie if we canna get to it.”

## Chapter

# 5

With a sigh of resignation, J’lenn pulled the hood of her full-body protective garment over her head, sealing herself inside. She had always detested wearing the things. Even though they were lighter and less cumbersome than regular environmental suits used in space, they were still confining and did a magnificent job of retaining the wearer’s body heat.

“Okay, Scotty, we’re all bagged and ready to drill.” Introduced into general use a little more than a year ago, no one she knew liked wearing the garments. They had quickly earned the uncomplimentary nickname of “space bags” from engineers across Starfleet. However, the suits would protect her and Kellerman from the worst of the heat discharged by the laser drilling packs they would be using.

“Orange is really not my color, you know,” she added, looking down at herself.



She heard laughter from over her communicator. It was al-Khaled. *"It brings out your eyes."* A few seconds later, the engineer's voice was all business. *"Keep this channel open, J'lenn. We'll be monitoring your progress and I want reports every few minutes."*

"Aye, sir," J'lenn replied. In order to help her do that, Kellerman had provided a minor yet surprisingly effective demonstration of the type of field-expedient ingenuity for which engineers were well-known. He had rigged their communicators inside the head-pieces of their protective garments, leaving their hands free to work with the laser drills.

*"Ye get a dram of Scotch for that one, lad,"* Scott said over the channel. *"We're ready here when you are, J'lenn."*

"Affirmative," J'lenn replied as she adjusted the straps on her laser drill's backpack rig. "Kellerman, I don't remember these things being so heavy during training."

Kellerman grinned and bobbed his eyebrows mischievously. "You're right. These are carrying a heavier battery pack than normal. I cannibalized a couple from a pair of old Mark IX artillery cannons."

J'lenn nodded in understanding. The bulky Mark IXs had been carried aboard starships for years and had proven their reliability in a variety of situations, though as far as she knew they had never been used in the types of combat operations for which they were originally designed. In addition to their own self-contained battery packs, the weapons could also receive and reconfigure power transmitted directly from an orbiting ship. The cannons were in the process of being phased out in favor of lighter, self-propelled models, though, so J'lenn wasn't surprised that engineers like Kellerman would seize the opportunity to salvage any useful parts.

"It's like Lieutenant al-Khaled has been trying to tell you," Kellerman began.

She smiled as she waved the rest of his statement away. "I know, there's plenty of time for you and your team to tinker aboard the *Lovell*. I'm beginning to understand the magnitude of that statement, Ensign." Taking hold of the drill itself, she hefted the tool in her hands and tested its weight. "I'm qualified to operate this thing, Kellerman, but that doesn't mean I'm an expert in drilling. How do you think we should proceed?"

Nodding, Kellerman indicated the rock wall that formed the recently created barrier in the tunnel before them. "No problem, Lieutenant. I'll make the first cut on my side, and then you just mirror what I do. Just watch out that we don't cross our beams." He smiled knowingly. "That would be bad."

Choosing a point on the upper part of the rock barrier, Kellerman took aim with his own drill and pressed the firing stud. The tunnel was soon filled with a high-pitched whine as the laser drill ramped up to its full power. Rock immediately began to disintegrate under the beam's power as the ensign carved into the wall.

Taking her cue from Kellerman, J'lenn activated her own drill and began to cut a similar path through the rock on her own side of the tunnel. It only took a few seconds for the pair of engineers to fall into a rhythm, working in tandem as they began to push their way forward. Even though the insulated material of her protective suit blocked most of the noise, it was still loud enough that she had to strain to hear the voices coming across the communicator channel.

*"Aye, that's the ticket, lass,"* Scott's voice sounded near her ear. *"Yer makin' some headway"*

*already.”*

“This is great,” J’lenn said to no one in particular as she watched the effect of the drills on the tunnel wall. “I’ll admit to being a bit more optimistic about this now that we’ve started.”

*“That’s fair to say, Lieutenant,” al-Khaled’s voice said over the communicator, “but we may not have as much time as we thought. The reactor’s temperature is continuing to rise. You’re going to have to speed things up a bit. No points for neatness.”*

J’lenn grimaced as she continued to work. “I don’t suppose you have any good news for us?”

*“Actually, we do,” Scott’s voice replied. “Anderson and O’Halloran must have connected the right two wires, because the life-support system is operating normally again. No more tri-ox compound for you, I’m afraid.”*

“Excellent,” J’lenn replied, never taking her eyes from where her drill’s beam continued to cut into the rock wall. “And the showers? I’m sweating enough to make a Tellarite jealous.”

Scott chuckled at that. *“Let’s walk before we run, lass. What’s your status?”*

Releasing her drill’s firing stud, J’lenn looked down at her tricorder, which she had left activated in order to keep track of their progress. “Everything looks stable. We’ve cleared about fifteen meters, and Mr. Kellerman has almost convinced me that he’s not deliberately holding back to avoid embarrassing me as he leaves me in his tracks.”

She didn’t really need to keep a close watch on the readings her tricorder was gathering as they worked. Back in the control center, al-Khaled and Scott were receiving all of the data the unit was collecting. With many of the outpost’s internal sensor systems off-line, the tricorder was providing the only truly reliable information about the area of tunnel they were working in and, as they drew closer to it, the reactor chamber itself.

\* \* \*

In the environmental-control center, Scott saw that al-Khaled was engrossed in one of the monitors at his console.

“Mahmud?” he said, crossing the small room to join his companion. “What have ye got, lad?”

Not answering immediately, al-Khaled continued to study the display for several more seconds before he turned toward Celine. “Chief, are these the most detailed schematics for the outpost that we can get from these workstations?”

Rising from his own chair, the outpost operations chief shook his head. “We’ve got everything mapped. What do you want to see?”

“The conduit system for the reactor coolant,” al-Khaled replied. “Something’s not right here. There has to be a leak somewhere. Maybe we can find the breach and patch it. Then we could direct some more coolant to the reactor and maybe avoid having to dig through to the chamber after all.”

Celine leaned closer to the console and tapped a series of switches, calling up a more detailed schematic that showed the system of conduits directing the flow of coolant to and from the reactor. Areas of bright

red highlighted several areas along the conduit lines, illustrating where the breaks were.

“We may have to rig a bypass for some of these damaged sections,” Scott said as he pointed to various areas on the screen. “It’ll take some time, though.” Shaking his head, he added, “More time than we might have. We dinna have any choice but to keep diggin’ for the reactor.”

An alarm suddenly sounded in the cramped confines of the control room. Scott’s head whipped toward the source and he saw that it was coming from the console he had been overseeing a few moments before.

It was the monitor that displayed the scan data from J’lenn’s tricorder.

“Stop the—!”

But then the control room rocked like a shuttlecraft struck by a photon torpedo.

The deck abruptly disappeared from beneath Scott’s feet. With no time to break his fall as he was dumped onto the grimy floor, the impact drove the air from his lungs and he felt a sharp pain in his back as he fell onto something hard and unyielding. In the corner of his eye he could see al-Khaled thrown from his chair to the deck and Celine barely able to hold on to the console. Dust shook from the walls and ceiling, creating a fine shroud that choked the very air from the room.

Still lying on the littered deck, Scott groped for his own communicator, which had been tossed to the floor by the explosion. It was still open and active.

“J’lenn! Come in, J’lenn! Kellerman? Is anyone there?” His shouting drowned out the plethora of buzzers and alarms now sounding in the control room. It did not, however, drown out the pounding sound of his heart.

“J’Lenn!”

\* \* \*

They raced through the winding subterranean corridors of the outpost, their steps echoing off the walls of the passageways. Their headlong flight came to an abrupt end, though, before a small mountain of rocks, shattered thermoconcrete and twisted metal beams clogging the tunnel ahead of them.

Scott and Celine were forced to halt momentarily, hunching over to gasp for breath in the still-thin air, but al-Khaled continued to sprint ahead to the newly created barrier of wreckage. He began to dig furiously with his hands, whipping stones and dirt away in all directions, oblivious to the fact that he was flinging some of the rubble back toward his comrades.

Managing to sidestep most of the barrage, Scott approached the muttering and obviously enraged engineer. He could hear the words carried by al-Khaled’s panting breaths as he stepped closer.

“...son of a bitch...son of a bitch...”

He placed one hand on the frantic man’s shoulder, but al-Khaled spun away from the mound to face him, his eyes red with both anger and pain.

*“Son of a bitch!”*

Scott reeled back a step, as much from the volume of al-Khaled's voice as from the rage in his eyes. "We *do not* lose people in the Corps! I have *never* lost anyone before, and I'm not starting here on this damn godforsaken rock!"

Having lost friends on hazardous missions before, Scott could understand the rampant emotions threatening to run unchecked through the lieutenant's mind. This was no time, however, to lose all self-control, even in the face of tragedy. With that in mind, he tried to temper his voice from reflecting the emotion that he, too, felt burning in his blood.

"Mahmud, lad. There was no way to know this would happen. We all knew this was going to be a risky job. You canna blame yourself for this."

"Unacceptable! It's unacceptable!" Al-Khaled's breathing had begun to deepen and slow, his voice still harsh but losing a bit of the anger that had consumed it only seconds before. Instead, he simply let his head hang in despair. "It's... dammit, Scotty."

The two men stood there, their panting and the gentle whine of Celine's tricorder the only noise in the tunnel. When he heard the chief turn the unit off, he looked over to see the man standing silently a few paces away. Celine comprehended the questioning look in Scott's eyes and nodded grimly in response.

After a few additional moments the chief finally said, "There're no life readings. Even with the elemental interference, I'm sure we'd pick up something this close to where they were digging." Looking to al-Khaled, his expression softened. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant."

Al-Khaled nodded, and Celine informed Scott that he wanted to return to the control room and make sure that the outpost had not suffered any other damage.

The chief jogged back up the passageway toward the turbolift, leaving Scott to wait silently as al-Khaled stood before the mound of rubble blocking the passageway. Somewhere beyond the mass of rock and debris, Scott knew, the bodies of the two doomed engineers were buried. For the moment, retrieving them would be potentially hazardous. More air pockets almost certainly existed along the length of the collapsed tunnel, and any or all of them could be filled with leaked coolant, waiting for something to ignite them as J'lenn and Kellerman had unfortunately done.

"Engineers aren't supposed to die like that," al-Khaled said after several moments.

"No one is supposed to die like that, Mahmud," Scott replied. "Engineers are supposed to make sure of it. But accidents happen, and sometimes even we are helpless to do anything about it." He was only partially aware of how incongruous the words sounded, coming from him. They were words that should have come from the mouth of someone with more wisdom and life experience than he possessed at this point in his life. Had his relatively short career in Starfleet and the things he had encountered in that brief span of time aged him that quickly?

The words, however, seemed to be sinking in as al-Khaled narrowed his eyes at Scott. "This is too dangerous. We can't keep boring along this passageway. We'll just hit more coolant pockets, and there's no way to detect them with all of these minerals fouling up our scans."

"Aye, that's likely." But Scott was at a loss as to how else they might get to the reactor core. A curse of technology, Scott reminded himself, was that it furtively invited dependence, almost an addiction to its developers and users. When the forces of nature stripped away the ability to use such devices as a

transporter or a warp drive or a phaser or a scanner, Scott knew, dependence became the enemy of imagination.

It was time for them to think, and think fast.

The chirping of his communicator interrupted his thoughts. Flipping open the unit's antenna grid, he was greeted by the voice of the *Lovell*'s captain.

*"Okagawa to landing party. Our sensor readings up here just showed a large power spike in that reactor of yours. What's happening?"*

Scott paused to look to al-Khaled, whose face showed some regret at what he would have to tell his captain. He offered the communicator to the younger man, who Scott knew was the appropriate bearer of their grim report.

"Captain, this is al-Khaled. We've had an explosion and tunnel collapse. Lieutenant J'lenn and Ensign Kellerman have been lost." Pausing to swallow a large lump in his throat, he added, "They're dead, sir." He squeezed his eyes closed and pressed his lips tight as he delivered that last part, fighting to keep his emotions in check. Scott refused to rub his own eyes, allowing the sting to burn into them as they awaited a response from the *Lovell*.

Okagawa's words were a few moments in coming. *"I'm sorry, Mahmud. I'm sure there was nothing you could have done to prevent that."* After pausing for several seconds he said, *"I hate to sound cold about this, but I think they'd understand that we have other concerns now. How quickly can you fix the reactor?"*

"It will take me a minute to estimate that for you, Captain," al-Khaled replied.

*"More than two hours?"*

"To reach it and repair it?" Al-Khaled looked to Scott as if to pose the question to him as well as to the captain. Scott shook his head no. If that was the team's time frame, they might as well write off the outpost and its subspace communications relay. Their only hope would be that the Romulans were busy enough with other matters on their side of the Neutral Zone that they didn't notice anything untoward until such time as the outpost could be repaired or replaced.

Nodding in silent agreement with Scott, al-Khaled raised the communicator to his mouth once more. "I'm sorry, sir, but we'll need more time than that."

*"You haven't got it,"* Okagawa replied. There was no mistaking the quiet confidence in the captain's voice. He had weighed the situation and made a command decision. *"Let's start evacuating the outpost. Pass my order to Chief Celine and the rest of the outpost crew. I'll send more personnel to start salvaging key equipment and copying computer data. That's the best we can do, son."*

Scott allowed himself a sigh. Sometimes, retreat was the only option left in battle, and they had waged war against the reactor, the outpost, and the asteroid itself long enough to know a losing fight when it confronted them. Though he refused to consider the deaths of J'lenn and Kellerman as losses in vain, he was certain he would carry the lessons of Outpost 5 for the rest of his Starfleet career.

"No, sir."

The tone of voice startled Scott. It was still al-Khaled's voice, but now it sounded older. No, not exactly older, but there was definitely an edge to the man's voice that it had not possessed earlier.

"Give us one more shot at this, sir. I can't leave this outpost and watch it destroy itself, not with so much at stake. The relay is too important, and we've already got blood on our hands."

The two merely stared at one another, waiting through what seemed to Scott to be the longest, quietest moment of the entire mission. He was certain that any captain in his right mind would simply tell al-Khaled that while his intentions were well-placed and his passion was heartening, time was simply no longer on their side.

Daniel Okagawa, however, was either not in his right mind or else he was accustomed to engineers and the crazy plans they tended to hatch when under pressure to succeed in the face of overwhelming odds.

*"All right, Lieutenant. What have you got in mind?"*

## Chapter

# 6

"I'm not sure if this qualifies under Occam's razor, but it might just be our only chance."

Scott said nothing as al-Khaled tapped a keypad next to the control center's main viewscreen. In response to his command, the screen's image shifted to show a computer-generated schematic of Outpost 5 and the asteroid playing host to it. The station's damaged PXX fission reactor, buried in its own control room beneath tons of solid rock, was highlighted in bright red. A pair of parallel lines colored a brilliant green hue traced a straight path from the surface of the asteroid to the reactor's location.

"Drill down through solid rock?" Scott asked. Contrary to al-Khaled's comment, the idea itself did indeed seem to be as simple as it sounded. It was well in keeping with the centuries-old axiom the younger engineer had referenced, or at least the most common interpretation of the principle widely attributed to William of Occam, a human philosopher who had lived on fourteenth-century Earth: "The simplest solution is often the correct one." Translations and contextual application of the notion had evolved almost continuously to the point that nearly every engineer who heard or invoked the age-old theory simply referred to it in the spirit of, "Keep it simple, stupid."

*Aye, a fine idea, Scott mused, but will it really work?* Given the dire nature of their current situation, he still needed convincing.

At another workstation, Chief Celine tapped a series of switches on his console and the image changed again, this time zooming in on the drilling path al-Khaled had proposed. "The limited scans we've been able to perform show more coolant leaks in several of the tunnels leading from the upper levels down to the engineering spaces. There's sure to be more that we can't detect farther down. If you take this route, you can avoid that hazard altogether."

When al-Khaled didn't say anything after several seconds, Scott turned to look in his direction and saw by the expression on the younger engineer's face that his mind was not entirely focused on the problem at

hand. It was obvious that he was still haunted by the tragic deaths of J'lenn and Kellerman less than an hour before.

Scott felt the loss as well, even though he'd only first met J'lenn at the briefing on Starbase 10 and he hadn't known Kellerman at all. The immediacy of their mission simply had not allowed him the luxury of getting to know too many of the *Lovell*'s crew.

In some ways that was fortunate, for it allowed him to push away the feelings of anger and despair over the engineers' deaths, to isolate them to a certain extent. Still, two people had died, and they deserved to be mourned and remembered.

But not here, and not now. Now, there was a job to do.

Placing a comforting hand on al-Khaled's shoulder, he said, "Easy lad. I know what you're feelin', believe me. But right now, the best thing we can do for them is see this mission through, otherwise their deaths'll have no meanin'."

On another of the control center's viewscreens, Captain Okagawa watched the exchange via the communications channel linking the two engineers with the *Lovell*. "*He's right, Mahmud. There will be time for remembering later, but only if you give us that opportunity.*"

Nodding at the comforting words provided by Scott and his captain, al-Khaled took a few deep breaths before returning his full attention to the task at hand. "The actual procedure shouldn't be terribly complicated. We have heavy drilling equipment on the *Lovell* that will make fairly short work of it. Once we get down there, if we can't shut the reactor down or repair the cooling system, then we'll have to remove it outright. The drilling rig has its own tractor beam, so we can pull or push the reactor right back up the tunnel, at least far enough for the *Lovell* to latch on with its own and pull it the rest of the way."

"That's a mighty bold plan, lad," Scott said, with no small amount of admiration for the tenacity al-Khaled was displaying. The plan was indeed audacious, but the younger engineer had proposed it with an almost matter-of-fact demeanor, as if the risk and the potential consequences were simply factors to be considered in the equation and nothing more. "We'll have our work cut out for us, that's for sure."

Celine said, "Even with the risk, though, this is the fastest way given the time constraints you'll be working under." Captain Okagawa had ordered the evacuation of the station's personnel to the *Lovell*, but only thirty-two of the outpost's fifty crewmembers had been able to get out. Most of the others, including the outpost's commander, were still trapped in the facility's lower levels beyond the range of the ship's transporter, given the interference from the asteroid's mineral composition. Of those, three had been assigned to the reactor area and had not been heard from since the storm had first hit the outpost, and the worst had already been assumed.

As for the remaining fifteen people, no one involved in the current operation had to say aloud what was already known. If the reactor could not be repaired or removed, those people would die.

"*We can transport anything you need to you in ten minutes,*" Okagawa offered over the comm link. "*And I can put a crew to work getting the heavier equipment down to you as soon as you give the word.*"

Al-Khaled studied the series of calculations he had requested from the station's computer. "According to this, it will take us nearly two hours to drill down through the rock to the reactor chamber. We won't be able to scan the room or the reactor itself until we're within a few hundred meters of it. It's very

possible the room will be flooded with coolant.”

Shrugging, Scott countered. “If we do nothing, we’ll lose the reactor and most of this asteroid. Seems to me we dinna have much choice, lad.”

\* \* \*

*Och, how I hate wearin’ these blasted contraptions.*

Scott tried to ignore the sound of his own breathing, echoed as it was within the confines of the environmental suit he wore. Instead, he concentrated on keeping himself safely behind one of the protective shields protruding from each side of “the Mole,” as the aptly nicknamed drilling vehicle chewed its way through the dense rock of the asteroid.

A squat, bulky piece of machinery, the Mole’s most prominent feature was the large, intimidating phased-energy drilling array mounted on the rig’s forward section. In addition to the pair of multiterrain treads that helped propel the Mole over ground, the vehicle also had a series of maneuvering thrusters and magnetic plates that would allow it to work in low-gravity environments or even totally exposed in space. Scott had encountered such a rig before, early in his career when his ship had ferried a group of dilithium miners to the newly established colony on Rigel XII. He had taken advantage of the long voyage to acquaint himself with the mechanics who saw to the mining vehicles’ maintenance. With an unmatched construction and operational record, drilling rigs like the Mole were a preferred favorite, used at mining establishments throughout the Federation. Upon first seeing this particular unit, however, Scott had not been able to suppress a chuckle when he saw a yawning mouth complete with large, irregularly sharpened teeth painted on its frame just behind the drilling array.

For what could probably have been the hundredth time, he glanced down at the compact control panel mounted to his left wrist. A series of small displays communicated information about his suit’s operation to him, continuously updating the status of his oxygen, internal temperature, and other annoying data such as his heart rate, which the suit dutifully informed him was accelerated. Catching himself in the mostly involuntary action, Scott forced his hand down to his sides and returned his full attention to the task at hand.

True to his word, Captain Okagawa had seen to the transfer of environmental suits for al-Khaled and himself only moments after severing communication with them, along with the standard tool-kit that the younger man had requested. While the pair of engineers had busied themselves preparing for their sojourn out onto the asteroid’s surface, a team of two additional crewmembers had been dispatched from the *Love*ll in a shuttlecraft, towing the Mole down from the larger ship with a tractor beam.

Displaying yet another quality Scott admired in officers of any rank or position, al-Khaled had notified the captain that he himself would be overseeing the drilling. Scott could hear the confidence in the man’s voice when he had relayed that, noting the determination that he would not stand idly by as another member of his team risked potential injury or death while digging down to the reactor. Okagawa must have heard it, too, for he said nothing except to acknowledge the report his lieutenant had given him and to wish the team luck.

“*Okagawa to landing party,*” the captain’s voice abruptly called out through Scott’s suit communicator. “*We’ve beamed everyone that we can reach with transporters up to the ship. That still leaves the eighteen down there that we couldn’t get to. Everyone else from our team is back up here, as well, so that just leaves you four.*” There was a significant pause before Okagawa added, “*I expect that head count to be the same when you’re done down there, Mahmud.*”



With about ninety minutes left to them before the outpost reactor was predicted to reach overload, the team was making excellent time. A tunnel more than six meters in diameter was being excavated most efficiently thanks to the firing sequence programmed into the onboard computer controlling the Mole's drilling array. Eight individual drilling lasers, working in rapid alternating succession, were boring and disintegrating the rock so quickly that Scott and al-Khaled were able to walk at an almost normal pace alongside the rig. Inside the vehicle's compact cab, the two engineers who had flown the shuttlecraft down from the *Lovell* were at the Mole's controls.

"How are we doing, Ghrex?" al-Khaled asked.

At the Mole's piloting controls, the female Denobulan ensign responded, "All systems are nominal, sir. We are proceeding on schedule."

Sitting next to Ghrex, Lieutenant Paul LeGere was monitoring the rig's drilling apparatus. "At this rate, Mahmud, we should be able to break through into the reactor room inside of thirty minutes."

Nodding in satisfaction, Scott consulted his tricorder. Though the dense mineral deposits scattered throughout the asteroid were still disrupting scans, he could already see a marked improvement in the unit's sensor returns since they had started drilling.

"I've got a faint readin' on the reactor room," he reported. "No sign of any coolant leaks that I can find. We might be in luck, at least as far as that's concerned." Checking the tricorder's display again, he added, "Reactor temperature is continuin' to rise, though. The damage to the coolin' system is too much for it to keep up. Even if we get down there in time to fix the bloody thing, there canna be enough coolant left to do any good." Without the necessary amount of coolant to assuage the unchecked heat put out by the reactor, there would be no stopping the building overload.

Grasping one of the handholds mounted along the side of the Mole's frame, Scott could feel the powerful vibrations generated by the machine as it continued to excavate the solid rock ahead of it. The reverberations allowed him to feel the variety of sounds of the Mole rolling across the uneven path it was creating as it moved forward. He could also make out the hum of the drilling lasers' synchronized firing sequence and even the pulses of maneuvering thrusters as Ensign Ghrex kept the rig on a straight, precise course down through the interior of the asteroid.

Then the asteroid moved.

It was a sudden jarring movement, nearly throwing Scott off his feet and overriding the series of attitude thrusters built into his suit and which had been giving him a limited ability to walk even in this low-gravity environment. Throwing his arms out instinctively was the only thing that saved him from being thrown headlong into the wall of the tunnel.

"What the devil—?"

Almost immediately another shock wave slammed him into the unyielding rock wall, forcing the air from his lungs. He rebounded off the wall and was tossed back in the direction of the Mole, flailing for something to grab onto as his suit's thrusters fought to bring his momentum under control.

The drilling rig wasn't faring much better, bouncing off the sides of the tunnel despite the best efforts of Ghrex to compensate with the vehicle's own maneuvering thrusters. As Scott managed to get his own body under control, he realized that there was a very real danger of his being crushed between the walls

and the Mole itself.

“Mahmud!” he shouted into his helmet communicator as he saw his companion encountering similar difficulty on the other side of the vehicle. “Be careful of the rig!” He breathed a sigh of relief as he saw al-Khaled maneuver safely out of the Mole’s way.

“Lovell to landing party,” Captain Okagawa called out. “*We’re registering explosions from within the outpost. Are you all right?*”

Scott was too busy scrambling away from the Mole to respond. Even as he managed to put distance between himself and the rig he could see Ghrex bringing it under some semblance of control. Instead of bouncing off the sides of the tunnel the Mole was now hovering in place, its treads only a handful of centimeters above the rock floor as the ensign at the controls finally managed to stabilize the rig.

“Are ye all right, lad?” Scott called to al-Khaled as he tried to bring his breathing under control.

Nodding inside his helmet, al-Khaled responded shakily. “Fine. You?” Scott indicated the same, and a quick check with Ghrex and LeGere revealed that they too had avoided injury, strapped as they were into the pilots’ seats of the Mole’s cockpit. Al-Khaled reported as such to the *Lovell*.

“*From what our sensors are telling us,*” Okagawa said, “*it sounds as though you were luckier than other parts of the outpost. We’re reading other tunnel cave-ins and some of the compartments have suffered hull breaches. Contact with the remaining station personnel has been cut off, Mahmud, so we have no idea whether or not they’ve suffered any casualties.*”

“Do ye have any idea what caused the explosion, sir?” Scott asked.

“*We think it may have been an overloaded power distribution relay in a compartment that suffered a ruptured coolant conduit,*” the captain replied. “*There’s no way to be certain at this point, and we won’t have time to investigate the matter if you don’t complete your mission. What is your status?*” According to Ghrex and LeGere, the rig hadn’t suffered any appreciable damage.

“Less than a hundred meters remain before we reach the reactor chamber,” al-Khaled reported. “We are recommencing drilling now, Captain.”

“*Excellent,*” Okagawa replied. “*Keep me informed, Mahmud. You haven’t much time left to pull off this minor miracle.*”

Though his own tricorder had not survived their ordeal, Scott had retrieved another one from a storage compartment built into the side of the Mole’s hull. Adjusting the unit’s sensors, he felt a sudden knot form in his stomach as he reviewed the scan results. “He’s putting it mildly, laddie. According to these readings, our problems have just gotten worse.”

“Don’t tell me,” al-Khaled replied. “The cooling system?”

Scott could only nod grimly. “Aye. It’s given up the ghost, I’m afraid. It’s totally off-line.” No coolant whatsoever was flowing through the system and compensating, even in a limited fashion, for the reactor’s rapidly building heat. “The buildup is increasing,” he added. “It’ll reach overload long before we can hope to have the cooling system repaired.”

\* \* \*

Once the Mole had finished drilling the remaining distance through the rock and succeeded in breaking through into the reactor chamber, a visual inspection of the damaged coolant system only confirmed the cold facts relayed by Scott's tricorder. What had once been a finely tuned, efficiently functioning series of components was now nothing more than a useless, mangled heap.

It was very much in keeping with the rest of the room, which had suffered no small amount of damage from the ion storm and its effects. Basically nothing more than a large hollowed-out cavern within the belly of the asteroid, the entire room was enshrouded in a green haze, coolant that had billowed from ruptures all along the vast network of conduits running from the reactor to the cooling system. Explosions had ripped through both sets of machinery, to Scott looking not all that different from the type of damage a starship's hull might encounter during a fierce battle.

"The master control console," al-Khaled called out to Scott, the younger man wasting no time mourning the loss of the critical system and instead moving for the small room at the far end of the chamber. "Ghrex, LeGere, check out the reactor's manual overrides. If I can't execute a controlled power-down, then you're going to have to throw the emergency shutoff." Intended for use only in situations where there were no other options and the reactor's continued operation was a danger to the outpost, the emergency override would instantly deactivate the massive generator. Doing so, however, would almost certainly result in widespread internal systems damage requiring extensive repair work if not outright replacement.

*But it's better than lettin' the damned thing blow up,* Scott thought.

He and al-Khaled reached the sealed door to the control room, and al-Khaled tapped a control set into the wall, allowing the door to slide open. As he moved to enter the room, though, he stopped short.

"My Lord," he whispered.

Moving alongside his companion, Scott felt a lump form in his throat as he beheld the gruesome sight of three bodies lying on the floor of the room.

"The reactor detail," al-Khaled said quietly. As feared, the two men and one woman assigned to this section had been trapped down here when the storm hit, cut off from the outpost's upper levels. When the coolant ruptures had started, the engineers had sought refuge in the small control room, but there had been no escaping the coolant's lethal effects.

Allowing al-Khaled a moment to gather his emotions, Scott then placed a reassuring hand on the man's shoulder. "C'mon, lad, we have work to do."

Nodding inside his suit's helmet, al-Khaled resolutely led the way into the room, focusing his attention on the bank of consoles and deliberately keeping the bodies of the three engineers from his line of sight. He took a few moments to familiarize himself with the controls before tapping a series of commands into one keypad. Watching the results of his actions on one set of display monitors, he shook his head.

"No response from the control computer," he said. "I can't access the deactivation protocols."

Moving to an adjacent console, Scott attempted to coax cooperation out of the computer terminal but received similar results. "There's probably been some damage to the system between the computer and here," he offered. "We'll have to find where the connection's been severed and repair it."

"No time for that," al-Khaled replied. Activating his suit's communicator he called out, "Al-Khaled to

Ghrex. What have you found?"

The Denobulan's reply was quick and clipped, as though she were talking while engaged in work requiring more attention than she wanted to devote to conversation. "*We've found the manual overrides, Lieutenant, but they've been fused. It appears they were hit by debris from an explosion. We're preparing to open the panel now and see if we can repair the controls.*"

Scott shook his head as he stole a look at the chronometer built into his suit's wrist control panel. "We dinna have time for that. At this rate the reactor will go in about seventeen minutes. All that's left is to pull the beastie out of here before she blows."

*Occam's razor, indeed.*

## Chapter

# 7

Removing the damaged reactor from its mounting frame was an easy enough task, as was using the Mole's tractor beam to maneuver the unwieldy P XK unit out of the chamber and into the tunnel created by the rig just for this purpose. The near absence of gravity in the asteroid's interior made the task of pushing the reactor back up the tunnel far easier than the team of engineers had any right to expect, given the luck they had experienced to this point.

They had cut it close. Because of the scattering effects of the asteroid's dense mineral deposits, it had been necessary to push the reactor more than halfway back the way they had originally descended from the surface before the *Lovell*'s tractor beam could lock on and pull it the remaining distance. Scott had been unnerved the entire time, able to feel the oppressive heat being cast off by the reactor in spite of his suit's heavy insulation. Though the chronometer on his tricorder told him they had plenty of time, he couldn't help but worry that the damaged power unit's output would continue to escalate at a rate that would ultimately find the engineers without the time needed to remove it.

With barely more than three minutes remaining to them before overload, the *Lovell* was able to direct its tractor beam far enough into the tunnel to latch onto the reactor. Drawing the doomed unit from the depths of the asteroid, the ship pulled it far enough from the outpost that when it finally exploded, it did so at a safe distance.

*Too bad we canna call it a day after all that,* Scott mused.

Instead, he was standing with al-Khaled and his engineering team in Outpost 5's control center, consulting the master system's displays and debating a new course of action.

"Battery backup systems are functioning normally," al-Khaled reported as he reviewed one monitor, "the ones that weren't damaged, that is." He shook his head in frustration. "Even if we cut all unnecessary expenditures, the available power will only last eighteen hours or so."

"And a replacement reactor that can handle the outpost's power requirements is weeks away," Scott said. Without sufficient power, the station and its vital subspace communications relay equipment would be effectively dead in less than a day, and the worst-case scenario first postulated by Commander Burke

at their initial briefing would come to fruition. There would be no way to effectively communicate sensor and intelligence information gathered by the Federation outposts back to Starfleet. The entire region of space would be open to exploitation, not only by the Romulans but also by anyone with the resources to take advantage of the situation.

*“Our only alternative is to create a substitute power source that can meet the outpost’s requirements until a replacement reactor arrives,”* Captain Okagawa said over the control center’s communications circuit. *“Surely there’s something on the station that you can make use of?”*

“We’ve got the shuttlecraft we brought down from the *Lovell*,” Ensign Ghrex said. “Could its engines be used somehow?”

Scott shook his head. “It can’t produce the amount of power we’d need.” Then a thought struck the engineer. “Mahmud, how many shuttles does the *Lovell* carry?”

“Three,” al-Khaled replied, already smiling at the rest of Scott’s unspoken thought. “If we remove the engines from all of them, we could string them together and hook them right into the outpost’s power distribution network.”

Scott wasn’t convinced, though. “The outpost’s power requirements would be more than even the engines from three shuttles could produce.” Considering the problem for a moment, he added, “Still, perhaps we can scrounge some additional power out of them.”

His smile growing wider at the unconventional idea taking shape before them, al-Khaled said, “Scrounge? Remember who you’re talking to, Scotty. The Corps of Engineers are masters of that particular art form.”

\* \* \*

Montgomery Scott had encountered more than a few unorthodox and rapidly improvised schemes designed to solve various problems he had faced as a Starfleet engineer. Therefore, it was easy for him to accept the idea of a fellow engineer adopting an unusual solution for an unusual challenge.

But working with Lieutenant Mahmud al-Khaled and his team was something else entirely.

Donning their environmental suits once more, they had put their irregular plan into motion, with al-Khaled ordering the two other shuttlecraft brought down from the *Lovell*. That accomplished, he and his team of engineers had expeditiously carried out the task of removing the engines from each of the three small ships. The assistance of the Mole and its tractor beam had made transporting the engine components to the outpost’s reactor chamber a simple operation. Now, with nearly six hours remaining before the station’s battery power was exhausted, all that was left was to reconfigure the engines’ power flow to be compatible with the station’s distribution network.

“What the devil have ye done here, lad?” Looking inside an access panel on one of the engine components, Scott could see that the entire inner workings of the power regulation system appeared to have been completely rebuilt from the ground up. The original network of internal circuitry, what was left of it, had been augmented, enhanced, and in some ways reconstructed in schemes he had never seen or even imagined before. It amazed him that the shuttlecraft engine didn’t blow apart the instant it was activated, much less actually allow the vessel it powered to fly.

“It’s like I keep telling you,” al-Khaled told him as he inspected the power settings on another of the

power plant components. “We have a lot of time to tinker between assignments. Not to mention that when something breaks, we’re usually in a spot where we can’t put in to a starbase for replacement supplies. Sometimes we have to adapt to the environment, whatever it might be.” Opening one of the engine shell’s larger access panels, he indicated for Scott to look.

Doing as he was asked, Scott peered into the opening and saw a plethora of wiring running to and from what should have been a flow regulator, responsible for channeling deuterium within a shuttle’s engine core and warp nacelles. But what he was looking at was most definitely not Federation issue.

“That almost looks...,” he began uncertainly.

“Klingon,” al-Khaled finished for him. “We salvaged it from a crashed scout ship we found about a year ago. We’ve taken it apart, documented its specifications and sent the information to Starfleet Research and Development. The thing works better than the one that originally came with this engine. I wish I had half a dozen more just like it.” He couldn’t suppress the playful grin that was forcing itself onto his face. “Maybe some of its features will make their way into future engine designs. Wouldn’t that be something?”

The younger man’s enthusiasm was infectious, very similar to what Scott had felt when he was confronted with a challenging technical problem. Having watched the man and his team in action, Scott was now convinced that the Corps of Engineers, with its oftentimes nonconformist methods, was just the arena where a man of al-Khaled’s talents could flourish.

“The engines on these shuttles operate around twelve to fifteen percent above normal standards,” al-Khaled explained. “And we have a few tricks that can squeeze even more out of them. It still won’t replace the station’s normal reactor, but it should be more than enough to power most of the outpost’s primary systems. We can reconfigure the power distribution to bypass nonessential expenditures, and that should be enough to get them by until the replacement reactor arrives.”

“Lovell to landing party,” Okagawa’s voice sounded in their helmets. “*How is everything going down there, Mahmud?*”

Tapping his suit’s external communicator control, al-Khaled replied, “We’ve just about finished here, Captain. Give us five more minutes.” He turned to see Ensign Ghrex stepping out of the reactor chamber’s master control room as the Denobulan gave him a thumbs-up sign, confirming his report.

“*Excellent. I have no doubt this will work, Lieutenant. You and your team are to be commended.*”

Exchanging frowns at the praise, al-Khaled tried to keep the doubt from his voice as he said, “Thank you, sir. However, perhaps it is unwise to congratulate us before we’ve had a chance to test our theory.”

“*No need, Lieutenant,*” the Lovell’s captain responded, the tone of his speech adopting a paternal yet almost teasing quality that Scott suspected had been employed against the engineers on more than one occasion. “*After all, if this doesn’t work, then the entire Federation intelligence-gathering apparatus in this region of space will be effectively neutralized. You certainly wouldn’t allow me to make such a report to Starfleet Command now, would you?*”

Unable to stifle the laugh provoked by that, al-Khaled shook his head in mock defeat. “Well, when you put it that way, Captain, I cannot disagree. Stand by.” Severing the connection, he turned his attention back to Scott. “Well, I suppose there’s only one thing left to do. Ghrex? LeGere? Are you ready?”

From the control room, LeGere replied, *“Aye, sir. Ready when you are.”*

Indicating the trio of salvaged shuttlecraft engines with a nod of his head, he said to Scott, “Let’s see what happens.”

While Ghrex and LeGere monitored the proceedings from the control center and stood ready to sever the power connections at a moment’s notice, Scott and al-Khaled activated the three engines. Scott could feel the rock floor of the reactor chamber begin to vibrate in concert with the units’ increasing power levels.

*“Readings are steady,”* Ghrex reported from the control room. *“Power levels are within normal levels, sir.”*

Scott was the first to detect it, though, a tremor in the protective shell encasing the third of the three shuttle engines that was almost imperceptible through the thick layers of his suit glove. Had he not had a hand on the control panel built into one side of the unit, he most likely would never have detected it.

At nearly the same instant, Ensign LeGere shouted from the control room, *“I’m picking up a power fluctuation in engine three!”*

“Shut it down!” Scott called even as an alarm sounded from a status display on the engine’s control panel. Reaching out, he stabbed the emergency shutdown switch and the suddenly ailing power unit immediately began to deactivate itself.

“We overloaded the internal flow regulator,” al-Khaled reported, consulting his tricorder. Casting a wry look at Scott, he added, “I told you I wish we had more of those Klingon parts.”

Ignoring the attempt at humor, Scott was already opening the panel that would give him access to the engine’s internal systems. Looking inside, he realized that he would not need a tricorder to determine the extent of their latest problem. “Aye,” he said, “it’s had it, all right.” Without the flow regulator, the power generated by the engine would be unchecked, creating a potentially dangerous situation when trying to channel that energy through the outpost’s distribution network.

“Let’s get it out of there,” al-Khaled said, moving to help. “We’ve got less than six hours to repair it and get this engine back up and running before we lose the station’s battery power.” Without its battery backup system, the outpost would lose everything, including life support to the fifteen personnel still trapped within the facility’s lower levels.

“Can ye not simply replace it?” Scott asked. “Surely ye’ve got another one aboard ship?” With the *Lovell*’s transporters all but useless after only a few hundred meters below the surface, they would need the Mole to travel back up the tunnel and retrieve any replacement components the ship could provide.

But the look on al-Khaled’s face told him that things were not going to go according to that plan.

“We don’t have a replacement regulator,” the younger engineer said, grimacing as if in pain at having to admit that. “We were overdue for resupply before we took on this mission, and besides, we’re never exactly first priority when it comes to replacement parts. That’s another reason we end up improvising so much.”

Scott shook his head. It disgusted him to think that with all the talent possessed by the members of the *Lovell*’s crew of engineering specialists and with the efficiency and practicality with which Starfleet

normally operated, that any one of its ships should find itself in such a situation. Something as ridiculous as not being considered important enough to obtain proper supplies might actually end up defeating them here, especially after all they'd had to deal with so far.

Not if he could help it, though.

Looking about the reactor chamber, it didn't take Scott long to zero in on the Mole, sitting unattended near the mouth of the tunnel it had created mere hours before. After all, it was the only thing in the room that could even begin to serve their present needs.

"We'll pull the flow regulator from the drilling rig," he said simply as he set off in the direction of the vehicle.

"It's not strong enough to handle the power put out by a shuttle's engine," al-Khaled countered. "There's no way it'll hold together."

Casting a knowing smile at his companion, Scott said. "Trust me, laddie. You've done a fine bit o' miracle workin' here today. Now it's my turn."

\* \* \*

"I don't believe it," al-Khaled said, making no effort to hide the stunned expression on his face.

No sooner did Scott activate the repaired shuttle engine than the unit immediately began its power-up sequence. After only a handful of seconds it had begun to generate power at a level equal to its two counterparts. In fact, as Scott scanned the engine with his tricorder, he was pleased to note that the unit's output was actually a few percentage points more than the other engines.

"It's a simple thing, lad," Scott said. "These drilling rigs are tough little beasties, designed to handle a lot more punishment than most engineers are willin' to expose 'em to. In fact, the flow sensors in this particular model work on a wee bit more than the conservative side, if ye ask me. Ye can almost bypass the bloody thing entirely." Which was exactly what he had done when he had removed the flow regulator from the Mole and hastily installed it into the shuttle engine. Now more than ever, he was thankful for that group of dilithium miners and the patience they had demonstrated all those years ago, obliging young Ensign Montgomery Scott and his endless stream of questions and burning desire to learn about just one more facet of engineering.

"Power levels are steady," Ensign Ghrex called out from the reactor control room. "All primary outpost systems are on-line and functioning. Captain Okagawa reports that full capacity has been restored to the main control center."

Scott nodded in approval. They had already received a report from the *Lovell*'s captain that another team from the ship had successfully reached the remaining outpost crewmembers who had been trapped during the storm. The better news was that all fifteen people had been recovered with no further casualties.

"I guess our work here is done," Scott said to al-Khaled as they made their final preparations to leave the reactor room behind. "There's no reason why these wee bairns willna run just fine until that replacement reactor gets here." Of course he knew that a team from the *Lovell* would be brought down to assist the outpost engineers until the reactor actually arrived, but there was no reason to expect any more problems.



“Just another day at the office, I suppose,” al-Khaled replied. Smiling wryly at Scott, the younger man asked, “So, Scotty, ready to chuck that pampered life aboard a starship and join a group of real engineers? I think you’d fit in just fine with the Corps.”

Laughing, Scott shook his head. “I dinna think so, lad. I’ve been looking forward to my next assignment for quite some time.” He wasn’t about to give up his upcoming posting to the *Enterprise*, at least not without a fight. Still, he had to admit to himself that were circumstances different, he might very well find life with the Corps of Engineers exciting enough.

With any luck, though, life aboard the *Enterprise* would provide its own set of challenges.

“One thing I intend to do when we get back for our after-action briefing, though,” he said, “is file a report to Starfleet Command with recommendations for the Corps. I know that your group was originally established to handle more routine assignments that don’t always make the Federation News Network. But this wasna some underground colony ye dug outta the rock, lads. This type of work is a wee bit more specialized, and dangerous. If they mean to send ye out on more missions like this, then they’ll hafta do a wee better job of supportin’ you.”

This assignment may not have enticed Scott to transfer over to this branch of Starfleet, but it had convinced him that a dedicated group of engineers, separate from the demands of regular ships of the line, could be a valuable resource. Not simply for performing the regular, mundane, even boring types of assignments for which the Corps had been created, he saw the potential to utilize the obviously unique talents and experience that a group of such high-specialized professional technicians could bring to the table. What was needed was for Starfleet Command to provide the necessary logistical and administrative elements to support such an initiative, just as they would for other departments and ships in the fleet.

“You’re talking about changing the minds of bureaucrats, Commander,” al-Khaled countered. “That’s going to take some serious report writing.”

Scott indicated the tunnel leading from the reactor room to the asteroid’s surface with a nod of his head. With the turbshafts and access crawlways leading to the outpost’s upper levels still blocked off due to damage from the ion storm, it was still the only way for the engineers to effect their departure. However, not even the Mole was at their service for the return trip back up the tunnel. All that was left was the engineers’ own feet.

“Well, considerin’ that I basically broke our only means of gettin’ outta here, I figure I have plenty of time to come up with a first draft. Come along, lad.”

And with that, the engineers began their long walk home.

## Chapter

# 8

**Stardate 53675.4**

Montgomery Scott.

*If ever there were an engineer's engineer, thought Kieran Duffy, it's Scotty.*

As he started to settle back in his seat at the engineering station, the sound of someone clearing his throat shook him back to the twenty-fourth century and the issues at hand. "Sorry, Captain, are my fifteen minutes up?"

"Promote me to admiral and I'll buy you another fifteen minutes," said Fabian Stevens, who had silently made his way to Duffy's post without interrupting the reading engineer. "I'd look good with a boxed pip or two."

"Good like a Medusan," Duffy quipped, "because if I ever see you sporting one of those, I'd better have a visor on. What are you doing up at this hour?"

"As soon as Bart got back from the bridge, griping about our heading into a first contact situation, how could I go back to sleep?" Stevens turned to look at the Senuta ship in the main viewer. "Any ideas?"

"I'm kicking stuff around," Duffy said as he let out a heavy breath. "You know me. Something's bound to fall out of my head at any minute."

"Out of your head and right onto the deck. Well, I'm ready to help." Stevens leaned on the console and moved a bit closer to speak to his friend. "Bart tells me that you did some morale-building from the big chair at my expense."

"I was just telling the Tellarite story to the night shift."

Stevens groaned. "I hate the Tellarite story."

"I loooove the Tellarite story. I even told Core-Breach the Tellarite story."

"I know. She mentioned it."

Duffy did not mask his surprise that Domenica Corsi, the ship's security chief and one of his prime foils, had talked with Stevens about such matters. "She mentioned it?"

"Yeah. We do converse, you know." Duffy watched Stevens pause a bit as if collecting or tempering his thoughts before speaking. "She's not all business and regulations, Duff. You'd enjoy her, too, if you weren't a smart-ass with her all the time."

"So you're telling me you enjoy her?"

"It's not what you think," Stevens countered. "We eat together sometimes, or talk in the corridors, just in passing." Duffy refused to suppress the smirk that was spreading across his face. Stevens saw it and knew precisely what Duffy was thinking. The rumors had been flying around the ship since Empok Nor. "Okay, so you know about the one time. She needed someone and I was there. No apologies, no regrets."

"Hey, you two are grown-ups," Duffy said, at once happy to have the rumor finally confirmed and confused as to his feelings about what that confirmation meant. "I'm not anybody you need to justify your flings to."

Stevens nodded. "But truthfully, I think that night helped her remember how to build a friendship, and she's trying that out on me."

"Friends are good. Sonnie and I were friends," Duffy said of his dating relationship with Sonya Gomez, the *Vinci*'s first officer. "I mean, we still are friends, but we were friends first back on the *Enterprise*." He paused, looking about the bridge and seeing that work continued as usual. "So, what, you think maybe you and Core-Breach are friends?"

"As close as she's willing to have me be one, sure."

"And you'd be open to more than that?"

Stevens paused again, mulling his words. "I'm thinking so, yes."

"And you think she might be, too?"

"That I don't know."

Duffy lost his interest in mincing words. "I know, and I just don't see it."

"Be open to her, Duff," Stevens countered. "Don't crack wise next time you talk to her and maybe you'll see it. She told me that she respects you, and that you earned that during the run-in with the Tholians. Maybe someday we can all sit down together. Eat, drink, find some common ground."

"What, you, me, Sonnie, and Core-Breach on a double date? Having a drink and some laughs?" Duffy figured that the chances of that happening were about as likely as a wormhole opening up in his cabin.

Stevens shrugged. "Well, sure."

"Not in my lifetime, pal," Duffy replied as he returned his attention to the bank of engineering displays and began to reconsider the problem of how to slow down the Senuta ship. The alien vessel's ion drive was not like anything he was used to, but the principles behind its method of propulsion were fairly straightforward. It all centered around the flow of ions through the engine's series of intermix chambers. In reality it was a simpler theory to grasp than even the most rudimentary Starfleet warp drive design.

When he noticed that Stevens was still leaning on the nearby console, Duffy looked up and saw the slightly withered expression on his friend's face. "Look, Fabe, I just don't want to see you shot down here. I know Corsi's type. I think what you need more than a meal and a talk is a cold shower."

"Sage advice, Duff. I'll consi—"

"Wait!" And just like that, the answer was there. It was so simple, sitting right in front of him the entire time while he had been so engrossed in searching for a complex solution that he had missed the easier approach. "That's it! A cold shower!"

Stevens was rattled. "Huh?"

Duffy jumped from his seat and put a hand on each of Stevens's shoulders, smiling as he regarded the shocked expression on his friend's face. "You're a brilliant man, Fabe! Brilliant!" Duffy freed a hand from Stevens and used it to tap his combadge. "Duffy to Gold. Captain, I think I have an idea."

\* \* \*

“You want to give the Senuta a cold shower?”

Gold looked no less incredulous at the idea than anyone else seated at the table in the *da Vinci*’s observation lounge. Duffy smiled as his eyes moved from Gold to Sonya Gomez, then to Stevens and finally to Abramowitz. “You know that’s not exactly what I mean, but in theory, yes.”

Gomez nodded back toward Duffy and smiled. “Then please enlighten us.”

“As I understand it, their ion engines work on principles very similar to those employed by other races in our experience. What happened, as far as I can tell, is that their ion engine reactions became hyperstimulated in an exchange with whatever charged particles passed through their ship during that storm forty-seven days ago.” Duffy paused to take a sip from a glass of quinine water. “Something happened to really heat things up over there. I propose we cool things off.”

Gold smiled in approval. Though the captain himself was not an engineer, Duffy knew that his commanding officer had taken advantage of leading a crew of engineers and enabled him to acquire knowledge in a wide variety of engineering principles. “And your proposal?”

Leaning forward in his seat, Duffy replied, “We use our deflector dish to fire a stream of ions of alternating charges. The goal is to slow the reactions within the engines without disrupting other systems on the ship. And, we do it in a gradual process so the folks inside don’t end up more liquid than solid.”

“That’s a laudable goal,” Gold said. Turning to Gomez, he asked, “Does that sound reasonable to you, Gomez?”

“Very, Captain.” To Duffy she smiled and said, “I knew you had it in you.”

“Thank Captain Scott and Fabian over there,” Duffy replied, indicating his friend across the table with a nod of his head. “They’re the ones who helped me sort it all out.” The assembled group shared puzzled glances for a second time, but Duffy moved on. “What might make this operation less risky would be to evacuate the Senuta ship before slowing it down.”

“Great plan,” Gold said. “So why don’t we?”

Abramowitz shook her head. “They won’t hear of it. I’ve spoken to Daltren twice to suggest it but some of the Senuta refuse to leave the ship. Some of them claim to be too ill or just not completely trusting of us. Daltren said those willing to come aboard are respecting the beliefs of the rest of the crew and refuse to abandon them.” She paused as the others took in her words. “I’d like us to honor their wishes and their solidarity. It’s not just an issue with the people on the ship. We’re representatives of the Federation, and the Senuta are a race new to us. This may determine whether we make friends or enemies of an entire civilization.”

Gold nodded. “Abramowitz is right on the mark. We know the dangers here and so do the Senuta. If they want to stay on their ship, then we won’t make an issue of it. What else, people?”

“As soon as we get their ship stopped,” Gomez replied, “I’d like a team ready to beam aboard her. I’m going, and I’m taking Elizabeth, Soloman, and Bart with me.” Duffy shifted in his seat noisily enough to draw Gomez’s attention, making her smile. “Kieran, I’ll invite you to take a look at the Senuta’s systems

as soon as we're ready.”

“Oh...okay,” he said, feigning disappointment. “Give me a couple more minutes to double-check my frequencies for the ion shower, and I'll be ready.”

Rising from his chair, Gold regarded his officers. “Then we're through here. Fine work as always, people. Let's get this done.”

Duffy hurried his step so he could walk through the door to the bridge just behind Gomez. He tugged on her uniform sleeve with two fingers just hard enough to draw her attention, and then he motioned with a nod of his head for her to follow him to his workstation. As the two neared the engineering console, Duffy spoke first. “Quick question. After we get all of this settled, could we set up a dinner or something with Fabian?”

“So I can watch him squirm through yet another retelling of the Tellarite story?” Gomez asked. “It's really not that funny, you know.”

Duffy laughed harder than he expected at the jab. “Nope. I just owe him some time, and some open-minded attention.” As she nodded assent he added, “And, um, let's invite Corsi, too.”

“What?” Gomez's jaw dropped, and then she broke into a huge smile. “Am I actually hearing you acknowledge Domenica Corsi as a real human being?”

He sighed and let slip one more laugh. “Sonnie, I'm happy. Aren't you?”

Gomez's features softened. “Yeah. Yeah, I am, Kieran.”

“Fabe is my best friend, and we talk about everything. Everything but Corsi,” Duffy said. “It's time I lightened up, I think, and figured out what makes my friend happy.”

“You big softie.” Gomez scuffed her fist against his arm. “I'll work it out and make sure she's there.”

“Just don't tell her I'm coming.”

“Precisely.” Gomez smiled as she walked away, taking the opportunity to stroll about the bridge's outer stations and review their status. Satisfied that everything and everyone was where they needed to be, she turned back to Gold, who had taken his place in the *theda Vinci*'s command chair. “Captain, we can begin at your discretion.”

Gold nodded. “This is an S.C.E. operation now, Gomez. Lead away.”

Gomez turned to Abramowitz at the communications station. “Alert the Senuta that we're ready to bring them out of warp. They need to be in their acceleration couches and expecting a bumpy ride.” As the cultural liaison tapped at her console, Gomez looked to Duffy's station. “How close are you, Kieran?”

Running a final check of his calculations, Duffy looked up at Gomez and gave her a short nod. “Ready when you are.”

On the main viewer, the stars streaked past and the silver Senuta ship was growing in size as the *theda Vinci* continued to close the distance. Duffy could feel his pulse beginning to quicken as the time approached to put his bold plan into motion. He was confident in the preparations he had made to this

point, and he trusted the *da Vinci*'s computer to carry out the required actions with the necessary precision that no living being could possibly match. With a touch on his console, he expected their problems would be over and then he could get a look at those ion engines. So why was he feeling such a sense of dread?

*Because you're paranoid, he scolded himself. But isn't this the point where something usually goes wrong?*

Forcing the errant thoughts from his mind, Duffy returned his attention to the task at hand, his finger hovering over the panel as he awaited Gomez's order. Finally, after what seemed like a century, the words came.

"Mr. Duffy, engage the deflector beam."

\* \* \*

**To be continued**  
**in Star Trek: S.C.E. #18: Foundations Book 2**

## About the Authors

**DAYTON WARD** has been a fan of *Star Trek* since conception (his, not the show's). After serving for eleven years in the U.S. Marine Corps, he discovered the private sector and the piles of cash to be made there as a software engineer. His start in professional writing came as a result of placing stories in each of the first three *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* anthologies. He is also the author of the *Star Trek* Original Series novel *In the Name of Honor*, as well as having cowritten the two-part *Interphase* for the *Star Trek: S.C.E.* series with Kevin Dilmore. Besides working on other *Star Trek* projects, Dayton is currently writing *The Last World War*, an original science fiction novel scheduled for publication in 2003. Though he currently lives in Kansas City with his wife, Michi, he is a Florida native and still maintains a torrid long-distance romance with his beloved Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Feel free to contact Dayton anytime via e-mail at [DWardKC@aol.com](mailto:DWardKC@aol.com).

\* \* \*

**KEVIN DILMORE** remains very thankful to the person who, at age nine, tipped him off to the fact that *Star Trek* was a live-action television show before it was a Saturday morning cartoon. A graduate of the University of Kansas, he works as news editor and "cops and courts" reporter for a twice-weekly newspaper in Paola, Kansas, where he lives with his daughter, Colleen. Kevin also covers "nonfiction" aspects of the *Star Trek* universe as a contributing writer for *Star Trek Communicator* magazine. He is looking forward to his future writing projects with Dayton Ward, which include additional tales in the *Star Trek: S.C.E.* line to be published in coming months. Kevin still harbors his adolescent desire to see his name shared with a doomed red-shirted ensign in an Original Series novel.

**Coming Next Month:**  
**Star Trek™: S.C.E. #18**

**Foundations**

# Book 2

## by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

Continuing an all-new trilogy that tells the origin of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers!

\* \* \*

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\* \* \*

Over a century before the days of the *da Vinci*, the *Starship Enterprise*™ encountered—and deactivated—a world-running computer called Landru on Beta III. In the aftermath of the incident, a team of engineers, led by Montgomery Scott, are tasked with getting Beta III back on its feet. But even in “death,” Landru's influence can be felt. . . .

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