

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHORS](#)

[COMING NEXT MONTH: Star Trek™: S.C.E. #19 FOUNDATIONS Book 3](#)

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STAR TREK™
S.C.E.
#18

FOUNDATIONS
Part Two of Three

Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore



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Chapter

1

Stardate 53675.5

Isn't this the point where something usually goes wrong?

Sitting at his station on the bridge of the U.S.S. da Vinci, Kieran Duffy could not shake the thought, the same one that tended to plague him whenever he undertook a demanding and risky assignment. He had performed many such tasks during his career as an engineer, but it had been fortunate happenstance that only a small number of those had entailed risk to the lives of either himself or people around him.

This, however, was most definitely one of those small number of times.

"Commander Gomez," Carol Abramowitz called out from the communications station. "They've responded to our message and signal that they're ready for us to begin."

From where she stood near the helm console, Commander Sonya Gomez nodded in approval to the ship's cultural liaison, who often handled the responsibilities of the communications officer when conversing with newly encountered alien species. "Thanks, Carol." Turning her attention to the helm, she asked, "Ensign Rusconi, what's our range?"

"Twenty thousand kilometers and closing, Commander."

On the main viewscreen, the image of the runaway ship they were pursuing stood out in sharp relief against the starfield surrounding it. The da Vinci had encountered the alien vessel only a few hours earlier,

its abrupt appearance on the ship's sensors having disrupted the otherwise quiet calm of gamma shift. They had established contact with the vessel and its crew, members of a previously unknown race called the Senuta, and learned that their ship had suffered massive damage inflicted by an ion storm.

The storm had disrupted the Senuta vessel's ion-based engines, fusing the propulsion system. With the crew unable to slow the ship down, it had been traveling undeterred at high warp speed for weeks until the *Vinci* had detected its distress call.

Captain David Gold had assigned Duffy the arduous task of figuring out a way to slow the alien craft. With that directive, Duffy had spent more than two hours searching through the ship's library computer, coming away with a wealth of information on the effects of ion storms on mechanical equipment. However, a casual conversation with his friend and shipmate Fabian Stevens had given him a last bit of needed inspiration to devise a solution.

Deciding to use the Senuta's own engine design to his advantage, Duffy planned to slow the vessel by using the *Vinci*'s deflector dish, projecting ions charged to varying levels directly into the alien ship's intake manifolds. With any luck, the cascading reaction of the ion stream's differing intensities would act as a gradual braking mechanism, reducing the craft's velocity in a controlled and, hopefully, safe manner.

It looks good on the computer screen, anyway.

His finger was hovering over the controls on the panel before him. After all of his preparations, the only thing he could do was wait for Gomez to give him the order to proceed. Only then would they find out if this outlandish scheme of his would work or not.

"Mr. Duffy, engage the deflector beam."

Here we go, Duffy told himself as his finger pressed the control.

Though his computer simulations had told him that the effects of the varying streams of ions would be fast acting, he was still unprepared for what happened next.

"Reading a fluctuation in their ion drive, Duff," Fabian Stevens reported from the science station. "And a disruption in their warp field." Smiling, he added, "Looks like this crazy idea of yours is working."

From his command chair, Captain Gold said, "Stevens, isn't it a bit early to be inflating the lieutenant commander's ego?"

The witty response that had already formed on Duffy's tongue vanished as an alarm sounded at his station. Turning his attention back to his console, it took only seconds for him to determine the cause of the problem.

"It's the ion stream," he reported, his fingers stabbing at controls as he spoke. "Their warp field is collapsing faster than I wanted it to." He shook his head in mounting frustration. "The damage to their ion drive must be more extensive than we thought. Damn it! We're tearing them out of subspace. I'm disengaging the deflector."

On the main viewer, the effects of the ion stream were plainly visible even as it dissipated in response to Duffy's commands. The Senuta ship was shuddering and bucking wildly as its engines struggled against the unexpected assault.

What the hell did I do wrong?

There would be plenty of time later to figure out where he had so obviously screwed up, however. Right now there were more important things that needed his attention, such as how to keep the Senuta vessel from tearing itself apart.

"Their speed is dropping radically," he reported, his eyes glued to the console before him.

Still seated in his command chair and possessing an outward calm that Duffy envied, especially now, Gold called out, "Rusconi, match their speed. Stay with them."

"Fabian," Gomez said as she jumped from the command well and made her way to the science station, "get me a damage report."

"Already on it," Stevens replied, all business once more as he worked. "There's some hull plate buckling, and I'm detecting internal space frame damage." Shaking his head, he added, "They're not built for that kind of punishment."

"What about a tractor beam?" Gomez asked. "We could use it to steady them."

Duffy's fingers were already entering the necessary commands, moving as if free of his conscious control. "Yes! That just might do the trick!"

From his own station, Stevens frowned. "Maybe, but with the damage they've already suffered, it might just make things worse, Duff."

Nodding, Duffy replied, "I know. As small as that ship is, a half-strength tractor should still do the job while being gentle about it." He made no effort to hide the doubt in his voice, concentrating instead on entering commands to make the proper adjustments. That completed, he turned back to Gomez. "It's ready."

"Activate tractor beam."

All eyes on the bridge turned to the main viewer as the Vinci's tractor beam reached out across the void and enveloped the Senuta vessel. The alien ship's violent gyrations continued for a moment before beginning to subside under the beam's influence.

"It's working," Duffy said, remembering to breathe as the ship's tumbling was arrested. Only a few more seconds passed before the craft was once again traveling on a steady course.

Congratulations, Duffy told himself with a sigh of relief. But you shouldn't have had to do it in the first place.

Rising from the center seat, Gold nodded in approval. "Excellent work, people. Open a channel to the Senuta ship, and let's see how bad off our new friends really are over there."

It didn't take long for Abramowitz to respond, however. "They're not answering, Captain."

"There could be damage to their communications system," Stevens said.

Gold said, "Well, since we were planning to beam over anyway, now seems as good a time as any."

Looking to Gomez, he asked, "What do you say, Gomez?"

Nodding, Gomez replied, "Duffy and his team will have their hands full with the engines, and I'd like Soloman to take a look at their computer. Maybe he can figure out why it won't let the Senuta engineers in. Bart will be helpful over there, too, since we'll need to communicate with their computer techs. I'd like Dr. Lense to beam over and check out the medical situation."

"Good," Gold said. "Proceed at your own discretion." To the rest of the bridge crew he added, "It looks as though we've still got plenty of work ahead of us, people, so let's snap to it."

Personnel set about their various tasks, and at his own station Duffy began composing the lists of equipment and people he would need to transport with him to the alien ship when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to see Gold, hands clasped behind his back, regarding him with the fatherly air that the captain affected so very well.

"I'm sensing a bit of tension with you, Duffy," Gold said. "Anything you'd like to share?" Though the question was offered in a gentle manner, Duffy knew from experience that the captain would not settle for him declining the offer to say what was on his mind.

"I screwed up, Captain," he said simply. "I missed something in my calculations and I could have destroyed that ship."

Gold frowned. "But you didn't, and you managed to overcome the error and create a solution that salvaged the operation. I also suspect that once this is all over, you'll spend however long it takes to find what it was you overlooked. Am I correct?"

A sheepish expression formed on Duffy's face. "Yes, sir."

"I don't expect my people to be perfect, Duffy," Gold said calmly, "but I do expect them to give their best effort. I've seen nothing to indicate that you've done anything less than that, on this or any other occasion. I also expect my people to learn from their mistakes and use that knowledge to better themselves. I've seen everything to indicate that you will do so in this instance, as well. But right now there's a ship full of people over there who need you to focus on the problem at hand, so my advice to you is to concentrate on that."

Somewhat relieved by the captain's words, Duffy nodded. "Understood, Captain. Thank you."

Gold smiled and his eyes narrowed as he added, "Besides, look on the bright side. Once you get over there, you'll have a whole new audience for that Tellarite story of yours."

"Aye, it sounds as though ye've got things under control, Captain."

From the main viewer in the Vinci's conference lounge, Captain Montgomery Scott regarded Gold, Gomez, Abramowitz, and the captain of the Senuta ship, Daltren.

Basically humanoid in appearance, Daltren and Nirsrose, who had been introduced as the Senuta ship's second in command, possessed physiques and stature comparable to that of Soloman and other Bynars. Daltren stood no more than 1.5 meters tall, while Nirsrose was slightly shorter. Both Senuta were slight of build, with pale skin and hair that contrasted sharply with the dark, loose-fitting clothing they wore.

Gomez had found herself drawn almost immediately to their eyes. They were colored an iridescent blue, conveying intelligence and intense curiosity that became evident the moment the Senuta began talking.

The questions were seemingly endless, with the Senuta inquiring about anything they happened to see as they moved through the ship. Their enthusiasm was infectious, prompting Domenica Corsi to express her customary concern about providing too much information to these all-but-unknown aliens. Gomez, however, had convinced her to relent in her desire to have a security team present in the conference lounge while the Senuta were there.

"Commander Gomez and her people are handling all of the hard work," Gold said, smiling affably in the direction of the viewer from his seat at the head of the conference table. The viewer itself had been segmented into two sections. One half displayed the wizened visage of Captain Scott, while the other featured Duffy, who with several members of the S.C.E. team had transported to the Senuta ship more than an hour before. "I just get to sit back and take all the credit," the captain continued. "Judging by the initial reports we've received from the away team, they should have everything repaired in less than a day."

"That's right," Duffy said. "The engines themselves are actually in pretty good shape. There's some structural damage along with those systems taken out by the storm. We've got Senuta engineers helping us to identify the functionality of certain components so we can fashion replacements for the parts they don't have. There's plenty of work to be done and it'll take some time, but nothing too complex, sir."

Gomez noted a renewed confidence in Duffy's voice, a quality that had not been there when he had first beamed over to the Senuta ship. She knew that he still hadn't forgiven himself for whatever error he may have made while putting his plan to decelerate the alien vessel into motion. She had offered her own encouragement to him prior to his departure, but if there was one thing that she knew about Kieran Duffy, it was that he would continue to feel guilty until he alone had resolved the question over what had gone wrong. That sense of responsibility and obligation was one of the qualities she loved about Kieran, of that she was sure.

It was also one of those things that could make her want to smack him silly.

"Sounds good, Commander," she said. "Keep us informed of your progress." On the viewer, Duffy nodded and severed his connection, leaving only the image of Captain Scott.

"What about our computer, Captain?" Daltren asked. "It controls nearly every system aboard our ship. Many of those same systems are beyond our ability to control without its assistance. The engineering area of our vessel is especially dependent on a number of integrated systems that are fully automated."

"Soloman is making some progress," Gomez reported. "But we may have to come up with some sort of alternative in the short term, at least until my people can learn the ins and outs of your computer system." Faulwell and Soloman had reported that they could be busy for quite a while, as two of the three Senuta crewmembers who had been killed during the ion storm were the ones assigned to oversee the ship's computer. None of the other Senuta possessed the necessary knowledge to really dig in and understand the operating system at a purely technical level, so Gomez knew that her people had their work cut out for them.

"I appreciate the effort your crew is expending on our behalf, Captain," Daltren said. "You must understand, ours is a society that places a great deal of respect and trust in computers. On our world, they autonomously oversee countless routine and mundane tasks, completely removing the need for our people to handle or even to think about them."

Leaning forward in her chair, Abramowitz added, "Mr. Daltren tells me that on his planet, all forms of public transportation, even most orbital and interplanetary travel, are run almost exclusively via automated computer control. It's been that way for generations, with nearly flawless performance and safety records. Their society isn't as reliant on computers as, say, the Bynars, but it is similar to Earth's dependence on them during their equivalent level of technology at the start of the twenty-third century. At the rate they're progressing, however, they could rival the Bynars in a century or so."

"Quite impressive, if ye ask me," Scott said. "However, I'd be remiss if I dinna point out that in my experience, such dependence on automation isn't always a good thing."

"You speak wisely, Captain," Daltren said. "For all the wonders our computers are capable of, the one aboard my ship could not have foreseen what happened to us, nor could it have predicted that the specialists charged with its care would be killed." Pausing a moment, he cast a downward glance to the conference table, and Gomez saw the pain at the loss of his companions in the Senuta's eyes. Shaking his head, he continued. "I sincerely hope that unfortunate instances such as this, rare though they may be, will serve to remind my people of the potential folly for entrusting ourselves so completely to the power of the machines."

Gold nodded soberly. "We've seen our fair share of societies that got themselves into trouble by relying too much on computers. I can certainly sympathize with your sentiments, Daltren."

Gomez agreed as well. "We've encountered two in the past few months alone." The chaos that had ensued when Ganitriul, the mammoth computer system that had overseen for millennia every facet of life on the planet Eerlik, began to malfunction remained a particularly powerful memory.

"I appreciate your insight," the Senuta captain replied. "But you must understand that my people have relied on automation for so long that I fear we may forever be enraptured by its spell. Adopting any kind of philosophy that lessened that dependence would undoubtedly be met with stark resistance."

From the viewscreen, Scott said, "Take heart, sir. You at least have the presence of mind to know the dangers and limitations of allowing computers to have so much control. There have been numerous societies that dinna have that luxury."

Smiling, Gold said, "If anyone here would know about that, it's you, Captain Scott. How many planetary supercomputers did Captain Kirk end up convincing to turn themselves off, anyway?"

"More than his share, I'm afraid," Scott replied, chuckling. "And of course ye know about one of them, that blasted contraption they called Landru."

Gomez could not help smiling as she remembered the da Vinci's recent encounter with a group of Ferengi who had managed to acquire components from the world computer that Captain Kirk and the Enterprise had encountered more than a century before.

"That was one of Captain Kirk's earlier missions," she said, a playful grin on her face, "so he hadn't quite polished his computer deactivation skills yet. If your mission to Beta III had come a few years later, there would have been nothing left for us." Of course, Gomez knew that the Enterprise's original encounter with the Landru computer had been at least indirectly responsible for the evolution of the S.C.E. into the organization it was today.

"We only thought we were finished with Landru when Captain Kirk turned the beastie off," Scott replied.

"But it was really just the beginning."

Chapter

2

Stardate 3176.9

Will this never end?

Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott leaned into his stride as he slogged through watery muck that rose above his knees. A worklight attached to the hood of his orange environmental suit helped guide him through the tunnel, its illumination reflecting off the water's brackish surface and the damp slime coating the walls around him. Sloshing sounds marked his progress and echoed up and down the sewer pipe, all but drowning out the crinkling and crunching of his suit's protective material. In an effort to fight the oppressive heat in the tunnel, Scott had shrugged off the upper half of the suit and tied the sleeves around his waist, leaving him clad in a standard Starfleet undershirt.

But the headgear stays on, Scotty, lest this ungodly smell make you lose your breakfast.

"So, how's the view down there?" said a voice from the communicator Scott carried in his other hand. The voice belonged to his friend and fellow engineer, Lieutenant Commander Mahmud al-Khaled.

"Oh, it's quite the visual treat," Scott replied as he trudged onward. "You'll hafta let me give you the tour before we go."

Laughter came through the communicator's speaker grid. "Well, you know that you could put a merciful end to this."

"Don't I know it." With a simple call to the U.S.S. Lovell, orbiting somewhere above the surface of Beta III, this sweaty, smelly, dirty walk could be swapped for an almost-instant journey to where he was already headed. However, skipping a naked eye tour of this main sewer connection might have meant his overlooking a fouled pump or a cracked seam or anything else that would lead to a malfunction of the village's wastewater treatment system.

Besides, if you'd not taken the easy ride yesterday, he chided himself, maybe you'd not find yourself back in this stinkin' place.

Scott continued through the pipe, the tricorder in his hand adding a smaller measure of illumination as it outlined the engineer's course. On its miniature display a blinking dot indicated his goal: a broken proton pump inhibitor located just a few meters ahead. From his review of the sewer system, he knew that the inhibitor played a rather minor role in the overall scheme of things. However, experience had taught him with hard-learned lessons that even a simple problem could quickly escalate into a major crisis if left unattended.

"You should be getting close to the inhibitor assembly's access panel," al-Khaled said over the communicator.

Sloshing a few more steps through the muck, Scott spied the slightest swelling in the left side of the tunnel, the outline of what looked to be a panel perhaps a meter square.

"Aye, I've found it."

Donning the pair of gloves that came with his sullied environmental suit, he traced a finger through the film on the tunnel wall, further distinguishing the panel from the metal surrounding it. He wiped the surface of the panel until he found the recessed pull handle that had been buried under years of accumulated slime and grime. Gripping the handle, Scott tugged the panel free from the wall.

A torrent of cold black water exploded outward, striking the engineer square in the chest and instantly dousing him in more of the same filthy mess that he had been wading through for the past hour.

"Oh, for the love of..."

Only the voice of al-Khaled kept him from unleashing a particularly vile string of Scottish oaths.

"Scotty? Is everything all right?"

Even as the sludge began to soak through his shirt, Scott raised his communicator to his mouth. "Oh, never better, thank ye very much." Sighing, he added, "Well, ye wanted payback after gettin' shocked by that power converter I sent ye to fix yesterday. I dare say ye've gotten it, lad."

"That bad, is it?"

"Let me just say that I'm glad I decided to keep my hood on."

"Spare me the details until I can really enjoy them. Can you see the inhibitor?"

Peering into the access panel, it took Scott several seconds to spy the pump inhibitor, tucked away as it was beneath a layer of wiring and other components. There was no mistaking the heavy layer of corrosion coating the gadget's exterior, which itself looked to be brittle and cracked. A quick scan with his tricorder showed what a visual inspection had already told him: The inhibitor definitely needed to be replaced.

"Aye, the wee beastie has given up the ghost, all right," he said, speaking more into the compartment than his communicator. "I'll have it replaced and tested within half an hour."

"So what you're telling me is that you'll be ready to beam out in about ten minutes. I've worked with you long enough to understand your repair estimate methodology."

Scott smiled. Only a few short years had passed since his first meeting with Mahmud al-Khaled on Starbase 10. They, along with a contingent of Starfleet engineers, had been brought together to assist in the repair efforts of several Federation observation outposts that had suffered damage in a massive ion storm near the Romulan Neutral Zone. While Scott had been preparing to assume his posting as chief engineer of the *Enterprise*, al-Khaled had been a lieutenant serving on the *Lovell*. Starfleet had seen fit to retain the obsolete *Daedalus*-class starship, along with a few of its sister ships, on active duty and detailed to the Corps of Engineers. The ships were used to transport their equipment and personnel from one mundane, even boring assignment to another. It was a decrepit excuse for a starship, or so Scott had thought at first.

Assigned to work with engineers from the *Lovell*, he had quickly found himself in the uncustomary position of working with an entire crew of technical specialists who shared his passion for discovering

unorthodox solutions to problems. Both the ship and her crew had comported themselves admirably during that mission, with Scott and al-Khaled becoming fast friends once their work had been completed.

Despite their differing career paths, with al-Khaled remaining on the *Lovell* and Scott continuing with his assignment aboard the *Enterprise*, fate had conspired to bring the two friends together here, overseeing the operation to help the people of Beta III get back on their feet again.

"When a system works for me, Commander, I stick with it." Setting the communicator on the edge of the access compartment opening, Scott dug around in his bag again until he produced a tool to assist him in removing the useless pump inhibitor. Leaning forward, he craned his head for a better view. The environmental suit's hood was not designed to facilitate easy viewing of one's workspace, though. Sighing in resignation, Scott took a final breath of clean air before pushing the hood over and off his head. The unfiltered stench of the sewer pipe wasted no time wafting up his nostrils.

"Och."

"Something amiss, Commander?" came al-Khaled's mildly taunting voice over the communicator. Scott glared at the unit, sorely tempted to toss it into the dark sewage.

"Nothing I canna handle. As nasty as it might be down here, it still beats bein' in the captain's chair of the *Enterprise* right about now."

Al-Khaled laughed. "I heard rumors that Captain Kirk got his aft shields chewed up rather severely."

"You dinna know the half of it, lad." Suppressing a gag, Scott leaned into the access panel once more.

As friendly as he had become with al-Khaled in the past few years, it still would not do to discuss what had transpired in the wake of Captain Kirk's decision to disable Landru, the mammoth computer that had ruled the people of Beta III for more than six thousand years. Memories of the post-mission briefing, held with the *Enterprise* senior officers, remained very clear in his mind, as did the urgent call from Starfleet that had interrupted it. He also remembered the one very important lesson of command he had learned that day.

Never take an admiral's call in front of your crew.

After reviewing how Captain Kirk had convinced the Landru computer to deactivate itself upon realizing that its programming and actions had stifled the growth of the Betan people, Admiral Nogura had not been a happy man. His comments on the subject were both succinct and memorable.

"You pulled the rug out from under an entire civilization...and then you just left?"

Not exactly, of course, Scott conceded as he pulled the broken proton pump inhibitor from its recess and stuffed it in his satchel, only to snatch up its replacement.

Though Kirk had left behind a team of cultural and sociological experts to aid the Betan people in transitioning away from life under the rule of Landru, it had become apparent that more assistance in a wide variety of areas would be required. The *Enterprise* was ordered to return to Beta III in order to provide engineering assistance in assessing the technology and its usefulness in the wake of Landru's deactivation. More important, however, they were tasked with determining just how much influence the supercomputer had actually held over day-to-day operations of "the Body" of Betan society.

To their relief, Landru's grip had not been as tight as they had originally feared. While the computer had controlled their actions, the Betan people were more skilled technically than their architecture, dress, and mannerisms might lead a casual observer to presume. They were capable of operating electrical generating plants, waste water systems, food distribution centers, and the like. What they lacked was the ability to determine on their own when and how tasks ranging from the mundane to the critical needed to be accomplished. Without "the will of Landru," the people of Beta III simply had no direction.

Therefore, it had become the job of Scott and other engineers, to say nothing of the team of sociologists and cultural scientists theEnterprise had provided, to teach the Betans about "the will of the people." Since beaming down from the ship, he and a dozen of his engineers had quickly become mother ducks to the suddenly "orphaned" Betan citizens.

It took less than two days for the assignment to gnaw at Scott's patience.

Thankfully, it had also taken less than two days for reinforcements to arrive. To assist theEnterprise, Starfleet had also assigned a crew of crack problem solvers already known to Scott: theLovell. Once they had established orbit, wave after wave of technical and mechanical experts appeared to help the now-leaderless people begin to make their own way.

"That's got it," Scott said as he felt the satisfying click of the inhibitor snapping into place. Picking up his communicator he added, "She's in. Now I just need to run a diagnostic before we reactivate this section."

"Excellent,"al-Khaled said."You just may make a decent engineer one day, Commander. Sure you don't want to stay on with the Lovell?"

Scott laughed. "It's only a temporary assignment, lad, just until theEnterprise comes back to get me. I figure they're about halfway to the rendezvous with theLexington by now."

Despite the proverbial can of worms that Captain Kirk may have opened here, it did nothing to alleviate his other responsibilities. Indeed, at this very moment theEnterprise was on its way to pick up an ambassador en route to the starship's next assignment.

"That's right,"al-Khaled said."You're going to ferry Ambassador Fox to his diplomatic mission in that star system with the two warring planets. I hear that he's a hard man to get along with."

Scott had heard the same thing, mostly from colleagues on theLexington who had informed him that life with the ambassador was something akin to being consigned to the Third Concentric Circle of Hell. Faced with two weeks in the volatile company of Ambassador Robert Fox, slogging through the sewers of Beta III did not seem all that bad.

Is it too much to hope that the captain might forget to pick me up on the way to NGC 321?

His work with the inhibitor finished, Scott mopped sweat and grime from his forehead with the back of his sleeve, then closed the access door.

"All right, Mahmud, I'm ready to reactivate the inhibitor assembly."

"What? Has it been thirty minutes already?"Scott smiled as al-Khaled paused for a moment."Stand by, Scotty. We're setting it up now." Several moments passed before Scott heard the telltale vibrations and groans of ancient machinery, much of it embedded in the concrete all around him, returning to life. After the initial few seconds, the hum of the equipment settled into a comfortable rhythm.

"Sensors show the pump inhibitor is working perfectly," al-Khaled reported. "A job like that should earn you a beam-out, unless you'd rather hike back to base."

For a fleeting moment Scott pictured himself hurling his friend headfirst into the depths of the murky water, followed closely by the communicator in his hand.

"Energize."

Mahmud al-Khaled closed the flap on his communicator and returned the device to his belt, chuckling at the expense of his friend. That minor yet welcome distraction completed, he drew a breath before returning to his own apparently unending task. Looking up from his desk and the pile of status reports that seemed to multiply every time his attention was drawn elsewhere, al-Khaled saw that the line of engineers and other specialists waiting to see him had grown as well.

"And I traded Scotty's job for this one?" The question was voiced just low enough that none of the crewmen waiting to see him had heard it. Looking up, he waved the first man, an ensign he recognized as a member of the Enterprise crew, to step forward.

The ensign offered an electronic clipboard containing his status report. "We're finished checking the water treatment systems with the new automation computers and everything is working fine, sir. Actually, the system's working a bit above specifications, if I may say so."

"You may," al-Khaled replied. "And great work there, too." Quickly signing the report and returning it to the ensign, he looked up at the line of men and women still waiting to see him. "Now, who's next?"

The process was repeated, with al-Khaled reviewing and approving report after report from the engineers who had come to him, watching as even more of them filled in the ranks of those who left the room with new assignments. As he worked he listened to the voices of crewmembers from the Enterprise and his own ship rise above the ambient noise within the makeshift command center that he and his team had established here in the first hours after arriving on Beta III.

It almost sounds like the bridge of a starship, al-Khaled thought, except busier.

In the wake of Landru's deactivation, there had been an atmosphere of confusion and uncertainty as automated systems working behind the scenes of this normally tranquil city and others like it across the planet had suddenly found themselves operating without the guidance of the master computer. Power, water, sanitary systems, food distribution, all of these processes were controlled by some means of mechanization, their systems overseen by the all-encompassing presence of Landru as it had been for more than six thousand years.

Without that influence, Betan citizens found themselves in the position of having to quickly learn how to issue instructions and see to the management of these processes on their own. Al-Khaled and his engineers had been tasked with assisting in that transition, teaching the Betan people to be self-sufficient while at the same time working to reconfigure and reactivate the master control system, this time without the vast network of software that had comprised Landru's "personality."

Finishing his review of one final report, an update from his Lovell shipmates O'Halloran and Anderson on their installation of a new computer monitoring station, al-Khaled put the paperwork aside and leaned

back in his chair. He was not used to jockeying a desk, but coordination of the considerable effort under way here had made it necessary for him to assume a more managerial role than was typical for him on other missions.

This is starting to feel too much like a real Starfleet outfit, he mused, with no small amount of disappointment. It would be good to finish this assignment and get back to the Lovell and to being just a regular engineer for a while.

At the sound of a tentative set of footfalls behind him, he smiled. He had no need to check the chronometer on his desk to know what time it was or who was approaching. Sitting up in his chair, al-Khaled turned to see Bilar, a young Betan male who had volunteered to assist him with various duties around the command center. He was dressed in a formal gray suit, complete with tie and bowler hat, and carrying a tray of food.

Yes, al-Khaled thought, right on time.

"Needing a break, Mahmud, ayeh?" Bilar said in the almost lyrical dialect that many Betans used. "I am sure this will be to your liking."

Al-Khaled surveyed the tray's contents: typical Starfleet cuisine of a tuna salad sandwich, a mix of raw vegetables, and hot tea. Ration Pack #47, and one of the better offerings, truth be told. Nodding his thanks to Bilar, al-Khaled scooped a wedge of sandwich from the tray and ate.

Removing his hat, Bilar asked, "What is your will for me now, Mahmud?"

The engineer knit his brow, uncomfortable with the man's choice of words yet knowing that the Betans could not help themselves from speaking in such a subservient manner. "Just watch and learn, Bilar. The Elders tell me that you'll be the person who manages these systems once we leave, so you'll need to know how to keep an eye on things."

"It is an honor to serve as best I can, Mahmud." Bilar paused as al-Khaled chewed. "Marplon and the others should be coming at any moment. Might I wait for them outside?"

Al-Khaled rose, grabbing the rest of his sandwich in one hand and swigging from his tea with the other. "We'll both go. I need to get an update on how the reprogramming efforts are proceeding, anyway."

"It helps much that the Elders are so learned," Bilar said as they left the command center.

"That it does, Bilar, but don't sell yourself short." Seeing by the look on the man's face that he did not comprehend his words, al-Khaled added, "Everyone in the city has proven useful and willing to help get things going again. You all have reason to be proud."

"It is for the good of the Body," Bilar said. Then, catching himself, he smiled and amended with, "I mean, it is good for us all. Yes, Mahmud, it is a time of change."

"And it is a welcome change!"

The voice from behind him startled al-Khaled for a moment, as he turned to see the men he awaited.

"Greetings, gentlemen," al-Khaled called to the approaching pair. Reger and Marplon, formerly Elders in the society Landru had once overseen, had covertly participated in an active resistance to the computer's

rule before its ultimate deactivation at the hands of Captain Kirk. Marplon in particular had quickly earned al-Khaled's trust and confidence through his knowledge of Landru's operating systems. Along with Reger, Marplon had been working with several of al-Khaled's engineers to eliminate any trace of pseudo-consciousness from Landru's master computer network.

Marplon extended a hand and when al-Khaled returned the gesture, he grasped it in both his hands. "This is a time long in coming, and one I did not think I would see. But it is here." He paused, barely containing his joy. "Landru is no more. With the assistance of your technicians, we have gone through the data banks, as you call them, and have removed all that supplied the will of Landru."

"Your men now are seeking to locate any of what they called subroutines, but we agree that the task is almost completed," Reger added.

Al-Khaled smiled in satisfaction. By far this had been the most difficult task that had presented itself to his engineering team since arriving on Beta III, given the extensive nature of the software that comprised the vast entity once known as Landru. "Excellent. Once we reconnect the master computer to the remainder of the network, your systems will be running just as they used to, only now without Landru making all of the decisions."

"My people owe you a great deal, Mahmud," Reger said. "We have lived in the grip of Landru for far too long."

"We still have some work to do, and you will need to help," al-Khaled replied. "But once we are gone, Beta III will be in your hands. You will be able to live as you see fit."

Marplon nodded. "We are ready, of that you can be sure." Turning to Reger, he placed a hand on his companion's arm. "Come, my friend. We still have many matters to attend to this day."

As the Elders turned and departed the command center, Bilar turned to al-Khaled. "And where are we off to next? Meeting with our Mr. Scott, ayeh?"

"Not until he hits the sonic showers. He probably smells worse than a platter of haggis."

"Haggis, Mahmud?"

Al-Khaled could not help but laugh at the quizzical expression on his protégé's face. "Be sure to ask him about it the next time you see him."

Chapter

3

The people of Beta III moved differently these days.

Christopher Lindstrom noticed it more and more as he walked through the streets of the city, greeting passersby while threads of the afternoon sun peeked between buildings that looked to him as if they had sprung from history tapes of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century Earth.

The residents of the city had put him off when he had first arrived a little more than a week ago, but that had not daunted him. His training as a Starfleet sociologist helped him keep an open mind to all

differences in manner of speech, dress, custom, and interaction he might observe in sentient races inhabiting worlds far from his home on Earth. He thrilled to the idea of meeting representatives of new civilizations, and dreamed of one day leading his own first contact mission.

Yet his gut had given him an odd feeling about the Betans from the moment he materialized on the planet's surface as part of Captain Kirk's landing party. In reflection, he attributed his initial unease to one thing. It had been their gait; a slow, methodical stepping that gave them the appearance of being more automated than human. They had moved as if every action, from tipping a hat to holding a door, had been programmed or dictated to them by an unseen source.

Of course, we learned just how right that observation was, didn't we?

When not driven by inner voices from Landru, the citizens had taken some direction from the Elders. This select group of senior residents of the village had been groomed by Landru to lend some of their insight and experience to the others in context with the computer's grand plan for peace and life on Beta III. They had also been charged with the secrets of Landru's maintenance and operation, possessing closely guarded knowledge that had been passed quietly from generation to generation of Elders.

Continuing his casual stroll down the street, Lindstrom noticed a young woman emerging from one of the buildings that had been converted into a temporary supply warehouse. Dark-haired and fair-skinned, she was dressed in a black skirt and cream-colored blouse, fastened at the neck with an ornate lace collar. It took only a moment to recognize her. Catching sight of him, she smiled brightly as she waited for him to approach her.

"Good morning, Tula," he offered as he drew abreast of her. Noting the parcel she carried, with the familiar logo of the Starfleet Medical Service emblazoned on it, he asked, "Still helping out at the hospital?"

"Yes, Mr. Lindstrom. I was bringing these to Dr. Hamilton right now. Are you headed that way yourself?"

"Eventually, yes," he answered as she began to walk beside him. "And please, I know I've told you that my name is Chris."

Tula's face flushed slightly and she turned away from him. "I know you have. This is more...comfortable for me, at least for the moment. I hope that doesn't upset you."

Shaking his head, Lindstrom said, "Not at all. I'd never want you to be uncomfortable with me, Tula." Once again he found himself drawn to the young woman, just as he had the first time he had laid eyes on her, on a street much like this one mere moments after beaming down with Captain Kirk. He felt more than a little protective toward her, and he knew the feeling arose from the chaotic scene that had unfolded minutes after the landing party's arrival from the Enterprise.

They had found themselves in the midst of "the Festival," a period of wanton violence and decadence that had abruptly gripped the entire city. The landing party soon discovered that the Festival was a manifestation of Landru, just another way that the mammoth computer entity had exerted its control over the populace. Tula had been swept up in bedlam that had ensued when the "Red Hour" had struck and the Festival had commenced.

Fearing for their safety, Lindstrom and the rest of the landing party had sought a place to hide and found it in the home of Reger, a man they would quickly come to know as an Elder and, to Lindstrom's

surprise, the father of Tula. Lindstrom had initially expressed shock at her father's lack of concern for the safety of his daughter, but it had worn off when he and the other Enterprise officers learned just how powerful Landru's influence had been.

"Thank you for understanding," Tula replied. "Understanding is the will. . ." She brought herself up short, and Lindstrom turned to look at her, concern etching his features. Seeing his expression, she attempted a small smile. "I am fine," she said after several awkward seconds. "I meant that understanding each other is good for us all."

Lindstrom nodded uncertainly as they resumed their walk to the hospital. Originally run under the auspices of several Elders who possessed all the medical training that Landru could provide, the hospital had been augmented with Starfleet medical equipment and supplies, to say nothing of a full contingent of doctors and assistants. It was yet another way the Federation had found to assist these people in the wake of Landru's deactivation.

The people, he had learned, were quick studies when it came to technical training, something for which the Starfleet engineers and scientists had expressed a great deal of gratitude. They knew how to operate the mechanical systems of the village, and they could perform the basic functions of running their own lives at home. While they did not possess the understanding of social interaction and subtle nuances of emotions that came into play during such situations, these too could be taught. It would be Lindstrom's job, and the task of other sociological experts like him, to shepherd these people through the obstacles of simply living in harmony without the assistance of a machine to make the decisions for them.

If only they could get a jump start of their initiative.

"Tula," Lindstrom said. "What are you going to do after you give your supplies to Dr. Hamilton?"

He watched as the young woman knit her brow and mulled his question. "Well, Dr. Hamilton asked me to bring her these bandages and cloths from the supply area. So I gathered them and am doing that."

"But, Tula, what will you do afterward?"

Her look showed she was becoming more perplexed as she seemed to grapple with what would be a simple question for someone with practice at exercising free will. "I...these bandages. I need to give them to..."

Lindstrom put his hand on her forearm and they paused. Tula looked into his eyes as she sought some direction from the Starfleet sociologist, and he ached a little inside for the Betan woman, who in many ways was but a child. "It's all right, Tula. You're doing fine."

"I still have much to learn, don't I?"

Nodding, he offered what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "We all do, I think. I..."

His attention was drawn to a sudden disturbance up the street, where a woman wearing a Starfleet engineering jumpsuit was working with a Betan man. The man was holding his head in his hands and shouting in pain as he staggered away from his companion. Sinking to his knees, the man rolled into a fetal position as he continued to groan in agony. The female engineer rushed to his side in an attempt to help.

Running to the scene, Lindstrom saw that the woman was Lieutenant Vanessa Masters, another of the

Enterprise engineers. He could not help but notice the circles under the woman's eyes and that her dark skin was smudged with dirt and grime, testament to the hard work and long hours she had been putting in since arriving on Beta III. "Vanessa," he called out as he sprinted to join her. "What's going on?"

Masters shook her head as she knelt beside the fallen man. "I don't know." She placed her hands on his arm, trying to reassure him. "We need a doctor."

Reaching for his communicator, Lindstrom flipped the unit open. "Lindstrom to Dr. Hamilton. We have a medical emergency and could use your help." Looking up to verify his location, he added, "We're just to the south of the hospital."

The doctor's response was immediate. "I'm on my way, Lieutenant."

As the connection went dead, Lindstrom noted that the Betan had fallen into unconsciousness. He checked for a pulse and to ensure that the man was breathing.

"We were running some scans on the gas lines beneath the street," Masters said, "when Dorin was gripped by this seizure."

Tula, who had run up behind Lindstrom yet remained silent to this point, said suddenly, "He is a Lawgiver."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Masters asked, her eyes narrowing in confusion.

Ignoring the question, Lindstrom gently reached around the back of the man's head, his fingers seeking out the area just beneath the bottom edge of the hairline at the neck. There, just where Dr. Hamilton told him he would find it, his fingers traced the telltale bump beneath the surface of the skin.

"What is it?" Masters asked.

His suspicions confirmed, Lindstrom replied, "Tula's right. Dorin was once a Lawgiver."

The Lawgivers had been Landru's version of a police force, and, until the computer's deactivation, the chief method of maintaining order in the city. Where the Elders had led by example and sincerity of purpose, the Lawgivers had struck fear in the souls of the people. In their long flowing robes and concealing hoods, the Lawgivers had usually appeared at the first sign of trouble or discord. In addition to their intimidating appearance, they alone had carried the only weapons allowed in the city: Long cylindrical staffs that projected a type of forced energy pulse. Despite a week of continuous study, the construction and operation of the staffs still baffled Starfleet engineers.

The sounds of running footsteps caught his attention and he looked up to see a woman in a blue Starfleet uniform running toward them. Her fair skin and long locks of fiery red hair, to say nothing of the medical kit she carried under her left arm, immediately identified her as Dr. Jane Hamilton.

"What happened?" she asked as she dropped to a knee beside Dorin, simultaneously reaching into her kit for her medical tricorder.

"He's a Lawgiver, Doctor," Lindstrom answered. "I think the scans they were conducting induced a neural shock."

Frowning as she activated her tricorder and accompanying diagnostic scanner, Hamilton asked, "You

found the chip?"

"Just above his neck, where you told me to look."

"What are you two talking about?" Masters said, making no attempt to hide her confusion.

Waving her scanner over Dorin's forehead, Hamilton glanced up at the engineer. "Sorry, Lieutenant. I haven't been able to brief the engineering staff on what our medical research has learned about these people." Noting Tula, who was standing just behind Lindstrom with a worried look on her face, she amended, "Some of these people, that is."

Turning off her scanner, she returned the device to her kit. "The shock has induced a light coma, but I'm not detecting any neural damage. We should get him to the hospital." Swapping her tricorder for a communicator, Hamilton contacted the hospital with instructions for medics to bring a stretcher.

Lindstrom rose to his feet and, noting the still-puzzled look on Masters' face, indicated Tula with a nod of his head. "Landru controlled the bulk of the populace with sonic and light waves to literally reprogram parts of the brain. When it came to the Lawgivers, his hold was even tighter."

Putting away her medical instruments, Dr. Hamilton ran a hand through her long hair, the bangs of which were matted across her forehead with perspiration. "The Lawgivers all have a computer chip implanted at the base of their brains. Landru used the chip to control them, even more so than he did the rest of the people. Electronic signals sent to the chip carried instructions directly into the Lawgivers' brains. They had no choice but to obey."

"Are the chips malfunctioning?" Masters asked. "Is that what caused Dorin's seizure?"

Shaking her head, Hamilton replied, "Some of our equipment operates on frequencies similar to those used by Landru, including ones he apparently used for punishing individual Lawgivers when discipline was needed."

Pointing to the tricorder Masters had slung from her shoulder, she added, "If you were running a high-intensity scan, it was probably enough to trigger the chip. We haven't figured out the complete range of frequencies that were utilized yet. We have learned, though, that the chips can't be removed without extreme risk to the patient, at least not here. Once the Hippocrates arrives, we'll have the facilities we need for further research and even delicate surgery." Starfleet had already dispatched the medical ship to Beta III, but it was not scheduled to arrive for at least another week. For now, Dr. Hamilton and her staff were on their own.

During the past week he and the physician had spent long hours, when time permitted, discussing the situation here, and had found their specialties overlapping in their quest to better understand the Betan people. They had used each other as sounding boards several times already as they each strove to peel away one more layer of mystery surrounding the people of Landru.

Hamilton said, "If I didn't already have orders to the Defiant, I'd be tempted to stay here. There's enough research potential to last several years." Nevertheless, Lindstrom knew, the doctor would soon be leaving Beta III to assume her posting as chief medical officer of the Enterprise's sister ship. She had already confided to him how the compelling nature of both this assignment and the one that awaited her had given her pause to consider a change of orders, even though she had already admitted that the Defiant was where she truly wanted to be. This mission, however, had already proven to be as challenging as anything she was likely to encounter during her upcoming deep space assignment.

"It's amazing," she said. "An entire race mentally controlled by some computer implant. If, somewhere in this universe, a race ever set to using such technology to conquer and subjugate its enemies, that race might be unstoppable."

"Well," Lindstrom replied, the visions conjured by the doctor's words causing a small shiver to run down his spine, "let's hope that never happens."

Chapter

4

Reger stepped up his pace through the darkness as he neared Marplon's residence. Although the two Elders had worked together for years within the secret resistance to Landru, this would be his first visit to his friend's home. After all, he hadn't even known Marplon's name until a week ago, the organization of the resistance cells having been such that although he had worked with the man, he had been unaware of his identity.

All of that nonsense can be forgotten now, Reger reminded himself.

He ascended the several steps to the stoop of Marplon's modest home and reached for the front door's handle. It flew from his grasp, however, as the door was opened from the other side to reveal Marplon standing in the doorway, a worried expression clouding his aged, distinguished features.

"Joy be with you, friend," Marplon said.

Without Landru to guide us, Reger thought, even old habits such as a traditional greeting seem out of place now.

"Thank you for coming so quickly, Reger," Marplon continued. "I fear we may have a problem."

Marplon ushered Reger into his home and as he stepped forward into a simple yet warmly furnished sitting room, he saw his friend Hacom sitting on a couch with his face in his hands. The man was visibly distraught, dressed in wrinkled bedclothes and a robe. His gray hair, normally groomed impeccably, was tousled.

Casting a questioning look at Marplon, Reger crossed the room to his friend. As he drew closer, he could hear the man sobbing quietly. "Hacom," he said, putting a hand on the old man's shoulder, "what troubles you so?"

Hacom looked up, and Reger saw a measure of calm ease the deep lines of his face. "You are strong," he said. "You are much stronger than I. The will of Landru is so great, and I can resist it no longer."

Reger's eyes narrowed in confusion. "Hacom, Landru is no more. You have no reason to fear his wrath."

"But I do," Hacom replied, watching as Marplon entered the room and seated himself in one of two overstuffed chairs situated near the fireplace. "He will not let me sleep. He troubles my every thought. I have abandoned him in his hour of greatest need!" Tears ran from the old man's eyes as he looked at Reger.

"Why do you say that, Hacom? Landru is powerless against you."

Marplon said, "I believe Hacom is the Guardian."

Feeling a shiver run down his spine at the words, Reger's eyes widened in momentary shock. He brought his hand to his mouth, his finger rubbing his lips. It was an almost unconscious gesture, one that he performed whenever he was nervous or uncertain.

The Guardian? Does he truly exist?

"Surely you jest," he whispered. Looking at Hacom, his friend for uncounted years, Reger found it difficult to speak for several moments. Then, "We have heard the stories, certainly, but...Hacom, can it be true?"

"I do not know!" He shouted with a force of voice that Reger hardly expected from the slight-framed man. "I have never been called that, neither by man nor by Landru. I know only that he calls to me with a voice distant and yet powerful. He tells me what I must do."

Stepping forward, Marplon placed a comforting hand on his friend's shoulder. "Hacom, let me get you something warm to drink. Settle yourself, and let us help you seek peace."

"There can be no peace without Landru! It is he who brings us peace and tranquility." Sinking back into the couch, Hacom began to sob once more.

Rising from the couch, Reger guided Marplon by the arm into the small kitchen just beyond the sitting room. As Marplon busied himself warming a kettle on the stovetop, Reger could see that despite trying to project an outward appearance of calm by involving himself in the mundane act of preparing tea, his friend was anything but relaxed. Taking a moment to look back to where Hacom was still sitting on the couch, Reger asked in a low voice, "What has he told you?"

"Hacom has told me nothing," Marplon said as he gathered three mugs from a cabinet. "I found him and led him here just before I summoned you. He was in the Hall of Audiences, screaming for Landru and asking for his guidance."

Confusion returned to Reger's face. "Why would he go down there?" The Hall of Audiences had been the main auditorium where Elders and other trusted advisors could go to seek Landru's counsel. With the computer's deactivation, there seemed no need to return to that once-hallowed chamber.

"I asked him a few questions when I found him there," Marplon replied, "and his responses made all very clear to me." Looking up from his tea preparations, he fixed Reger with a solemn stare. "He is the Guardian."

"The Guardian is a myth," Reger countered. "A tale of the prophets, is it not?"

Marplon shook his head. "Was not the prophesied return of the Archons just another tale to you not ten days ago? 'And at my darkest hour, when the winds of change are upon us all, from among you shall come the Guardian to champion the will of Landru and restore all as it once was.' Those are the words of the prophets, Reger. I think it best that we heed them."

"Hacom is overwrought," Reger said. He too knew the words, but that did not change one unalterable fact. "He has simply not been able to come to grips with the fact that Landru is gone and that a new life

lies before us, one that Landru does not control." Even as he spoke the words, though, Reger knew that he had at least to acknowledge the possibility that Marplon could be right.

"We have always known that the Guardian was among us," Marplon replied, "but we could never imagine what events would come to pass that might require him to come forward. Surely what has happened to Landru at the hands of Starfleet is just such an event."

"But if Hacom is the Guardian," Reger said, "he is not strong enough, neither mentally nor physically, to fulfill this prophecy on his own. Is the power of Landru so great that it can act on Hacom despite that fact?"

Reger began to move about the small kitchen, somewhat frustrated that the confined space did not allow him the freedom of movement he craved when he wanted to pace and think. "If what you say is true, Marplon, then the mind of Hacom must be more deeply affected by the will of Landru than any of us, anywhere in all of this world. Landru is strong, my friend, but we must be stronger if we are to succeed in our dream to live as free people."

"What shall we do?" Marplon asked.

"If we calm him and keep watch over him this night, Starfleet will finish their work and we will have our world as our own." On the stove, the kettle started to whistle and boil. "He trusts me, Marplon. Let me speak with him. I may be able to reason with him."

"Yes," Marplon replied as he moved the kettle from the hot burner. "You have known him far longer than I. Perhaps you can..."

The thud of a closing door cut Marplon off in midsentence. The two men rushed from the kitchen into the sitting room only to find it empty.

"Oh no," Marplon whispered as Reger ran to the front door and flung it open. Looking into the dark street, illuminated only by the faint glow of the gaslights lining the street, he saw no sign of his friend.

"Hacom? Hacom!"

But he was gone.

It was hardly a celebration feast, but Montgomery Scott looked upon his tray of Canopian spiced salad, lasagna, and steamed vegetables as if it were food fit for a king rather than a meal processed in a field kitchen. Not only was this his first hot meal in two days, but tonight would be the first time he had actually relaxed since arriving at Beta III. It was a sure sign that their assignment here was more than likely drawing to a conclusion.

Taking a seat at the table already occupied by Lindstrom and al-Khaled, Scott offered the men a greeting before turning to his meal. As he took his first bite, he glanced down at Lindstrom's plate and thought he recognized the orange contents of the lieutenant's soup bowl.

"Is that plomeek soup yer eatin' there, lad?"

Lindstrom nodded. "I'm in a Vulcan phase, I guess. I go through the dietary cards of all the races I can

stomach. I guess you could say that it helps me to understand them as separate peoples, at least in some fashion. I've been doing it since I got my first sociologist's posting after graduating from the Academy."

"And has Beta III proven to be an interesting case study for you?" al-Khaled asked.

"It has," Lindstrom said. "I would bet that there are plenty of assignments given to the Corps of Engineers team that would be of great interest to Starfleet sociologists. Have you ever given any thought to creating such a post onboard your ship?"

Shaking his head, al-Khaled replied as he reached for a piece of bread, "You have to remember that this is hardly a typical mission for us. We're usually out making emergency repairs to subspace relay stations or catching up with starships that have matter/antimatter drive problems or digging tunnels through asteroids. Situations like this do not come along all the time, Mr. Lindstrom, and we're not the type of team that gets first contact missions."

"Granted," the sociologist answered. "But should this type of situation arise again, you don't necessarily want a group of engineers handling things."

Al-Khaled said, "I'm no sociologist, but even as an engineer I can appreciate how this situation has hobbled the Betans as a race. I don't know how I'd react if someone told me my god was dead."

"You've just underscored my point, Commander," Lindstrom said, smiling. "The Betans did not view Landru as their god. They didn't worship him in churches, nor do they even have any churches that we've been able to find. The Betans talk of a few prophecies but they read no scripture. There are no dogmatic beliefs that we can find stemming from the will of Landru, other than he is to be obeyed and feared. He told them what to do and dictated almost every decision they made."

Scott and al-Khaled exchanged looks, the full weight of the sociologist's words beginning to sink in for the first time since they had set foot on this world. "So, they really are lost," al-Khaled said.

"Yes, Commander," Lindstrom replied. "But these people do not miss their god. Instead, they miss, some of them desperately, being told what to do. Keep in mind that sometimes the need to be led is stronger than the need to lead. People seeking that kind of direction have done unexpected things to get it."

Scott nodded, realizing for the first time in several minutes that he had left his meal untouched while Lindstrom was speaking. "You raise good points, lad."

Smiling, Lindstrom shrugged and offered his hands in mock surrender. "I'm not trying to be full of myself here. Just an observation that long after the machines have been fixed, the people will still need tending to."

The conversation paused as the men finished their meals. Scott looked at a chronometer on the mess hall wall as he stood from his chair. "What needs tending to right now, gentlemen, is my body, in the form of sleep. This is the earliest we've knocked off for the day since we got here. If there are no objections, I think I'll be honorin' that request."

"Barring any unforeseen weirdness," al-Khaled said, "I do not see that as a problem, Commander."

Scott smiled at that.

Now wouldn't a break from weirdness be nice?

Hacom shielded his eyes from the cloud of displaced dust rising up to enshroud him as the wall panel before him slid through the floor. The musty smell that escaped from the room beyond the doorway was distasteful and stale, but he didn't dare hesitate. As the door mechanism's grinding ceased, he crossed the threshold into the hidden chamber.

Though he had never even known of this room's existence before tonight, Hacom had arrived here as though he'd known the route his entire life. How had he known about the concealed street-level entrance and the elevator that descended hundreds of meters beneath the city to this chamber? And the correct procedure to open the sealed door? The knowledge had come to him as easily as any fact he had ever committed to memory.

There was, of course, only one explanation.

"Landru!"

His words echoed in the Spartan chamber. Lighting panels set in the walls reacted to his presence, glowing even brighter as Hacom stepped farther into the room.

"Landru?" After the torment he had been experiencing these last days, would his calls go unanswered?

The centerpiece of the room was a single waist-high railing, constructed of ornately carved wood and highlighted with sections of polished metal. Hacom listened carefully, but he did not hear the comforting hum that he typically had sensed whenever he had come to any of Landru's halls.

"Landru! Where are you?"

His cries unanswered, Hacom walked to the rail and kneeled before it, bowing his head and supplicating himself before a blank wall. "Guide me, Landru."

Opening his eyes after a moment, Hacom noticed a small, hinged plate set nearly flush within the center metal section of the railing. He worked a fingernail under its seam and raised it. Underneath was a single button, blinking with ruby light. He ran a finger over the button, feeling the warmth that pulsed in rhythm to the light. For no other reason than it seemed the proper thing to do, Hacom pressed the button.

Immediately a low rumbling began somewhere beneath his feet. No, it was in the walls. It was everywhere, surrounding him as it grew in intensity before evolving into the hum of power, no, of life, that had always signaled the presence of...

The wall before him began to glow brighter than even the lighting panels as an image took form before him. Hacom gasped as the blurry image came into crisp focus, that of a man wearing a gown and draped with a golden sash. The man's head, made larger in appearance by upward streaming hair, seemed almost to levitate above his shoulders. His eyes were piercing yet friendly. The edges of his mouth carried the hint of a smile.

"Landru!"

"Guardian, you have carried out my will," the image said. "You have rescued the Body when all seemed

lost. Landru is grateful for your service."

"I am your humble servant, Landru," Hacom said, drinking in the image of his protector, of the one who had guided him throughout his entire life. "I want only peace and tranquility as there was before."

The image nodded, its thin smile unwavering. "Soon, all will be as it was."

Hacom smiled, reveling in the bliss that only moments ago he feared had been taken from him forever.

Chapter

5

"Mr. Scott! Mr. Al-Khaled!"

As he exited the building that housed the Starfleet contingent's temporary mess hall with al-Khaled and Lindstrom, Scott caught sight of three men running toward them. Actually, Scott realized, two of the men, Reger and Marplon, seemed to be assisting the third man, whom the engineer recognized as Hacom, moving as fast as their aged bodies appeared able to carry them.

"Marplon? What's wrong?" Al-Khaled broke away from his companions to meet the approaching Elders. The three men stumbled to a halt, gasping for air, and Reger dropped to his knees.

What could upset the Elders like this? Scott wondered. As he crouched beside the fallen Reger, the old man's breaths were coming in ragged wheezes as he fought to speak.

"Lan--uunh!" was all he could force out before the effort overwhelmed him.

Grasping Marplon by the shoulders and trying to steady the man, al-Khaled's face was a mask of concern and confusion. "Marplon, what is it? What's happened?"

The Elder was beginning to catch his breath, nodding in response to al-Khaled's words. Indicating Hacom with a wave of his hand, he managed to say between deep, sucking breaths, "The Guardian has been revealed! Hacom...Hacom...Landru is returning as it was foretold in prophecy. He is coming to enslave us again."

"What?" The words seemed to Scott at first to be the ramblings of a man lost in hysterics. "That canna be possible. Landru is gone, Marplon. Ye helped to turn him off, remember?"

It was Hacom who answered, his expression one of mild contentment. "I have carried out the will of Landru. He has returned. We will all be of the Body once again."

Scott rose to his feet. "I thought the beastie was completely shut down," he said, "that its memory banks had been wiped."

"Landru is all-powerful," Hacom countered, his voice remaining calm. "He has been here for six thousand years, and he will be here long after our passing."

Al-Khaled's eyes were wide with near shock. "If this is true, then we may be in big trouble. We should get these men to the hospital. Reger doesn't look good at all."

And then the wailing started.

Screaming, shrieking voices filled the outdoor air from all directions at once. Scott saw a pair of passing Betans fall to the ground, writhing and moaning in what must have been intense agony. Another man burst from a nearby building, his hands over his ears while shouting something unintelligible at the top of his lungs. All around the Starfleet officers the sounds of panic and pain from women and men alike were beginning to bleed together in a single unrelenting cacophony.

"This can't be good," Lindstrom said.

Marplon froze, his voice a whisper. "Landruuuu..."

The hospital that had once belonged to the Elders now rivaled, thanks to the efforts of Dr. Hamilton and her staff, the sickbays of most active Federation starships. For that Scott was grateful as he observed Reger and Hacom on two of the diagnostic beds. Hamilton was studying the readouts on the medical displays arrayed around the patients' heads.

"How is he?" al-Khaled asked, referring to the unconscious Reger.

"Severe heart palpitations," the doctor replied. "And I don't like the looks of his blood pressure. He's a little too old and out of shape to be running around like he was."

Moving over to Hacom's bed, her frown deepened as she studied the diagnostic monitors. "As for Hacom, scans show unusual brainwave activity. The frontal lobe stimulation is consistent with what we've seen in our research of Landru's neural reprogramming processes."

Only partly listening to the doctor, most of Scott's attention was instead on the report from the security detachment commander over his communicator. When the report was finished he said, "Send a detail to the hospital on the double. I want a man on each door right now."

Lindstrom shook his head. "I've seen this mob mentality at work, Commander. One man on each door won't be enough."

"It'll have to do, Mr. Lindstrom," Scott replied as he flipped the unit shut and returned it to his waist. "Things are beginnin' to get out of hand. Reports are comin' in from all over the city. Mobs are formin' and fights are breakin' out. It seems that some people have fallen back under a kind of trance while others haven't."

"So it's true," al-Khaled said, sighing in exasperation. "Landru has been reactivated somehow. If we let it go unchecked, he could undo everything we've accomplished here."

Scott shook his head. "I dinna think so, lad. The systems we installed are independent of the main computer network. Landru canna tie into them."

"But he can turn the Betans against them and physically tear them apart," al-Khaled argued as he reached for his communicator. "That's not happening on my watch." Activating the unit, he barked out a series of orders. "Al-Khaled to all personnel. Report to your primary duty stations. The Landru computer has somehow been restarted and is in the process of reassuming control over the people. Everyone is to

be armed with phasers on stun. Guard your stations and await further instructions. Al-Khaled out."

As the engineer severed the connection, Scott regarded his friend. "So, how do ye propose we shut Landru off again?"

Al-Khaled almost smiled. "I don't know. I'm making this up as I go along."

"You remind me of my captain sometimes, do ye know that?" Scott replied, shaking his head. "I suppose the best place to start formulatin' a plan is the command center." Turning, he walked over to where a sagging Marplon sat limp in a nearby chair. "Marplon, we're going to need your help, sir."

Having been administered a vitamin supplement and tri-ox compound by Dr. Hamilton to help ease the discomfort of his earlier exertions, Marplon nodded enthusiastically. "Whatever I can do to assist you, my friend. You have only to ask."

Taking the Elder by the arm, Scott looked to the rest of the group. "Let's get to the command center."

Leaving Hamilton to tend to Reger and Hacom, the four men made their way to one of the hospital's street level exits. Scott was thankful to see that a security guard he recognized from the Enterprise but whose name he could not remember was already stationed at the door and was observing the street outside through a small window. At the group's approach the ensign nodded to Scott.

"It was almost a riot out there a few minutes ago, Commander," the security guard reported, "but it seems to have quieted down now."

Moving to the window, Scott peered out and saw dozens of Betans standing motionless in the street. He motioned for Marplon to take a look.

"They are communing with Landru," the Elder said after a few seconds. "We should hurry."

Taking his own look out another window, al-Khaled sighed. "It's a long way to the command center. I wish we had a phaser or two."

"Look at it this way, lad," Scott said. "We'll have plenty of them when we get there."

Chuckling at the deadpan remark, al-Khaled cast a wry glance in Scott's direction. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

Scott said nothing as he opened the door and moved out onto the sidewalk. Seeing that the citizens on the street still appeared to be communing, as Marplon had called it, he motioned for the others to follow him as he set off at a brisk jog up the street. As they ran, he tried to inspect every person they passed, looking for some hint that any of them might be about to come out of their trance.

Don't move, he willed the crowd of people all around them. Don't move.

They began to move.

"Uh-oh," al-Khaled said.

A sharp pain lanced through Scott's shoulder and he felt himself knocked partially off balance. "What the...?" Then he heard al-Khaled cry out in pain from behind him. Turning, he saw that his friend was

grabbing the back of his thigh and limping.

"Rocks! They're throwing rocks!" Lindstrom called out as he raced ahead of the running pack, leading Marplon by the arm with the older man struggling to keep pace with the sociologist. "Watch out!"

Scott and al-Khaled both picked up their pace, running even faster up the street as the crowd around them began to react with more urgency to their presence.

"Why is it...Scotty?" al-Khaled said between pants, his breathing becoming labored as they continued to run.

Scott was feeling the exertion, too. "What...?"

"When things...go to hell...they always go...so fast. For once...why can't something go...to hell at a...leisurely pace?"

Moving as they did, they were able to avoid most of the objects thrown at them. Rocks, bricks, pieces of wood, and anything else people could heft rained down all around them, bouncing off the sidewalk and the walls of buildings. Scott was beginning to feel his lungs burning in protest to the extended sprint. The group turned a corner, and he saw the familiar entrance to the building housing the Starfleet command center. As they approached, the doors opened and two security officers beckoned to them, phasers in hand to provide cover from the horde of people chasing after them.

"Seal the door!" Scott yelled as he and the others piled through the entryway. Safely inside, they allowed themselves to sag against a nearby wall, each of them doing their best to inhale all of the unused oxygen in the room.

"I haven't run like that since the Academy," Lindstrom spat out between breaths. "And we sure didn't have to run so far for cover when this happened after the Red Hour."

Al-Khaled said, "Sorry I missed that."

"Aye," Scott added. "And I was having my own problems onboard the Enter --"

He froze in mid-sentence as he remembered yet another problem Landru had caused when it was still operating. The computer's influence had not been confined to the planet and the people who lived upon it, after all.

"Oh dear lord," he breathed as he reached for his communicator and viciously flipped the unit's cover open.

"Scott to Lovell!"

On the Lovell's bridge, Captain Daniel Okagawa heard the alarm in Scott's voice as it exploded from the intercom. Swiveling his command chair toward the communications station, he nodded toward the ensign on duty there to open the frequency.

"Okagawa here. Mr. Scott, what's wrong?"

"Captain! Ye've got to get the hell away from here, now!"

Feeling the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, Okagawa leaned forward in his seat. "Mr. Scott, what are you talking about?"

The engineer's voice was almost frantic. "The Landru computer is back online, Captain, and its planetary defenses are sure to follow. It'll drag ye down just as it did the Archon, and tried to with the Enterprise."

Though he had only worked with the Enterprise engineer once before, the man's reputation had preceded him, both then and before this current mission. He was not known for irrational or ill-advised courses of action. If Scott believed that something bad was about to happen, Okagawa was obliged to at least consider what he was saying.

Turning to the science station, he said, "Run a scan for any new energy sources down there." Then, returning his attention to Scott he asked, "What are we looking for, Mr. Scott?"

"It's a series of heat beams that Landru used to defend itself from orbital attack," Scott replied. "If it gets a lock on ye, the Lovell will be unable to break orbit or do anything until it's off. You've got to leave right away."

From the science station, the Tellarite lieutenant on duty, Xav, turned to the captain. "Sir, sensors are picking up a large power source coming online, from a location approximately five hundred meters beneath the surface of the city. It's larger than anything that's been running since we arrived here, and it's increasing in intensity."

Okagawa ran the scenario through his mind. With nearly eighty Starfleet personnel on the planet, it would take a good bit of time to transport them all back to the ship, maybe more time than they had before... before what?

His course of action, therefore, was simple.

"Raise shields," he ordered. "Helm, prepare to leave orbit." Then to Scott he said, "Mr. Scott, does Mahmud concur with your theory?"

"Aye, that he does, sir. This is the first he's hearin' of this, too, but he's agreein' with me."

That was enough for Okagawa. "Break orbit, helm. Put some distance between us and..."

Then the ship shuddered around him and nearly threw him from his seat. Personnel at every bridge station flailed for something to hold on to as the deck shifted beneath their feet.

"What the hell is that?" he asked as the shock wave began to intensify.

Xav, still holding on to his console to keep from being thrown to the floor, replied, "Some type of energy beam from the surface, sir! Shield strength is at seventy-nine percent and dropping rapidly."

"Helm, get us out of here. Full impulse power!"

The very hull of the Lovell seemed to voice its objection as the ship's powerful impulse engines, modified and reconfigured over the past few years by its crew of talented engineers, strained and fought against the attack. Okagawa had a vision of the ship in the grip of Landru's orbital defense system, being dragged

down through the atmosphere of Beta III.

Then there was the feel of a rubber band snapping and the ship's inertial dampeners groaned in protest as the Lovell gathered enough power to break free of the beams' influence and head away from the planet.

"That was a bit too close, thank you very much," Okagawa said to no one in particular, wiping his brow as he sighed in relief. To the ensign at communications he asked, "Can we still contact the landing party?"

The ensign shook his head. "Afraid not, sir. We're out of range."

Nodding, the captain turned his chair to face the main viewer, which now displayed a field of moving stars instead of what he wanted to see, the welcoming curve of Beta III from high orbit. As he settled back into his seat, Okagawa had the sudden feeling that his ship seemed very empty to him, to say nothing of feeling a lot less purposeful.

It's up to you now, gentlemen, he mused, directing his thoughts and good wishes to the men and women he had been forced to leave on the planet's surface.

Chapter

6

As his connection with the Lovell crackled and finally died out altogether, Scott closed his communicator and returned it to his belt. His expression was somber, a fact not lost on his companions.

"Did they make it?" al-Khaled asked. "Have they left orbit?"

"Aye, that they have," Scott replied. "They're out of range now. We're on our own for the time being, lads."

"I don't understand," Lindstrom said, finally bringing his breathing under control. "I thought that you removed Landru's control over everything."

Al-Khaled nodded. "We severed the ties between Landru's central core and the rest of the network that it once oversaw. We also removed any trace of the Landru personality from the databanks we found."

"Landru is all powerful," Marplon said as he lowered himself into one of the few chairs in the command center. "He foresaw a time when he might face enemies such as you, and provided for that eventuality. The Guardian, Hacom, must have been the instrument of that will."

Shrugging, al-Khaled replied, "Obviously there was some sort of recovery or backup system in place that we missed. That must be what Hacom found."

"Well," Scotty said, "it doesn't matter now how it happened. All that matters now is that Landru is active again and is regaining control of its computer systems."

"But his overall influence will be limited, Scotty," al-Khaled countered. "Landru doesn't have the control he once did over the rest of the automated network. We saw to that. None of our modifications tie into the central core yet, so we still retain control over most of the city's automated systems."

"He still has control over the important parts, though," Lindstrom said. "We've already seen that he is reasserting his influence over the people. There's nothing to say he can't order someone to launch physical attacks on those areas we've removed from him."

"Exactly," al-Khaled said. "Landru is like a severed head in search of a body." When his friends looked at him with odd expressions on their faces, he amended, "Sorry. Bad choice of words."

"Actually," Scott said, "that brings up a good question. Landru may have regained control of the systems he used to keep the people under his control, but will the people fall back into his grip that easily?"

Marplon mulled the engineer's questions. "We all are vulnerable to some degree, but the indoctrination runs undeniably deep in many. There are those among my people who long for Landru's return."

"You mean like Hacom," al-Khaled said.

Shaking his head, the Elder waved the suggestion away. "You do not understand. Hacom was chosen by Landru to protect his will at all costs. His role as the Guardian was decreed for him long before you came to us."

Hacom was only the cause of their current problem, Scott knew. The effects of the Elder's actions were continuing to reveal themselves with each passing moment. The longer he and his friends waited to act, the harder he knew their task would become.

"We have to find a way to shut down Landru again, for good this time. Not simply deactivate him, but disable him completely." Sighing in resignation, he nodded as the implication of his words became clear even to him. "We may have to destroy the central core completely to do it. Of course, that's easier said than done, isn't it?"

Al-Khaled moved to a supply locker and opened it after keying in the proper security code on the small keypad set into its door. Inside were twelve Type II phasers along with extra power cells. Extracting three of the weapons, he resealed the locker before handing a phaser each to Lindstrom and Scott.

"So, how do we get to the central core?" al-Khaled asked.

Marplon shook his head. "With Landru once again active, approaching it will be all but impossible. Lawgivers will be stationed to protect that area."

"The Lawgivers," Lindstrom echoed. "With the microcircuit chips they each carry, Landru's control over them is sure to be absolute."

"And we don't have the resources to launch any kind of attack," al-Khaled added, "not with the Lovell out of communications range." He shook his head. "A few well-placed photon torpedoes and our problems would be solved."

Marplon started at the words, rising from his chair with an excited expression on his face. "Are you saying you require weapons?"

"Possibly," Scott said, holding up his phaser for emphasis. "These willna be enough if we're going to have any chance of stoppin' that contraption."

The Elder nodded. "There may be a way."

Not pausing to explain himself, Marplon instead waved for the trio of Starfleet officers to follow him from the command center, leading them deeper into the building. A curious Scott followed close behind, with al-Khaled and Lindstrom bringing up the rear. Each of them had drawn their phasers and were keeping an eye out for trouble.

"Where are we going?" Scott asked.

"You already know about the underground tunnels that connect many of Landru's control centers," Marplon replied. "They were used by Lawgivers and Elders to better carry out his will. There are entrances to the tunnels throughout the city. I believe we can use the one in this building to take us where we need to go."

Rounding a corner, Marplon reached out to what Scott at first thought was nothing more than a section of wall, unadorned except for a coating of drab yellow paint. The engineer was only mildly surprised when the wall panel swung open, revealing a concealed doorway and a dark tunnel beyond.

What he was surprised to see, however, was the Lawgiver ascending from stairs beyond the hidden entrance.

"Look out!" he called, reaching to pull the Elder clear as the Lawgiver, dressed in the now familiar robe and hood that concealed the wearer's head and carrying the staff that was the symbol of their power, moved to stand in the doorway.

"Stop," it said, pointing its staff at the group. "You attack the Body. You are enemies of Landru."

Before Scott could react, a blue beam of energy appeared from over his shoulder, striking the Lawgiver in the center of the chest. The beam held the robed figure for a moment before fading, leaving the Lawgiver to collapse in a heap to the carpeted floor.

Turning, Scott saw Lindstrom, his phaser arm still extended in the direction of the Lawgiver. Seeing the look on Scott's face, the sociologist shrugged. "Sometimes the simplest approach is the best one."

"There are liable to be more of them throughout the tunnels," Marplon said. "We must hurry now!"

As he moved to inspect the opening that led downward into the vast network of tunnels beneath the city, al-Khaled regarded the Elder. "Just where exactly are we going?"

It was a cache the likes of which Montgomery Scott had not seen outside a museum.

The room was filled with Federation technology and Starfleet-issue equipment. An assortment of items, some of which Scott had never seen outside of reference books and historical texts, lay before them. Everything was shrouded with fine dust and tucked away on shelves in accordance with no rhyme or reason as to order or function.

More than a century old, it was all that remained of the U.S.S. Archon.

"Landru decreed all of this, even the room in which we walk, forbidden," Marplon said as he watched

the three Starfleet officers assess the room's contents. "No one was to examine the devices, or reveal to anyone that they even existed. Even those who salvaged the artifacts were... never heard from again."

Scott ran a finger along the edge of what looked to be the monitoring console for an impulse engine. More than likely, he decided, this panel had come from the Archon's main engineering center, regulating fuel flow and output efficiency levels. He could see that the gunmetal gray surface beneath the layer of dust was smoked with soot. Had this been caused by an onboard fire? Had the ship suffered structural failure as it was dragged from orbit by Landru's defensive systems, allowing the unyielding heat of the planet's atmosphere to roast the interior of the vessel during its plummet to the surface? Shaking off the vision, he looked about the rest of the room.

That looks like the barrel of an old laser cannon, he told himself as his eyes fell across the antique weapon. A Mark II at least, and there's a subspace relay beacon, an interphasic coil. However, none of it seemed to be operational or even salvageable.

"I have no idea what most of this stuff is," Lindstrom said. "I wouldn't know if there was anything useful in here even if I was looking right at it."

Al-Khaled replied, "I doubt we'd even have the time to rig up something that clever or involved. Our best bet might be something we can use to subdue the Lawgivers so we can get at Landru and start tearing out circuit boards by the handful."

Scott crouched to floor level to examine what appeared to be a section of scarred plating from the Archon's hull. "I'm not even sure what we could devise from this collection of junk."

Inspecting another section of metal, apparently a door panel from one of the ship's interior hatches, Lindstrom shifted it aside to get a look at what lay underneath. "Scotty, I think I may have something here." Moving the door panel completely out of his way, he added, "Are these what I think they are?"

Their interest piqued, Scott and al-Khaled abandoned their own searches to join the sociologist. Getting a look at what Lindstrom had found, the engineer gasped in surprise.

"My dear mother's mother," he said. "Those look like old-style spatial torpedoes." Long and slender, the dull silver casing of the torpedoes appeared to be largely undamaged, possessing few marks other than the standard Starfleet codes and serial numbers stenciled on their exteriors. These weapons were not nearly as powerful as the photon torpedoes carried by modern-day starships like the Enterprise, but they had still packed quite a punch in their day.

"That's exactly what they are," al-Khaled replied, making no effort to contain the rising excitement in his voice. With Scott and the others assisting, the younger engineer directed the movement of the torpedoes to where he could better inspect them. The next several minutes were spent in silence as al-Khaled gave the weapons a fast visual once-over.

"All three look to be fully operational," he announced, "at least as far as I can tell. Amazing, isn't it?"

Scott shook his head in near disbelief. "Aye. Things in those days were built to withstand all sorts of harsh punishment and to last a long time, but this... well, this is definitely beyond the warranty period."

"These might be powerful enough to use against Landru," al-Khaled said. "We can set them to detonate either individually or together. It would be no trouble to set them to a timer or to a remote control."

"Landru would never permit you to move such weapons close to the central core," Marplon said. "He would either deactivate them before they detonated or else he would simply send an army of Lawgivers to repel you."

"And we canna launch 'em," Scott added, "nor could we guide them once they were launched."

Shaking his head in frustration, al-Khaled swore under his breath. "Besides, all of those options would likely destroy the central computer, and we'll still need it to keep things running here." The engineer began to pace the room. "There has to be a way to disable the machine without destroying it." Then he eyed the torpedoes again. "Wait. What about a bomb without the blast?"

Scott looked askance at his friend. "I don't follow ye, lad."

"We tune the torpedoes not to detonate their charges, but to channel their explosive energies into an electromagnetic pulse. That should short out the active Landru routines without causing catastrophic damage to the equipment."

"But," Scott said, "it'd also wipe out the other computer systems we've been working on for a week. That's a lot of effort to sweep away, Mahmud."

Waving the comments aside, al-Khaled shook his head. "Listen. We'd have to coordinate a shutdown of the active power systems that we've established. The pulse won't affect any inactive power sources. We have eighty people in the city, Scotty. That's more than enough people to cover all the bases." Indicating Marplon with a nod of his head, he added, "And we have Elders to help us, as well."

"Getting all of that in order will take some time," Lindstrom said. "Landru may not give it to us."

Nodding, al-Khaled replied, "Then we had better get started."

Chapter

7

Chaos reigned supreme.

At least, that was the way it looked to Scott as he stared with a mixture of fascination and horror at the disorder that was quickly descending upon the city. From his vantage point, looking through a basement-level window of the command center, Scott could see citizens fighting and running amok in every direction. Others who had taken up their roles as Lawgivers once again moved slowly yet purposefully through the crowds, assisting in the roundup of those who still retained their free will.

Scott heard footsteps behind him. Turning, he saw that it was Lindstrom.

"Something wrong, Chris?"

The sociologist smiled in response. "I'm something of a fifth wheel until al-Khaled finishes with the torpedoes." He indicated where al-Khaled and Lieutenant Ghrex, the female Denobulan engineer from the Lovell, were still working feverishly, all but oblivious to anything going on around them.

After moving the torpedoes from the subterranean cache to the command center, al-Khaled had wasted

no time turning to the task of reconfiguring the weapons to emit the electromagnetic pulse needed to disable Landru's central processing core. Though Scott considered himself fairly knowledgeable when it came to ship-based weaponry, the century-old torpedoes were an unfamiliar model to him. The engineers from the Lovell, however, with their experience serving aboard a near-relic from the same era as the Archon, were more than equal to the task. With time being of the essence, Scott had elected to step aside and allow the others to work until they called for him.

But when I get back to the Enterprise, he decided, I've got some catch-up learnin' to do.

"Well," he said, "there's still plenty for us to do before this is over. Have ye made the other arrangements we need for this crazy plan to work?"

Nodding, Lindstrom replied, "Everything's underway right now." Consulting the chronometer displayed on his tricorder's monitor, he added, "We've got about fifty-seven minutes to go. Reger and Marplon are already coordinating with other former Elders, getting the people we need into the key positions. If anyone knows how to organize this city, it's the Elders. Even Hacom is helping us." Shrugging, he added, "I think he feels guilty over what's happened, even if he had no conscious control over his actions."

"Aye, I hope so, lad." While the timetable they had established for this plan had seemed too rushed at first to Scott, the engineer knew that delaying the operation any longer would seriously jeopardize their chances of succeeding.

Lindstrom held up his tricorder. "They also helped me to pinpoint the best place to position the torpedoes." Turning the unit for Scott to see, he indicated the small display screen with a finger. "Landru's central processing core is almost directly below the center of the city."

Studying the information on the tricorder's display, Scott frowned. "That area's also very heavily shielded, as I recall. From the readings Mr. Spock took with the Enterprise sensors, that underground area was built to withstand anything short of an orbital bombardment. We'll have to be almost on top of the bloody thing if this is going to work."

"The Town Square," Lindstrom said. Nodding in the direction of the basement window and the pandemonium ensuing beyond it, he added, "And we'll probably have to fight every step of the way to get there. Reger told me that Landru has already regained control of all Lawgivers and that people who need to be reabsorbed are being rounded up. At the rate they're moving, the entire city could be back under Landru's control by nightfall."

Scott nodded, closing his eyes momentarily as he listened to the sounds of disorder on the streets outside. In addition to the chaos already taking place, reports had come in that Landru had also regained total control of its complex security system. Neither the Lovell nor even the Enterprise, which was at this moment on its way back to Beta III to retrieve him, would be able to safely assume orbit around the planet until that security grid was disabled.

They turned to see al-Khaled walking over to join them. The engineer was wiping his hands with a towel and was wearing a small smile on his dirty, tired face.

"We're finished, Scotty," he said. "All three torpedoes have been reconfigured and tested. Together, they should produce a pulse more than enough to disable any active power source."

"Nice work, lad," Scott replied, letting his gaze wander over to where Ghrex was reattaching an anti-gravity unit to the trio of torpedoes, which had been bundled together with packing straps Lindstrom

had found in one of the tool kits brought down from the Lovell. With the anti-gravs, two men would be able to guide the weapons with one hand each, leaving the other free to carry a phaser. Scott knew, though, that whoever was staffing the units would have their freedom of movement compromised.

"Mahmud," he said, "you and I will see to the torpedoes. Lindstrom and Ghrex will provide cover for us."

Pulling his phaser from his waist, Scott held the weapon up to inspect its setting and power level. "We have to get these into position and be ready to detonate on schedule. I dinna think we'll get another chance at this, so whatever happens, even if one of us gets hit or captured, the group keeps moving. Understood?"

The stark order had the effect of turning the expressions on the faces of al-Khaled and Lindstrom to those of grim determination. Seeing the reaction his words had on his two companions, Scott felt the sudden need to reassure them.

"Not to worry, we'll get through this," he offered with only slightly more confidence than he himself was feeling. With a mischievous grin he added, "After all, ye already did the hard part."

Al-Khaled made a show of rolling his eyes in mock exasperation. "Oh, sure. Now he gives the proper credit where it was so sorely overdue. Better late than never, I suppose."

As they emerged from the command center into an alley, their presence was almost immediately noticed.

Scott had to duck to avoid the brick that nearly took his head off, which smashed into the wall behind him and splintered into several pieces. Stone shrapnel peppered the team. Nearly losing his grip on the handle of the anti-gravity unit and its cargo of torpedoes, he instinctively dropped into a defensive crouch and turned to see where the brick had come from.

"Look out!" al-Khaled shouted, his own phaser already aiming at their attacker. It was a man, dressed in a smoke gray suit with a long black overcoat and top hat to complete the ensemble. The man's elegant manner of dress clashed with the expression of manic rage on his face. Dashing into the alley from the street, the assailant's eyes were wide and his mouth twisted into a sinister sneer as he wielded what looked to be a steel bar. The bar was held high, ready to strike at the first thing, or person, that presented a target.

Almost with a will of its own, Scott's weapon arm came up, aiming his phaser at the onrushing man as his finger pressed the firing stud. The phaser's cold blue-white energy beam washed over the man, halting his advance. As the glow of the beam faded, the attacker wobbled for a moment before crumpling to the ground, unconscious.

"Nice shooting," al-Khaled said as he adjusted his own grip on the anti-grav, taking a moment to ensure that the trio of torpedoes was still stable.

Scott nodded, exhaling audibly as he rose from his crouch after confirming that the man had been acting alone. "How much time do we have left?"

Lindstrom consulted his tricorder, which he was also using to guide them to where they would plant the torpedoes. "About thirty minutes. We need to get moving."

"Let's do that, then." With Lindstrom leading the way, phaser in one hand and tricorder in the other, the Starfleet officers began moving in the direction of the street. Scott and al-Khaled maintained their positions in the middle of the group, with Ghrex bringing up the rear.

If Scott thought the greeting they had received in the alley was gruff, it was nothing compared to what was waiting for them as they emerged from the shadows of the buildings onto the sidewalk lining the street before them.

"Good lord," he whispered as they stopped just at the edge of the alley. Debris of all types--glass, wood, metal--littered the streets. People ran in all directions, some dashing frantically up and down the street while others attempted to force open doors leading into the various buildings. Still other citizens were fighting each other, as those who still retained their own self-control struggled to fend off those who had already succumbed once more to Landru's influence. The skirmishes in some cases were savage, with people using any and all means to overpower their opponents. Scott nearly recoiled in horror as one man slammed his assailant in the side of the head with a brick.

As his opponent fell to the ground, the man looked up and his eyes locked with Scott's. The engineer saw the look of abject terror on the face of someone fighting for his freedom if not his very life.

"Landru is coming for us all!" the man shouted. "He will find us and destroy us!" Then he pointed directly at Scott. "You are to blame for this! Landru is punishing us for your interference here!" Dropping the brick and allowing it to clatter to the street, the man abruptly turned and ran away, leaving Scott and his companions to stare after him in shock.

"Scotty, are you okay?" al-Khaled asked. Scott jerked his head in the direction of the voice and saw his friend's expression of concern. Swallowing hard, he nodded.

"Aye. He may be right, you know. If we can't stop that blasted contraption for good this time, there's no telling what fresh hell it's liable to unleash on these people." Pausing to take a deep breath in order to refocus himself, he added, "Let's get this done."

Once more they began to move, emerging from the tenuous protection of the alley. Lindstrom, one eye on his tricorder as he tried to watch all around him for other approaching threats, guided them up the street. Rather than risk getting caught out on the open street, the sociologist instead stayed close to the buildings, hugging the walls as he led them toward their target.

Phaser fire from behind him made Scott turn to see Ghrex taking aim at another attacker, a woman this time, running at them while brandishing a club. The phaser beam cut her down, dropping her into an unconscious heap on the street. Almost immediately he heard al-Khaled's phaser whine as the engineer fired at another citizen. All around them people were beginning to take notice of the Starfleet officers.

"They are not of the Body!"

"Traitors! Kill them!"

"It is the will of Landru!"

Dropping his hold on the anti-gravity unit, Scott used his free hand to adjust the setting on his phaser. "Wide-field stun!" he called out. "It's the only way we'll be able to handle them all."

His companions reacted to the order, adjusting the power level on their own weapons as the first hail of stones, bricks, and whatever else the rapidly growing throng of attackers could find rained down on them. His free arm held protectively over his head, Scott had to dodge to his left to avoid an oil lamp hurled at him. The lamp's glass bulb exploded against the wall behind him as he danced away from the attack, his phaser already coming up to aim in on the man who had thrown it.

"Fire!" he yelled above the growing cacophony of yelled threats and cries of seething anger now being directed at them. The engineers each fired their own weapons, and the effect was that of a wall of blue energy erupting from the phasers. It expanded and enveloped the oncoming mob in an instant, rendering all of their attackers unconscious even before they collapsed to the ground.

The abrupt absence of near pandemonium surprised Scott for a moment. While he could still hear sounds of chaos from elsewhere, the area right in front of them was almost serene now that nearly everyone in sight had been neutralized. Taking a second to ensure that none of the group was injured, Scott saw al-Khaled holding a free hand to the side of his head as he leaned against the wall of the nearby building. Blood flowed freely between the man's fingers and his face was screwed up in pain.

"Are ye all right, lad?"

Al-Khaled nodded. "I think I'll be all right. I zigged when I should have zagged."

Scott pulled his friend's hand back to inspect the wound. "Looks like ye got hit by a rock," he said. "We'll get ye fixed up."

"No time for that now, Scotty," al-Khaled said. "We have to get the torpedoes into position."

Knowing his friend was right, Scott turned and reached out for the anti-gravity unit. "Aye, and that's just what we're going to do. Mr. Lindstrom? How much time?"

"Less than fifteen minutes," Lindstrom reported. No further words were necessary as the engineers set out once again. Scott noted that al-Khaled had opted to retain his grip on his phaser while he carried his end of the anti-grav, leaving his head wound to bleed unabated. It was a nasty gash, and Scott suspected that it was all that his friend could do to simply remain conscious.

Moving quickly, they encountered no further resistance. Scott tried not to count off the seconds in his head as they jogged down the street, trying to stay close to the relative safety offered by the buildings. His eyes darted about, scanning each doorway, window, and gap between buildings for new threats, but no one appeared to challenge them.

"Over there," Lindstrom called out, pointing to the open area that Scott recognized as the Town Square. The vast courtyard, surrounded on all sides by buildings and dominated by the huge clock at the square's far end, was the first thing he had seen upon beaming down from the Enterprise.

The tension was palpable as they entered the square. Everyone in the group stepped up their level of alertness as they moved farther out into the open. Their vulnerability to attack was growing with every step, and as they hurried across the courtyard Scott's mind taunted him with visions of walking into a monstrous arena in order to do battle for the amusement of a crazed audience. However, what few people Scott did see on the street did not appear to be the least bit interested in the Starfleet officers.

"Let's get these beasties into position and find cover," Scott called out as they followed Lindstrom across the square. Finally the sociologist stopped and indicated a point on the ground with his tricorder.

"That's the spot."

With al-Khaled matching him step for step, Scott rushed across the last few meters and lowered his end of their precious package to the ground. Deactivating the unit's gravity-nullifying field, he disengaged it, leaving the torpedoes to settle under their own weight to the street.

"That's got it," he said. "They're not going anywhere now. Let's get the hell out of here."

"Scotty," al-Khaled said, his voice nearly a whisper.

When nothing else came, Scott looked up and saw that his friend was staring at something over his shoulder. He started to turn when movement several dozen meters away attracted his attention. It was a figure, standing at the end of the street.

A Lawgiver.

Another of Landru's enforcers was standing at the mouth of an alley. A third had appeared as if conjured by magic, standing in a doorway to Scott's right.

"They're coming out of the woodwork," Lindstrom said. Scott noted the anxiety in his friend's voice as he turned to see that another Lawgiver was standing in the street behind them, blocking the path that they had used to get there.

They were surrounded.

Chapter

8

"They must think we're lonely."

Al-Khaled's quip did nothing to ease Scott's escalating tension as he regarded the four Lawgivers that had taken up stations around him and his companions.

"Whatever happens," he said, "we canna let them near the torpedoes. We only have to hold them off for a few more minutes."

"Less than five," Lindstrom offered, holding his tricorder up for emphasis. "We need to get away from here." Scott agreed. Though the torpedoes would not produce anything resembling their normal violent explosive force upon detonation, the electromagnetic pulse they would emit could still cause severe neurological damage to anyone standing too close. He had no intention of setting the weapons off until he and the others had found some form of cover.

"I don't think our friends are going to just let us walk out of here," Ghrex said. Scott had to agree with the Denobulan's observation as he studied the Lawgivers, who had assumed nearly equidistant positions from one another, creating a circle with Scott and his companions in the center. The Starfleet officers quickly took up a defensive posture, facing outward with their backs to each other.

"You attack the Body," the Lawgiver in front of Scott said, pointing his staff at the engineer. "You will be

absorbed."

Then he heard the whine, faint at first but growing in intensity with each passing second as, only a few meters in front of him, a pinpoint of light appeared. It stretched and elongated, taking on an unmistakable humanoid-like shape.

"Landru," Lindstrom said.

"A projection," Scott said, remembering Mr. Spock's report and its details of the holography Landru had demonstrated. Scott had hoped to study the mechanisms behind the incredible display of technology, provided enough time remained between the completion of his repair duties and the arrival of the Enterprise to pick him up.

I know, he chided himself. Be careful what you wish for, and all that.

"You are the enemy," the projection said. "The infection you carry is lethal, and your destruction is necessary to the continued health of the Body."

Scott shook his head. "I dinna think so." To the rest of the group he said, "Time for us to leave, people." Taking aim once more at the Lawgiver nearest to him, Scott pressed the firing stud on his phaser.

Click.

Frowning, Scott tilted the weapon up to examine its power setting and, seeing that it still possessed most of its charge, attempted to aim and fire it again. Once more, the phaser refused to cooperate.

"Mine doesn't work, either," al-Khaled said, followed quickly by similar reports from Lindstrom and Ghrex.

"Your weapons have been neutralized," Landru said, "Just as you shall be. You will become one with the ultimate good."

As if in response to the computer's statement, the Lawgiver in front of Scott stepped forward and pointed once more to the engineer with his staff. "You will come."

"What do we do now?" al-Khaled asked.

Scott did not know. After all, Captain Kirk's the one who knows how to talk to these blasted contraptions. The engineer's expertise with computers was limited to the realm of keeping them operating at peak efficiency and diagnosing and repairing malfunctions.

He also knew that negotiating with Landru was out of the question. The computer was merely following the directives its creator had imparted to it thousands of years previously. So too were the Lawgivers, each of them controlled by the sliver of microcircuitry embedded within their bodies. Their subservience to Landru was absolute, and even if it was not, Scott had no time to figure out how to circumvent their programming.

"Why don't they just kill us and get it over with?" Ghrex asked.

"It would go against Landru's programming," Lindstrom said. "Violence is used as a last resort when it senses that no other options are available. Its directive is to absorb its enemies and stamp out the

violence and hate it believes they represent. Turning his enemies into allies of its notion of good is a larger victory than simply responding with violence in kind." Suddenly his expression darkened. "Maybe that's it."

"What's it?" Scott asked.

Rather than replying, Lindstrom instead returned his phaser to his hip. Then, raising his hands to show that they were empty, he said to the Lawgiver nearest to him, "We obey the will of Landru."

Scott was aghast. "Chris, what are ye doin'?"

"Buying us some time," Lindstrom countered.

"You will find peace and contentment within the Body," the Landru projection said calmly, as if responding to Lindstrom's act of surrender.

The Lawgiver pointed his staff at him. "You will come."

"This is crazy," al-Khaled said, and Scott had to agree. What was Lindstrom thinking? He could applaud the man's bravery, and though the number of options open to them was rapidly dwindling, Scott had no intention of willingly handing himself over to these goons. Frantically he looked about the courtyard, searching for something that could be used as a weapon, anything that might give him some kind of advantage.

Then he saw the clock.

The giant clock at the end of the courtyard, its massive white face highlighted by the black numbers and hands denoting the time. He had not given it much thought in the past few minutes. As his eyes focused on it, however, he realized that the clock was all that really mattered now as it began to chime, sounding out across the courtyard and echoing off the brick facades of the surrounding buildings.

Six o'clock.

"It's time!" al-Khaled called out.

What had once been known here as "the Red Hour" was now the signal for Scott and his friends to put their plan into motion. In his mind's eye the engineer could see other members of the Starfleet contingent, stationed at key points across the city, carrying out their assigned tasks. Some of that work entailed disabling independent power control mechanisms that had already been installed by engineers from the Lovell to replace those systems that Landru had once overseen. In some extreme cases, workers at this very moment were, if things were proceeding according to plan, even going so far as to physically cut power lines or destroy control consoles in various underground facilities where Landru had presided with total autonomy. Scott knew that actions, drastic as they may be, were the only methods to protect those critical systems that would be needed after Landru was deactivated once and for all.

None of that'll matter though if we canna do anything.

Apparently Lindstrom had not forgotten this, either.

Drawing abreast of one Lawgiver, the sociologist then flicked several switches on his tricorder. Suddenly several of the robed figures went into some kind of seizure, collapsing to the ground and shaking

violently.

Lindstrom grabbed the Lawgiver's staff and wrenched the weapon free, then ran toward one of the Lawgivers who wasn't affected by whatever it was the sociologist did. Swinging the staff like a bat, Lindstrom struck the Lawgiver in the left shoulder, sending the man tumbling to the street.

"Watch out!" al-Khaled shouted even as he tried to take advantage of the distraction. He launched himself at another of the non-seizing Lawgivers as the enforcer aimed his staff at Lindstrom, tackling the robed figure and sending them both to the ground before the weapon discharged.

The projection of Landru, seemingly unfazed by the rapid turn of events, continued to speak in the same calm manner. "You attempt to harm the Body. You must therefore be destroyed for the good of all."

Scott called out to his friends, "Let's get out of here!" The four officers sprinted away from the torpedoes, heading for an alley that Scott had already seen and decided upon as the best place for cover in the limited time available to them. As they ran, Scott reached for his communicator, flipping the unit open and activating it.

Almost there. Just another few seconds.

Beside him, Lindstrom was trying to read the status display on his tricorder. "Hang on, Scotty. I don't know if everyone's ready for us or not."

"They bloody well better be," Scott replied as the group dodged into the alley. Throwing himself against one wall, he gave his communicator a final glance to ensure that it was set to the correct frequency before resting his thumb atop the transmit control. "Because we're out of time."

He pressed the switch.

The explosion was not nearly as loud as it would have been had the torpedoes' original payload been allowed to detonate. Still, it was impressive enough. Scott felt the shock wave hit the building they were hiding against as it buffeted the brick exterior, and the ground vibrated beneath his feet in response to the massive electromagnetic pulse the torpedoes unleashed.

"You will be absorbed," were the last words of the Landru projection before it twisted and distorted, disappearing altogether as whatever source that had powered it fell in the face of the pulse.

Other effects became apparent immediately as well. First, Scott's communicator promptly went dead in his hand, the transtator circuitry offering no resistance to the pulse. Lindstrom's tricorder suffered a similar fate, as the sociologist was unable to deactivate the unit in time to protect it from the blast.

Within seconds the effects of the explosion began to dissipate, fading almost as quickly as they had appeared. Then there was only silence.

Poking his head around the corner of the building, Scott saw the four Lawgivers lying scattered across the courtyard near the casings of the three torpedoes. It was not hard to figure out what had happened to them, he realized grimly. The pulse would have overloaded the implants at the bases of their skulls as well. If the resulting shock had not killed them outright, the least it would have done is render them unconscious.

"Scotty," al-Khaled called out softly. As Scott turned to face his friend, the Lovell engineer held up his

tricorder, which had been deactivated during the torpedo detonation. "According to my scans, most of the critical systems were shut down in time. We did lose some secondary power distribution relays, but nothing serious. Our plan worked."

Nodding, Scott said nothing at first. Instead he looked out again on the scene of the fallen Lawgivers, which to him illustrated profoundly the nature of what they had just done here. Once again they had cast off the oppressive hand of technology left to run rampant so that it could no longer control the free will of living beings.

Now what?

"Engineers. All you know how to do is fix machines."

Scott, al-Khaled, and Lindstrom walked down the sidewalk bordering one of the city's main streets. All around them, Betan citizens were going about the tasks of cleaning up the city in the aftermath of Landru's nearly successful bid to regain control over their lives. Various people offered smiles and warm gestures of greeting as they walked past. It was an altogether different scene from the one that had transpired here less than a day before.

"Are ye saying that this wasna engineering problem, Mr. Lindstrom?" Scott asked. "Besides, that stunt you pulled on the Lawgivers looked like an engineering solution to me."

Lindstrom smiled sheepishly. "Well, I knew the high-level scan could induce that kind of seizure in some of the Lawgivers. It happened by accident before, so I thought it was worth a shot to do it on purpose this time."

Exchanging a wry grin with al-Khaled, Scott said, "Well then, lad, perhaps you'll enlighten us as to where our thinking is wrong."

"It's not wrong," Lindstrom countered. "But where your expertise is in the machinery, mine is in the people those machines were built to serve. Landru wasn't out to kill us, merely to negate us as a threat. If we had continued to resist him and the Lawgivers, however, he would have eventually ordered his men to kill us, to protect himself if nothing else."

"But if we cooperated," al-Khaled added, "then his programming dictated that the Lawgivers take us to their absorption chambers. In other words, we should have just let them escort us far enough from the torpedoes so we could set them off anyway?"

Lindstrom nodded. "Exactly."

"A mighty bold idea, lad," Scott said. "So tell me, why didn't ye stick to it?"

The sociologist could only smile sheepishly. "When the clock sounded, I wasn't sure what the Lawgivers would do. I remembered about the scans, and I just reacted."

"Ah," Scott replied. "Spoken like a man after Captain Kirk's own heart. He'll love the report you'll surely be filin' once all the dust settles here."

"That could be a while," al-Khaled said. "It will take some time to acclimate these people to their new

situation. Some of them will not believe that Landru is gone forever, and still others will actually miss the control he once possessed. I do not envy you your task here, Mr. Lindstrom."

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Lindstrom said. "With help from Starfleet and the Federation, these people will have everything they'll need to make a better life for themselves. Even with Landru permanently disabled, the automated network he controlled is more than enough to keep essential services operational. It'll also provide a nice foundation for bringing in more advanced equipment to help with the transition. The Betan people have all the skills they need to work and thrive, they simply need a guiding hand to help them evolve socially and culturally."

Al-Khaled said, "Early reports indicate that Starfleet wants permission to use Beta III as a starship maintenance facility. It will take years to work out solutions to problems these people do not even know they are going to face yet, but who knows? One day, this could be one of the premiere planets in the Federation. I almost regret that I will not be around to see it."

Scott almost agreed with his friend, though he knew that neither al-Khaled, nor himself for that matter, would ever have as much passion for such an endeavor as Lindstrom obviously possessed. The challenges the engineers sought lay elsewhere, after all.

"But that's why we're glad for experts like you," al-Khaled added. "While you want to meet new races of people and learn about their culture and maybe help to improve their lives, we just want to take apart all of their toys."

"Fair enough," Lindstrom said, "but suppose you and that shipload of engineers of yours are the first ones to come across a newly discovered race. You'll be able to figure out their hardware, of that I'm sure. But who's going to talk to the people who own it?"

It was an interesting question, one for which neither Scott nor al-Khaled had a ready answer.

At least, not today.

Chapter

9

Stardate 53676.2

"I'm hungry," Bart Faulwell said as his stomach growled for the third time in ten minutes.

Involved as he was with his work at the main computer station of the Senuta ship's compact command deck, Soloman nevertheless paused to regard his companion. "I have noted the indicative sounds emanating from within your torso."

Faulwell chuckled at the perfect deadpan delivery of the statement. In his experience, the Bynars as a species weren't normally given to frivolous wordplay. They preferred instead to concentrate on ensuring that any communication was restricted only to what was essential to the accomplishment of a given task. This was especially true with verbal interaction, which was typically employed only when dealing with other species that did not possess the Bynars' fantastic ability to communicate at speeds rivaling the most advanced computer processors. Like other members of his race, Soloman much preferred interacting with machines instead of living beings, as it freed him of the need to slow down the process of giving and

receiving information.

However, he had been taking infrequent, tentative steps of late to engage various members of the *theda Vinci* crew in verbal discussion when it related to the assignment at hand or, more recently, in more casual conversation. Faulwell wouldn't categorize Soloman's attempts as "banter" or "chit chat," but it was a departure, and a most welcome one at that, from what had once characterized the *Bynar's* normal behavior.

"Well, if you know what it means," Faulwell said as he continued to study the array of computer display screens dominating the rear wall of the command deck, "then you also know that it's not something I'm going to want to ignore for too much longer."

Despite his teasing comment, he knew he only had himself to blame for being hungry. There had been plenty of time to grab something to eat prior to beaming over from the *theda Vinci*, but Faulwell had elected to spend that time writing a quick note to Anthony. He'd spent thirty minutes painstakingly updating his partner on their current mission, composing his thoughts on paper by hand as he always did before transcribing the missive for transmission via subspace communication. The handwritten letter, like all of the others that he wrote to Anthony, would be saved until such time as Faulwell could deliver them in person. The intimate ritual was one of his few private pleasures, and he had become so engrossed in it that he had nearly lost track of time. When the reminder to report to the transporter room came from his computer terminal, Faulwell had been forced to leave the note unfinished until he returned from the *Senuta* ship.

And after I get something to eat, he reminded himself. Sorry, Anthony.

Looking up from his console, Soloman said, "You will be pleased to know that I have nearly completed restructuring the interface to the operating system and providing a simpler means for the *Senuta* crew to interact with the computer. It will not give them the entire range of capabilities the original interface possessed, but it will be sufficient to make up for the loss of the ship's computer technicians." His brow furrowing slightly, the *Bynar* added, "There is a great deal of security integrated into the various applications software, not unexpected for a vessel originally constructed for military use. In order to affect the interface, it was necessary to deactivate or bypass much of those protection schemes. I am preparing to run a final diagnostic to ensure the interface functions properly before instructing the *Senuta* on its operation."

"Sounds great," Faulwell replied as he glanced about the command deck. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't more than ready to get back to the *theda Vinci* ." Once again he had to shake off the feeling that the room's bulkheads were closing in around him.

I think it's going to be a while before I complain about how cramped my quarters are again.

This room, like everything else on the ship, had been constructed to conform to the physiology of the comparatively smaller *Senuta* crewmembers. It had taken Faulwell more than a few minutes to adjust to the smaller-scaled equipment, which had been designed for a more diminutive body type. In contrast, Soloman had found the accommodations as comfortable as the furnishings of his own quarters on the *theda Vinci*.

From behind them, a soft voice asked, "Have your repair efforts been successful?"

Faulwell turned to the two *Senuta* crewmembers. Each regarded him with what the linguist had come to recognize as their typical wide-eyed, expectant expression. *Ircoral* and *Tkellan*, as the two female *Senuta*

had introduced themselves earlier, were part of the Senuta ship's engineering staff and had been assigned to assist Faulwell and Soloman by providing information about the systems overseeing the vessel's propulsion systems. Their expertise had allowed Soloman to craft the new interface to the ship's computer, giving the crewmembers more direct control of the automated systems than they had previously enjoyed. Though Ircoral and Tkellan had been intensely curious in the beginning, peppering the da Vinci engineers with a myriad of questions, once Soloman had gotten down to the serious work of reprogramming the computer they had been content to remain quiet, working at other stations, until they were needed again.

"Yes, Ircoral," Faulwell replied. "It looks as though we're almost done here. Thanks to your help, Soloman is nearly finished repairing the damage the storm caused to your computer and its software."

Soloman had been working steadily for the past two hours, his attention only rarely wavering from the bank of computer displays. Most of his attention had been focused on the subsystems overseeing the ship's engines and propulsion, which had borne the brunt of the storm's effects. It had been slow going at first, with the Bynar encountering more than a bit of difficulty in understanding the computer languages responsible for the software running the Senuta computers. That's where Faulwell had been able to help.

As a linguist and cryptographic specialist, Bart Faulwell had not set out to become anything resembling a computer expert. Called upon to perform more demanding assignments as his experience grew, such as deciphering enemy communications codes and encryption schemes, it soon became apparent to him that understanding the nuances of discourse used by living beings was not enough. Therefore, Faulwell had expanded his knowledge into the world of computers and the languages used to transform instructions into the actions carried out by machines.

In this case the work he had already done to translate the Senuta's spoken and written language had allowed him to assist Soloman in understanding the alien ship's computer system. Once the language barrier had been broken, the Bynar was able to interface with the Senuta computer easily. The only remaining obstacle was the level of technology itself, which Soloman had likened to that used by the Federation during the early to mid-twenty-third century.

"This degree of self-sufficiency is comparable to that of modern starships in several respects," Soloman said as he continued to work. "The major difference of course is that the Senuta are more easily inclined to entrust themselves to their computers than many of the humanoid species I have encountered."

Noting a quality in his companion's voice that didn't seem to be a ring of approval, Faulwell glanced momentarily in the direction of the two Senuta engineers. Neither of the aliens appeared to have heard the Bynar's words, though. "Is there something wrong with that?" he asked. "I figured that if anyone would appreciate the Senuta's reliance on technology, it would be you."

The Bynar regarded him with an almost amused expression on his pale features. "My people have fashioned a society that embraces an interdependence on computers, yes, but the idea that we are slaves to automation is a misconception shared by many who do not understand us."

"Fair enough," Faulwell replied, now even more relieved that the Senuta had not overheard their conversation. After all, it would not do to offend these people so soon after establishing first contact. Though such initial meetings with new races usually caused Faulwell no small amount of concern, he still undertook the inherent responsibilities during such momentous occasions with all the seriousness that they deserved.

Besides, Carol will kill us if we find a way to screw this up.

The lights on the bridge flickered around him and Faulwell became aware of a steady thrum resonating through the deck beneath his feet. The engines had come back online, he realized, thanks no doubt to the efforts of Kieran Duffy and his repair team from the *Vinci*.

Turning in his seat, he saw the two Senuta engineers watching him again, anticipation dominating their features. Smiling, he nodded in their direction. "I think you're back in business."

Nodding excitedly, Tkellan replied, "Yes, it appears as though your companions have succeeded in helping our technicians. Your crew is very skilled."

Faulwell began to offer a response but was cut off by a voice from his combadge.

"Duffy to Faulwell."

"Go ahead, Commander."

"As you may have noticed, Bart, we've finished our repairs on the engines. She'll run well enough to get them home. All that's missing is the link to the propulsion management subprocesses in their main computer. How are you coming up there?"

The fatigue was evident in Duffy's voice. No doubt the repairs to the damaged engines had been extensive, as they had begun their work hours before Faulwell and Soloman had started their investigations of the Senuta's computer.

"We're almost finished, sir," he replied. "Soloman is preparing a final test of his reprogramming before we hand things over to the Senuta."

"Outstanding. I don't know about you, but I'm ready to get back to the *Vinci* and stretch out in my luxurious, oversized bed in my luxurious, oversized room."

Faulwell laughed at that, looking around once again at the bland, cramped confines of the Senuta ship's command deck. "I hear you, Commander. I'd estimate another ten minutes and we'll be done here. See you back on the *Vinci*. Faulwell out."

Severing the connection, he returned his attention to the two Senuta engineers. "With the engines fixed, all that's left is the computer, and we'll be ready to return control of it back to you."

"I do not know how we will be able to repay your generosity," Ircoral replied.

Shrugging, Faulwell tried to smile humbly as he thought of how Carol would want him to handle this. "Perhaps if our two peoples spend time together after this, we can learn more about each other and you'll be able to better understand our motivations for helping you."

Ircoral considered that for several moments. "A most excellent idea. I will be sure to pass it on to Daltren when he returns from your ship."

Nodding in approval, Faulwell turned his attention back to Soloman. "Anything else I can do to help?"

"No," the Bynar replied simply. "I've finished my preparations and I'm ready to begin my diagnostics." He tapped a final series of commands into the workstation's oddly configured manual interface. In

response to his instructions, graphics on the array of computer displays began to shift and scroll information, almost too fast for Faulwell to follow.

And then the alarm sounded.

It did not have the droning, piercing wail of a red alert klaxon, but it nevertheless echoed across the compact command deck. Harsh red illumination promptly replaced the more normal soft lighting, and flashers began blinking frantically near the two doors providing exits from the room. An audio message also began to play from the internal communications system. The message was spoken in the Senuta's native language, so it took Faulwell a second to understand the words.

"Intruder alert. Activating countermeasures."

"What's happening?" he called out over the alarms as his attention was drawn to the wall of computer displays. One by one, the monitors were blinking out, the various graphics and information being replaced with a single line of Senuta text.

This station is deactivated.

His fingers almost a blur on the consoles, Soloman did not look up as he answered. "My diagnostics have triggered some type of security protocol. The computer is closing out access to systems all across the ship."

Trying to keep his growing apprehension under control, Faulwell swallowed the lump that had risen in his throat. "I thought you said you disabled or bypassed the security protocols."

"I apparently missed at least one."

At any other time, Faulwell might have thought the straight delivery of the simple statement humorous, but this was rapidly becoming anything but one of those occasions. Rising from his chair, he turned to face the Senuta engineers. "Ircoral, what sort of countermeasures is the computer activating?"

Already studying their own display monitors, the Senuta did not immediately reply. After several seconds that seemed like an eternity to Faulwell, Tkellan turned to look at him.

"Our computer is proceeding as if combatting an unauthorized access by an enemy during wartime. There are a number of security procedures that were installed to prevent such an occurrence, as this was once a military vessel. Though onboard offensive weapons were removed years ago, the computer protocols were simply deactivated, as it had proven too expensive and time-consuming to completely remove those components from the computer system."

Ircoral added, "The protocol that has been activated was only intended for use if the crew is incapacitated and the ship has been boarded by enemy invaders."

His sense of dread continuing to worsen, Faulwell asked, "So what happens then?"

Ircoral turned to face Faulwell, her own expression one of near horror. "The computer's instructions are to prevent access to its systems at all costs, to include destroying the ship if necessary."

Pausing only long enough to look at Soloman, who was still working feverishly to salvage any kind of access to the Senuta computer system, Faulwell did the only thing that made sense to him at that moment.

He tapped his combadge.

"Faulwell toda Vinci. We've got a big problem here."

To be concluded

inStar Trek: S.C.E. #19:Foundations Book 3

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 the author of the Star Trek Original Series novel *In the Name of Honor*, as well as co-writer of 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.

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.

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