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AGE OF UNREASON

Scott Ciencin



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New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore

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An Original Publication of POCKET BOOKS

Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY
10020

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ISBN: 0-7434-7592-5

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To Denise.

With thanks to Keith DeCandido.

—S.C.

Chapter

1

The world was coming to an end.

Again.

Farhan Tanek struggled to keep his hands from closing on the neck of the oily little man quavering before him. Tanek knew that as spiritual leader of the Varden faith, he had certain traditions to uphold, and cold-blooded murder performed without a ceremonial blade and before the first hour of dawn would be a break with ceremony, and thus looked upon unfavorably by his people. If only he could say honestly that the killing would be an act of passion, a manifestation of ultimate rage, such matters would have no bearing. But such forward thinking nullified that possibility. No, this killing would be a testament to annoyance, and for that, there were protocols.

Tanek's gaze drifted from his advisor to the open window of his private chamber, wondering where he had put his knife and when the sea of stars in the night sky would be replaced by the blood-red hues of dawn.

Not soon enough, he decided, sighing inwardly and again fixing his attention on his advisor, Ezno Clyvans. The two men were alone in Tanek's chamber, a handful of guards posted outside the heavy door. Tanek was tall and brawny, two meters in height, with a thick mane of wild auburn hair, a beard so long it had been braided into two strands tossed behind his back and tied midway down his spine, brutish features, and a plethora of rippling muscles reflecting the amber glow of hastily lit candles in each corner of the room. He wore only a strip of dark cloth hastily tied about his waist that reached to just above his knees. Even so, Tanek held himself with power and pride, his spine ramrod straight, his chin raised imperiously. In a more superstitious age, he might, quite reasonably, have been considered a god.

Clyvans, on the other hand, might have been mistaken for a goat. Though he wore the many-colored robes of their order over his flabby form and carried the Scepter of Truth, he slouched and was constantly arranging his ill-kept, inky-black hair with pudgy, trembling fingers, trying and failing to the point of distraction to keep it from covering his forehead and obscuring his third eye.

The third eye was simply a genetic anomaly serving no practical purpose, yet those rare beings (often only one in a generation) bearing the mutation were invariably elevated to the role of advisor as per the prophecies of the Ancients.

Tanek had wanted, for quite some time, to see the sacred scrolls revised to eliminate that particular bit of business. Right at the moment, he was tempted to take care of the matter himself.

And why not? If what Tanek suspected was true, the war between the followers of the One True Faith and the heathen Nasnan was about to come to pass, and with it would come global annihilation.

If am I going to die, if we are all going to die, should it not be with every fantasy fulfilled, every heartfelt desire sated?

He could practically taste his advisor's blood....

"Stop your blathering," Tanek said firmly, bringing an immediate halt to his advisor's incessant chatter. "Let me see if I understand you correctly. After all, I am not highborn, I am simply a barbarian who seized his position by force of arms. I have none of your breeding, education, or culture. My mind is minuscule and unable to grasp greater concepts and greater truths, and I have all the sense of a rutting animal. Yet here I am, standing tall, while you are on your knees before me. Fate mocks us, yes?"

Tanek took cruel satisfaction in placing Clyvans in the impossible position of coming up with a response that would not entitle his superior to beat him to within an inch of his life. In point of fact, everything Tanek had said was true, or was, at least, the popularly, if silently held position of the highborn. Yet Tanek was brilliant, and knew more about his people, their needs, and the intricate inner workings of every facet of their society better than any other member of the Varden.

Clyvans stammered yes, no, and maybe in quick succession, then fell silent and closed his eyes, waiting for the blows to fall.

Smiling, Tanek instead retired to a chair beside his bed. "As I was saying, if I understand you correctly, the plans for the device that might have rid us of the Nasnan once and for all have been stolen. The only person who could replicate these plans lies dead in a chamber three stories below us in this keep, his throat cut ear to ear. All evidence points to a single suspect who has fled the keep. It seems to me our course is clear."

Clyvans nervously tapped his scepter, giving Tanek no choice, by the will of his people, but to listen. “Not all evidence points to a lone suspect. There are no witnesses. What this man might stand to gain is unclear. And he, ah...he seemed nice.”

Tanek waited, crossing his huge arms over his barrel chest.

“Oh!” Clyvans cried, then tapped his scepter again.

“In any case,” Tanek said, “we have one killer, who is also a thief, and, by all reports, a collaborator. Our course seems simple enough. Find the bastard before he can meet with Tirza Sirajaldin. Either take the plans from him or torture him into revealing where they’ve been hidden, then give him to me that I may amuse myself with his long, lingering death...an event I will choreograph with amazing creativity.”

“Our best trackers have already been dispatched. The Elite will find him.”

“Then why are you here, precisely?”

“I, ah...interpreted your likely response to this crisis.”

Tanek rubbed his temple. His head was beginning to throb. God’s teeth, for just a ray of sunshine through that damnable window.

“Anticipated,” Tanek said. “You mean to say that you ‘anticipated’ my likely response.”

“Exactly so. This man is an offworlder. Our people are interested in offworlders. To treat him as you might a member of the enlightened Varden who has fallen from grace or even a heathen Nasnan would not be advisable.”

“Offworlders know the risks in coming here. Our planet may be beautiful and interesting to them as our culture is not like theirs, but once they step foot on the ground that is mine to hold sway over, once their vessels penetrate the atmosphere of our planet...there is no turning back for them.”

“But we are talking about a Federation citizen, my liege. And, as I may remind you, the Federation recently extended an invitation—”

“A Federation...citizen...” Tanek whispered, his expression unchanging. “And that means what, exactly?”

“Well,” Clyvans began, unaware at first that he was not being asked for his opinion and expertise. Tanek leaned forward and froze the smaller man with his powerful and vengeful gaze before the advisor could say another word.

“I just wonder,” Tanek said with terrifying softness, “does his status as a Federation citizen make him a superior physical specimen of some kind?”

Still unsure of how to respond, or even whether or not he should, Clyvans panted, “Um, ah, that alone, no, I wouldn’t think it—”

“Able, for example, to withstand multiple knife wounds without flinching? Amputations with an only slightly sharp surgical saw? A beheading, even, without it being a particular bother or inconvenience?”

“I would think not,” Clyvans said, quivering at the images Tanek had ruthlessly placed in his own head. “No. But the political and social ramifications must be considered.”

“Done and done,” Tanek said coldly. “Now find this soon-to-be-screaming bag of flesh and bring him to me!”

Tanek watched with no little pleasure as Clyvans rose, spun, and practically tripped over his robes fleeing the chamber. In moments he was gone, and Tanek went to the window, surveying the city he made his home in these warm summer months. Though it was still the hours before dawn, the city was abuzz with activity. Merchants swarmed about the jagged spires in airships to deliver their wares, workers hurried through the winding streets to be at their jobs on time, lovers met with breathless anticipation or parted with sorrow and regret. Somewhere, at least one duel to the death was taking place over a matter of honor, perhaps because a show of anticipation was mistaken for anxiety and neither party would take responsibility. And elsewhere, a child was being born. The city, and thousands more like it upon this precious world, teemed with life.

If his people failed, if the Elite did not do their duty well and retrieve the plans, all life that did not serve the Nasnan would be eliminated. The buildings would remain, but the people, his people, would all be dead.

He’d lived through such crises before. He’d brought about resolution through peaceful negotiation or through relentless battle. Yet this time felt different. There was change in the air, and he could sense it.

It was the end of the world.

Again.

Perhaps this time, there would be no reprieves.

* * *

Ezno Clyvans scurried from the keep of his lord just as the first rays of sunlight burst upon the horizon. He carried two things with him. One was in his flowing robes, and he had to reach an elevated point, a clear field, to make it work. The other was in his head. It was knowledge, and that meant power, pain, and responsibility.

Ezno had hoped things would go better with Tanek. The man was brilliant, no question of that, but he was also very proud, and his righteous fury, once engaged, was almost impossible to disarm.

Thus, technically at the very least, Ezno was about to commit treason. In his heart he was true to the Varden faith, the order that also ran all government upon the planet Vrinda. Yet he was certain that Tanek would be the death of them all. He had to take extreme measures.

Twenty minutes later, Ezno stood atop the mound housing the Shrine to Unreason. He stole up through the spiral staircase, ten stories, twenty, his unique status having provided him sole and unlimited access to the tower. The sun was now peeking from between the clouds, the sky a furious meld of crimson and ochre.

He reached the rooftop only seconds before an airship cruised within firing distance and came to a stop, hovering menacingly.

“Advisor Clyvans!” roared a synthesized voice from the airship. “Your duplicity has been uncovered. Recordings have been found of you speaking with the criminal after Menzala Trivere’s killing. Keep your hands at your sides, turn, and proceed to the base of the tower, where you will be arrested.”

Fear ripped through Ezno as the chilling realization came that he would die atop this shrine if he did not absolutely and immediately comply. Yet, his life, one life, compared to so many others...

His hands slid into the pockets of his robe.

“Advisor, please, do not force us to damage the shrine!”

Ezno almost smiled at that. He would be cut in half, but it was the shrine these soldiers worried about. Good—that was as it should be. There was hope for his people yet.

Hauling out the small device the offworlder had given him, Ezno raised it high, and struck the button to engage its transmission signal. He never heard or felt the bolt of blue-white lightning that took his life and seared a hole in that tower, causing its upper two levels to collapse.

Then all was silent... but for a receiving beacon in deep space that captured the transmitted signal and instantly forwarded it to Starfleet Headquarters.

Chapter 2

Carol Abramowitz stared out the viewport into the endless reaches of space, startled to hear the mad, shuddering clinking of ice cubes coming from the drink in her hand, an actual Napoleon Brandy. A few months ago—a lifetime ago—a Ferengi lieutenant named Nog had promised her this bottle in exchange for one of her recordings of Sinnraviandrad music. Nog had come through a few weeks later, and Carol had put the bottle away, saving it for the right occasion. She was lucky to have been able to rescue it from the slag heap that her quarters had become in the turbulent atmosphere of the gas giant Galvan VI—the planet that had become the grave site for twenty-three of her crewmates.

Shifting her gaze from the flowing array of stars and suns, she focused on her hand and saw that it was shaking. There was no turbulence from the transport *Lionarti*, the only means of travel available to her at this late date. The ship was an old, ill-conditioned Belgianian freighter, true enough, but there were no external forces preying upon her, all the critical stresses she was experiencing were coming from somewhere deep within.

“Nice view, wouldn’t you say?”

Carol whirled, the glass falling to the floor, shattering, the centuries-old alcoholic beverage splattering across the deck. A breathtakingly handsome raven-haired man stood before her. She drew in a sharp breath, momentarily backing away from her bout of nerves, now compounded by embarrassment. Looking closer at his angular face, she could see minor flaws, a slight asymmetry to his features, little scars, and eyes that were a shade lighter than perhaps they should have been.

“I’m sorry I startled you,” he said, crouching quickly at the same moment as Carol, the two of them snagging old rags shoved against the interior bulkhead and gingerly picking up the broken pieces of glass.

“It wasn’t you,” Carol said, eyeing a nearby airlock and wishing she could just pop it open and let herself be blown into space rather than face any further humiliation. Her companion was well dressed and well groomed, a man who looked every bit as out of place on this junker as Carol herself. His tunic’s design reminded her of something she had seen for sale on one of the pleasure planets whose brochures she went through before charting her current course, and she said as much.

He smiled, glancing down at the soft dark fabric of his tunic, his strong hand unconsciously tracing the thin white detailing. “You’re right, that’s exactly where I found this.”

“Been to many of them?”

“No, that was my first. It was . . . interesting. But the lack of spontaneity surprised me. There was very little truth in it, if that makes any sense at all.”

“It does.” Carol felt herself flushing, and the heat rising within her now had very little to do with embarrassment. Soon they were on their feet, her unknown gentleman leading her from this overstuffed storage area to what the crew had laughingly called “the lounge.” The only difference between the two areas was that this one lacked a viewport and the crates had been arranged in a semblance of furniture in an ancient living room: three for a couch, two for a love seat, a smaller one for a coffee table, and so on. The crew themselves were clustered in the aft deck, working on some repair or gambling, or perhaps even both. Carol had come to see that every moment she spent in space was a gamble, but where else might she feel at home?

The man smiled. “Ian,” he said.

“Oh. Carol.”

Sitting together on the couch, they shook hands, the contact electric and immediate, lingering far longer than necessary.

For the simple fact alone that he hadn’t asked what was troubling her, she thought she could hug this man. How could you talk about the death of friends, the immediacy of grief, and the terrible dawning of one’s own true mortality with someone you’ve only just met? That only left her the option of lying, a thing she despised.

Then again, maybe an old quote she had once read was indeed true, that confessing to strangers was easier somehow.

“Critical stresses,” Carol said, biting her lip.

“Pardon?”

“That’s what I was thinking about.”

Ian surveyed their surroundings. “This ship may be old, but it’s a war horse. No worries of it tearing itself apart.”

I wasn’t talking about the ship, she thought. And in that moment, something changed in his eyes. He seemed to get it without her having to speak a single word.

Sighing, Ian shook his head. “There is no order to the universe, only chaos.”

“Pardon?”

“Well, if a beautiful and clearly extraordinary woman like yourself can be so stressed, so burdened by hardships, how can this be anything but an age of unreason?”

She grinned at the play on words. They chatted for several hours, Carol revealing her position with the S.C.E. and recounting a few of their less harrowing recent adventures—avoiding Galvan VI altogether—while Ian said very little, his attention fixed solely on her. She did learn that he was a “quality inspector” for a major ten-world corporation, and that after she was dropped off on Caliph IX, he would continue on to a client meeting on Pacifica, some ten days off.

“So, a conference,” Ian said.

“I know. What could be more boring than a hundred cultural specialists sitting around talking, giving lectures, handing out awards...”

Ian’s brow furrowed. “Why do you do that? This is something you’re excited about, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes.”

“Then why run it down like that? Why assume that someone who’s interested in you would not be interested in what’s important to you?”

Carol shrugged. “I guess I’ve just been in what a friend of mine would call ‘negative space.’”

“I understand.”

“To be honest, it’s been years since I’ve been to one of these,” Carol said, feeling herself perking up.

“Really? Why so long? Has work interfered?”

“No, not really. It’s just...it’s going to sound stupid.”

“Carol.”

“But it is.” She hesitated. “There was a man. Martin Mansur. I thought he was a friend. It turned out he was a thief. He took my ideas and built a presentation around it that won him the highest honor possible among our professional association. Since then, he’s bilked it to become famous on a thousand worlds.”

“I always thought that guy looked like a fake.”

“You know who I’m talking about?”

He nodded. “I’ve seen his holos. I wasn’t impressed.” Ian leaned closer, his hand almost, but not quite, touching Carol’s leg. “As I said, what impresses me is truth.”

Carol slowly eased her leg upward, edging herself toward his hand. Would it be so terrible of her to simply indulge herself for once? To lose herself in a momentary fling, a bit of passion, just to have some time to forget all that had happened aboard the U.S.S. da Vinci, the fate of Duffy, McAllan, Barnak, and a score of others, the sorrow of the surviving crew...in point of fact, getting away from it all while the

ship was being repaired was the entire point of booking this journey. That, and finally being able to attend a conference where Martin-the-thief wouldn't be around. He'd canceled at the last minute, leaving the way clear for Carol to take his place.

A figure appeared in the doorway. A scruffy young man with dull, tired eyes. One of the crew. "Carol Abramowitz? There's an urgent communication for you from a Montgomery Scott, I believe—"

Scotty, Carol thought. Good lord. What happened now?

"Why don't we pick this up later?" Ian suggested as Carol rose.

She hesitated. "I don't think there's going to be a later. Not for this."

And she was right.

Chapter 3

Before the day was out, the Lionarti had been met by a Federation runabout, and Carol was back on active duty, winging her way to the planet Vrinda, Bart Faulwell at her side. With the exception of a few polite words here and there, Carol had been silent for the entire trip. It wasn't until the runabout was approaching Vrinda's atmosphere that Bart spoke up.

"You're pouting," he said.

"I don't pout. It's not in my nature."

Bart smiled. "Concurrent sentences. I'm relieved that's actually possible."

Carol looked away. "I've been reading the mission briefing."

"No, you've been staring at a screen. And you've been pouting." Bart hesitated. Then, "Look, I was supposed to go to Starbase 92 to see Anthony. But, like Captain Gold says, when you wear the funny-looking A on your chest, you dance where they tell you, even if you'd rather be wallowing in grief. Heck, even Soloman's not quite himself over this. He's meeting us planetside, by the way."

"I'm fine," Carol insisted. "You know me. I've never been one to give in to my emotions. You know how uncomfortable I am around all that business."

Bart looked at her strangely.

"What?"

"The mission briefing," he said. "I think you should look at it again. And this time, you might consider actually reading it."

Carol was about to protest, but Bart was right, she hadn't really read it. So her gaze fell back to the screen, and this time, she read what was there.

“Oh,” she said, growing a little pale.

“That’s one way of putting it.” Bart followed a series of automated commands from planetside and guided the runabout into the planet’s atmosphere.

It was midnight when the runabout set down on a docking pad atop Farhan Tanek’s keep. They were greeted by a dozen men, and half as many women, all wearing heavily padded leather armor with steel trim. Weapons that looked somewhat like ancient cross-bows but pulsed with alternating green and amber energy were held at the ready. Each guard carried an identical and very recent scar, a single gash from forehead to chin, beginning above the right eye and ripping downward across the mouth.

A particularly brutish guard stepped forward and greeted them. “There is no joy, no sorrow, no pain so great that the heart cannot tolerate.”

“I...grieve for fallen friends,” Carol admitted, hesitantly.

“As do I,” Bart said grimly.

The guard grunted. “The last off-worlder who followed our traditions so well revealed himself as a betrayer, a thief, and a murderer. He was of yoursect.”

“A member of the Federation, you mean,” Bart said softly.

“Blood calls for blood,” the guard said gruffly. “I am Alhouan.”

Carol and Bart introduced themselves and were told that Soloman was in a different quarter of the city, reviewing technical specifications for the job at hand. Alhouan led them down two stories and through the ancient stone keep. Seemingly incongruous bits of technology were scattered about: viewscreens, replicators, and more.

I feel like I’m in King Arthur’s court, Carol mused, if he’d been visited by aliens who liked to spread their tech around....

“We have not forgotten the souls of our ancestors,” Alhouan said, gesturing down a darkened hall at the thick set of heavy wooden doors. “The traditions and beliefs of five thousand years are as healthy for us today as they were in times long ago. However, advances in science and new discoveries of the fabric of time and space are inevitable, and we are not above the use of a few conveniences. Does it anger you that we primitives have toys that are so advanced?”

Carol would not rise to the bait. According to the mission briefing, the entire Varden society was highly ritualized and based primarily on the myriad colors of emotion. It was for this reason she and Bart had been forced to reveal an emotional truth when greeting Alhouan.

“I see only splendor,” Carol said without emotion. “A harkening back to what our people would consider a simpler time...only with a handful of improvements. I assume you have running water?”

Alhouan laughed and clasped Carol’s shoulder. “Indeed. And you must try not to find yourself accidentally drowned in it.” He pointed to the end of the corridor. “Identify yourselves to the guards before Lord Tanek’s door. They will grant you access.”

The guard, whose grip would leave a bruise, released the shaken Carol and stalked off in the opposite

direction. Carol looked to Bart.

“I feel like we’ve been dropped into a lunatic asylum,” he whispered.

“You don’t hear me arguing the point.”

Upon giving their names, they were led into Farhan Tanek’s private chamber, a surprisingly sparse affair that also doubled as his bedchamber. Tanek wore armor similar to that of his guard, only his muscular arms were exposed and his vest offered a glimpse of his equally muscular chest, covered in ringlets of auburn hair. The man stood near a throne set beside an open window, moonlight bathing his regal, but very tired looking form.

Tanek looked to the newcomers and dismissed his guards with a gesture. The door was closed and locked, sealing the off-worlders in with the burly man, whose eyes seemed to capture the moonlight and hold the power of the stars.

Carol raised her chin imperiously. It wasn’t in her nature to be intimidated by the physical presence of another being. The sensation annoyed her terribly.

“You were the best they could send?” Tanek said darkly as he looked her up and down.

“I am eminently qualified,” Carol said, flushing with anger despite her predilection for avoiding strong emotions. “I was under the impression the listing of my accomplishments had been forwarded to you. I have been told that you are without a permanent advisor. I wonder if the file wasn’t simply misplaced or not read—”

“I meant that if these are the end days, as I believe they are, it might have done to have had a prettier face than yours to look upon.”

Carol was stopped for a moment, unsure of how to respond. Was Tanek simply testing her? From the look in his eyes, she felt reasonably sure he was not, or, at least, that placing her in a crucible was not his primary objective, but instead, perhaps, an act that was second nature for him with any unknown quantity.

“You’re not my type, either,” Carol said flatly.

At this, Tanek returned his gaze to his visitor. He almost looked amused. “I think we may get along after all.” He gestured to Bart. “And this one? Your slave? Your concubine—or would it be ‘consort’ in your culture?”

Always trying to get a rise, Carol noted. “Not hardly. As I’m sure you know, Bart is a top linguist. We have been assured his skills were necessary.”

“‘Necessity’ may be too strong a word,” Tanek offered. “To me, it suggests the possibility of success in your current endeavor. This is a notion I find dubious at best.”

Carol shrugged. Tanek looked like a barbarian, all right, but his tongue was sharp, his mind agile and ever seeking openings for verbal onslaught or retaliation.

“We are here to help,” Bart said. “Perhaps if you could tell us, in your words, what this is all about?”

Laughing, Tanek settled in his throne. “The seditionist did not explain all in the message he sent?”

Carol shook her head.

Tossing his head back, Tanek laughed a full five minutes, practically until he was hoarse, or on the brink of hysterics, tears forming in the corners of his eyes. Carol and Bart stood frozen, transfixed by the disturbing display.

“Then let me show you the problem. Much has changed for our people in a very short period of time,” Tanek said, holding up his arm and displaying an ornate wristlet sparkling with jewels. “For example…”

Carol started as someone tapped her on the shoulder from behind. That’s impossible, we’re alone in this chamber—

The sight that greeted her as she spun was even more impossible. The figure behind her was Tanek. She looked back to the throne and saw that the ruler hadn’t moved an inch. She looked back and forth several times. This was impossible. He was in two places at once!

“All right,” Carol said. “Some kind of holo-technology—”

“Much more than that,” Tanek said from his throne. “You, Faulwell. Come here and take my hand.”

Bart did so.

“Real, yes? Flesh and blood?”

“Indeed.”

Tanek did not release Bart’s hand as he instructed Carol to try to touch his duplicate, who stood behind her. She reached out to the figure—and her hand passed through the second Tanek, as if he were a wraith.

“I don’t—” she began, then “oofed” as the wraith suddenly became corporeal and shoved her back a few feet.

“Total control,” Tanek said. “To touch, but not be touched.”

Bart wrested his hand from Tanek’s grip. “What are we looking at here?”

“This is a working prototype made from the plans your man stole from us, which we retrieved, but not quickly enough,” Tanek said. “The technology in question has many possible uses. Some are benign. Others… quite deadly.”

Carol gasped as Tanek’s duplicate drew a knife and charged at her with a bloodcurdling war cry, vanishing an instant before his blade could cleave her heart.

“The mystics call it astral travel,” Tanek explained. “The ability to send your soul or consciousness out of your body so that it might instantly travel to any place imaginable. Though many have claimed such a thing was possible, it was never quantified. Not until recently.”

“So… this began as a way of spying on others,” Carol said, still catching her breath.

“Yesss,” Tanek hissed, regret mixing with anger in his tone. “Then its uses as a means of assassination, even extermination, became evident.”

“You can travel to any point of reference with this?” Bart asked, gesturing at the wristlet.

“Anywhere on this planet,” Tanek said. “I won’t tell you how this is possible. It has to do with the interconnectedness of all things, the manifestation of a being’s force of will. What’s important is that the astral self has always been viewed as an ethereal entity, unseen by others, unable to impact the physical world. This is better. With this, problems of every kind can be solved.”

“You mean... mass killings. Penetrating any walls of defense—” Bart began.

“Problems of every kind, yes,” Tanek replied curtly.

Carol crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t understand. I thought this was about forging an alliance between your faction and your enemies.”

Tanek settled back and turned his gaze to the window. “Because of the interference of your Starfleet compatriot, the schematics for this device reached the hands of heretics at exactly the same moment they were returned to us. Our scientists, and theirs, have built working prototypes. There is a balance of power, which is not what I wanted when I commissioned research on this device. I wanted the Nasnan wiped out. Now... it seems I must find a way to reach an accord with them. This device could bring an end to all our people, and even if this technology can be nullified, and we have good reason to believe it can, we have seen that where one device of mass destruction can be created, so can another. Annihilation will come if things do not change; it is only a matter of time.”

Suddenly, a figure appeared before Tanek. There were no telltale effects of a transporter beam, no warping of the physical world to allow the intrusion. The figure, who wore a shimmering, light-refracting garment from head to toe, lunged forward, plunging a ten-inch blade into the heart of Farhan Tanek.

Chapter

4

Carol and Bart had not been relieved of their phasers. Each had their weapons out and was calling for the guards as the assassin looked down at Farhan Tanek and drew back.

The blade had passed through Tanek and buried itself in the wooden backing of his throne.

“Fare you well, little wraith,” Tanek said, touching his wristlet. The assassin screamed, and it was a man’s voice, clearly, as his body was pulled this way and that, finally shattering like a mirror before dissolving away into the unseen world.

The guards who burst into the room leveled their weapons at Carol and Bart, but were quickly dismissed by Tanek. “A test of your alertness, nothing more,” he told them. Shaken, the guards withdrew, once again sealing Bart and Carol into... an empty room?

“What is real, and what is illusion, have, by necessity, been placed on a need-to-know basis,” Tanek said.

“Multiple projections. More than one doppelgänger,” Bart said. “You’re not real.”

“Define reality.” Tanek struck his chest, the blow created a resounding thud. “The flesh and blood from which I was first willed into reality is elsewhere, yes. But even in this form, I could cripple or kill either of you if you were to incur my rage. As to willing into existence more than one version of oneself, that is an accomplishment that only I, so far as I’m aware, have had the strength and discipline to accomplish.”

“How did you get rid of the assassin?” Carol asked.

Tanek only smiled. “A short-range burst of the energies needed to nullify the weapon’s power. This is how I know a planetwide null field is possible.”

“This technology,” Bart said, “it could bring about an age unlike any your world has ever seen.”

Tanek rose and paced. “Ah, the less deadly uses, yes. It has been considered. Imagine a child is hurt in an accident, and only one physician in the world could save her. But he is occupied saving the life of another. With this technology, he could be in two places at once, performing two tasks at one time. The child would not die.”

Carol was surprised to hear anything other than talk of blood and death from the man.

“Or imagine an end to acts of passion,” Tanek said, his volume rising, the timbre of his voice becoming even more passionate, “murders which are, of course, perfectly legitimate and sanctioned provided the emotional state of all parties is properly aligned and the scrolls have decreed it a proper time for such an act. . . . Worthy individuals have passed from our annals because of being torn between their passion for more than one being. With this device, a man or woman could love and be loved by more than one at a given time, and how could there be jealousy, yes?”

I don’t know about that, Carol thought. But then, I know so little of these people. . . .

Tanek stopped before Bart and Carol. “Your roles are quite simple, and, unfortunately, dictated by ancient prophecy. Your plaything here, this thin little male, is to help us decipher one section of the prototype’s plans that will allow the construction of a null field, rendering this device useless to all. Your Soloman will help configure that device. And you, Abramowitz, will assist in the ritual of Unity, in which the Varden and the heathen Nasnan will put aside their differences and at long last become one.”

“What about the prisoner?” Carol asked. “His name was not given in my report, but he is a Federation citizen, and his release—”

“That is negotiable only if it can be proven that he is not a murderer. Otherwise, he is subject to our laws and punishments. If your Federation attempts to interfere or intervene, there will be war between Vrinda and all your allied races.”

“Then. . . who is working to prove his innocence?”

Tanek stared at her blankly.

“Who defends this man, who seeks to uncover the truth?”

He merely frowned. “I’m afraid I don’t follow. His fate is in his own hands. He does not show remorse.

He does not show elation at the kill. This makes him a Hollow, a killer without a soul. As of this moment, his guilt is proven in our eyes. He does nothing to defend himself. Why should that burden be placed on us?"

"You were about to commit genocide. He stopped you."

Tanek continued to stare uncomprehendingly. "What of it?"

* * *

"Their passions run wild, they're more animal than human, their ritualization, the foundations of their culture, is based on madness." Carol stared down at the ugly mess she had been served as a late dinner. Bart sat across from her in a huge, empty room that looked like a mead hall of ancient Vikings.

Bart looked equally displeased with the stew of guts and other unmentionables bubbling before him. "Their species has achieved warp drive, but it seems more for the purpose of conquest and colonization than peaceful exploration and the expanding of cultural and intellectual horizons. Yet there is something here, something about them, that offers a promise that they might embrace reason, they might ascend beyond their aggressive mind-set, just as humankind and so many other races did long ago."

"There's more to this. So much more than has been revealed."

"I agree. The identity of the prisoner, for one. Why would Starfleet keep it a secret from us?"

Carol set down her ladle. "I don't know." She rose from the table. "But now seems as good a time as any to find out."

"What about this ceremony? You are to officiate, yet—"

"It can wait," Carol said, storming away.

"Carol, it's this time tomorrow!"

She slammed at the wooden doors to get the attention of the guards posted on the other side. "Then by this time tomorrow, I'll be ready."

* * *

It took until dawn for Carol to negotiate an audience with the prisoner. By the time she was taken to his antiseptic steel chamber eight floors beneath the keep, she had come to wonder if she had somehow passed from one state of reality to another. The design of this underground prison was patterned after one used on a dozen war-worlds, and there was no trace of "medievalism" to it. Every cell on this, the lowest level, was empty, save one.

A man sat in the bright recesses of the cell. Tall, dark-haired, haggard, but possessed of a sly smile and a near-boundless reserve of contempt.

Martin Mansur. Her hated rival.

"What took you?" he asked.

The guards left her with him, an invisible wall of energy separating them.

“So,” Carol said, “it’s a question of scandal.”

Martin’s smile was as smug as ever. “Even you can’t think things are that simple and straightforward. Not after being around these people for any length of time.”

“You’re an important symbol for Starfleet. So far as most people are concerned, you teach independence, existence without self-limitations. You and I know better, but that’s not the point. So what are you doing here, anyway?”

Martin eased himself back against the wall of his cell. It was lit by some inner fire, just like the floors and ceiling. His clothing was white, pure, just like the sheets on his cot and the waste disposal device set discreetly in the corner.

He laughed, taking in her discomfort. “Why am I here? Um—because I got caught?”

“You know what I mean. Why did you come to Vrinda in the first place?”

“Well, you know what they say. You’re only as good as your last big triumph.” His smile faded, but only a little. “It’s been some time for me. I have competition. I’m not about to retire, not at my age—”

“So you were out to prove something,” Carol said.

“Again, things are not so simple.”

“A man is dead,” Carol said. “Did you kill him?”

Martin said nothing. His expression didn’t change. He was too well versed in neurolinguistics to reveal himself in any way through conventional body language. There would be no looking to the left when he was lying or looking to the right when he was telling the truth. No concealing of his thumbs to indicate he was concealing other information. None of the thousand “tells” that she knew so well, which also made her a lousy choice for a poker-playing partner...and a cynic when it came to human nature.

“All right, I’ll ask another question. Why disrupt the natural order of a world that isn’t even Federation aligned?”

“Why? That’s simple enough. If your skills were as sharp as you say they are, there would be no need for explanation from me.”

Carol barely had to think twice about it. “This is all about your standing in the community. Your fame. That’s all you think about.”

“Oh, but you do go on. The question is, are we really so different? Is the life you have the one you really wanted, or just your way of dealing with disappointment, of trying to be someone, anyone, rather than owning up to your failures.”

“You mean when I trusted you.”

“Exactly. Look at the basis of the work you claim I took from you: Trust no one, depend on no one, but yourself.”

“Yet here you are, depending on me.”

“No. Here I am, knowing full well that you will follow the dictates of your nature—that you are weak. You were afraid to go forward with your findings. Left up to you, they would have sat in a drawer all these years. Even now, you don’t have the courage to own your own mistakes. You have to have a ‘bad guy.’ Your weakness is your enemy.”

“Maybe I was wrong in what I believed,” Carol said.

Martin gestured expansively. “Maybe you were. I never said I agreed or disagreed with your notions, only that I felt they had merit. In other words, profitability. A universal enough statement that those in need of a moral compass, those, like you, who are weak, would seize uponin droves. And in that, I was correct.”

Carol nearly staggered under the weight of the sudden realization that struck her hard and fast. “You don’t care if these people go to war. You don’t care if they all die.”

“I ‘care,’ as you put it, in terms of how it will affect me. This prison is proof from the weapon they’ve created. None of the ghosts can enter here. And if they employ any of the conventional weapons they already possess in mass quantities, I’ll also be safe from the blast and radioactive side effects.”

“But you’ll starve.”

“Not at all. I could leave this cell and get to the mess any time I wish.”

Carol didn’t bother to ask how this was possible. “You knew they’d send me.”

“I was counting on it. I knew that if I canceled my appearance at the conference, you would be en route there when this situation turned critical. That would make you the only likely choice.”

Carol’s anger was boiling over. “Why?”

“It’s a win-win for me. If you succeed and help this ceremony of joining to go off without a hitch, if the null-field device is installed, and so on, I will be given a slap on the wrist by Starfleet for my actions, but lauded publicly as the savior of this world. If you fail, you’ll die, everyone dies, but me. I lose nothing either way. I only stand to gain.”

“I could kill you myself,” Carol murmured. Even as she spoke, she was shocked that such a thought would cross her mind, let alone leave her lips. Hadn’t she seen enough death on Galvan VI?

Again, Martin smiled. He had goaded her well. “You could. But you won’t. Too weak. Now, if you will excuse me, I have a paper I’m writing in my head, and I really must keep on schedule.”

With that, he sat on his cot, closed his eyes, and tuned her out.

Chapter 5

“I’ve been in touch with Starfleet,” Bart said. He walked with Carol through an elegant hedge maze in the keep’s enormous central courtyard. A trio of guards—two women, plus the bulky Alhouan—trailed at a respectful distance. An hour had passed since Carol’s visit with the prisoner. “By this evening, the Sugihara will be standing by to beam us out of here if we raise the alarm.”

Carol frowned. “And Martin?”

“The hope is for a diplomatic solution to secure his release, obviously. But if he is indeed guilty of this murder, things become a bit murky. The Federation doesn’t have any jurisdiction here. Even if we decided to throw protocol out the window, scans from previous vessels show that a transporter beam can’t penetrate to the underground level where he’s being kept, and sending in an extraction team could touch off an incident that would be... unfortunate. Particularly with these people being in possession of a technology that absolutely baffles the top minds in S.C.E.”

“You transmitted the schematics?”

“No, I simply described what the device can do. Martin had the chance to do so but elected not to. I suppose he had his reasons.”

“He always does.” She shuddered. “Have they shown you the plans?”

“Only passages that have been copied from the original. Menzala Trivere was a genius on every possible level. His linguistic encryptions are among the best I’ve ever seen, and that was nothing but a sideline to him. Still, I’ve already cracked some of the code, and I’ll have the rest in time, I’m sure.”

“Is the Sugihara going to be able to back us up on planet?”

Bart shook his head. “Again, this is a delicate situation. Farhan Tanek authorized the intercession of three outsiders, and he has made it clear there will be no more.”

“Their scrolls... They must have a library here. I’ll need to see it.”

“I doubt they’ll allow that. They’ve been bringing items to me, and to Soloman, on a need-to-know basis.”

Carol hugged herself. “Then I’ll tell them, what I need to know is all of it.”

“I think you would have to put on quite a display to get anything accomplished in this place. And there are other concerns...”

“Assassins who can pop up anywhere, anytime? We can’t touch them, but they can hack us up into bits?”

Bart swallowed. “Right. Yes. That. Not so graphic, though, the way I would have phrased it.”

“We should each have one of those devices Tanek was wearing.”

“I’ve already suggested it to Soloman. He’ll do what he can.”

They navigated the remainder of the maze in silence. Every now and then, they passed laughing couples on benches, groundskeepers, or small gatherings of guards.

Any of them, Carol thought, any one of them could be a killer. Any one of them might be real... or an illusion. Tanek, what were you thinking when you approved the development of this technology? We can, therefore we should? I can wipe out my enemies? Then what?

What about your new enemies, your new rivals? How can you hope to control or contain a thing like this?

It was madness. As Ian had so perfectly prophesied, a true age of unreason.

* * *

Three hours later, Carol was hunched over the small table in her quarters, reading one of the scrolls that had been approved for her viewing. This was insane. She couldn't possibly learn all that she needed to know in the narrow margin of time allotted to her. Did Tanek want her to fail? His paranoia would destroy them all....

Or she could go see Martin. He had been on this world for well over a month. She had questions and he could certainly provide the answers. But could he be trusted? Naturally not. It might amuse him to give her some measure of truth mixed with just the right amount of lies to make her falter at a crucial moment in the ceremony.

Did he really care so little about the lives of others that he might do such a thing? Or was she allowing her own emotions, her feelings about what he had done to her, how he had broken their trust, to command her?

Rubbing her eyes, she leaned back and wondered if that might be the case.

"Excuse me," said a rumbling voice.

"Gah!" Carol shouted, nearly falling out of her chair. Alhouan stood before her. Or did he? Was he real, or a projection? She hadn't heard him come in.

"I need to talk to you," the guard said.

Carol nodded slowly. "Ah...there's a custom on my world. In the part that I'm from. We shake hands every time we see each other. A little odd, I know..."

"You want to be sure I'm not a phantom. I would, too, given the circumstances." He held his hand and she shook it. His grip was firm. Carol felt her body relax, then immediately tense up again as she remembered the doppelgänger sitting upon Tanek's throne, and how he had been solid to the touch when he willed it. This was no test at all.

Maddening.

"You are doing nothing to learn the truth about the killing," Alhouan said.

That startled her. "I thought you and Tanek and all the rest had already decided what was true."

"No matter. The man being held is one of your sect. For that reason alone, his welfare should concern you."

“I don’t have the time to play detective, all right? It’s out of my realm of expertise. After tonight, if all goes well, I’m sure Tanek will allow Federation investigators to come and examine the evidence and attempt to build a defense, if one is warranted.”

“Not so. There will be an accident tonight. When you are at the ceremony, the accused will meet with misfortune. It has been decreed.”

Carol stepped away from the table. “By Tanek? By—what do you call them? The highborn? Your council?”

“It has been decreed, and it will be done. Unless the truth is uncovered in time.”

“And what if the truth is that Martin killed that man?”

Alhouan was rock steady, and his silence filled the room with a fiery fury. His upper lip twitched and he said, “Blood calls to blood. And ‘that man’? He was my friend. If the betrayer below did not kill him, then the guilty party will be able to rest easy after tonight. Unless something is done.”

“So tell other people. You can’t just leave this in my hands.”

Alhouan’s gaze narrowed. “Everyone else knows. ”

Carol stared as the man turned his back and left her chamber.

How could she stop this? How could she possibly play her part in the evening’s events, while also preventing Martin’s murder. Was she supposed to be in two places at once?

Then it came to her: Perhaps that was exactly what she would have to do.

* * *

Carol entered the wide, opulent throne room where Tirza Sirajaldin paced like a caged, mad animal. The man was wiry, his head shaved and littered with tattoos, and he wore a scarlet robe with strips of deep blue in the form of lightning bolts. Jade jewelry adorned his flitting form: rings, bracelets, even a gleaming headband. His boots scraped along the stone floor and he held a golden goblet in his hand.

“They seek to mock me,” Sirajaldin said.

“Sir, my name is—”

“I know who you are. The pawn.”

Carol’s ire rose at that one, but she held her composure.

“They keep me here, in the seat of power of my enemy, as if to rub my nose in what I may see, but never have.”

“Then power’s all you’re after, too?” Carol asked. “As leader of the Nasnan, I would have thought your position somewhat different, at least based on what I’ve read.”

“Even this goblet is Tanek’s!” Sirajaldin screamed, hurling it across the room, shattering a glass statue. Carol found herself reminded of the glass of brandy she broke on the Lionarti.

Sirajaldin stood before an open window, golden sunlight streaming in, clutching at his form with its searing fingers. Finally, he hung his head. “Power is not what I want. Control is what I’m after. The right to live my life as I choose.”

“Isn’t that what tonight’s ceremony is all about? A peaceful accord between former enemies? Freedom to live as you wish?” Carol crossed her hands behind her back. “Or am I not the only pawn in this game?”

Sirajaldin faced her. “Ah. The enemy of my enemy must be my friend. So that’s what this is. No, I wouldn’t count on any such thing if I were you.” He nodded at the rafters. “They are listening, you know. Watching and waiting. Devices so small, one couldn’t possibly see them with the naked eye.”

“Then they already know who killed the scientist.”

Sirajaldin shook his head. “They know all save what is in your heart and mind, and that is what maddens them. That is why they manipulate, that is why they ritualize emotion. What they seek is truth, and to them, the only truth is what you feel.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“He was intelligent enough to evade their devices. In point of truth, he may have designed many of them. There are no records of what went on in that chamber. All that is known from surveillance in the hall is that Martin Mansur entered the chamber, fled shortly thereafter with the schematics, and delivered a communications device to Tanek’s advisor.”

“I’ve seen no advisor.”

“His advice wasn’t taken well, it seems. He met with an accident. Note the tower in the distance,” he said, pointing at a ruin on a hill. “It accidentally had its upper levels blasted off by one of Tanek’s ships. It just doesn’t pay to be a stationary object on some planets, I suppose. Oh, and the advisor was standing on the roof at the time, I should have mentioned that.”

“I want to talk to you about the device.”

Sirajaldin laughed. “This weapon of theirs. Imagine what it must be like to divide yourself, to be in more than one place at one time. One would have to be mad to imagine actually doing such a thing, madder still to master the skill.”

“You can do it. You’re not really here.”

Sirajaldin stopped. “Pardon?”

“It took me a little while to see the tells,” Carol said. “Look down. Sometimes you cast a shadow, like when you threw that goblet. Sometimes...most times...not.”

“If I’m mad, it’s because they made me this way.”

“No doubt.”

Sirajaldin frowned. “What is it you want, anyway?”

Carol smiled for the first time that day. “To go a little mad myself.”

Chapter 6

The device fit firmly on Carol’s wrist. Sirajaldin had refused to meet Carol in the flesh, and she was beginning to think his paranoia justified. However, he had led her to a chamber in which another of the weapons could be found.

Thinking makes it so, Sirajaldin told her. It may also drive you mad....

The contraption on her wrist was slightly more complicated than Sirajaldin had let on, but although she was no technical adept like Soloman or the various tech heads on the *da Vinci*, she quickly deduced what each control might allow her to do. It was all a matter of degrees. In the first stage of “removal”—as Sirajaldin had called it—one might travel outside his or her body with no awareness of the corporeal form that was left behind. Traditional “astral travel.”

She touched the control and felt as if she were taking a nap. The sensation wasn’t jarring in the least, which surprised her.

Seductive little thing, aren’t you? she thought as she thought of the hall outside—and suddenly found herself whisked through solid matter, into that other space.

“Yow!” she hollered, despite herself.

The sensation, admittedly, had been a rush. So long as she could think of this body, this new body of hers, able to pass through walls, able to be seen or not seen depending upon her will, as her one true form, she would be all right.

But just thinking that had made her visualize her true body back in her chamber, open-eyed and staring at nothing—and suddenly she was seeing through two sets of eyes, her mind processing more images, more tactile sensations, more thoughts, than she could possibly handle. She almost screamed—

And it was over. She was back in her room. Back in her body. Simple as that. For a moment she had feared that a return to her true form would not be possible, that she would grow confused as to which form was which....

That she would, indeed, go mad.

Steeling herself, she tried again. This time, her second form made it down the corridor and even passed through a couple of walls, breezing past guards who had no clue she was anywhere nearby, before her anxiety once again mounted and she recalled herself to her primary form.

Mastering the skill of being a ghost took much less time than she expected. Then she set to work on duplicating herself. In other words, maintaining control of both forms at once, multitasking, studying the scrolls and learning what she could in preparation for the ceremony with one body, while traveling,

listening to conversations, processing information with another.

The whole thing became second nature to her so quickly that she wondered what she had feared. There was a sense of freedom, of empowerment, that went along with this business that was greater than anything she had ever experienced before. Why had she been so afraid?

Remember, they know you're doing this. They want this.

You have to figure out why....

She found Bart working hard in his chamber on the translation. He was surprised to see her, but he didn't realize that she was just a projection; the device on her wrist was hidden under the billowing sleeves of the long ceremonial robe given to her for tonight's service. Solomon sat beside him. They exchanged greetings, then Bart filled her in on their progress.

"We're having to extrapolate some," Bart said wearily as he shoved the scrolls away. "Fill in blanks. It's the only way we'll have any chance at all of activating the null field in time."

"I bet you could use two of you right now," Carol said, smiling inwardly.

Bart bit his lip. "Hmmm... I don't know. I worry about the side effects of the device, even if I had one to wear. I think Tanek is right in having this null-field generator employed."

A sudden rush of anger coursed through Carol. She had no idea why Bart's words had struck her so disagreeably, but she suddenly wanted to be elsewhere. She flickered in and out of existence for an instant—fortunately at the exact moment when her comrades were looking to the window, distracted by the sound of laughter outside—then controlled herself once more.

Side effects? Ridiculous. The only side effect she had felt was the confidence brought about by finally having some control over circumstances. Even as she stood here, information was flowing into her mind...her other mind...her true mind. Or was this her true mind...?

Enough, she commanded, banishing the chaotic flow of thoughts.

"Will you be ready by tonight?" she asked.

"Absolutely," Bart said.

Nodding, Carol turned and left the chamber. The guards outside snickered as she passed, one of them raising his wrist and flicking his own device in her way. She shrank from him, remembering how Tanek had destroyed the doppelgänger assassin in his quarters.

No, not Tanek. Another ghost...

They know...

Walking down the corridor, she wondered why she hadn't told Bart what she had learned from the guard about Martin's upcoming accident, and that she had secured a device herself. It was curious that she would keep such things to herself. Against her better judgment, against her nature...

But what need did he have to know? She would resolve all of this by herself. She would find the

answers.

She even knew right where to look.

Gaining access to the dead man's chamber turned out to be a simple matter; what surprised her was that it had been cleaned out completely. Bared wires dangled from the ceiling and from otherwise cleverly disguised ports in the walls, all rugs and wall hangings had been removed (though she could tell from the accumulated dust in certain areas that such items had once been in evidence), and all furniture, files, and such were gone.

She heard laughter from just behind her, a kiss of shadows upon her neck. Startled, she whirled just in time to see another hooded figure—dressed identically to her—leaping through the wall overlooking the courtyard. Racing to the window, Carol peered out and saw nothing. The robed and hooded figure had vanished before hitting the ground.

A ghost. Another ghost!

What would happen if they met? If they fought?

She wanted it. She wanted to know.

Stepping back, she gained some distance on the window and leaped through the wall. She laughed as the cobblestones launched themselves up at her, exalted in the thrill of executing the impossible and knowing full well she could survive it, survive anything. . .

It was like being a god.

“Someone's had enough, I'd say,” someone whispered behind her. “I wonder if she'll even feel it.”

Carol's mind was suddenly overturned. She was plummeting to the ground. In a second she would strike, yet not die. How could anyone be behind her?

Then she understood. The voice hadn't been heard by this body, it was her true form that was being threatened, her frail prison of flesh that was about to be attacked.

Withdrawing instantly, she found herself back in her chamber, launching herself away from her desk as a crackling energy blade soared down at her, slicing into the billowing hood she wore, but missing her head completely. There was a crackle and a thunk as a very solid blade buried itself in the desk. Her phaser was in her hand, aimed and ready to fire as she turned to face her assailants.

A boot kicked the weapon from her hand and a fist struck her in the mouth, the pain sending her reeling. All she glimpsed was the hooded figure—her doppelgänger, was that possible? It wasn't, yet—

And someone else's leg swept under hers, tripping her, sending her smashing onto the floor, her back and skull ringing with pain as she smacked down hard. She wasn't trained to be a warrior, didn't have the savage will, even, of these barbaric, mad people. That was what Corsi and her security people were for. But she wouldn't die here, not here, not like this, not with that bastard Martin smirking at her from his cell down below, not with the lives of so many depending on her.

The energy blade was back in the hand of the first hooded assassin. There were two, she now saw, both with shadowed faces, both dressed identically to her. Yet the shimmering material worn by the killer who

went after Tanek could be glimpsed from beneath the robes. Were these ghosts? Flesh?

Did it matter?

Carol's left hand went to the device on her wrist. All she knew was rage: an almost divine fury at the idea of losing control now that it had been granted to her, of losing in any way, of causing grief to others...

Then they appeared. Two more doppelgängers. Another four behind them. Six in all. She could see through each of their eyes. Move through each of their forms. The sensory overload was staggering.

She didn't care. Her doubles descended upon the intruders, pounding, kicking, breaking chairs upon them. One laughed, scooping up her phaser. Her—its finger twitched as she aimed at the killers hunched nearby—

"No," all seven of her forms said at once as she realized what she had almost been tricked into doing: The phaser's line of fire was directed toward the intruders, and beyond them, to her own sprawled, corporeal, original form. If these were ghosts, and she now thought they were, the blast would pass right through them and she would kill only herself. Instead, she activated the disruption signal Sirajaldin had pointed out to her, and grinned with savage delight as the intruder ghosts were shattered like screaming glass.

She looked to the ceiling, to the recording devices she could not see, but knew were there somewhere. You can see, she thought. Watching. However many of you there are. Whoever you are.

Like what you've seen? Have I done as you've expected?

Carol considered trying to find them. It would be fun seeking out the avatars of insanity, the nameless, faceless gamers who were driving her so desperately to the brink. And when she found them...

When she did...

No! This isn't me. Not me.

Then who?

Struggling to regain control, she looked to her wrist and felt the gnawing, hungry weight of the device strapped to her. With it, anything was possible. Reality was just a silly word, nothing more.

In that moment, it all came together in her mind. She knew what had happened. All that had happened—and why.

All that was left now was to stop it before this world was plunged into a greater sea of madness and destruction than even she had dared to contemplate.

Chapter

7

Night had fallen, the tapestry of stars spread wide over the horizon. Carol stood upon an ornate stage

erected near the newly restored tower where Tanek's advisor had met his fate. She was surrounded by thousands of onlookers, including two dozen of the so-called highborn, as well as Tanek and Sirajaldin. Bart and Soloman were high above, on the tower's rooftop, the machine they had been working on all day rising next to them, reaching another ten feet into the air. The machine was an uncomplicated affair from the look of it, bearing the shape of a trident with curling talons.

Carol had never been so terrified in her life. Oh, she knew the Sugihara was in orbit around this world, and that she could be beamed out at a second's notice...but she also knew Tanek and all his insane compatriots must also have that information. That meant they could have made arrangements to block any transporter beams, any communications.

She was on her own, and that likely meant she would die on this mad world. And for what? A people she didn't understand, a race she cared nothing about, beings whose beliefs brought nothing to the surface within her except contempt? Loathing?

Who am I angry at? she wondered. These people, for being true to their own nature, or myself, because I see all my own weakness mirrored in their acts?

Soon, Martin would have his little "accident." Time was running out. She gazed upon the sea of distrustful faces that made up her audience. They looked at her with unabashed hatred. An outsider should not be here, no matter what the scrolls said. That was what their expressions suggested to her.

That...and a desire for annihilation before accepting the beliefs of others. Yet they were followers. Two men controlled the masses, and both needed to be called to the stage.

She tapped the Scepter of Truth twice, and Tanek and Sirajaldin approached.

"I face my fears," she said, her voice quivering slightly. "I face them openly and honestly, and I share with you my terror."

Her heart raced and she pictured Kieran Duffy, wondering what thoughts went through his mind in those final moments, and how he found the strength to do what had to be done.

Love. For him, it had been love, she decided. The face of another was before him.

For her, only Martin's face came to mind. As Tanek and Sirajaldin approached, then bowed before her, Carol felt only hatred. "I wear my emotions like this cloak. Its colors are many, its shading varied. I have forgotten the souls of my ancestors. I am enraged because I see the faults of myself reflected in all of you, and rather than direct that anger inward, I find myself loathing each of you. Since coming here, I have let myself be ruled by emotions, and while that is strength for all of you, for me, that is weakness."

A roar of outrage came from the assemblage, but Tanek and Sirajaldin turned at the same moment, raising their hands for silence and the crowd acquiesced.

"Our traditions center on truth," Tanek said. "And she speaks truth. We don't have to like what she says, but we must respect it."

"I mourn for lost comrades," Carol said, moving forward and nodding to Tanek and Sirajaldin. "And I mourn for all of you. Because the truth—"

Carol yelped as something unseen struck her leg. She tripped and fell, a collective gasp rising up from

the audience. She had never stood before so many people in her life, and right now, she wasn't standing at all. Sprawled at the feet of the dissident leader Tirza Sirajaldin, a man she had never truly met in the flesh until this moment, Carol considered the device on her wrist.

A ghost was up here with her, a ghost that could take corporeal form but still be unseen.

It's evolving, she thought. The technology, its uses are becoming even more frightening.

She could warn the others. A part of her felt she must.

Yet... something was not right.

Helped to her feet by Sirajaldin, she continued the ritual. "Unburden yourselves," she commanded. "Free yourself of your hatred for one another in the only way both your factions will recognize." She lowered the staff. "Touch this relic, sacred to both your orders, and tell if your intentions toward peace are true or false."

It's here, she thought, feeling the breath of the invisible intruder upon her neck, hearing a snicker as it darted from one side of her to another, then vanished. It might kill me. Kill either of them. Set off a riot, touch off a war.

Or is it in my mind? Has all this put me over the edge?

Tanek went first. The brawny barbarian clutched the staff. "I believe the teachings of the Ancients should be upheld. Blood calls to blood. But a world at war because of a division of beliefs, while appealing on many levels to me, is not what is best for my people. I ordered the creation of the device we have come to nullify today in order to kill Sirajaldin and all his people. That is no longer an option. We must live together, if we are to live at all."

Carol nodded. According to tradition, the staff would splinter and break if either man lied. She could see no physical reason why that should happen, but there was much more to the physical world, at least so far as this planet went, than she had ever dreamed possible, and so she considered it might be true. Or that the ghost might make an attempt, not on the men, but on the staff.

And she was prepared.

Sirajaldin grasped the staff. "I have never wished for genocide. Only control over my own destiny. That is a gift I would share with my people. This accord is true."

Carol drew back as both men released the staff and tapped it twice. She was about to speak, when the ghost slipped its hands on her from behind, the cold edge of an invisible blade pressing against her throat.

"Say anything other than the words from the sacred texts and I will slit your throat," the ghost whispered.

"I saw your eyes. I know you have a sense of what's happening here. Speak anything but what you were brought here to say and you will be silenced."

Carol said nothing. Instead, she willed herself away, releasing hold of this doppelgänger form, drawing back into her true body, buried deep in the crowd.

"What?" shouted the invisible assassin upon the stage.

Tanek whirled—and disrupted the ghost’s essence, his own device turning it visible as it shattered the wraith like an ancient mirror.

The scepter dropped to the stage, bouncing once upon the wood floor, and then Carol was back, grasping it, startling all who had gathered here, even her friends high above.

“It doesn’t kill the original, does it?” she asked. “It only makes it difficult for that person to gather his wits and his will again for some time.”

“Yes,” Tanek said. “That is true.”

“You have all been deceived,” Carol said. “And you have all willingly participated in that deception.”

“Madness,” Sirajaldin said.

“That’s right. And we live in an age of unreason.”

Carol had known that it was far more than a coincidence that attempts had been made on her life, but none on Bart and Soloman. She had been the one wearing the device. She had been the one to leap forward into the same madness engulfing so many of these people.

And her would-be assassins... how serious were they? If someone had actually wanted her dead, there were cleaner and more efficient ways of going about it, particularly considering they had access to the same technology that was practically branded to her wrist.

That was how it felt now. A part of her, a thing that had been seared into her flesh, her soul, a mark upon her sanity.

She aimed the scepter at Bart and Soloman. “It was all a trick. Menzala Trivere couldn’t transform all his theories into reality on his own. He needed our help.”

“With what?” Bart called.

“You haven’t created a null field at all. This is a mass amplification module. It will make the power available to any and all on this planet... possibly even beyond.

“Power for its own sake.”

“What are you accusing us of?” Tanek demanded.

“She’s simply stating truth,” came the voice of Alhouan, who dragged the chained form of Martin Mansur with him through the crowd.

Carol said, “This was about potential. It never had anything to do with your planet joining the Federation. The man behind this wanted to know what we might do with your technology. If we could be stronger with it than yourselves.”

“The murderer,” Tanek breathed.

“He’s not,” Carol said. “Because there was no murder.”

Alhouan stopped before the stage, removing a small projection device from his pocket. “See for yourself.”

A screen rippled into existence behind Tanek and Sirajaldin. Images with specific dates and times played. Carol looked at the footage of the scientist entering and leaving his chamber, all that could be found after she had appeared to Alhouan and communicated all she could to him by covering her hands from view and tracing ceremonial symbols upon his arm to secretly pass along her suspicions.

“The man you see before you was my friend, or so I believed,” Alhouan said. “And no one killed him. He had all that he needed in his private chamber to assemble his own working prototype weeks ago, and that is what he did. View the holos yourself. Seventeen days ago, he entered his chamber at night, left it in the morning... then left it again in the afternoon. The corpse we found was a duplicate, one he maintained until ritual cremation.”

“The device already existed?” Martin said, his eyes wide with fury. “I was manipulated?”

“We had no knowledge of this,” Tanek maintained. Sirajaldin agreed.

“Not consciously,” Carol said, holding up her arm, exposing the device. “But you’ve felt it, haven’t you? The lure of it. The power it offers.”

“It’s an addiction,” Alhouan said. “One that drives its victim mad. We were all in it with him. All of us. But it seemed like sanity. It still does.”

Someone in the crowd gasped as a figure fled from its ranks and burst into the tower. It was the scientist. The dead man.

He was desperate. Crazy.

Tanek’s face flushed crimson. “You have no right to secrets,” he hissed at Carol. “The ritual has been tainted. This union—”

Sirajaldin struck him, and suddenly, dozens of wraiths burst into existence all about them, the crowd multiplying, doubling, tripling in number with every beat of Carol’s heart.

“The only thing you can’t control is what is in my heart and mind,” Carol said, touching the device on her wrist, willing her doppelgänger into existence beside the startled Bart and Soloman. It reached the device seconds before the lunatic scientist, who was still intent on seeing his will inflicted upon all on this planet.

Carol touched off the null field from her wristlet, causing the energies within the amplifier to overload. Crackling blue-white energies reached for them all, wiping the doppelgängers out of existence.

Epilogue

Tanek ordered them offworld immediately, of course. Although there were isolated bits of fighting here and there, the civil war on Vrinda never materialized. The people thought they wanted mass destruction, chaos, bloodshed; what they truly wanted was the power of the device. Without that, without its addictive abilities to re-create oneself, the desire had been lessened.

Martin was in the Sugihara's brig, and the first thing Carol noticed when she went to visit him was his mad eyes. His mind, upon taking in the possibilities of all she had experienced, the power and control she had possessed, then tossed away, had snapped. In his head, he was still planetside, living in a world in which he could be anywhere, everywhere at once, and even transform his appearance to be a dozen, a hundred, a thousand individuals at once. More than that, he could be idolized by countless admirers, and they could all be himself.

"Why would I leave? Why would I ever go?" Martin said, laughing and telling her she was again the failure...but now she knew differently.

"Fine, Martin...you belong here," she said.

"He had been right," Martin whispered. "Tanek. He visited me. Tortured me. Said it was the end of the world. He was right. The end of the old world, the beginning of the new. And it is glorious."

Martin was right, of course, but not the way he thought. Once, Carol might have taken pleasure in Martin's fall from grace, but now she just pitied him.

From there she went to the mess hall to find Bart and Soloman.

As she sat down to join them, Carol said, "I'd say their emotional honesty isn't all it's cracked up to be. In the end, they were just as self-deluded as the rest of us."

"Not all of us," Bart said, taking a sip from his coffee. "You wound up being the most emotionally honest person on Vrinda because you recognized the device for what it was."

Carol almost smiled. "Not something I've been accused of in the past."

Soloman added, "Now the people must go cold turkey—which is, I believe, the best way to recover from an addiction." He frowned. "I have never understood that phrase."

"Later," Bart said with a grin. "I think you should be proud of what you've done here, Carol. It may not be what Starfleet had hoped for in terms of the mission, but it's probably best for Vrinda in the long term." He gave her a look. "And maybe for you, too."

"Maybe."

"And best of all, we've got a week and a half left. It's not the vacation I was hoping for, but Captain Demitrijian is gonna be able to drop me off at Starbase 92."

This time, Carol's smile was genuine. "Good."

"I will be returning to McKinley Station," Soloman said, "to make sure the da Vinci's new computer is up to standard."

"I'm sure it will be," Bart said.

"Up to my standard," Soloman amended.

Laughing, Bart turned to Carol. "What about you?"

“Oh, something will turn up,” she said. She thought about an angular face framed by raven hair, and wondered how long it would take to get to Pacifica, and if it would leave enough time to get back to Earth in a week and a half. She really liked Ian, and it was about time she started being a bit more honest with herself—and her feelings.

About the Author

SCOTT CIENCIN is a New York Times bestselling author of adult and children’s fiction. Praised by Science Fiction Review as “one of today’s finest fantasy writers” and listed in the Encyclopedia of Fantasy, Scott has written over fifty novels and many short stories and comic books. He has written in many shared worlds, including Star Wars, Dinotopia, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and Angel. He is the coauthor of the Star Trek: S.C.E. adventure Some Assembly Required and his original Dinoverse series has been optioned by Critical Hit Entertainment. Scott lives in Fort Myers, Florida, with his beloved wife, Denise.

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