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FOUNDATIONS  
Part Three of Three

Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore



**POCKET BOOKS**

**New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore**

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# Chapter

## 1

Stardate 53680.2

*This station is deactivated.*

With a growing sense of dismay, Bart Faulwell watched as the images on display monitors all around the Senuta vessel's compact command deck were replaced, one after another, with that simple line of text. Repeated alerts from the ship's computer continued to advise about intruders while enabling its automated defensive countermeasures, which Soloman somehow had activated during his efforts to repair the damage suffered by the onboard systems.

The same ion storm that had disrupted the ship's engines had also severely compromised the computer and the Senuta crew's ability to interact with it. Unable to interface with the ship's complex network of automated systems, the Senuta had been helpless to do anything as their vessel careened out of control through space until the U.S.S. da Vinci had heard their distress signal.

Spending several hours working with the alien computer system, Soloman and Faulwell had succeeded in reprogramming several of the damaged processes and had created a simpler means of interacting with the system for the crew, whose computer experts had been killed during the storm. Faulwell had thought their work here completed, until the alarms started blaring and the computer began to shut out all access to the Starfleet engineers.

Ircoral, one of the Senuta engineers assisting Faulwell and Soloman, turned from her station. “The protocol that has been activated was intended only for use if the crew is incapacitated and the ship has been boarded by enemy invaders.”

Feeling a ball of ice beginning to form in his gut, Faulwell asked, “So what happens then?”

“The computer’s instructions are to prevent access to its systems at all costs, to include destroying the ship if necessary.”

Now why did I know she was going to say that?

He saw the expressions of horror growing on the faces of Ircoral and her fellow engineer, Tkellan. What could they be thinking right now? The Senuta had already been through a great deal in the past several weeks, he knew, so how much more could they be expected to endure? If the computer carried out its predetermined instructions and destroyed the ship, where would that leave these people, assuming they survived?

“Faulwell toda Vinci, ” he said as he tapped his combadge. “We’ve got a big problem here.”

The voice of his captain, David Gold, responded. “Da Vincihere. What’s the problem, Faulwell?”

Casting a worried look at Soloman, who was still engrossed in his attempts to override the computer, Faulwell replied, “We seem to have triggered some kind of booby trap, Captain. The computer is locking down access and has activated a self-destruct protocol.”

“What?” There was no mistaking the shock in Gold’s voice, something that happened only on rare occasions. Faulwell knew that the captain, like everyone else involved in the effort to assist the Senuta, had believed this to be a rather simple if time-consuming mission with few or no difficulties expected to be encountered. This latest revelation had shattered the peace of what should have been a routine set of tasks for the crew of the *Vinci*.

It’s just not the S.C.E. if something doesn’t go wrong, he reminded himself.

“Can you override the computer?” Gold asked, his voice having returned to the measured delivery that made the captain the calm in the center of any storm.

Turning back to Soloman, Faulwell saw that the Bynar had abandoned his attempts to access the computer and was now looking at him with no small amount of worry.

“I have been locked out of the computer,” the Bynar said as he reached for his tricorder. “There is nothing more I can do.”

That was most definitely what Faulwell did not want to hear. “Are you saying the ship is going to blow itself up?”

“That is correct. I suggest we leave as soon as possible.”

“I heard that, Faulwell,” Gold said over the communicator. “I’ve already got Feliciano preparing to evacuate that ship. How much time do we have?”

Soloman was working again, holding his tricorder in one hand while the other tapped a few tentative commands to the computer console. "I estimate that we have less than five minutes."

"Stand by for beam-out," Gold ordered. "Sensors are detecting a massive power buildup in the engines. I want to be out of here before she blows."

Faulwell nodded at that, though the captain could not see him. "Soloman, it's time to leave," he called out to his friend who was still hard at work, seemingly oblivious to everything around him.

"One moment, Bart," the Bynar responded. "I am scanning and attempting to record as much information from the computer's central data banks as time will permit. I will need an additional few minutes to complete the task."

It was Faulwell's turn to be shocked again. "Soloman, I really don't think we have time for this."

"I am reasonably certain that the download will take slightly less time than we have remaining before the engines overload."

Reasonably certain? Was that supposed to make him feel better? Looking about the command deck, he tried to remember: How much did they have? How much time had passed? What if Soloman's estimate was wrong?

He noticed Ircoral and Tkellan regarding him, their faces masks of concern. "Are we leaving?" Tkellan asked, nervousness evident in her voice. Faulwell did not blame her. After all, it was not as if he wanted to be here, either.

Nodding to the Senuta engineer, he replied, "Yes, we're leaving in just a moment." Looking to Soloman he added, "We are leaving, right?"

"I'm nearly finished," the Bynar responded, not looking up from his tricorder.

"Gold to Faulwell," the captain's voice called out again. "Our sensors are saying that the engines are approaching the overload point. Stand by for transport."

"Not yet," Soloman said.

"What's that?" Gold asked, his tone suddenly quite frosty. "What does he mean, 'Not yet'?"

Rolling his eyes, Faulwell offered a silent plea to any deity who might be paying attention to this particular dark comedy in the making: Please let me live long enough to regret what I'm about to say.

"Soloman is trying to retrieve as much information from the Senuta computer as he can, sir. He's almost finished, but he needs a bit more time."

He felt an abrupt rumbling beneath his feet, a rattling that shook the deck plates and the bulkheads. The ship shuddered around him, already gripped in the beginning of its death throes.

"You're out of time, Faulwell," Gold said over the communicator. "We're pulling you out of there right now."

Another tremor shook the ship, more violent this time, nearly throwing Faulwell off his feet. He could feel

the explosion somewhere beneath him and his mind envisioned the force of the blast tearing through the interior of the ship's engineering section, ripping it apart as the engines succumbed to the effects of the overload. He reached for a nearby console to retain his balance, seeing as he did so that Soloman and the two Senuta engineers were doing the same thing to avoid being tossed to the deck.

The first tendrils of a transporter beam reached out for him just as another shock wave enveloped the ship. As he felt his body start to dissolve, an insane thought gripped him: If I survive this, it'll make a great finish to Anthony's letter.

As he rematerialized in the da Vinci's transporter room and saw the expression on Kieran Duffy's face, however, Faulwell wondered if he should have just stayed on the Senuta ship.

Duffy came around from behind the transporter console, where he'd been standing next to Transporter Chief Diego Feliciano. As the latter shut the transporter down, Duffy asked, "Are you all right? The bridge reported that there was some kind of computer problem over there."

"You could say that," Faulwell replied as he looked around him on the transporter platform, relieved to see that Soloman as well as Ircoral and Tkellan had made the transport safely. Turning to Duffy he asked, "Everyone else was evacuated, right?"

Duffy nodded. "And we went to warp as soon as we had you aboard." Noticing the expectant yet resigned looks on the faces of Ircoral and Tkellan, his expression turned somber. "The engines reached overload and exploded. Your ship has been destroyed. I'm truly sorry."

Ircoral and Tkellan regarded Duffy with horrified expressions. "That means that we are stranded here, with no way to get home," Ircoral said. "What will we do now?"

"You're not stranded," Faulwell replied, stepping down from the transporter platform and turning to face the Senuta engineers. "We, and Starfleet, will see to it that you and the rest of your crew are returned to your homeworld."

Her brow furrowing, Tkellan said, "But without the navigational systems aboard our ship, we will not be able to plot a course to our planet."

In response to that, Soloman stepped forward. "I was able to record a great deal of information from your computer's memory banks, including what I believe to be your navigational databases. If that is the case, then it will allow our navigators to assist in locating your home and determining the most efficient route to get there."

Faulwell nodded in agreement. If Soloman had indeed managed to get that information from the Senuta's onboard computer, then the heart attack the Bynar had nearly given him by demanding to remain on the doomed vessel until the last possible second would be worth it.

Almost.

"That is very kind of you," Ircoral said. "I do not believe that we have ever encountered a race of people so willing to help others in need." Turning to Soloman, she amended, "Or, as I should have said, races of people."

Faulwell smiled reassuringly at her. Seeing Ircoral and Soloman together, he was reminded once again of how similar in physique and demeanor the Senuta were to the Bynars. "It's like I was telling you before,

Ircoral. It's what we do. I guess that if there's a positive effect of what's happened, it's that you'll have more time to get to know us better." His smile faltering a bit, he added, "Besides, it's the least we can do. It was our trying to help that put you in this situation."

An exaggerated coughing sound interrupted him, and he turned to see Duffy looking at him, a mildly amused expression mixed with irritation on his face.

"Yeah, and about that," the engineer said with mock annoyance in his voice, "you couldn't blow up the ship before I spent all day fixing it?"

Before he could actually say anything, Faulwell's stomach replied for him, the noises it made echoing softly in the transporter room and causing Duffy's eyebrows to shoot skyward.

"Is that all you've got to say?" Duffy asked.

Shrugging, Faulwell replied, "At least until after dinner." He regretted the flippant words as soon they left his mouth and as he saw the expectant, almost helpless expressions on the faces of Ircoral and Tkellan. They were looking to him, and by extension the rest of the theta Vinci crew, for help. This was no time for jokes.

What the hell are we supposed to do now?

\* \* \*

Carol Abramowitz could feel a prize-winning headache coming on.

"Are ye all right, lass?" Captain Montgomery Scott asked, looking out at her from the conference lounge viewscreen. Hearing the concern in his voice, Abramowitz realized for the first time that she was rubbing her temples, trying without success to relieve the pressure steadily building behind her eyeballs.

"Abramowitz?" Captain Gold leaned forward in his seat, his expression also one of concern. "Is something wrong?"

Shaking her head, she replied, "I'm fine, sir. Thank you." Forcing herself back to the situation at hand, she directed her attention to the padd she had brought with her to the meeting. The text on the unit's display comprised the sum total of the report she had fashioned, both for Gold and for Captain Scott back at Starfleet Headquarters on Earth. Somehow, she decided, the words themselves were woefully inadequate. No matter what flowery language she used to describe their current situation, it did not change the simple fact: Despite the best of intentions, the actions of the theta Vinci's crew had trapped the Senuta here. Because of that, the Senuta were, at least for the time being, a people without a home.

However, after conversing with Daltren, the commander of the Senuta ship, Abramowitz had been unable to find any indication that the aliens harbored anything even resembling resentment or bitterness about the situation. During her meetings with the alien ship captain, he had shown nothing but gratitude for the theta Vinci crew since first coming aboard. Even faced with the loss of his own vessel, his support for the Starfleet engineers had not wavered.

"Ensign Wong is continuing his attempts to extrapolate a reverse course to the Senuta homeworld," she said, reading more of the cold facts from her padd, "based on the route their ship was taking when we answered their distress signal. Additionally, Soloman is searching through the data he downloaded from their computer, looking for their navigational charts. He's not sure if he managed to retrieve those or not."



Pausing, she winced involuntarily as another spasm stabbed at her brain.

Having only partially allowed himself to relax in his chair, Gold said, "You look like you could use a breather, Abramowitz, not that I'm surprised. You've been working as hard as anyone on this mission, and it shows. This is a sticky situation, but we'd be a lot worse off if not for you."

On the viewscreen, Scott added, "Aye, yer captain's right. I for one am grateful to have ye on the job."

Though she was seldom comfortable with compliments directed at her, Abramowitz could not help but smile at the praise these two veteran officers had conferred upon her. She knew from past experience that neither Gold nor Scott offered such accolades lightly, yet that did not stop her from believing she was unworthy of them.

"I have to admit to feeling a bit out of my depth, sirs," she said. "I've spent years training in a wide variety of subjects that allow me to interact with hundreds of cultures the Federation has encountered. But that's just it. All of my training and experience revolves around races and cultures we've already met. I'm nowhere close to being an expert when it comes to first contact situations."

"Dr. Abramowitz," Scott replied, "in my experience, there's no such thing as a first contact expert. After all, it's a mighty rare thing for one first contact to be like another. Life just doesn't work that way, I'm afraid. The best thing that can be done is to have people like you on hand for such eventualities."

Smiling at that, Abramowitz replied, "On any other day, I'd be tempted to argue that point. Truth be told, though, I'm really just too tired right now." She shrugged. "Sometimes I wonder if I should have just taken that research posting on Memory Alpha."

"And deprive us of your talents, to say nothing of your unflappable good nature?" Gold asked, amusement tugging at the corners of his mouth. "That would be criminal in the extreme, I think."

Adopting a more serious expression, the *Vinci* captain leaned forward in his chair once more, clasping his hands atop the conference table. "Look, Carol, I know you think you're in over your head, but we all know that this isn't a normal mission, even by first contact standards. The *Senuta* have been thrown for a loop to be sure, but they're confident that we'll do whatever it takes to get them home. The vast portion of that faith is due to you."

"And that, more than anything else, is why we have cultural liaisons aboard our ships," Scott added. "Even our S.C.E. ships." On the screen, the Starfleet legend shook his head. "In fact, this whole thing reminds me of another time when a ship was lost far from home and came into contact with another species."

"Uh oh," Gold said, looking to Abramowitz with a mischievous glint in his eye. "I feel another story coming on."

Abramowitz could not help laughing at the captain's deadpan delivery. It was fascinating how Scott could be counted on to have a timely anecdote for whatever crisis the *Vinci* crew happened to encounter. Then again, that quality was only part of what made Captain Montgomery Scott the unique individual he was.

"Aye, but I think Dr. Abramowitz will appreciate this tale. For one thing, on this occasion it was one of our ships that was the lost little lamb, dependent on the goodwill of a previously unknown people to get them home...."

# Chapter

## 2

Stardate 7981.3

“What do ye call déjà vu the second time ye get it?”

As had happened three days earlier upon boarding the starship that had ferried him here, Montgomery Scott was struck by the familiarity of the transporter room in which he had just materialized. It, like its counterpart on the transport ship, was a near match for the Enterprise’s transporter room before his own ship’s extensive refit. Here the higher level of lighting served to intensify the already vibrant colors and give the room a pulse, a certain zest that he occasionally admitted to missing aboard the Enterprise. He knew that the heart of his beloved ship still beat proudly from beneath newer and stronger hull plating, faster engines and more advanced onboard systems. However, while his engineer’s mind had long since embraced and even relished the improvements bestowed on his vessel, the romantic in him had refused to dismiss the sense that something had been lost in the Enterprise’s redesign.

One major difference, however, was that this ship’s transporter console was missing most of its components. The transport ship had performed the beam-in procedure all by its lonesome. This vessel was no longer on active duty, and many components had been removed, including the transporter.

“You’re not going to pine over the tune-up your ship got again, are you?” Commander Mahmud al-Khaled asked as he stood before the gutted transporter console with a wide grin on his face, moving forward to greet Scott as the latter stepped from the platform. “I’ve told you before and I’ll tell you again: If you’re looking for sympathy from me, you’re wasting your time. You starship types are spoiled compared to the rest of us real engineers, so quit complaining every time they give you new toys to play with.”

Ignoring Scott’s outstretched hand, al-Khaled instead embraced his friend. Drawing back, he cast the Enterprise chief engineer an amused look.

“I thought you said you only grew that mustache on a dare and you were going to shave it off. How long ago was that?”

Smiling, Scott replied, “A few lassies convinced me to keep it.”

Al-Khaled chuckled at that. “Well, mustache or no, welcome to the Chandley. I’m glad you could make the trip.”

“I had to come,” Scott said. “It was either this or Risa. Dr. McCoy has been champin’ at the bit for me to take shore leave.” His last conversation with the Enterprise’s chief medical officer prior to leaving the ship had been amusing, with McCoy shaking his head in disbelief that the engineer would choose to spend time with other engineers instead of immersing himself in the pleasures offered on the legendary resort planet.

Scott followed as al-Khaled led the way from the transporter room. “You know, you were right the other day about Alhena’s knack for our line of work,” al-Khaled said. “Her mother sent some images

over subspace of her tearing into an old food processor. She almost got it put back together, too.”

Scott smiled at that. Though he had never had the opportunity to meet al-Khaled’s wife and daughter, he had heard all about them through his own irregular subspace correspondence with his friend. “What is she now, five?”

“Just turned,” al-Khaled replied. “It’s way too soon for this dad to wish for it, but if she wants to be an engineer when she grows up, I’m certainly not going to stand in her way. There are plenty of worse careers she could choose.” Laughing mischievously he added, “I only hope I can convince her to join the Corps and avoid that cushy starship duty.”

As they continued down the corridor, Scott could discern more signs that the Chandley was not a starship on active duty. Panels that had once provided access to circuitry overseeing many of the ship’s key systems had been taken out, showing only dark maws where control mechanisms had once been. Defensive systems as well as most of the more powerful onboard sensor and computer components had been removed upon the vessel’s decommissioning.

“They dinna leave much, did they?”

“Enough for the Kelvans,” al-Khaled replied as they approached a turbolift. “When you see what they’ve been working on these last couple of years, I think you’ll agree that the trip was worth it.”

“I have to admit to bein’ a wee bit intrigued at the offer,” Scott replied. “I haven’t been here in years, you know.” How long had it been since his first visit to New Kelva? For that matter, what was the planet’s original name? Tau Delta III, Delta Tau III, something else? The names of many worlds that Scott had visited during his service aboard the Enterprise had long since blended together, and the planet they were currently orbiting was not one he had ever regarded as a likely candidate for a return visit.

They stepped into the turbolift and al-Khaled ordered it to proceed to the engineering deck. “The Enterprise crew is held in high esteem by Rojan and the others,” he said. “After all, if not for you, New Kelva would not have been founded, and the Kelvans would not be in a position to unveil their little surprise today.”

Scott frowned, uncomfortable with such praise. After all, his first and only encounter with the Kelvans had been a trying one. The aliens had hijacked the Enterprise after their own vessel had been damaged during passage through the powerful energy barrier at the edge of the galaxy. Part of an advance scouting party from their planet in the Andromeda galaxy, they had been sent to find a new home for their empire when Kelvan scientists discovered that radiation harmful to their life-forms was rising toward lethal levels. Projections called for the extinction of all life in their galaxy within ten thousand years.

Ships had been dispatched from the Kelvan Empire, traversing the void between their own area of space and the nearest neighboring galaxy, a journey that had taken generations to complete. In order to return with their report, the scouting party that had captured the Enterprise had intended to use the vessel to replace their own for the three-hundred-year voyage back to the Andromeda galaxy.

Scott suppressed an involuntary shudder at the memory of how the Kelvans had asserted their control over the Enterprise crew. Using the awesome power at their command, the aliens had transformed the bulk of the ship’s crew into small, brittle duodecahedrons, each containing the essential chemical components of the person it represented. He recalled walking the starship’s corridors, mindful of each step around the seemingly innocuous geometric shapes that had littered the decks. An errant footfall would have crushed one of the blocks, and brought instant death to the crewmember whose essence it

contained.

Despite the obstacles before him, however, Captain Kirk had naturally been unwilling to stand by and allow his ship to be taken from him.

“It was Captain Kirk who was the real motivator,” he said. “Of course, he practically had to knock their leader through a bulkhead before he convinced the man that the Federation would rather welcome them than battle them.”

Laughing, al-Khaled nodded. “Rojan told me the whole story over dinner last night. An inauspicious first contact to be sure, but one that could ultimately provide many positive ramifications for the Federation. They have been most generous in sharing their scientific and engineering knowledge, which as you may remember was very advanced in many areas, especially with regards to engine design.”

“Aye, that’s a fact,” Scott replied. “I dinna know how they did it, but they rigged up theEnterprise to fly at a speed I’ve seen bested only once.”

The turbolift slowed to a halt and the doors opened again. Here, on theChandley’s engineering deck, the evidence of the ship’s new status was even more apparent, though this time it was because of what was present rather than what might be missing. The corridor was littered with all manner of equipment, some of it undoubtedly Kelvan in origin and unfamiliar to Scott.

“You haven’t seen anything yet, my friend,” al-Khaled said as they proceeded down the passageway. “I’ve been here long enough to dig into what the Kelvans are going to show the Federation tomorrow. In a word, it’s staggering.”

Scott’s brow furrowed. “What?”

“They may very well let the genie out of the bottle.”

What did that mean? Scott knew from subspace correspondence with his friend that al-Khaled had been dispatched by Starfleet to report on the progress of the engine design project initiated by the Kelvans several years ago. What had he found here? Was Kelvan propulsion technology even more advanced than Scott had believed based on his previous encounter with the aliens?

He did not have time to ask any more questions before they arrived at the main engineering section. A glance around the room revealed a host of technicians, of whom almost none were dressed in any kind of Starfleet uniform. That made sense, of course, as most of the people currently aboard the ship were Kelvans. He had read in al-Khaled’s last message that only thirty-six Kelvans lived on the planet below, most of those having been discovered nearly seven years ago marooned on a small planetoid several light-years from here. The castaways turned out to be from the same ship as the Kelvans encountered by theEnterprise crew, and after their rescue they had been brought here to join their shipmates.

No doubt they’re anxious to find more of their people,Scott thought before his eyes locked on the grouping of silver cylinders standing silently in the center of the engineering room.

“Will ye just look at that,” he said as he regarded the odd object occupying the space where the matter/antimatter reaction chamber would normally have been situated. Appraising the construct, Scott realized it was not unfamiliar. After all, he had seen something very similar once before: the energy projector that Rojan and his group had installed aboard theEnterprise.

But this, Scott could plainly see, was something altogether different.

“Ah, yes,” al-Khaled said as they crossed the floor to the unusual equipment, “the Kelvan version of an intermix chamber. I personally cannot wait to see this beauty in action.”

Venturing forward to more closely inspect the device, Scott reached out to touch it and was a bit taken aback at the cool sensations on his fingertips. He could also feel the pulse of power from within its chambers. “Is this supposed to be the bottle yer genie is hidin’ in, lad?”

A voice behind him said, “If you are asking whether or not this is the central component of our engine design, you are correct, Commander.”

Scott was surprised to realize that he recognized the voice, although it had been many years since last hearing it. He turned to see a tall, black-haired man dressed in a utilitarian jumpsuit. His complexion was not pallid as Scott remembered it, his skin instead sporting a healthy tan no doubt cultivated beneath the warm rays of the New Kelvan sun.

“I believe you know Tomar,” al-Khaled said to Scott. “From what I understand, you two are old drinking buddies.”

Unable to stifle the laugh his friend’s deadpan comment had provoked, Scott merely shook his head. It had been years since he had last thought about his unorthodox strategy to aid in overpowering the Kelvans who had taken over the Enterprise. He had managed to incapacitate Tomar, but it had taken several hours and nearly the entire contents of his liquor cabinet.

“Aye, I remember,” he said as he extended his hand in greeting. “I certainly hope that you haven’t held a grudge against me all these years.”

Smiling slightly as he shook Scott’s hand, Tomar nodded formally. “Neither I nor any of my people carry ill will toward you or your shipmates, Commander. I am grateful that you have chosen to join us for our tests, as your invitation was extended at my request.”

“Mahmud here tells me that this project has been years in the making,” Scott said. “If it’s as successful as he says it should be, it’ll be quite an achievement for all of ye.”

Tomar turned to survey the drive structure. “We are proud of the accomplishments that have come about due to our cooperation with the Federation. As you already know, before we arrived in your galaxy our way was that of the conqueror. While in transit aboard our generational craft, we were taught only how to overpower and rule other worlds. Now, with your help, we are ready to venture out, possibly to unite with our fellow travelers or at least prepare for their ultimate arrival. This is far removed from what might have been.”

“That’s not to say you didn’t have your share of settling-in adjustments,” al-Khaled said. Scott recalled that al-Khaled and his ship, the Lovell, had been among the Starfleet detachment assigned to New Kelva to help establish the initial colony for Tomar and his companions.

Scott nodded. “As ye said, all of that is behind ye. But now I canna wait to learn more about these engines of yours.”

“There is no need to trouble yourself with such details now, Commander.”

Scott turned at the new voice and saw a young Andorian standing at al-Khaled's side, wearing a Starfleet uniform with insignia designating her as a lieutenant and an engineer. What Scott noticed most of all, however, was the hint of a smug grin on her soft blue face.

"There will be plenty of time to discuss specifications once we're on our way," she continued. "Before we can do that, however, I need to review some calibration data with Tomar."

Scott felt his jaw go nearly slack as Tomar excused himself and joined the Andorian, both of them stepping away to consult one of the computer monitors lining the bulkhead in this room. He had not been so smartly brushed aside by someone that...that young before.

"Well, that was a fine how-do-ye-do."

Al-Khaled leaned toward his friend. "Scotty, meet Lieutenant Talev zh'Thren, one of Starfleet's latest additions to the S.C.E. Though she's assigned to the Tucker, she's been on temporary duty here, helping with the Chandley's refit. She knows her way around the computer system overseeing the new engines better than the Kelvans who designed it."

"Aye, but apparently she knows it," Scott replied, not bothering to keep his first impression of the young officer from his friend.

Chuckling at that, al-Khaled said, "I'll admit that she needs to refine her interpersonal skills, but don't let that close your mind to her abilities."

Scott frowned. "We'll have to see what we'll see, I guess."

Dismissing the haughty young lieutenant for the time being, Scott instead looked about the engineering room. "You know, ye could have told me before that the Chandley had been selected for this project."

Al-Khaled exhaled sharply before saying anything. "Well, it has been a long time, and I wasn't sure that you would make the connection."

"That this was J'lenn's ship?" he asked, recalling the young Alpha Centauran whom he had known all too briefly before her tragic death so many years ago, during his first mission with al-Khaled. "She's always been hard to forget, I'm afraid."

A vibrant, energetic woman, J'lenn had been assigned with Scott to render assistance to one of the outpost stations lining the Neutral Zone near Romulan space. She had been killed on that mission, one of the earliest occasions that Scott had been forced to deal with the loss of a fellow officer and friend. One of the few things he had learned about J'lenn prior to her death was that a previous assignment had been aboard this very ship, which had been tasked with patrolling the area of space separating the Federation and the Klingon Empire.

"I think of her sometimes, Scotty," al-Khaled said. "She's always been a reminder to me that our work is dangerous. It hurts me any time one of my shipmates dies, but each one makes me think of J'lenn, and then it hurts worse."

"J'lenn was a fine engineer, Mahmud," Scott said, sensing his friend's pain. It was al-Khaled who had assigned J'lenn to the detail that resulted in her death. "And 'twas your leadership that made that mission a success. Just like this one will be."

Frowning, al-Khaled replied, "I don't know about that. There are several hundred people involved with this project, many of them volunteers, but Rojan is still very much the leader here. He figures that more members of his race are out there, on their way from their home planet, and neither he nor the other Kelvans are content to simply sit and wait for them to arrive. They know that the clock is ticking for their people back home, and that if billions of migrating Kelvans show up without warning, there'll be no room for them. New Kelva can't sustain that many people, so Rojan and the others want to start looking for other suitable planets."

"So why not set up a contingency plan with the Federation?" Scott asked. "There are a legion of researchers and bureaucrats ready to place new settlements on planets of one sort or another."

"Because in spite of everything that's happened since they settled here, they're still Kelvans, Scotty. They want to do this, and they want to do it on their terms."

Gesturing for Scott to follow him, al-Khaled began a slow walking circuit of the engineering room, pausing every so often to inspect a computer display or a control console. Scott regarded his friend quizzically as he worked, shaking his head in mild amusement.

"Speaking of doing things on one's own terms, Mahmud, tell me something. You enjoyed being out on assignment, so why did you settle for a long-term job at Headquarters?"

Before replying, al-Khaled stopped to tap a series of diagnostic commands into one nearby console, nodding in satisfaction at the results the monitor displayed.

"Call it payback," he said. "After we pushed like hell to get the Corps into official standing with Starfleet, things changed. Instead of three old tubs, we had S.C.E. teams assigned to ten active starships, to say nothing of special assignments like this one. For the concept to truly work, it made sense to break up the original three teams in order to spread experienced crewmembers across all of the ships. Not everyone from the Lovell left me high and dry, though. Can you believe that O'Halloran and Anderson still want to take orders from me?"

Scott laughed. "Of course I can. What I canna believe, though, is that you're done givin' orders."

"I wouldn't exactly say that."

Now what does that mean? Once again Scott was left to consider his friend's cryptic words as al-Khaled completed his inspection tour of the engine room and returned to where Talev and Tomar were still reviewing data on one of the control consoles.

"Lieutenant," he said, "let's have a look at what you've come up with."

As Talev looked up from her computer station, Scott noted the not-quite-suppressed expression of irritation on her face. It seemed to him that the Andorian did not appreciate being interrupted, regardless of who might be doing the interrupting.

"We've identified a few minor fluctuations in the intermix chamber," she said, and Scott could almost hear her jaw tightening as she spoke. "However, at the speeds we're going to approach, these fluctuations are likely to cause no noticeable effect."

Scott chuckled. "Lieutenant, it's the little things that usually get ye into trouble. We had 'minor fluctuations' in the Enterprise's warp engines the first time we took her out after her refit, and we ended

up in a wormhole and almost got ourselves killed.”

Talev stood silently for a moment, and Scott got the distinct impression that he was being sized up by the younger officer. “Mr. Scott, the Enterprise’s intermix formulas are remedial mathematics when compared to the technology we’re working with here. We will manage just fine. I would like you to just sit back and enjoy your ride today, and to be prepared for a potential redefinition of warp speed as we understand it.”

Neither convinced by nor impressed with the Andorian’s assertions, Scott nevertheless held back voicing his doubts when he saw the cautioning look on al-Khaled’s face. For his friend’s sake, he attempted a small smile as he regarded Talev zh’Thren.

“Well, in that case, Lieutenant, best of luck to ye. As they say, fortune favors the bold.”

Just as he thought he might get away before his desire to throttle the young officer got the best of him, Talev decided to say one more thing.

“This is hardly a matter of luck or fortune, sir. We are here because of attention to research and application of our skill. Confidence, Mr. Scott. That’s what they’re teaching in the Academy these days.”

Al-Khaled must have sensed his rising ire, because Scott quickly felt his friend’s hand on his shoulder before he asked, “Do they also teach patronizing behavior toward superior officers, Lieutenant?”

“No, sir,” Talev said, stiffening at the rebuke and shaking her head quickly. Pausing for a moment, she finally asked, “Permission to return to my departure preparations, sir?”

Nodding assent, al-Khaled waited until the Andorian was out of earshot before turning his attention back to an almost seething Scott.

“She certainly paid attention to her Academy cockiness course,” Scott said.

“Scotty, she’s young and full of herself,” al-Khaled replied. “For her, this is like being in the locker room before the big game. I’ll talk to her about it later, but right now I need her focused on her pre-launch duties.”

Shaking his head, Scott sighed in exasperation as he cast a final look about the bustling engineering room. “Why do I get the sudden feeling that this is going to be a very long day?”

## Chapter

### 3

Montgomery Scott had always believed that the very atmosphere of a starship’s bridge demanded action from its occupants. The constant barrage of sound, the flashing of indicators and switches, the flurry of personnel either at their posts or moving from station to station lent an almost palpable charge to the air.

Therefore, it did not seem right that he would be idly occupying a chair hugging the perimeter of the Chandley’s upper bridge deck, crammed out of the way at the edge of the turbolift alcove.



“I feel like I’m sittin’ on my hands here, Mahmud,” he said as he swiveled to his left, moving his legs from the path of a passing Kelvan engineer. “You know this is killin’ me.”

Al-Khaled smiled as he proffered the padd that had been resting in his lap. “You want something to do? You can write my report to Starfleet.” When Scott shook his head at the offer, al-Khaled shrugged, returning the padd to his lap. “You’re supposed to be a guest here, Scotty. Enjoy yourself, and let somebody else worry about the small stuff for once.”

“Aye, just a wee shakedown, as ye said.” But was it as simple as that? According to al-Khaled, Starfleet was most interested in the results of this test. If the Kelvans truly were on the cusp of some important advance in propulsion technology, such an accomplishment stood to benefit not only the Kelvans, who were now poised to take the next step in their quest for identity within their adopted family, but the Federation as well.

“I guess you could slide over there and eavesdrop,” al-Khaled said, indicating the engineering station where Talev and Tomar were consulting the array of display monitors. “We’re well enough away from New Kelva by now to engage the drive. I wonder if there’s a problem.”

“Now you’re just goadin’ me,” Scott said, a smile creasing his features. “I’ll stay put, if ye don’t mind.” He let his eyes wander over the other bridge stations, several of which were unmanned. Still others, such as the weapons control alcove just to the left of the main viewer, had been removed entirely, the gaping holes in the consoles where keypads and monitors had once been were now covered with plastisteel plating. It was yet another stark reminder to Scott that this vessel’s days as an active ship in service to Starfleet were behind her.

“They might find something for us to do yet,” al-Khaled said. “With only a skeleton crew aboard, anything’s possible. I was surprised when Tomar said that only eighteen people would be onboard for this test. That’s not even a tenth of this ship’s normal complement.”

Scott understood his friend’s concern. This was not his first run-in with extreme shipboard automation, after all. The mishaps of Richard Daystrom’s failed M-5 computer test on the Enterprise were still fodder for much debate, especially in the Starfleet engineering community, and had provided lessons that Scott himself would never forget.

He watched as Talev and Tomar stepped down into the bridge’s command well and began to speak in quiet tones to the occupant of the captain’s chair, Hanar. Scott recognized the dark-haired, slightly built man as another of the Kelvans who had hijacked the Enterprise. For that matter, the woman seated at the helm position was also familiar to him. He could not remember her name, but he was sure that she had also been part of that small group who had caused so much trouble for him and his shipmates.

“I’d have thought the Kelvans would have given up their humanoid appearance by now,” Scott noted quietly as he watched the aliens at work.

“Interesting, isn’t it?” al-Khaled replied. “I’ve read Captain—I mean Admiral Kirk’s report about how the Kelvans had encased themselves in a type of ‘shell’ in order to appear human and better interact with our technology during their voyage to the Andromeda galaxy on the Enterprise. I guess the same mindset is what led them to retain their humanoid appearance even after all these years.” He shrugged. “Too bad, really. So far as I know, no one has ever seen any Kelvans in their natural form.”

Scott’s attention was drawn to Talev as the young Andorian returned to the engineering station, spending several moments examining the information on the console’s displays. “Shipboard energy readings are

optimal. Everything is in line with our computer simulations. I would say we're ready."

Nodding at the report, Hanar toggled a switch on the arm of the command chair. "This is Hanar. We are preparing to engage the primary drive. All personnel mind your stations and report any anomalies to the bridge immediately."

Apparently realizing that she was being watched, Talev turned in her seat to face Scott and al-Khaled. "Everything is proceeding according to plan, gentlemen. There's nothing to be concerned about."

"But an engineer is always concerned, Lieutenant," Scott replied. "And even if everything does happen as planned, an engineer is still concerned because there's always next time."

To Scott's surprise, Talev seemed to ponder his words rather than arrogantly discard them out of hand as he had expected. If she was going to respond to him, however, her opportunity was lost as Hanar spoke once again, this time to the female Kelvan seated at the helm.

"Drea, lay in the course for Starbase 22." Turning to face the communications station he added, "Jahn, please alert them that we are ready to commence our test." Scott knew that sensors on the starbase would record the Chandley's passage, as well as provide a marker for the distance and speed portions of the test.

Waiting patiently for confirmation that his instructions had been carried out, Hanar calmly relayed his next order. "Engage the drive and accelerate to warp three." The order was as much a formality as anything else. The computer system designed and installed aboard the Chandley by the Kelvans would oversee the engines' operation, including monitoring of acceleration and performance once the desired speed was reached. The parameters of the test run had already been programmed by Talev, so Drea's duties in this regard would be limited to simply ordering the computer to carry out its predetermined instructions.

As the command was initiated, Scott sensed a quiver in the soles of his feet and the pit of his stomach. It was a feeling familiar to the engineer, yet tinged with a hint of uncertainty as, in his mind's eye, he saw the warp field created by the Chandley's engines flare into existence. Scott imagined himself being pressed back in his chair as the ship entered subspace, a sensation he knew was wholly artificial thanks to the effectiveness of inertial dampers.

"Warp one," Drea reported, issuing updates as the ship continued to accelerate. Taking his eyes from the main viewer and its almost hypnotic field of streaking stars, Scott noted Tomar studying one of the monitors at the science station and wondered why the Kelvan had not issued any sort of status report since the ship had gone into warp.

Then the hairs on the back of his neck stood up at the precise instant a concerned frown crossed Tomar's features, and a full three seconds before Drea called out in alarm.

"Hanar! We're at warp four and continuing to accelerate!"

Without conscious thought Scott bolted from his chair, noting as he did so that al-Khaled had done the same thing. "What's the problem?" Scott asked.

"The computer doesn't appear to be following the test instructions," Drea replied, her brow furrowed as she hunched over the helm. "And it isn't responding to abort commands."

Talev rose from her chair and moved toward the science station. Scott turned to follow but felt al-Khaled's hand on his arm.

"This is their test, Scotty," al-Khaled said in a quiet voice. "Let them work."

His jaw torqued in growing annoyance, Scott heard Hanar call for Jahn to contact Starbase 22 as Talev and Tomar conferred at their console. He watched Tomar shake his head while Talev raised a hand as if to calm him.

Now what's that about?

As if in response, the young Andorian turned to Hanar. "We believe this is an anticipated effect of the new automated oversight system."

"How d'ye figure that?" The question exploded from Scott's mouth before he could do anything to suppress it, and he heard al-Khaled sigh in resignation. Despite that, he continued, "Y'expected the computer to deviate from its programming?"

"Of course not," Talev replied, and for a moment Scott detected a trace of the annoying demeanor the Andorian had displayed at their first meeting. "This is not a deviation." Turning back to Hanar, and effectively disregarding Scott in the process, she added, "The automation protocols are operating perfectly, and the computer is allowing the warp drive to operate at faster speeds because it knows the engines can accommodate the increased demands in a safe manner." She paused to look at the viewscreen and the streaking starfield displayed upon it. "Let it work, Hanar. I promise you that the computer will initiate safety protocols to avoid exceeding tolerance levels."

Much to Scott's dismay, Hanar appeared to consider the proposition. "Drea, what is our current speed?"

The Kelvan's voice quavered only slightly, but Scott noticed it nevertheless. "Warp seven-point-eight and continuing to accelerate."

"Ye dinna think that's approachin' tolerance levels?" Scott asked. "This ship isn't built for this kind of speed."

"Scotty," al-Khaled hissed, but Scott ignored him.

For the first time since the test had begun, Tomar turned from his station. "The ship is perfectly safe, Commander. We have not yet reached even the speed at which your vessel was traveling when we attempted to return to Andromeda."

Of course, this would make sense, Scott admitted. The Kelvans had obviously outfitted the Chandley with a similar form of reinforcement to the ship's structural integrity system that they had used on the Enterprise during their attempt to hijack her. The ship had reached speeds far in excess of its supposed limits, and according to Tomar had not even attained its maximum velocity before the hijacking had been thwarted.

"Commander," Talev said to him, "what you must understand is that this new drive generates a warp field unlike that of our Starfleet ships. In a sense, the field itself provides more protection for the vessel than would result from our current level of Federation technology. This turn of events is precisely what we need to study in our tests!"

This youngster is startin' to irritate me, Scott mused, tiring of the Andorian's condescending attitude but electing to say nothing about it for the time being. Once the situation was under control, however, he would have his say.

Swiveling in his seat, Hanar regarded al-Khaled. "Commander, you've not weighed in on this issue. What's your opinion?"

Frowning, al-Khaled studied Talev for a few seconds before responding. Finally, though, he nodded. "It seems that all systems appear to be functioning normally or as expected." Scott caught the hard glare his friend leveled on the young Andorian as he spoke. It eased his discomfort, if only slightly, that al-Khaled appeared to have the same concerns that he did. With that in mind, the engineer in him found he could not disagree with him when al-Khaled finished with, "Since we are on a test mission, I recommend we see where this takes us."

Nodding in approval, Hanar exchanged looks with the rest of the bridge staff before he said, "Very well, then. We shall continue."

Personnel turned to their respective tasks, and Scott only partially listened as Drea continued to report on the Chandley's acceleration. His attention was instead focused on the engineering station where Talev was standing, having resumed her study of the warp drive diagnostic displays. He could not tell whether she failed to notice his approach or simply chose not to acknowledge it.

Easy, he reminded himself. Let's keep things professional, eh?

"Lieutenant," he began as he stepped closer, "I don't wanna believe ye knew this would happen, but I'm havin' a hard time of it."

Looking up at Scott, the Andorian smiled slightly in response. "We've known all along that this could be the next big step, that we could be opening the door to transwarp drive."

Transwarp. Of course. Supposedly the next big step in interstellar travel, engineers throughout the Federation had been carrying on about transwarp for years. Starfleet designers were at this very moment developing a prototype transwarp drive, and a whole new class of starship was being created to accommodate the new propulsion system. Scott himself was skeptical about the concept, but had the Kelvans developed the equivalent to transwarp, or even something superior? Was Talev merely consumed with ambition at the idea of being involved in such a staggering achievement? That would go a long way toward explaining her attitude, he decided.

"Ye knew that, did ye? Well, here's something that ye better learn quick," Scott said. "Engineers don't keep secrets. They don't hide tricks up their sleeves for their own amusement, and they don't keep a damn thing from their captains, even if the person playin' captain is a civilian overseerin' a test run. This may be a great feather in your cap, but don't be so quick to smile. Ye've got nothin' to be proud of just yet."

Talev's smile faded and her posture stiffened in response to the comment. "And why is that?"

"Because ye've not got us home yet."

Several seconds passed as Scott held the young engineer's gaze. Talev did not flinch from his scrutiny, but he could see that his words had struck some sort of chord in her. That was good, he decided. His gut told him that she was a good officer, intelligent and full of passion. All that was really needed to fully tap

her potential was experience, both practical and personal. Time would bring that, he knew, so long as she was receptive to the occasionally harsh lessons that experience would bring. Judging by what he had read in her eyes, he believed that would not be a problem.

A voice cut above the rest of the bridge noise, begging for his attention. It was Drea.

“Hanar, we have accelerated beyond our instruments’ ability to measure.”

Scott turned from Talev and moved toward the bridge railing as Hanar leaned forward in the center seat. “That’s at least warp fifteen.” Turning to Tomar he asked, “Engine status?”

Consulting the science displays, Tomar replied, “Engines are operating within tolerance levels, Hanar.”

“What’s our current position?” al-Khaled asked as he stepped down into the command well.

Drea tapped a series of controls on her console. “We are traversing Sector 68H now.” Scott frowned at the reference. So far as he knew, this sector of space had been charted but never explored. Life was believed to exist here but nothing substantial had ever been detected with the probes sent into this region.

“I think we should rein her in, Hanar,” Scott said. “I dinna like the idea of stampedin’ into an unknown region of space.”

“Agreed,” Hanar replied. “Drea, bring us to a full stop.”

Several seconds passed as the Kelvan attempted to do just that. “The helm is not responding.”

Hanar turned to Talev. “Lieutenant?”

Moving to the science station, the Andorian engineer’s fingers were nearly a blur as she entered several strings of commands. Scott’s apprehension grew as he watched her pause before repeating the sequence. Shaking her head, she turned back to Hanar. “The automation protocols refuse to abort the test.”

A familiar knot tightened in Scott’s gut, just like the one that he had felt years ago when it had become apparent that Richard Daystrom’s M-5 computer had seized control of his beloved Enterprise and refused to let go. “Where’s the override?”

To her credit, Talev was obviously thinking in that direction herself as she thumbed the intercom switch on her console. “Engineering, this is zh’Thren. The computer won’t let us slow the ship down. Initiate emergency override.”

“Stand by, Lieutenant,” a disembodied voice answered. A few moments later, however, the voice returned with the words that Scott had dreaded but still expected. “Overrides are not responsive.”

“What?” Talev exclaimed, clearly startled by the report. “That’s impossible.”

Exchanging looks with al-Khaled, Scott felt his pulse beginning to quicken. “Apparently not, Lieutenant,” he said, hating the way the words sounded as he spoke them.

This is no time for “I told you so.”

“If we can’t override it,” al-Khaled said as he moved to stand next to Scott, “then we have to deactivate it altogether.”

Hanar nodded at the assessment. To Talev he said, “Go to engineering and see to it, please.” He indicated Scott and al-Khaled. “I’m sure the commanders would be most helpful, as well.”

Though he bristled at the thought of being directed by the cocksure young engineer, Scott decided it would be best to bury such feelings belowdecks for the moment. “We’ll have ye fixed in no time.”

\* \* \*

Scott let his head hang over the circuitry panel exposed before him as he brought a hand laser to bear over a small relay grid. What he and al-Khaled were about to try was a last resort after nearly fifteen minutes of attempting to reprogram the Kelvan computer system by conventional means and another twenty minutes of trying to understand the vast network of circuitry that formed the backbone of the new computer.

“A few shocks to the system should get us the hard reboot you’re lookin’ for here,” he said to Talev as he steadied the laser in two hands. “One or two jolts and we should have control back in no time.”

Talev moved closer to get a better look at the junction that Scott had selected as the focus of his efforts. “I am trying to protect the integrity of this system, Commander,” she said with no small amount of alarm in her voice. “Disabling it in this manner may compromise its ability to perform once we have regained command of the warp drive.”

At the moment Scott only cared about arresting the Chandley’s headlong flight through space. Data gathered by the engines’ automated oversight system indicated that its speed had peaked, though there was no way to be certain what that velocity might be. For all anyone knew, they could be traveling at warp twenty or better. With that sense of urgency propelling them, he and al-Khaled had practically taken over main engineering in the process of conducting their repair efforts.

“There’s enough of us onboard to get the ship home on our own,” Scott said as he used his thumb to tune the laser’s beam width before firing. “And most of us are engineers, to boot. We’re miracle workers, don’t ye know.” Calling out in a louder voice, he said, “Mahmud, I’m ready to try this if you are.”

From the master control console in the rear of the engineering compartment, al-Khaled answered, “Standing by.”

Taking one last look at the circuit junction he had selected, Scott fired the laser. The effect was immediate as he heard the Kelvan computer unit stutter momentarily before resuming its otherwise constant hum. He thought he also detected a telltale flicker in the room’s lighting as the massive processor reset itself.

“Aye, that’s got it,” he said, nodding to himself. His suspicion was confirmed a second later as al-Khaled called out from the master console.

“Warp drive protocols have been released.” Tapping a series of commands to the console he added, “Disengaging warp drive now.”

In response to al-Khaled’s instructions, the engines of the Chandley almost immediately changed as their

former high-pitched whine began to deepen and lower in volume. Scott felt himself pulled to one side as the ship's inertial dampers struggled with the abrupt deceleration.

That's a clue all by itself as to how much power thosebeasties must have been puttin' out.

Several moments passed as the engines continued to power down. While al-Khaled was monitoring the engine status, Talev was busying herself with a hasty diagnostic of the Kelvan computer system.

"It appears that the remaining protocols for the drive are intact. Very nice work, Mr. Scott. Thank you for taking such care."

"So now what?" al-Khaled asked. "Do we make the necessary adjustments to the computer and set a course for home, or do we want to spring back into warp just long enough so we know we still can do it?"

Scott's reply was cut off by Hanar's voice over the ship's intercom system. "We have come to a full stop. Excellent work. However, it appears that we may have another problem. A vessel has entered sensor range."

"That didn't take long," al-Khaled said.

"It seems to have detected our passage through this region," Hanar continued, "and began following us as we decelerated. They are closing fast, and our sensors indicate that its weapons systems are armed."

## Chapter

### 4

As he regarded the image of the approaching alien spacecraft displayed on the main bridge viewer, Scott could not suppress an appreciative feeling for the ship's design. Unlike those of the Federation or other races that he had encountered in his travels, this vessel was flat and narrow, trading width and height for length. He saw no nacelles or any other structures indicating faster-than-light propulsion that he was familiar with, even though the craft had to be equipped with such technology for it to have intercepted the Chandley so quickly. The ship's dark metallic exterior was difficult to make out against the starfield even with the assistance of the viewer's computerized resolution. Scott saw no external illumination of any kind. To the naked eye the ship could almost certainly be missed if one did not know to look for it.

"That is one mean-looking ship," al-Khaled said from the science station as he consulted the sensor displays. "Weapons are similar to disruptor cannons we've seen on the newer Klingon cruisers, and their shield generators are more powerful than anything on our ships. Their engines are matter/antimatter, but they're using something other than dilithium to regulate the reaction. I can't even tell you what the mineral is." Shaking his head, he added, "I'd love to take a walk around that engine room."

Standing next to his friend, Scott asked, "How soon will she be here?"

"Five minutes, twenty seconds."

Seated in the command chair, Hanar swiveled around to face the communications station. "Jahn? Any progress?"

“We are continuing to broadcast universal greetings on all frequencies. They’ve responded, but the translator is still deciphering their message.”

Jahn toggled a switch and Scott winced at the cacophony of guttural noise that erupted from the intercom, a mishmash of barking animals and belching drunkards that drowned out the ambient noise on the bridge.

“They dinna sound very happy, do they?” Scott asked. The voice in the message, alien as it was to his ears, did indeed sound agitated. If the approaching craft was a threat, the Chandley was in no condition to defend itself. Without the weapons and deflector shield generators that had been removed following its decommission, the frigate would have no chance if the current situation turned hostile.

“The translator is making some progress,” Jahn reported. Scott noted the Kelvan’s narrowed eyes as Jahn listened to the information being relayed from the computer via the Feinberg receiver he held to his right ear. “It’s just bits and pieces, but I think I can grasp the basic meaning of their message.”

“Well?” al-Khaled prompted when several seconds elapsed without Jahn elaborating further.

“They’re saying, ‘Go away.’”

Despite the rising tension on the bridge, Scott could not help a small laugh at the report. “Ye canna put a thing past these universal translators nowadays.”

From where she sat at the engineering station, Talev said, “If they want us to leave, then they’ll almost certainly be upset when they arrive and we’re still here.”

It was a simple yet accurate observation, Scott conceded. Even though the Chandley had been broadcasting a standard greeting stating their affiliation with the Federation and their peaceful intentions, it was probable that the unknown aliens were suffering from the same lack of understanding toward a new language as the Chandley’s crew was.

“Let’s just tell them what happened. Let them know that we’re here by accident.” Scott shrugged. “It certainly canna hurt.”

Hanar rose from the center seat and turned to face Scott, a solemn expression on his face. “Commander, as this is a Kelvan mission, perhaps I should be the one to speak on our behalf.”

“This might be a touchy situation, Hanar,” al-Khaled said as he stepped to the bridge railing from the science station. “Have you ever conducted a first contact meeting with another race?”

Hanar nodded. “A few times, yes, though the circumstances were somewhat different.” He cast a wry look at Scott. “Normally we were the aggressors.” Turning back to the main viewer, he indicated for Jahn to open a hailing frequency.

“Greetings, fellow space travelers. I am Hanar, and I speak to you on behalf of the United Fed—”

An intense howling screech exploded from the intercom system, drowning out Hanar’s greeting and every other sound on the bridge. Scott covered his ears with his hands in a vain attempt to block the jarring noise even as Jahn scrambled to reduce the volume. The shriek ended abruptly before he could do so, however, this time replaced with a translated voice that sounded very similar to the original guttural



sounds they had heard earlier.

“...addition to your flagrant intrusion into the sovereign territory of the Lutralian Hegemony, you have now compounded your insult by brazenly forcing visual communication upon us without our permission. These are not the actions of strangers seeking our friendship.”

“Cut the link!” Scott called out as the agitated alien speaker continued. Jahn immediately complied and the transmission ended, leaving only the normal background sounds of the bridge.

“I don’t think that went very well,” Talev said.

As if in response, the entire ship shuddered around them and the deck lurched violently beneath their feet. Alarm klaxons sounded as everyone on the bridge flailed for something to hold on to, and Scott barely managed to avoid being thrown to the deck as he grabbed for the bridge railing. From the corner of his eye he saw Talev fall from her chair as al-Khaled was tossed into a bulkhead. Though Drea was able to keep her seat at the helm, Hanar was thrown forward into the navigation console.

“Hang on!” Scott called out as, on the viewscreen, he saw the forward edge of the Lutralian craft flare crimson red and a pair of writhing energy bolts leap forward, crossing the space between the attacking vessel and the Chandley.

The ship groaned in protest under the force of the second assault but the bridge crew was better prepared this time, each of them able to maintain their grip on a console or chair to avoid being thrown about again. Instrumentation did not fare so well this time, though. The environmental control station, obviously the victim of an overload, exploded in a shower of sparks and shrapnel. Even as fire suppression systems activated, Scott gave silent thanks that the station hadn’t been staffed. Anyone sitting at the console would surely have been injured, if not killed.

As the effects of the attack faded, al-Khaled dropped down into the command well to make sure that Hanar had not been injured before turning to Jahn at communications. “Get me a damage report, all stations.”

Pulling himself upright, Scott looked to the viewscreen to see the alien vessel simply holding station, a dark spot amid the dim stars. Why had they not fired again? Why had they fired in the first place? Was the Lutralian ship without sensor technology and therefore unable to see that the Chandley was a defenseless target?

Scott hated tactical situations that were dictated by the whim of emotion rather than any of the measurable qualities in the realm of an engineer’s influence. He understood command decisions influenced by a vessel’s firepower, maneuverability, speed, or endurance, and he felt comfortable giving orders or carrying them out based on that understanding. Now, however, he and his companions were faced with predicting the actions and motives of a race of beings unknown to them, and to the Federation, mere minutes ago.

“Report from engineering,” Jahn called out from the communications station. “We have hull breaches on several decks, but they’re in unoccupied sections of the ship and those areas have been sealed off.” Pausing for a moment to listen further he added, “Main life support is down but backups are functioning.”

Listening to the reports, Scott continued to regard the Lutralian ship. What was its commander thinking? Was it sizing up the Chandley at this moment, determining the best avenue for a lethal final assault?

“Okay,” al-Khaled said, “now for the big question: How are the engines?”

At the engineering station Tomar and Talev spent several seconds consulting the bank of monitors, all of which now displayed diagnostic information. “The engines themselves are fine,” Talev reported, “but internal sensors are detecting a fluctuation in plasma levels.”

Scott and al-Khaled crossed the bridge as Tomar tapped commands to his console. “We are venting plasma from our port nacelle,” he said as the two veteran engineers moved to stand beside him. “A manifold has apparently sustained damage from the attack.”

“If we don’t close that off,” al-Khaled said as he reviewed the computer graphic, “we’ll lose all our plasma within two hours.” Scott did not need his friend to complete the report. Without warp plasma, the engines would be all but useless, effectively stranding the Chandley and her crew here, in the sights of an alien ship’s weapons.

Scott said, “Aye, somebody has to go outside and patch the rupture.” He nodded in the direction of the viewer. “Of course, if our friends start shootin’ again, it really won’t matter.” Without the means to defend itself, the Chandley could not withstand much more punishment at the hands of the Lutralians.

“They are hailing us,” Jahn said, turning to face the group hovering near the engineering station.

“Are they asking for our surrender?” Talev asked.

Holding the Feinberg device to his ear, Jahn frowned in response to the message he was receiving. “There is no mention of that. They are, however, demanding visual communications be established.”

“This should be interesting,” al-Khaled said. “I suppose it’s too late to pretend we’re not home.”

Scott cast a sardonic look at his friend before placing a hand on Hanar’s shoulder. “Perhaps ye should let me take it this time, lad.” The Kelvan agreed and Scott indicated for Jahn to open the channel.

On the main viewer the image of the Lutralian ship was replaced with that of a humanoid figure sitting ramrod straight in what looked to be a throne. Large and muscled, the alien’s teal-colored skin contrasted sharply with the highly polished, silver-colored armor chest plate it wore. Its head was devoid of hair and Scott could see what looked to be a large scar along the left side of its skull, and its eyes were two black pools set above a narrow nose and a mouth filled with even rows of sharp gleaming teeth. From the image on the screen it appeared as though the Lutralian was looking down at them, a sensation that put Scott immediately on edge. This was someone who was used to being perceived as an authority figure, he decided.

“I am Nrech’lah, commander of the Lutralian warship Durgejiin.” the Lutralian said, its tone clipped and formal and confirming Scott’s gut feeling.

“My name is Montgomery Scott, and I speak for this vessel. On behalf of my crew, I would like to thank ye for grantin’ an audience with us.”

Waving the attempted greeting away, Nrech’lah said, “We have fired upon your vessel, and yet you are not roused to retaliation. You squandered an opportunity to strike. Why?”

“It is not our way to declare those we do not know as enemies,” Scott replied. “We came here by accident, having experienced technical malfunctions with our ship’s drive systems. I respectfully request

that we be allowed to make our repairs, and then we will leave your space in peace.” He hoped the words were more convincing to Nrech’lah than they were to him, as he was certainly no diplomat. Where’s a poppinjay Federation ambassador when ye need one?

On the screen, Nrech’lah’s expression revealed nothing. “Interesting. You shirk the opportunity to engage us in combat. Are you unwilling or unable? I suspect the latter.”

Listening to the Lutralian captain, Scott thought his demeanor to be similar to that of Romulan ship commanders he had encountered over the years. Calm and composed, Nrech’lah affected an air of being in complete control, which of course was not far from the truth. Even without sophisticated sensor technology, it would not take long for him to figure out that the Chandley was incapable of mounting any kind of defense. The only decision Nrech’lah would have at that point would be whether or not to exploit his advantage. That he had not done so by now gave Scott a glimmer of hope that this situation could still be resolved peacefully.

“You are correct, Captain,” he said. “Our ship possesses no weapons. To be truthful, we were testing a new engine design when we lost control. It brought us here, quite unintentionally, I assure you.”

Nrech’lah appeared to consider this for several seconds before he nodded slowly. The smile on his face was anything but warm and welcoming, though.

“Your candor is most reassuring, alien. As a gesture of goodwill, I will allow you a small amount of time to effect your repairs.”

Smiling himself, first at his companions and then at Nrech’lah, Scott nodded enthusiastically. “That is most kind, Captain. Of course, we are in somewhat of a bind due to a shortage of personnel. We would certainly welcome any assistance you might lend to—”

A low menacing laugh echoed from the bridge’s intercom as the Lutralian captain slowly shook his head. “Are you attempting to insult us again?”

Careful, Scotty, don’t blow it.

“Not at all, sir,” he replied, talking quickly to recover from his apparent misstep. “I merely thought you would like to help in the spirit of respect and friendship.”

Again came the sinister laugh. “We do not respect that which we can so easily brush aside, alien. This is not an issue of respect, at least, not yet. Attend to your repairs, but if you do not complete them in a timely manner, it will no longer be an issue. I trust you understand our position.”

With that Nrech’lah terminated the transmission, leaving only the image of the dark, silent Lutralian ship on the main viewer once more.

“I think I could have handled that a wee bit better,” Scott said as he turned to his companions. These Lutralians, he decided, appeared to be even more hung up on protocol and the trappings of authority than Romulans or even Tholians, another race with which he had had some experience. He would have liked to spend more time figuring out why Nrech’lah appeared to view the Chandley and her crew with such disdain, but he had to remember that at present there were more critical priorities to worry about.

“The first order of business is repairin’ that ruptured manifold,” Scott said as he regarded the bridge personnel.

“Already on it,” al-Khaled said from the engineering station. “I’ve got people assembling the gear we’ll need. You and I are the best qualified to go outside, but one of us should stay here to coordinate the repair efforts if we’re going to finish in anything resembling a short time. I have more hours in zero-g repair work than you do, so I should be the one to go.”

Scott hated for al-Khaled to be right about this, but the fact was that with his years of service with the Lovell and the S.C.E., his friend had logged many more hours wearing an environmental suit. That decision, at least, was simple to make.

“Aye, when you’re right, you’re right. You need to take someone along with you as a backup, though.”

“Don’t worry, I have just the perfect volunteer for this job,” al-Khaled replied, and Scott followed his gaze to the science station where Talev sat. So engrossed was the young Andorian in studying the rapid fire of information constantly being updated on the monitors that it took several seconds for her to realize that eyes were on her.

And why.

“Sir?” she asked, her expression one of shock and her tone possessing none of its former confidence.

Well, Scott thought, at least I lived long enough to see that.

\* \* \*

Left foot down. Right foot up. Right foot down. Left foot up...

Talev kept pace silently as she made her way along the exterior of the Chandley’s port warp nacelle, peeling and lifting her magnetic-soled boots from the hull as she and Commander al-Khaled maneuvered toward the ship’s leaking nacelle. Between them they carried a section of plating that, once secured over the hull rupture, would be large enough to contain the plasma leak.

She listened to the echoes of her own breathing in the bulbous helmet of her environmental suit. That she and al-Khaled were wearing an older model of suit, which had been retired from active service several years ago and apparently after the Chandley’s decommissioning, only added to her dismay at coming outside in the first place. The suits did not possess maneuvering thrusters, forcing the two engineers to be dependent on magnetic boots to grip the hull and safety tethers feeding out from the open hatchway at the base of the nacelle’s support strut.

Though she did not suffer from claustrophobia or vertigo, as was the case with some people when they donned an environmental suit, Talev had never relished the idea of working outside a starship. She had dreaded the training classes at the Academy, always wishing for them to end as quickly as possible. Her assignments post-graduation had never called for her to work in such conditions, and she had gotten used to the idea that the chances of her being called to do so were minimal at best.

And yet, here I am. Wonderful.

They walked in silence for the most part, crossing the distance to the hull rupture where she could see the swirling cloud of gas leaking from the breach. It would be dangerous working near the released plasma, even with the low-level welding torch that al-Khaled had brought along for the task. She had disagreed with his and Scott’s decision not to stop the plasma flow while they worked on the damaged

nacelle, but she understood the reasoning: doing so would have resulted in the shutdown of the warp drive, which would then require a cold restart. That would take at least another thirty minutes to accomplish, time they could not be sure the Lutralians would grant them. With that in mind, she and al-Khaled were faced with working in close proximity to the dangerous plasma as it vented freely from the damaged hull.

“How are you doing, Lieutenant?” al-Khaled asked through their commlink.

She nodded in reply before remembering that the commander could not see that. “I have been better, if you must know.”

Al-Khaled laughed. “A sense of humor. I love it. This really isn’t that hard once you get a rhythm down, Lieutenant. Just shuffle along and don’t hurry. You’re doing fine.” Another few moments passed as they came upon the repair site, with al-Khaled directing where to step and how to angle the hull plate.

As they maneuvered the plate into the proper position, al-Khaled said, “You know, this reminds me of why I got into the S.C.E. in the first place.”

Talev tried to take her mind off her apprehension as she stutter-stepped past al-Khaled and moved to where he wanted her to stand. Kneeling down and placing her hands on the hull plate, she asked, “The Corps of Engineers was not your first assignment?”

“Not on your life,” he replied. Between the two of them, it was simple work to move the replacement plate over the plasma leak. Taking a moment to judge their progress he said, “This may look quick and dirty on the outside, but it’ll do the job well enough.”

She watched as al-Khaled drew the welding laser he had brought with him and adjusted the tool’s power setting before aiming it at one edge of the plate. An intense orange beam of energy lanced from the welder, beginning the process of joining the two hull sections. He had obviously done this many times before, she decided, as he made quick work, and Talev found herself caught up in watching wisps of plasma escape through the crack between the plate and the hull just before the phaser welded the seam closed.

“My first assignment was at Starbase 2,” al-Khaled said as he continued to work. “I worked on everything imaginable there: ground craft, suborbital ships, even passing starships. It all came pretty quick to me, and at a starbase you learn to be resourceful. You don’t think this is the first time I’ve used an all-purpose deckplate for an emergency repair, do you?”

He talked as if the two of them were lounging in the mess hall rather than kneeling exposed on the surface of a starship hull. How did he do that? The answer was obvious, of course: because his experience gave him confidence. Talev had to admit that listening to his voice eased her own tension somewhat and she suspected that it was deliberate on al-Khaled’s part. At any other time she might find such an attempt offensive and condescending, but not now. If it helped them to complete their task and get back inside the ship, then she welcomed the effort with open arms.

She shifted her position as al-Khaled moved in her direction with the welder. As she did so, she felt a vibration beneath her feet. Al-Khaled must have noticed it, too, because he deactivated the welder and turned to look at her.

“Did you feel that?”

Nodding, she looked down at the hull and saw tendrils of plasma seep from the weld line that al-Khaled had just created. How was that possible?

“Mahmud,” Scott’s voice suddenly called out over the open communicator channel, “we’re registering spikes in the plasma flow. I’m shutting it down, but there’s still a lot of released plasma. Be careful out—”

The hull plate bucked upward sharply as vents of ignited plasma erupted from beneath it. Only partially secured to the nacelle’s metallic exterior, the plate was wrenched away from the hull by the force of the explosion. Talev had but a heartbeat to throw her arms up in defense as the plate struck her. Then she was tumbling head over heels, and she realized she had been knocked free of the ship!

“Talev!” al-Khaled’s voice rang in her helmet as she instinctively grabbed for her tether. Using both hands to pull on it as she twisted about in open space, Talev yanked but felt none of the resistance she had expected.

Her eyes followed the length of the tether to its abrupt end, where scorched metallic fibers bore mute testimony to where the intensely hot plasma had sliced through the line.

“Commander!”

## Chapter

# 5

As Talev zh’Thren fell away, al-Khaled exercised the only option open to him.

He jumped.

Arms stretched outward, al-Khaled kicked off from the Chandley’s hull, arcing away from the ship and into free space.

“Commander!” Talev called out again, her arms and legs thrashing about as she drifted farther from the ship. She was reaching out for anything that might arrest her motion, but of course there was nothing.

“Hang on, Talev,” al-Khaled said, speaking in as calm a voice as he could muster, all the while cursing whoever had dismantled the Chandley’s transporter. “I’m coming.”

Drifting after her in the void, al-Khaled was helpless to do anything but listen to the echoes of his own breathing. His pulse raced and pounded in his ears as the distance between them shrank too damned slowly.

“Mahmud,” Scott’s voice sounded in his helmet, “what’s wrong?”

Not answering, al-Khaled’s attention was instead focused on Talev, who was now close, so very close. Reaching out, al-Khaled’s gloved fingers brushed against the side of the Andorian’s boot. He missed the grab, the action serving to twist her body away from his hand, her body turning cartwheels in the vacuum. Her arm was swinging around, though, and al-Khaled angled to reach for it.

And then his tether line went taut.

“No!” he cried as his hand closed around nothing and he felt his body pulled back toward the ship. The gap between him and Talev, which had been mere millimeters an instant ago, started to widen again.

As her body turned about and the visor of her helmet became visible, Talev’s expression was one of panic. “Commander!” She reached vainly in the direction of al-Khaled even as she continued to drift farther away from the Chandley. Al-Khaled flailed his arms in a desperate attempt to grab on to her, knowing even as he did so that the attempt was fruitless.

Then he saw movement in the corner of his eye.

Drifting past him was the remainder of Talev’s tether, still attached to her environmental suit. The severed safety line was arcing and twisting in response to the lieutenant’s frantic motions, and now it was almost within al-Khaled’s reach. But could he grab on to it?

“Mahmud,” Scott’s voice repeated in his helmet, “what the devil is goin’ on out there?”

“I’m a little busy at the moment, Scotty,” al-Khaled replied through clenched teeth. “Stand by.”

He grabbed on to his own tether and, using it for the tenuous amount of leverage it possessed, al-Khaled twisted his body around and reached out one last time with his free hand. The material of Talev’s safety line slid across his gloved fingers and he tightened his grip. His body curled around as the Andorian’s momentum was transferred to him, and then he felt his own movement arrest as his own tether went taut once more. When he was jerked in the direction of the Chandley this time, however, it was with Talev’s line still in his grip and the lieutenant now drifting along with him back toward the ship.

“Gotcha,” he called out in triumph. Easy there, he cautioned himself. You’re not home free yet.

As they drew nearer to the hull, he used his hold on his tether to bring himself around and plant his feet on the metal plating, letting the magnetic sensors in his boots secure him to the ship once again. Seconds later Talev was beside him, anchoring herself to the hull as well.

“I can’t take you anywhere, can I?” al-Khaled asked, breathing hard from the brief but intense exertion.

Shaking her head, Talev frowned behind her face-plate. “I guess not. Thanks for coming after me.”

“Save it until you get my bill,” al-Khaled responded as he rechecked his boots’ grip on the hull. He was sure he had detected a note of humility in the young Andorian’s voice, a quality that had been notably absent in his previous dealings with her. Interesting, he thought.

Then Scott’s exasperated voice was sounding in his helmet once more. “Mahmud, so help me, if ye dinna answer I’m comin’ out there and throtlin’ the both of ye.”

As they began to make their way across the hull back to where the damaged manifold awaited the rest of their repairs, al-Khaled replied, “Oh, now you offer to come outside and help. Your timing is impeccable as always, Commander.” Surveying the new damage to the ship’s exterior from the plasma eruption he added, “Bring me another hull plate while you’re at it.”

“He will probably want to kill you once we get back inside,” Talev said.

Al-Khaled nodded. "Probably. In that case, let's finish our work here. I do not want to die in vain, after all."

\* \* \*

Though the idea of killing al-Khaled did cross his mind, Scott decided that it would be best if he waited until they got home first.

"Repairs are spot on, Mahmud," he said as he studied a status display at the engineering station on the Chandley's bridge. The decision not to shut down the plasma flow had been dangerous, even given their current situation, and they had nearly lost Talev because of it. For that he was furious with himself. Sloppy engineers make dead engineers, he reminded himself.

"Plasma levels are lower than I'd like, but they're holding steady. All we have to do now is bring those engines back online and let the computer run its start-up diagnostics. Once that's done, if we dinna give her too many bumps along the way, the old girl should get us home without too much trouble."

At the science station, Tomar turned in his seat, a frown creasing his features. "We may have another problem, Mr. Scott." As the trio of Starfleet engineers moved to join him, the Kelvan motioned for them to observe one of the monitors on the bulkhead above him. "The computer's diagnostics are reporting that the warp drive cannot be brought back online."

"What?" al-Khaled asked as he studied the display. "Is there something else wrong? Some other damage that we missed?"

Shaking his head, Tomar indicated a graphic in the computer screen's lower left corner. "We installed computer software that is dedicated to monitoring the warp drive systems. It uses a series of overlapping protocols that continuously recalibrate engine performance. Some of the adjustments it makes are so minute that most living beings can't even detect the change. The recalibrations are made much faster than flesh-and-blood engineers could accomplish them, as well."

Scott held up a hand. "Ye covered all of this at the briefing, Tomar, but what does that have to do with anything right now?"

From behind him, Talev replied, "Commander, what I believe Tomar is trying to say is that the computer will not allow the warp drive to be enabled because it views doing so with our drastically reduced plasma levels to be an inefficient if not outright unsafe operating condition."

Rolling his eyes, Scott forced himself to maintain his composure. Why was this so difficult? "So bypass the bloody thing."

"I wish it were that simple, my friend," Tomar replied, his expression almost one of embarrassment. "We designed the computer software to regulate the engines as close to standard technical specifications as possible, in order to ensure the best possible performance with the least required amount of interaction with our engineering staff. It was hoped that being able to rely on computers for such tasks would allow us to set out into space with smaller crews. We would then be able to distribute the limited number of experienced space travelers of our people more efficiently among our ships."

It was a laudable goal, Scott agreed. The Kelvans had always shown themselves to be self-reliant almost to a fault, dating back to the first time the Enterprise crew had encountered them. Naturally they would want to launch their new program of exploration with as little outside help as possible. Talev and the



other Starfleet engineers temporarily assigned to New Kelva had been tolerated, to be sure, but only because of the opportunity to learn about Kelvan engineering techniques that had been part of the deal struck by Starfleet for the use of their ships.

Using automation to free up their limited number of personnel was a natural step to take. Though the duotronic computer components originally installed in the Chandley and other Federation starships were not ideally suited to complete automation, the Kelvans' expertise in software development rivaled their own engineering expertise. This, as much as the engine design that had been created and installed aboard the Chandley, had also piqued Starfleet's interest.

"It appears that we did our job too well," Tomar said. "The computer will not allow the engines to be brought online in their present state, I'm afraid."

Moving closer to the science station, Scott tapped a control on the console. "Computer, display a schematic of the automated warp drive oversight systems on Science Monitor 1."

"Working," replied the stilted, feminine voice of the ship's computer. Several seconds passed before the image on the science station's leftmost viewscreen shifted to show the information Scott had ordered.

"What are you thinking?" al-Khaled asked.

Pointing to the monitor, Scott replied, "There has to be a way to bypass this thing. I'm not about to believe that we're beholden to a collection of circuits and computer programs. We'll find a way to trick this beastie, lad."

"You can't trick a computer, sir," Talev said.

Scott snorted. "Sure ye can. Talkin' a computer into doin' something it doesn't want to do is an art form, I'll give ye that much. But it can be done." Smiling at the Andorian, he added, "If ye dinna believe me, ye can just ask Admiral Kirk the next time ye see him."

"You mean if we see him," Talev said. Seeing the scowl her remark evoked from Scott, she quickly continued. "The software can be reprogrammed, yes, but we are talking about millions of lines of code."

"So why not simply craft a workaround?" Scott asked. "Surely ye can do that?"

Thinking about that a bit, Talev replied, "Perhaps, though it may take some time."

Nodding in the direction of the bridge's main viewer, al-Khaled said, "I wonder what our friends over there will think of that."

It was a valid question, Scott conceded. The Lutralians had been patient to this point, allowing the Chandley crew to perform their repairs unobstructed. But Scott knew that their patience would not hold out forever. They had already expressed disdain over requests for their assistance, and there was no way to anticipate how a call for more time would be received.

What Scott also had to concede, though, was that he and his companions had no choice. If they were going to get home, then they would need more time to finish their work.

He shook his head, temporarily dismissing the concerns. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it." He pointed to Talev. "Come, lassie. Let's see about convincin' this computer to do things our way."

\* \* \*

Much to Scott's pleasant surprise, Talev's expertise as a computer specialist proved more than equal to the challenge of circumventing the warp drive oversight system.

"Fourteen minutes, twenty-six seconds," he said as he consulted a chronometer at the science station. "A very nice piece of work, Lieutenant. Very nice indeed." Though he himself was no expert in computer programming, Scott had spent enough time with such specialists in his career to appreciate their skill.

Like engineers of other disciplines, the best software developers understood the rules relating to their chosen field of endeavor, and by extension knew where those same rules could be bent, broken, or just plain ignored. Talev zh'Thren was obviously of this mold, Scott decided. Forgoing the verbal command set commonly used to interact with the computer, the Andorian had set to work in the customary manner of most programmers, working directly with the science station's primary interface console. Scott had been hard-pressed to keep up as he watched long strings of commands scroll past the edges of the display monitor in response to Talev's fingers moving in a near blur over the keyboard. Regardless of what he might think of her personality, there was no disputing her technical talents.

"Thank you, Commander," the lieutenant replied, and Scott noted more than a bit of pride in her voice. "I have to admit, I did not think such a workaround was possible, at least not in such a short time. The solution was rather simple when I started looking for it, however." Shaking her head, she added. "I almost looked past it completely."

Though she had not completely lost the arrogant streak that had dominated her personality at their first meeting, Scott thought he detected a distinct mellowing in the Andorian's attitude. Of course, having to be rescued from dying in space combined with being taught something about her chosen specialty by someone admittedly less skilled than herself would certainly contribute to such a shift in outlook. He could only hope that this mission, if they were successful and able to return home, had provided Talev with a valuable learning experience and an opportunity for growth as not only a Starfleet officer and an engineer, but also as just an ordinary person.

"The engines are free to activate," Tomar reported from the bridge's engineering station. "Engineering reports they are ready to begin the start-up sequence. Warp drive will be available in thirty-four minutes."

Indicating Talev with a nod, Scott replied, "Well, the good lieutenant has done her part, and we still have a bit o' work to tend to before we can think about leaving. Shall we see to it?"

## Chapter

### 6

Talev zh'Thren was sure of one thing: she did not want a command of her own.

Sitting in the center seat on the Chandley's bridge, watching as others performed more meaningful tasks around her, she knew that she should feel pride at being given the conn. While Hanar, Tomar, and the others were down in engineering taking care of the final adjustments of the ship's distressed warp engines, she had been tasked with seeing to the welfare of the ship's overall operation. Everyone on the bridge, or on the entire ship for that matter, would turn to her for a decision so long as she occupied the

captain's chair. Such power did have its allure, she had to admit. Besides, Hanar would not have placed her in this position were she incapable of carrying out her duties.

So why did she not embrace this responsibility?

Other Andorians had made fine Starfleet captains, she knew, some of them having served with distinction. The Andorian captain of a Federation science vessel had recently ordered her ship's destruction after a Klingon attack rather than allow the vessel to fall into enemy hands. Her actions had been in keeping with the highest standards of both Starfleet and her own people, and would almost certainly inspire many young people, of Andorian heritage as well as a myriad of other races, to pursue their own dreams of one day captaining a starship.

Many young people, yes, but not Talev zh'Thren.

She was reasonably sure she knew why, of course. Having never been comfortable around other people, the idea of being responsible for the actions of others was something that had never appealed to her. Talev much preferred the solace of machines, who only spoke the words programmed into them in response to situations as dictated to them by living beings. Machines did not have feelings or other personality quirks that served only to impede the efficiency of her work. She did not have to worry about offending a computer like she did with other officers, especially humans, who to her seemed able to take offense at the slightest provocation.

Is it always them? Or is it you?

Despite the way her initial meeting with Commander Scott had gone, the seasoned engineer had wasted no time calling on her technical expertise in solving their current problems. Any ill feelings he might have harbored toward her had been dismissed for the sake of the mission. Though Scott's computer skills were not as extensive as her own, he had still been able to devise a scheme to override the propulsion computer systems, systems she herself had played a hand in designing and implementing. A lesser person might have used that opportunity to gloat over her mistakes, but Scott had instead complimented her on her ability to improvise a workaround for the computer software.

The same had happened with Commander al-Khaled, who had chosen her to accompany him outside the ship for the repair operation. She knew that he had been at least partially motivated by a desire to perhaps humble her a bit. However, she also had to believe that the commander would not have placed himself at risk by undertaking a dangerous mission with someone he did not trust, and he had literally saved her life to boot.

After all of that, Talev was certain of one thing: the past several hours had given her much to think about in regard to her interactions with fellow engineers and officers.

"Lieutenant zh'Thren," Jahn called from the communications station. "We are receiving an incoming hail from the Lutralian ship."

Feeling a knot tighten in the pit of her stomach, Talev acknowledged the order with a nod. There could be only one reason why the alien captain would be contacting them now, after all. She shifted in the command chair and straightened her posture, hoping that she appeared more confident than she actually felt.

"On screen."

As the intimidating features of the Lutralian commander again filled the main viewer she said, “Captain Nrech’lah, I am Lieutenant zh’Thren, temporarily in command. How may I help you?”

“We have waited for you to complete your repairs, Lieutenant, but our patience wears thin.”

Talev’s first instinct was to tell the Lutralian captain what he could do with his patience, thin or otherwise. However, she was sure that Commander Scott would most definitely not approve. Instead, she said, “I understand your concerns, sir, and I assure you that we are proceeding with all haste to finish our work.”

“Our Central Command has been notified of your presence here, and they have classified your vessel as a hazard to navigation. If you are unable to leave under your own power, my orders are to destroy your ship.”

Now what was she supposed to do? Talev was no diplomat, and if she had little patience for the niceties of regular social interaction, she had even less for the bloated flowery extensions of language normally employed by stuffy politicians. As difficult as such an admission might have been before today, she had no problem coming to terms with the fact that she was out of her depth right now.

To the viewscreen she said, “Captain, if you would grant me the necessary few moments, I need to consult with my superiors.”

Nrech’lah considered the request for several seconds before nodding tersely. “Very well, but do not take too long.”

Turning in her seat, Talev made a motion for Jahn to mute the signal before tapping a control on the arm of the command chair. “Zh’Thren to Commander Scott.”

“Go ahead, Lieutenant,” Scott’s voice said a second later, and Talev noted that the veteran engineer sounded harried, no doubt from his and the others’ feverish attempts to finish the final repairs to the Chandley’s engines. With that in mind, she wasted little time bringing Scott up to speed on Captain Nrech’lah’s latest ultimatum.

“We need another fifteen minutes or so down here, lass. You’ll just have to stall him until then.”

Talev would not have been more shocked if Scott had smacked her across the face. “Commander? Surely you don’t mean that I should engage him in some sort of diplomatic dialogue?”

“I dinna care how ye do it, Lieutenant, but find me fifteen minutes.” As if sensing her uncertainty, the engineer added. “Listen to me, Talev. You’ve already done everything you can to get us out of here with your hands, now use your head to get us the rest of the way. Just do me a favor and keep that famous Andorian ire in check, would ye?”

“As humans are occasionally fond of saying, Commander, that is easier said than done. But I’ll do my best, sir. Zh’Thren out.” The connection was severed and she exhaled audibly.

Fifteen minutes. He may as well have asked for fifteen years.

She nodded to Jahn to reestablish connection with the Lutralian ship. “Captain, I have been informed by my superiors that we will be ready to depart in only a few of our minutes. You have my word that we will leave your space as soon as the repairs are complete.”

When Nrech'lah did not reply, Talev considered what else she might say. How would a politician proceed at this point? Say something dull and sycophantic while using entirely too many words in the process, no doubt. Diplomats were experts at ingratiating themselves to others.

“Captain, as this is the first time our two peoples have encountered one another, we view this as an historic occasion. Perhaps there is something that we could take back to our leaders on your behalf, something that would give them a better understanding of your people and your culture?”

On the viewscreen, Nrech'lah smiled slightly. “You stand before me with a defenseless vessel, knowing that I may destroy it and you as well, and yet you still manage to maintain your bearing. Bravery is a trait we admire. Tell me, alien, are you experienced in speaking as a representative of your people?”

Hardly, Talev thought. To Nrech'lah, however, she said, “I must admit that it is not a specialty of mine. I suspect that you and I are alike in that we have little use for those who talk too much.”

To her surprise, Nrech'lah laughed heartily at her statement. “An excellent observation. I can appreciate the need for such skill, though I have no desire to cultivate it myself.”

Not daring to hope she might have made some kind of breakthrough with the Lutralian ship commander, Talev knew that at the very least she was buying Scott and the others a few precious minutes. Mindful of that, she decided to test the waters further.

“Perhaps we could discuss our mutual dislike of politicians, Captain,” she said, making up the entreaty as she went. “It is a custom of many races in our Federation to share stories with friends, over a meal, for example. My commander is otherwise occupied at the moment, but I am sure he would have the time to meet with you, if you would accept my invitation to transport to our ship for dinner.”

Nrech'lah laughed again, though this time he shook his head and the laugh was not as warm. “It is an intriguing offer, but I am afraid I must decline. After all, I suspect you are not naïve enough to overlook the possible advantage of taking me hostage.” Regarding the Andorian for a few more seconds, though, he added, “However, I will allow you to transfer over to the Durgejiin.”

“Forgive me, Captain, but how do I know you won't take me hostage?”

Shrugging, Nrech'lah said, “Capturing you would be a waste of time, alien, especially when my orders are to destroy you.” The smile returned, though this time it was the smile of someone who knew he was in command of the situation. “I am committing a breach of those orders by delaying that action, however, so the least you could do is honor my request.”

How much more time did Scott need? Could she buy them the extra few minutes, and possibly more, by undertaking this risky scheme? Her gut told her that Nrech'lah was being truthful in telling her that she would be safe. The Lutralians could have destroyed the Chandley a dozen times over by now. Despite her misgivings, she had no choice but to explore the avenue that Nrech'lah was providing.

“When you put it that way, Captain, I feel obligated to accept.”

Nodding, Nrech'lah replied, “Then I await your arrival.” With that the communication was severed and the viewscreen image returned to that of the Lutralian ship.

“Are you really going over there?” Jahn asked. “Do you want a weapon? You saw the looks he was

giving you, Lieutenant. I don't think I'd trust him to act in the most honorable fashion."

Talev shook her head. "I can take care of myself." Shrugging, she added. "Besides, if he tries anything I know I'll just bounce him off the bulkheads until Commander Scott is ready to leave."

"Not a very diplomatic solution," Jahn countered.

"Call it Andorian diplomacy."

\* \* \*

As she stepped out of the small shuttlecraft that had taken her across space to the Lutralian ship, the first thing Talev saw was the two hulking figures, their body armor and weapons suggesting that they were the equivalent of a ship's security detail.

"You are to come with us," one of the guards said. Talev noted no malice in the order, though there was firmness behind the words that indicated the guards would not appreciate refusal. Their weapons were holstered, indicating that they did not consider her a threat. So far, it appeared that Nrech'lah was honoring his word not to harm her.

She nodded to the guards, who flanked her as they led her from the cargo hold into which she had piloted the shuttlecraft. The room itself was cluttered with containers and various equipment, most of it unrecognizable to her. Talev noted that although the chamber appeared to be utilitarian in purpose, the components and tools stored here seemed to be clean and well maintained. That suggested an orderliness and pride in work ethic to the young engineer, a notion that was strengthened as she was led into a corridor and deeper into the ship. The passageway itself was immaculate. Uniforms worn by the Lutralian crewmembers were meticulously tailored, with polished metal buttons, buckles, and other accessories. The military atmosphere of the Durgejiin was unmistakable.

Following the guards up a series of stairs, Talev wondered if she were being taken to the ship's command center. She found that unlikely. Perhaps a conference room or reception area, then. Her theory appeared to gain credence when the guards stopped before a pair of polished metal doors, both of which sported a multicolored ornamental crest unlike any of the markings she had seen elsewhere on the ship.

One of the guards reached out to a panel, which Talev recognized as a type of intercom control, set into the wall next to the door. "Captain, we have brought the alien as ordered."

"Excellent, see her in," Nrech'lah's voice replied through the intercom. Seconds later the doors parted to reveal a dimly lit chamber beyond.

Talev paused before the threshold, allowing her eyes to adjust to the room's lower illumination. As she studied the room's interior, it became apparent that she had not been brought to a meeting room at all, but rather the captain's private quarters.

"Come in, Lieutenant," Nrech'lah called out from somewhere in the room. Stepping forward, Talev noted the ornate tapestries lining the walls and the eclectic collection of exotic weapons, art, and other decorative objects filling shelves and cabinets. The room's contents reflected an owner who had traveled extensively, most likely as part of a long and distinguished military career.

Following the sound of Nrech'lah's voice, she stepped deeper into the room. As she did so she became aware of a faint odor teasing her nostrils. Not completely unpleasant, the smell grew more pungent as she

moved farther into the chamber. She noted steam coming from one doorway on her left, and guessed that the odor, whatever it might be, was coming from there.

Tell me this isn't going where I think it's going.

Stepping to the doorway, Talev looked in, her sense of dread growing as she beheld the room that lay beyond. Inside, a large tub dominated the chamber. Filled with a dark, thick liquid, it was undoubtedly the source of the odor. A trio of female Lutralians, each dressed in flimsy shifts hinting at the lithe forms only partially concealed beneath, moved about the room, either tending to the bath or to the person occupying it.

Captain Nrech'lah.

Seated in the tub, naked at least from the point that his chest rose above the surface of whatever it was that filled the tub, the Lutralian regarded Talev with a wide grin on his face.

"Please, come in, Lieutenant."

## Chapter

### 7

With a satisfying click, Scott felt the final retaining clip slide into place. The control panel immediately activated as power was restored, and its status displays illuminated as information began to once again transfer to it from the ship's computer.

"Aye, that's got it," Scott said as he tapped a series of test commands to the panel. The displays reacted to his requests, flashing diagnostic data about the Chandley's warp drive. According to the readouts, the engines were operating as well as could be expected, given the damage they had sustained and the limited resources he, al-Khaled, and the team of engineers from New Kelva had at their disposal. Even with the lower-than-normal plasma levels, Scott was confident that the engines would function adequately enough to get them home.

Assuming we can control them, he reminded himself.

"All that's left now is to set the course and let the computer do the rest," al-Khaled said from a nearby control station. "I've been doing some computations based on the course we followed to get here, and I think that, with Talev's help, we can instruct the computer on how best to get us back to New Kelva."

From where he sat next to al-Khaled, Tomar pointed to one of the computer displays. "Without the computer overseeing propulsion, we will have to plot the navigation and set up the parameters for acceleration and braking ourselves. This of course invites the possibility of error."

Scott frowned at that. It was an incomplete grasp of the power harnessed by the Kelvan engine design that had gotten them here in the first place. Any modifications made to the navigational subsystems would be rushed, with no time for any sort of simulator testing. Whatever they did, it would have to be right the first time.

That meant they needed Talev to oversee the modifications.

“Scott to bridge,” he called out as he tapped the console’s intercom control. “Lieutenant zh’Thren, I’m gonna need ye one more time, lass.”

Instead of the young Andorian, the uncertain voice of Jahn answered. “Commander Scott? I’m afraid that the lieutenant is not here.”

“What do ye mean she’s not there?” Scott replied, his brow furrowing in confusion. “Where the devil is she then?”

There was a pause of several seconds before Jahn spoke again. “It was my understanding that she had informed you of her intention to go over to the Lutralian vessel.”

Scott’s eyes went wide in shock. What had happened while he and the others had been finishing their repairs? “What in the name of hell is she doing over there?”

\* \* \*

At the moment, Talev zh’Thren was standing in the doorway to Captain Nrech’lah’s bathing chamber, hands on hips and with an annoyed expression on her face.

“The effects of the doamjah oil in the water are really quite therapeutic,” Nrech’lah said as he drank from a large, polished goblet. Holding the vessel up for her to see, he added, “Especially when coupled with those ofelbbarcs wine. You should do yourself a favor and try both.”

Shaking her head slowly, Talev replied, “I appreciate the offer, Captain, but I’m afraid there really isn’t time. With our repairs almost complete, we will be leaving shortly. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your generosity.”

Nrech’lah made no attempt to hide his leering stares at her. “I note from the visual communications with your ship that you are different from your companions, and I do not simply mean the physical distinctions. There is a quality to you that seems to be lacking in the others, and I must confess that I find you most alluring, Lieutenant.” Taking another drink, he added, “Therefore, if you wish to thank me you may do so by remaining here as my guest.”

The first response to enter Talev’s mind was to plant her boot squarely in the Lutralian captain’s face. If he was operating under the assumption that she would offer herself to him in exchange for safe passage for the Chandley, then he was about to be very disappointed. He had made no indications of such an agenda during their previous communications. Had she misread him so completely? That, along with the fact that the captain appeared to be sincere in his desires only served to anger her further.

Even with an effort to remain calm and controlled as she straightened her posture, Talev could not keep a slight edge from her voice. “As I said, my ship will be leaving momentarily, and as much as your offer might flatter me, I must respectfully refuse.”

She felt a hand on her shoulder just before one of the guards behind her said, “The captain does not take kindly to having his orders disobeyed.”

Instinct took over as Talev reached for the hand on her shoulder, grabbing the guard’s arm just above his wrist. Before the Lutralian could react she yanked on the arm and, using her own body for leverage, pulled the guard off his feet. She rolled the off-balance Lutralian over her hip, sending him crashing to the



deck in a clumsy heap.

His partner also was reacting, drawing his weapon and bringing it up to aim at Talev. She turned to face the new threat, regretting for the first time that she had not elected to bring a phaser with her.

You'll just have to make do with his.

Before the guard could extend his weapon, Talev launched herself at him. Her left arm caught his hand and pushed the weapon up and away from her as she thrust the palm of her right hand up into the Lutralian's jaw. The guard's head snapped up as her other hand closed around the barrel of the weapon and yanked it from his grip. Pivoting on her heel, she spun clear and lashed out with her right foot, catching the Lutralian in the midsection and driving him back into the bulkhead. He struck the wall headfirst before sliding stunned to the deck.

Light reflected from something metal and moving and she whirled to see the first guard coming at her, a large and ominous blade in his hand. With the Lutralian between her and the only known exit, there was time for only one course of action.

She shot him.

A thunderous crescendo filled the bathing chamber as she pulled the trigger. Unlike the phasers used by Starfleet personnel, the weapon she now held fired some kind of solid projectile that instantly crossed the space between her and her attacker and struck the guard square in the chest. As the Lutralian was thrown to the deck from the force of the impact, Talev was for a horrified moment concerned that she may have killed him.

The guard was still moving, though he was holding a hand to the area of his chest armor where the projectile had hit. Talev realized that the armor had protected the Lutralian from the lethal force of the attack, but he did not appear to be making any attempt to regain his feet.

Exhaling in relief, she gave thanks for the hand-to-hand combat training the Academy had instilled in her, to say nothing of the personal fighting techniques that her sister had taught her during their formative years. Though she still exercised both disciplines regularly as a way to relax and relieve stress, she had never expected to make use of such skills in a real-life situation. Looking at the two incapacitated guards, it was nice to see that the time spent in practice had not been wasted. With neither guard posing a threat, she turned and aimed the weapon in the direction of the bath.

While his trio of servants had sought cover behind a waist-high partition at the rear of the room, Nrech'lah had remained seated in the tub, not even bothering to discard his wine goblet. His smile had not faded, either, even when she leveled the muzzle of the weapon at his bare chest. Talev found his reaction most disconcerting.

Then he set his wineglass down and began to clap.

“Very nicely done, Lieutenant.”

Talev was sorely tempted to simply shoot him and be done with it. Part of her wanted to see what effect the weapon would have on soft tissue, bone, and muscle as the projectile tore into the Lutralian's chest.

“Would you mind explaining to me what the hell is going on here?”

Nrech'lah retrieved his goblet before answering. "As you indicated earlier, you are a poor diplomat. That much was obvious from our previous conversations. It is equally obvious from your crew's actions to this point that you are not our opponent, so the only question that remained was whether or not you are a worthy ally."

The words took a few seconds to register with Talev, but when realization dawned, it took a renewed effort on her part not to pull the trigger.

"Are you saying that this was a test of some kind?"

Laughing again, Nrech'lah replied, "Of a sort, yes. You showed great bravery on your ship by agreeing to come over here. I wanted to see if that courage was heartfelt or merely a bluff to buy time for your comrades."

It was now Talev's turn to laugh. "Well, I was buying time for them, actually." By her reckoning she had given Commander Scott and the others the time they needed to finish their repairs.

"Fair enough," Nrech'lah replied. "I would expect no less from either a worthy ally or enemy."

Indicating the bath chamber with her weapon, Talev asked, "So why all of this? This was all a setup? It was fake, just to test my reactions?"

Nrech'lah shrugged. "Not all of it, I confess. I was being truthful when I said I found you alluring." Placing a hand on his chest, presumably where his heart might be, he smiled again as he added, "I sincerely apologize if you are upset."

Frowning, Talev said, "It seems like a big waste of time to get information that you could have simply asked for."

"Ah, but then I would have been denied the exquisite look on your face." Nrech'lah's laughter nearly drowned out the sound of her communicator chirping for her attention. Reaching into a pocket of her uniform, she retrieved the unit and flipped it open.

"Zh'Thren here."

"This is Scott. Do ye mind tellin' me just what the hell ye think yer doin', Lieutenant?"

Regarding Nrech'lah for a moment, Talev finally lowered the weapon. "I am concluding negotiations with the Lutralian commander, Mr. Scott. Please stand by."

"But—"

The reply was cut off as she closed the communicator and returned her full attention to Nrech'lah.

"Captain," she began, "As we have already agreed, I am not a politician, and neither are any of my shipmates. It is obvious to me that you are not looking for a fight with us, and we are neither interested in nor capable of fighting you. Contact your leaders and tell them about us, and extend our offer to have a proper diplomatic envoy sent here from the Federation to meet with them. If you and I could find common ground here, today, imagine what our governments might accomplish if given the opportunity."

Nrech'lah nodded in approval, a wry smile warming his features. "Spoken like a politician. You may

have missed your calling, Lieutenant. I will pass on your request to our leadership. For now, though, perhaps you would honor me by agreeing to stay, for dinner at least. If you wanted to stay longer, that could certainly be arranged as well.” He started to rise from the tub but froze in place as Talev aimed the weapon at him once more.

“Is this another test?” she asked with a wicked smile of her own. “Because if it is, I promise you I will fail this one.”

\* \* \*

Opting not to press their luck more than was absolutely necessary, Scott ordered the Chandley to warp speed as quickly as possible. With Talev proceeding directly to engineering from the shuttle bay, she had assisted al-Khaled in coaxing the ship’s propulsion monitoring systems. The engines, despite their compromised condition, had operated almost flawlessly and in a short time Scott was once again looking at the blue-green hue of New Kelva on the main bridge viewer.

“We are home,” Tomar said from the science station, more than a hint of relief in his voice. Turning in his seat, he nodded formally in Scott’s direction. “My people will be most grateful for Starfleet’s assistance in this matter, Commander. We could not have succeeded without you.”

Scott indicated the bridge and, by extension the rest of the ship, with a nod of his head. “It was you and your friends on New Kelva who built the engines in the first place, Tomar. I think your designs are a few years away from being widely accepted, but if ye can devise the system that will keep those beasts under control, we may be lookin’ at a whole new generation of warp drive. Can ye imagine havin’ to recalibrate the warp scale because of what’s happened here today?” The very thought excited Scott. Until now, the scale had been thought to be absolute, but it was obvious that still faster speeds were obtainable. Perhaps in a few years, that scale would indeed be in need of revising.

He heard the hiss of turbolift doors opening behind him and turned to see al-Khaled and Talev step out onto the bridge.

“Welcome back, Lieutenant,” he said as the young Andorian moved from the turbolift alcove toward the command well. He started to extend his hand in greeting but stopped short as a foul odor abruptly assaulted his nostrils.

“What in God’s name is that smell?”

Near the engineering station, al-Khaled regarded his friend with an annoyed expression. “What are you complaining about? You didn’t have to ride in the turbolift with her.”

“It’s a long story,” Talev said. “But suffice it to say that I was successful. The Lutralian government will be expecting a communiqué from the Federation. They are interested in establishing diplomatic ties in the interests of mutual cooperation.”

Scott smiled in approval. “A very nice piece of work, Lieutenant. It seems that computer skills aren’t the only talents you’re blessed with.” His smile faded a bit, though, as he added, is “Ye could have at least told me you were goin’ over there.”

“I apologize for that, Commander,” Talev said, and Scott easily detected the sincerity in the lieutenant’s voice. “Given our situation at that time, I did not feel it appropriate to distract you any further than I already had. Your instructions were to stall Captain Nrech’lah long enough for you to complete repairs.

Engaging him in a personal dialogue seemed to be the most effective course of action.”

Rolling his eyes at that, Scott could not suppress a chuckle. He doubted that Talev was aware of just how much like Mr. Spock she had sounded just then.

“Well, I have to say ye did a fine job, all things considered. It might not have been the smoothest first contact mission ever made, but I know of several that have gone a lot worse. My hat’s off to ye, Lieutenant.”

Tomar added, “Congratulations, Lieutenant. I hope this does not mean you will give up your engineering duties to pursue a career in diplomacy. The successes we have enjoyed with our engine designs are as much a credit to you as to anyone else.”

“I am not planning a career move, Tomar,” Talev replied, smiling as she did so. “You and I still have a lot of work to do before this project is finished.” Turning to al-Khaled she asked, “Isn’t that right, Commander?”

“Right enough,” al-Khaled said, rising from the engineering station and approaching the bridge railing. “But I will admit that this mission has given me something new to think about.” Looking over at Scott he said, “Engineers in a first contact situation? Sounds like something we should be better prepared for in the future, don’t you?”

Scott frowned at the question. “If ye mean the S.C.E., I’m not sure I follow. Even if this had been an S.C.E. mission, it wasn’t exactly run-of-the-mill.”

“No S.C.E. mission is run-of-the-mill,” al-Khaled countered. “That’s the whole point of the Corps in the first place.” Pausing for a moment, the engineer began to pace the upper bridge deck. “Remember that mission we had on Beta III, and what Chris Lindstrom said?”

Nodding, Scott replied, “He said that engineers only know how to fix machines, and that it took specialists of a different sort to understand the people who construct them.”

“Exactly,” al-Khaled said. “And this mission was a perfect example of what he was talking about. The S.C.E. is being tasked with all manner of missions nowadays. Anytime an ancient alien ship is found, or one of our starships finds the remnants of a dead civilization, they’re sending in S.C.E. teams to investigate and evaluate the technology.” Indicating Tomar, he added, “What if an S.C.E. team had originally encountered the Kelvans? How might that first contact have gone?”

Tomar replied, “I suspect that the outcome would have been much different, and that we would not be having this conversation today.”

“It’s only a matter of time before our teams are the first to encounter a new alien species,” Talev said. “If that happens, then the S.C.E. has to be ready.”

Al-Khaled nodded. “Our teams should be augmented with cultural specialists and linguists, people who are trained to handle the rough spots when different species interact.” Shrugging, he added, “Engineers can’t be prepared for every type of alien technology they encounter. They can only draw from their previous experience when they encounter something new. But somebody who can deal with the people responsible for that technology should be present, too. I intend to see that our teams are prepared for that eventuality.” Smiling, he added, “I told you I wasn’t done giving orders, Scotty, and I intend to make this plan my first order of business when I get back to Earth.”

Perking up at that, Scott cast a guarded look at his friend. Was this the part where al-Khaled finally clued him in as to his next assignment? “What have ye got in mind, Mahmud?”

“Starfleet has created a new staff position at Headquarters: liaison for the S.C.E. This person will be responsible for coordinating all of the missions the Corps undertakes, as well as ensuring that the teams get the personnel and logistical support they need.” Pausing dramatically, he tapped himself on the chest. “You are looking at the first S.C.E. Liaison.”

So this was the big mystery, Scott realized as Tomar and Talev offered their congratulations. This was what al-Khaled had hinted at when Scott had first come aboard the Chandley. His friend was getting back into the game, all right, and doing so in a big way. After all these years of faithful service, Starfleet had finally seen the value of the S.C.E. and had appointed one of its most talented members to ensure that the Corps continued to thrive and succeed.

There was only one thing wrong with the notion.

“A desk job?” he scoffed. “That’s a fine waste of your talent if ye ask me. I could never see myself trapped in some office. It’s just not in my blood, Mahmud, and I dinna think it was in yours.”

Chuckling at that, al-Khaled pointed a warning finger at Scott. “If I can be talked into such a job, anything’s possible. Never say never, my friend.”

Scott laughed at the idea. Him, sitting at a desk while there might be a ship out there in need of an engineer?

Never, indeed.

## Chapter

# 8

Stardate 53684.7

“Chicken broth, Abramowitz Recipe Number Five.”

As the mess hall replicator processed her request and her drink appeared, Carol Abramowitz reached for the steaming mug, bringing it to her nose and savoring the aroma of its contents. The addition of the Cajun spices she preferred gave the broth a sharp, pleasing flavor that never failed to elicit a sigh of contentment from her as she took the first sip.

Settling herself at one of the tables in the rear of the mess hall, Abramowitz looked down at her padd for what seemed like the hundredth time today. The lines of text had long since begun to blur into a single indistinct mass, resisting her attempts to comprehend it. Somewhere amid that chaos was her latest report to Gabriel Marshall, the representative of the Federation Diplomatic Corps who had been assigned to this mission.

Perpetually gruff and irritable, the diplomat had no great love for anyone in a uniform who wavered from his idyllic notion of what a Starfleet officer should be: a drone who followed orders without question and

avoided complicating the lives of diplomats. Dealing with him, as well as confronting the data she had been collecting, organizing, and reviewing all day, had finally conspired to leave Abramowitz exhausted and dejected. This, despite the pep talk Captain Gold had given her earlier and the combination story/history lesson she had received from Captain Scott. Worst of all, she still had the same headache that had plagued her these past several hours. She could get any one of a number of remedies from Dr. Lense, but Abramowitz had never been one to take medication for what she considered simple ailments. What she needed, she knew, was rest.

Rest, and a damned fine mug of chicken broth.

“How’s it going?” a voice asked from near the replicators and Abramowitz looked up to see Kieran Duffy walking toward her with a glass in his hand. How had he entered the room without her noticing?

Shaking her head, Abramowitz took a sip from her mug. “Yet another report for Headquarters. I’m trying to find some way to make this one a little less traumatic. Marshall nearly had a stroke when he heard what happened to the Senuta ship.”

Duffy laughed at that. “My best buddy Gabe? How’s he doing, anyway? You should tell him I said hello.”

The flippant remark brought a much-needed smile to Abramowitz’s face. “Somehow I don’t think that would go over very well.”

Marshall had wanted Duffy’s head on a pike several months ago during the *theda Vinci*’s mission to recover the century-old U.S.S. *Defiant* from an interspatial rift deep in Tholian space. When the Starfleet engineers discovered incriminating evidence aboard the derelict vessel linking the Tholians to a devastating attack on a Klingon colony, the normally reclusive aliens had launched an assault on the *theda Vinci* and the *Defiant*. While in temporary command of the *theda Vinci*, Duffy had managed to defuse the situation, salvaging both the recovery operation and the tenuous peace between the Federation and the Tholian Assembly.

That, however, had done nothing to calm Gabriel Marshall’s anger over how the mission, one he had not endorsed in the first place, had come dangerously close to becoming a full-blown interstellar incident. Since then, the diplomat had continued to publicly make clear his disdain for Starfleet in general, and Duffy and the *theda Vinci* in particular. It had certainly served to make Abramowitz’s subsequent interactions with the man that much more trying.

“He’s going out of his skull trying to figure out what to do,” she said. “Headquarters is hip-deep working out all the bugs to get the Senuta home, but they keep stumbling over the fact that no one knows where their home is.” Smiling again she added, “They’re not used to being in the dark like that. And on top of everything else, Marshall can’t seem to get a grip on the idea that the Senuta aren’t blaming us for stranding them here.”

Duffy drank from his water glass before continuing. “It throws him off his rhythm. Diplomats need a balance of good things to take credit for and bad things to blame on enemies, or else the entire political fabric of the reality in which we live would be swallowed by entropy. They can’t stand the simple idea of everyone just getting along and not trying to point fingers at each other all the time. Such a notion gives them ulcers.”

“No dreams of serving on the Federation Council, I see,” Abramowitz quipped as she raised her mug to her lips. “That’s probably a good thing.”

“I should announce my candidacy for the next elections,” Duffy replied, “just to see how many shades of purple I can get out of Marshall.”

As the pair shared a laugh at Duffy’s irreverent view of politics, the mess hall doors parted to admit Bart Faulwell and the two Senuta engineers, Ircoral and Tkellan. The diminutive aliens wore their now familiar wide-eyed expressions of wonder as they followed theda Vinci’s linguistic expert into the ship’s dining facility, their eyes taking in the room’s every detail.

“Hello, you two,” Faulwell said, a satisfied smile on his face as he crossed the room to join Abramowitz and Duffy.

His own features screwing into a suspicious frown, Duffy regarded Faulwell warily. “You look entirely too smug about something. What’s the smile about?”

Faulwell took a seat at the table, followed almost immediately by Ircoral and Tkellan. “I bring good news,” he said. “Soloman has found the navigational charts in the data he recovered from the Senuta ship. I’ve taken a look at them and they’re pretty limited by our standards, but not unlike what our first deep exploration starships possessed a couple of centuries ago.”

“Ensign Wong can probably make short work of those,” Duffy replied.

Faulwell nodded. “Already has. He was able to cross-reference against our own navigational databases. It took some doing, though. The Senuta are from a star system deep in the Beta Quadrant, on the edge of explored Klingon space. Weeks away at high warp.” Shaking his head, he added, “I’m amazed that the Klingons didn’t intercept them.”

“That’s great,” Abramowitz said. “Of course, this makes Marshall’s job harder, as now he’ll have to explain how an alien ship tore through Klingon space and how they’ll be asked to allow these same trespassing aliens back through so they can get home.”

“Lucky for us we have an ambassador who’s friends with the Klingon chancellor,” Duffy said. Worf, the first Klingon to serve in Starfleet, had resigned his commission the previous year in order to assume the role of Federation ambassador to the Klingon Empire. Abramowitz had not yet met Worf but his reputation preceded him, of course. She was sure that this situation would be concluded with little further difficulty with his assistance. It was Worf who had overseen talks among the Federation, the Klingons, and the Tholians in the wake of theda Vinci’s mission to recover theDefiant, with the Klingons and Tholians actually engaging in the first true peaceful negotiations ever attempted between those two peoples. If Worf could handle that, then getting safe passage for the wayward Senuta would be child’s play for him.

“We will be going home soon,” Ircoral said, her face beaming. “My only regret is that we will be forced to leave you while there is still so much to be learned.”

Leaning forward in his chair, Duffy said, “Oh, I wouldn’t worry too much about that. If there’s one thing that you can count on when it comes to diplomacy, it’s that it takes time. Then there’s the matter of securing a ship to ferry you home. My guess is that we’ve still got a few days together, at least.”

“What do we do now?” Tkellan asked. “If we are to be together for a while longer, then we should not waste the opportunity. Surely there is something more you can tell us.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, Abramowitz settled back into her seat and allowed herself to relax for the first time since this mission had begun. The Senuta would be returned home, no doubt accompanied by Federation envoys eager to open a dialogue with the newly encountered people. While she of course would not be going along with the delegation, she could take satisfaction that she and her shipmates had set into motion the process that would allow that meeting to take place at all. Further, this entire mission had served as a reminder to her, and to her companions, just why there was a Starfleet Corps of Engineers, and just why she and others like her traveled with them.

Regarding the two Senuta engineers now, though, Abramowitz found herself with an uncustomary lack of ideas on what to do next. She did not want to disappoint Ircoral and Tkellan when they were so obviously expecting something from her and her companions. But all she really wanted to do was just finish her chicken broth, take a hot shower and then crawl into bed for a decent night's sleep. Seeing the look in Faulwell's eyes, she figured that the linguist felt very much the same way.

Only Duffy appeared to have any measure of energy left, and suddenly she had her answer. She cast a wicked look at the engineer, who saw the evil smile on her face and swallowed nervously.

“What?” he asked.

Abramowitz turned her attention to the Senuta instead.

“Have you ever heard of a Tellarite?”

## About the Authors

DAYTON WARD has been a fan of Star Trek since conception (his, not the show's). After serving for eleven years in the U.S. Marine Corps, he discovered the private sector and the piles of cash to be made there as a software engineer. His start in professional writing came as a result of placing stories in each of the first three Star Trek: Strange New Worlds anthologies. He is also the author of the Star Trek Original Series novel *In the Name of Honor*, as well as having cowritten the two-part *Interphase* and the upcoming *Home Fires* for the Star Trek: S.C.E. series, both also 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. Be sure to check out Dayton's Internet cobweb collection at <http://daytonward.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 the upcoming Star Trek: S.C.E. eBook *Home Fires*. Kevin still harbors his adolescent desire to see his name shared with a doomed red-shirted ensign in an Original Series novel.

## Coming Next Month:



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