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AFTERMATH

Christopher L. Bennett



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Chapter

1

“Danged Breen,” Katie Huang complained. “They put a hole in my city.”

Sanek, her new assistant, looked up at her as they worked their way down the slope, his bright orange hard hat clashing with his sallow skin. “The Breen put a great many holes in San Francisco. However, most of those holes have been filled.”

“Yeah,” Katie acceded grudgingly—or not so grudgingly, she decided as she caught a glimpse of the Golden Gate Bridge, now restored and reopened to traffic. She remembered how it had looked a year ago, after the Breen attack on Starfleet Headquarters—the north tower crumpled, the span missing a huge chunk in the middle. It was a miracle the bridge hadn’t collapsed. Some had wanted to leave it as a monument, but it was too valuable a thoroughfare, and too important a symbol of the City by the Bay, not to be restored to its former glory. As proud as Katie was of her fellow civilian builders and maintenance workers, she gave a silent thanks to the Starfleet Corps of Engineers, Earth Division, for their tireless efforts on the city’s behalf.

“But that’s just it,” she went on. “All this time, and there’s still this great big ugly scar in the middle of my town.”

“That is more the fault of the geology than the Breen.”

“They had sensors. They must’ve known about the underground caverns.” The Breen had been indiscriminate in their attack, hitting parts of the city far removed from the military targets and costing many innocent lives. They’d even attacked the Starfleet Museum Center, destabilizing the ground beneath it and opening a sinkhole into which most of the complex had collapsed. The losses to art, culture, and science were incalculable, and Katie felt them keenly; but the massive blemish on the landscape had become her personal symbol for all of it, something that affected her on a visceral level. What had made it worse was that the continued instabilities had hampered efforts to clear and restore the site, so it still remained, even though the rest of San Francisco was as good as new.

“Still,” Sanek said, “the ground is now stabilized and most of the wreckage has been cleared away. The new museum can be built soon. Perhaps the construction of a war memorial will be approved. I understand you humans are fond of such emotional representations.”

Katie smiled at her new friend’s very Vulcan sentiment. “Nothing wrong with a good emotional representation, Sanek. You should try it sometime.”

He raised an eyebrow. “That would be illogical, as you well know.”

Katie laughed and said, “I know, but you can’t blame a human for trying. I’m sure lots of humans think Vulcans would be better off if they let their hair down a bit.”

“Just as many Vulcans think humans would be better off if they, to maintain the metaphor, kept their hair tied up.”

That prompted another laugh. “Probably, yeah. But that’s what keeps the galaxy interesting.” They reached the bottom of the sinkhole and activated their sensor units. Not as versatile as Starfleet tricorders, they were still good enough to scan for remaining instabilities, gas pockets, salvageable artifacts from the museum. . .or organic remains. Even now, a few victims were still unaccounted for.

Sanek focused intently on his scanner, barely paying attention to his footing, and Katie smirked. “Don’t trip over any android heads.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“These tunnels are where they found Data’s head a few years back.”

“Assuming you are referring to Lieutenant Commander Data of the StarshipEnterprise, I was under the impression that his head has remained attached to his person.”

“This was his head from the past. He went back in time, it got knocked off, gathered dust here for five hundred years, and got put back on.” She frowned. “So his head’s twenty times older than the rest of him. I wonder what that does to the warranty.”

“According to the records, that was a ‘prank’ on the part of some cadets from Starfleet Academy—another of your emotional representations.”

Katie grinned. “That’s the official story. Of course, time-travel evidence gets classified. Too dangerous, you know. Imagine the havoc someone could cause if they knew how to go back and mess around with the past.” She noticed something on her scanner. “Hey, I’ve got some kind of. . .reading. It’s coming and going. . .but yeah, it’s there.”

“What manner of reading?”

“I think it’s some kind of subspace static,” she frowned. “Under those rocks.”

“Down here?”

“Hell, maybe it’s some old communicator from the museum with a bit of power left. Better check it out, though—might be a priceless antique.” Again, she smirked, showing what she thought of the odds. “Help me here.” Together they moved the rubble out of the way, exposing the item.

It was a small spherical object, about the size of a golf ball, covered in dust. “It is not registering on my scanner,” Sanek said. “Perhaps a Starfleet-issue tricorder would do better.”

“No, we don’t need to call in the troops every time a problem comes up.” She reached toward it.

“I would not advise touching it. We have no way of knowing its function.”

“Whatever its function was, if anything, it’s been blasted by the Breen’s energy dampers, dumped through a sinkhole, and buried under rubble for a year. It probably doesn’t do much of anything anymore. Hey, look, it’s even got a crack in it. Was that there a moment ago?” She reached a finger forward to indicate the hairline fissure. Her fingernail barely brushed it.

She never heard the blast that followed—though it rocked the whole city.

* * *

It’s too quiet, thought David Gold.

He was walking to the bridge with Sonya Gomez, the same morning ritual he and his first officer had enacted every day until Theda Vinci had been crippled in the incident at Galvan VI. This was their first morning back since then, and they’d resumed the ritual automatically, a natural beginning to the day when the repaired starship would launch herself out of dry dock once more. Around them the rebuilt corridors sparkled in mint condition; in the background the restored engines thrummed in perfect tune, supplying electroplasma for perfectly calibrated systems. Shipshape and Bristol fashion, Gold thought, remembering the phrase his old friend Jean-Luc liked to use in his antiquarian moments.

But it was too quiet. There was none of the pleasant bustle that had formerly filled the ship’s compact corridors—whether that of engineers pursuing their projects, constantly making adjustments to push the systems just a bit more beyond dry dock specs, or that of crewmates and friends exchanging banter and giving friendly greetings as their commanding officers walked by. All the people they passed were subdued—the old crew members (agonizingly few) still recovering from the tragedy, the new ones still adjusting to unfamiliar surroundings. It would take time for them to get comfortable with each other, to mesh into a unit that Gold hoped could work as smoothly as the old crew—though not in quite the same way, to be sure. Theda Vinci would never be truly the same again.

Gold wondered if his morning walk with Gomez would ever be the same again either. In the past, it had been an opportunity for small talk, for exchanging shipboard gossip and chatting about family and news and trivia, having more to do with friendship than duty. To Gold, it helped to compensate for being so far from his own family.

In fact, he hadn’t been sure that she was going to show up for the walk at all. Among the many fatalities had been Kieran Duffy, the ship’s second officer and Gomez’s lover. It had seemed from the outside like a simple shipboard romance—until Duffy had popped the question out of the blue. Gold couldn’t blame Gomez for being too farblonzhet to give him an answer. But then Duffy had sacrificed himself to save the ship, never knowing what her answer would’ve been. By her own admission, Gomez herself didn’t know, either. One more loss to add to the list—the loss of closure. But for a time, Gomez had blamed Gold for Duffy’s death, and, though they had settled that, at least, and regained a semblance of their former friendship, Gold knew that Duffy’s death would always be a barrier between them.

Gold knew she’d worked through the worst of her grief, and was ready to resume her duties. But there

was no telling how long it would be before she could take joy in them again. Which was a shame. She was generally a serious sort, a hardened pro, tough on herself, prone to worry; but underneath it all was a girlish innocence and playfulness, which manifested itself in a radiant smile that filled Gold with fatherly warmth. He missed that smile.

And it was still too quiet.

Naturally, just as he thought that, a jolt went through the ship, knocking him briefly off balance. As he and Gomez ran to the bridge, the captain reflected that he had some choice words for God about His sense of timing.

The bridge was bustling with activity as the crew worked to analyze the disturbance. Yet even here it seemed too quiet, without David McAllan to announce “Captain on the bridge” as he always had. That shtick had annoyed Gold at first, but over time he’d grown accustomed to it, and now he’d give anything to hear it again. Better that than the memory of McAllan sacrificing himself, shoving Gold out from under a falling ceiling support—of the look on the young man’s face in that last moment, meeting his captain’s eyes imploringly, seeking assurance that he’d done all right. Until that moment, Gold had never realized the deep respect and devotion that had underlain young David’s—hisnamesake’s—insistence on announcing his captain’s arrival.

Anthony Shabalala, McAllan’s replacement at tactical, looked for a moment like he wanted to announce Gold, but couldn’t bring himself to. They weren’t his words to say.

So Gold announced himself. “What’s all the tumult about?”

Lieutenant Commander Mor glasch Tev, theda Vinci’s new second officer, rose efficiently from the center seat and faced his captain. The stocky Tellarite barely came up to Gomez’s height, but carried himself high and proudly. His monk’s fringe of dark hair and the gray-frosted beard that framed his porcine features were groomed to machine tolerances. “Subspace shockwave, sir,” Tev reported in a curt but surprisingly mellow baritone. “No damage reported, but I’m having Chief Engineer Conlon recalibrate the warp coils.” Although no engineer himself, Gold knew well enough that the wave, moving through subspace instead of normal space, wouldn’t have affected theda Vinci at all if the warp coils hadn’t resonated with it and transmitted the shock to the ship. Any resultant misalignment would be minuscule, but if there was one thing Gold had already learned about Tev, it was that he was a perfectionist.

“Subspace shock?” Gomez asked with an air of dread. “Did a ship blow up?”

“The wave metric is wrong,” Tev told her. “No engine signature, no magneton pulse.” Efficient, too, to have evaluated and responded to the situation so quickly. “It reminds me of a warp-field collapse upon collision with a massive body, though.”

The most massive body in the immediate area was the one where most of Gold’s family, and a fair percentage of his species, lived. “Where did the shockwave come from?”

Tev’s reply was prompt, but muted. “San Francisco, sir.”

Gold stared for a second, then turned to Shabalala. “Get me Starfleet Command.”

* * *

The city looked like a bomb had hit it.

Smoke and dust hung in the air, obscuring the sun. Buildings around the blast site stood empty, some burning, some teetering on the brink of collapse. Emergency crews, including S.C.E. units, worked with grim, determined efficiency.

It could've been far, far worse, thought Montgomery Scott as he surveyed the scene. The sinkhole region had still been largely unpopulated. And transporter grids, both civilian and Starfleet, had been able to lock onto buried survivors and beam them promptly to hospitals across the western seaboard. But dozens of people—cleanup crews, surveyors, geo-engineers, and gawkers—were still unaccounted for. More than a few had been S.C.E. personnel. Scotty knew from experience—too much of it—that the number would likely fall as more information was gathered; but however low it went, it would still be far too many.

Perhaps the worst damage was to the spirit of the San Franciscans. Their postwar sense of security and comfort had been shattered in an instant. Thousands stood outside the force-field cordons, gazing on in fear or bewilderment or anger, while children cried and asked their parents why this was happening again, or whether another war had begun. Nobody had any answers for them. Scotty hoped to change that, with the help of his S.C.E. crews.

So far the one clear thing was that it hadn't been a bomb. Instead, in the middle of a new crater blown in the side of the sinkhole, there was...athing. A stout domed structure eight stories tall, its fluid contours declaring an unearthly origin. The blast damage had been done by its impromptu arrival, rather than by any explosive reaction.

An image came to Scotty's mind—the distress signal from Intar months ago, showing the devastation wrought when the Omearan Starsearcher *Friend* had crashed into their capital city. The Intarians had been lucky, he'd reflected at the time, that the ship had been traveling relatively slowly. If a vessel that massive had hit at full impulse, a quarter lightspeed, it would've been a dinosaur-killer of a blast. That was why almost every spacefaring world—including Intar now, belatedly—had a damned good planetary defense grid. The Breen fleet that had attacked Starfleet HQ had sacrificed half its ships just to break through Earth's defense grid, even with the advantage of their energy dissipators.

“And that's what doesn't make sense!” Scotty insisted to the two men who walked through the disaster zone alongside him: Starfleet Admiral William Ross, the decorated Dominion War commander, and Cemal Iskander, the civilian Director of Earth Security. “My crews rebuilt that defense grid stronger and better than ever, upgraded with the finest sensors and countermeasures ever devised. No cloak ever made could slip by it. A Denebian dust mite could not get through, not without setting off every alarm from here to Neptune's nether regions. I'd stake my life on it!”

“I don't doubt you, Scotty,” Iskander said. Indeed, the distinguished Turk had worked closely with Scotty in rebuilding the grid, and had proven a good sort to trade tall tales with, even if his faith kept him from enjoying a good bottle. “But then, how did it get here? Could it have stayed in warp until the actual moment of impact?”

“That would've set off the alarms even sooner.”

“Could it have been beamed in somehow?” Ross asked.

Scotty shook his head. “A confinement beam strong enough to shove that much solid earth aside, that forcefully? That'd be a devil of a weapon in itself—why bother beamin' anything in with it?”

Iskander frowned. “Maybe as a warning—psychological warfare. Maybe this enemy wants to terrorize rather than simply destroy us—to cow us into accepting conquest, like the Dominion.” He peered at the structure, though, as if expecting it to erupt at any moment. “But just dropping that in our laps as a statement isn’t enough. The other shoe could fall any moment. That’s why you’ve got to attack it now, Bill.”

“And we know this is even a weapon, how?” came a familiar, gruff voice. Scotty brightened to see David Gold and his team approaching.

Iskander was taken aback. “Look around you, Captain....”

“Gold. David Gold. Shalom.”

They shook hands. “Merhaba. As I said, look around. Our city is ablaze again. Does that look like a peaceful gesture to you?”

“In fact, it looks a little like the Starsearcher crash on Intar. That turned out to be an accident.”

Right, Scotty remembered, it had been the *da Vinci* that he’d assigned to that mission.

“And how do you ‘accidentally’ slip through the most secure defense grid ever built, bypassing its every sensor mechanism?”

“I don’t know, but my crew here is the most likely group to find out.”

Iskander looked impatient. “Scotty, all respect to your people, but shouldn’t they be working with the other S.C.E. teams on cleanup and ground stability? Even if we do risk the cautious approach,” and his expression showed what he thought of that, “we have specialists who are better qualified to tell us about that thing.”

“I can tell you one thing right now,” said P8 Blue, startling Iskander, who’d overlooked her since she was down in crawl mode taking some low-angle seismic readings. The *Nasat* rose to full height to continue her report. “That object wasn’t designed to arrive the way it did.”

“We don’t even know how it did arrive.”

“We don’t need to, not for this. The structure’s not as badly damaged as the buildings around it, obviously, but it shows clear signs of stress. There are cracked support members inside, fatigue in several shell layers, and it’s visibly crumpled at ground level.” Scotty peered closely at its curves, but couldn’t tell what was crumpled and what was intentional. But he wasn’t a structural specialist like Blue. “The only reason it hasn’t suffered worse is that it seems to be designed for a higher gravity than this, using dense materials such as cortenium.”

“Then there’s the inside,” said Tev, holding up a tricorder with a cross-section display. “Clearly designed for habitation, but not for ferrying troops. The compartment size, corridor layout—they’d be too spread out, take too long to get to battle stations or exits. And there’s nothing that looks like a weapon.”

Good man, Scotty thought. Tev wasn’t a tactical specialist like Fabian Stevens, but he was nearly as much a “Renaissance man” as Spock himself had been. Scotty had hand-picked him for this assignment, knowing only the best could hope to make up for Duffy’s loss.

Stevens, however, looked a little annoyed, as though Tev had stolen his lines. “And the very fact that we can scan inside,” he added, “means there isn’t any substantial shielding.”

“Obviously,” said Tev dismissively. “More importantly, it suggests the structure wasn’t designed for combat.”

Stevens glared. “I was getting to that.”

“What about life signs, though?” Iskander asked. “We can’t get a clear read. They might be shielding the occupants.”

“Or they could all have been killed on impact, and we’re just reading residual heat and organic residue,” Stevens replied.

“Besides,” chimed in Carol Abramowitz, the team’s cultural specialist, “if this structure were intended as a warning in itself, I doubt it would look so...placid and soft. Most species would symbolize aggression with sharper, more angular designs. And if something within it, rather than the structure itself, is the message, then it probably would’ve emerged by now.”

Scotty beamed. “Cemal, there are no better specialists around for this sort of thing than this bunch before you. Explorin’ dangerous alien whatsies, findin’ out if they’re safe and makin’ ’em safe if they’re not—that’s what S.C.E. teams like theirs are all about. And there’s no team I’d rather have here than this one. The best thing about this whole mess is that these lads and lassies are here to straighten it up. So let them do their job,” he said, addressing Admiral Ross as well now. “Send them in.”

“This was the team that brought back the old Defiant and averted a war with the Tholians,” Ross told Iskander. “I have every confidence in them.”

The director was hesitant. “We still don’t know what dangers there might be in there. Surely this is a job for Starfleet Security.”

“You rang?” Domenica Corsi strode forward, seemingly towering over Iskander, though they were comparable in height. She made her case just standing there. The security team behind her, and the sizable phaser rifles they all carried, didn’t hurt either.

Iskander sighed. “Very well. I concur. But may Allah protect you all.”

Chapter

2

The comm screen in the O’Brien household had been tuned to the newsfeeds ever since the disaster struck. But Keiko had grown tired of the images and taken Molly into her room to brush her hair. The nine-year-old had protested that she was old enough to do it herself, but Keiko felt a strong need to be with her children right now, to take care of them, to keep them close and at least feel like she was protecting them.

Besides, she knew what was coming. What Miles was about to do. And she didn’t want to be in the

room when he made the call, didn't want him to see her reaction.

Of course he came into Molly's room soon thereafter. The child fearlessly asked the question Keiko couldn't. "Are you gonna go help with the accident, Daddy?"

"That's right, dear. I just made the arrangements with Scotty's office, and they've given me an assignment."

"What about teaching your class?"

Miles shrugged. "The accident's kind of put things on hold today, honey. The Academy's not holding classes, so people can watch, and be together, and help if they can." He smirked. "Look at it this way—we both get the day off from school."

Molly pouted. "I like school. We're learning about subspace and warp engines, so I can be an engineer like my daddy!"

Miles wasn't falling for it. "And you like taking classes with that cute boy Masoud, don't you?" Molly blushed. "Well, maybe Mommy could invite a few of your classmates over for a little home schooling today, how about it, honey?"

"Um...sure! That sounds fine!" Inwardly she winced. Why was she so bad at trying to sound sincere?

Of course Miles caught it instantly, peering at his wife in puzzlement. "Molly, why don't you go call your friends now?" He didn't have to ask the girl twice—she was out the door before he finished. "Keiko? What's wrong?"

She rose and turned away. "Oh, nothing's wrong. I'm just concerned about the... 'accident.' The attack. Whatever. I'm sure everybody is."

He put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Well, there's no real sign that it's an attack. The thing hasn't made any hostile moves—there aren't even any clear life signs from it. Anyway, Scotty's put Sonya Gomez's team on it, and I'm sure they'll clear it up in no time. I'm more concerned about the mess it's made of the city. There's damage all the way from Presidio Boulevard to the Marina. We may have to demolish some of the buildings that just got finished a few months ago, and there'll have to be a whole new geological survey, no telling what new instabilities the blast has caused, and—"

"Miles..."

"What?"

She quashed what she'd been about to say, and put on a calm face as she turned to him. "I'm sure you could do more good if you went ahead and started doing it, instead of standing here telling me about it. So why don't you just go ahead?"

He started to nod, but then sensed something from her and frowned. Trust him to be most sensitive to her feelings when she didn't want him to be. "That's not what you were going to say, is it?"

"It's all right, Miles—"

"No, it isn't." There was no anger in his voice, just pure openness and caring, which made it worse.

“Honey, you know you can tell me anything.” He tried so hard, Keiko thought, to keep things running smoothly, to avoid the kind of tensions they’d had in the past. The problem was, his efforts were undermining her efforts to do the same thing.

“It’s nothing,” she insisted. “It’s silly and selfish and I don’t want to bother you with it.”

“Hey.” He put his hands on her shoulders. “Nothing you think or feel is silly to me. Whatever it is, you can tell me. It’s when we don’t talk that things build up and cause problems.” He gave her that adorable rakish grin. “Come on—if it’s that silly just tell me and we’ll have a good laugh.”

He didn’t seem to notice he was contradicting himself. It was the thought that counted, she supposed. Anyway, it was clear he wasn’t going to drop this. She sighed. “I really didn’t want to do this again.”

“Do what?”

“Complain. I was always complaining back on DS9. You were doing an incredibly hard job in incredibly chaotic conditions and instead of being supportive I just kept whining about how unhappy I was.”

“I never felt that,” Miles said emphatically. “You had every right to be happy, to fill your own needs.”

“But that meant going away from you, going off to Bajor. We spent so much time apart.”

“It wasn’t your fault. It was the place, that’s all.”

“That’s just it! I was hoping that, once we came back to Earth, we could finally live a nice, quiet life together, concentrate on being close again.”

“I want the same thing!” he assured her. “That’s why I took the teaching job—so I’d have time for my family.”

“And I do appreciate the intent, really.”

“The intent?” he frowned.

“It’s just that...no sooner did we get to San Francisco than you were off joining the repair crews, rebuilding the city. Or volunteering your time to help rebuild the defense grid.”

Miles’s gentle, understanding mood seemed to be fading, just as she’d feared. “Those were important jobs. They had to be done.”

“Of course they did, but they weren’t your responsibility anymore. Nobody ordered or even asked you to do these things. You promised we’d have a nice quiet life from now on, but you don’t seem that interested in living one.”

“I’m not doing these things for fun,” he countered, his voice rising. “They needed every extra hand they could get.”

“And I understand that, I do! But then there was the chaos from the gateways, and then the earthquake, and now this. Miles, every time there’s a problem to fix, you go off and fix it, even though it isn’t your responsibility. And I feel like I’m not seeing any more of you than I did back in the Bajoran system!”

“What are you saying? That I care more about my work than our marriage?”

“No, no, I’m not saying that.”

“Everything I do out there, Keiko—every bit of it—is to keep you, Molly, and Yoshi safe. I can’t do that by staying at home! This is what I have to contribute.”

Now her voice was hardening despite herself. “I could understand that back on DS9. You were the chief of operations; you had an understaffed department in a remote outpost. But this is Earth, Miles. This is the capital of the Federation, the heart of Starfleet. There is more ability and brilliance concentrated here than anywhere else in the quadrant. You don’t have to do it all yourself.”

“So what do you want me to do?” he demanded. “Call up Starfleet and tell them I changed my mind? Back out of my commitment, my duty?”

“No. No, you’ve already made the arrangements; you have to go.”

“Then why’d you dump this on me now?”

She gaped. “Because you asked me to! I didn’t want to burden you with it. It told you you didn’t want to hear it.”

“Damn right I didn’t! Too late now, though, isn’t it?”

“Look, just—just go. They need you.”

“That’s right. They do.” An awkward silence. “Good luck with Molly and the kids,” he said curtly, and left.

Keiko winced and rested her forehead against the wall. “I really didn’t want to do that anymore.”

* * *

Sonya Gomez stared up at the alien structure with no idea what to do next.

Was there any more they could learn from outside? She couldn’t think of a way. But did they dare attempt entry? Was it worth the risk? True, there wasn’t any sign of hostile intent—not recognizably so, anyway—but who knew how they might react if they felt they were being invaded? If there was anyone there at all. And how could they know for sure unless they went in? But shouldn’t they run every possible scan from outside to judge if it was safe?

She was thinking in circles, she realized. But her thoughts just seemed sluggish today, her creativity offline. I’ve heard of writer’s block—am I having engineer’s block?

Kieran would’ve had an idea. Kieran would’ve found some wisecrack to break the tension, make the problem seem smaller than it is and give us the confidence to face it. Kieran—

Kieran is gone. Stop it.

As if to drive the point home, Duffy’s replacement—no, Commander Tev, she corrected herself, realizing she had to accept him on his own terms—approached her. “Commander, I recommend we

proceed inside. There's nothing more to be gained by waiting."

She felt a twinge of resentment—who was this newcomer to tell her how to run an operation?—which fizzled in the face of her awareness that she wasn't doing so well on her own right now. And in the rather striking face of Corsi, a friend and proven veteran, who said, "I concur. If they don't want to come out and play, I say we start knocking."

"I've confirmed there's no match in the cultural databanks," Abramowitz added. "If there's more to learn about these people, we need to go to the source."

"True—Abramowitz and Faulwell should be on the team," Tev recommended.

"Sure, makes sense." Sonya nodded absently.

"One catch, though." That was Vance Hawkins, Corsi's deputy chief. "The readings show a synthetic gravity field over three times Earth normal in there. We'll hardly be able to move."

"Speak for yourself," Pattie chimed in (with actual chimes, no less, or at least that was how the Nasat's voice sounded).

"Ahh, I think I may have a solution for that wee problem," came Scotty's unmistakable brogue. "With some help from a laddie I think some'a you know. Obie?"

"Commander Gomez!" came yet another brogue, one Sonya knew. She turned, and was startled to behold a familiar face over Scotty's shoulder—a broad, rough, comfortably lived-in face, like an old teddy bear with its fur worn off from frequent attention.

"Chief O'Brien!" she exclaimed, her mood actually brightening a bit.

Stevens laughed. "Or should we call you 'Professor' now?"

"Fabian!" exclaimed Miles Edward O'Brien, heartily returning his handshake. "It's Old Home Week."

"Been too long, Chief," Stevens said, apparently forgetting his own question. "But that just means you've finally got some stories I haven't already heard a dozen times."

"Ahh, my life is boring now. Good and boring," he corrected quickly. "A cushy teaching gig, plenty of time for the wife and kids, no Jem'Hadar shooting at me..."

"You must be hating every moment of it."

"No!" O'Brien insisted firmly, even though Stevens had been joking. "I've never been happier. Though, well, I'll admit it's nice to get back in the saddle for a bit, work alongside the old gang. Just for a bit, though." He sobered. "I just wish Duffy could be here too. I'm so sorry, Commander," he told Sonya.

"That's all right," she demurred, really not wanting to face it again. "So what are you doing here?"

"Well, there's a little project I've been working on lately—really some of my students came up with it, but I've been helping out. It's a sort of antigravity suit, designed to allow mobility in high-gee environments. The prototypes are a bit bulky, I'm afraid, but they should let us move freely in there."

“Us?” asked Stevens. “Are you joining the team?”

“With the commander’s permission, of course. But you’ll need me in there if the suits need adjusting or something.”

“You mean like if they break down, as prototypes have a way of doing?” Corsi asked, skeptical as always of engineers and their experiments.

O’Brien seemed a bit intimidated by his first good look at the statuesque blonde, but then most people were. He recovered quickly, though. “Not on my watch, Commander.”

“We’re glad to have you, Chief,” Sonya told him. Except why did it have to be O’Brien? Looking at him just reminded her of her days back on the Enterprise, when she and Kieran had first dated. But she kept that to herself. It wasn’t his fault. It was just so frustrating—she’d committed to moving on with her life, but the universe kept throwing her reminders of what she’d lost.

Tev stepped forward. “Commander, will you be leading the team, or shall I?”

“If you don’t mind, Commander,” Scotty interposed, “I’d like to borrow Mr. Tev here. Stevens too. Some of us should stay out here and do some brainstorming, try to figure out how this bloody big bauble did what it did. I have a few thoughts, but I’d like some strong theoretical minds to help me out—tactical minds, too, in case Cemal’s right and this is some kind of attack.”

Gomez nodded. “All right, that sounds fine.”

“One more question, Commander,” said Tev.

“Yes?”

He faced her squarely. “I was told I would be the second officer on this crew. Following your leadership. But you have yet to offer any. Will I have to carry that load for you? Not that I’m not capable, of course. I just need to know what’s required of me.”

“Hey!” Stevens cried. The whole team bristled, but he was the one who strode forward to confront the Tellarite. “You have no right to talk to her that way. She’s just lost someone very special to her. Special to all of us.”

“Then if she’s not ready to resume her duties, she should still be on leave.”

“You areso out of line!”

“I?” Tev replied in cool disbelief. “Which of us has the officer’s pins, Specialist?”

“Fabe—it’s okay.” Actually it wasn’t; Sonya was angry inside. In place of Kieran, who would’ve supported her and cheered her up and made it all better, they’d stuck her with this smug, coldhearted. . . But no, that was unfair to Tev. She couldn’t let herself resent him just because he wasn’t Duffy. She had to give him every chance. “Mr. Tev is expressing a valid concern. Giving me something to think about. A little bluntness is a good way to do that. I’d prefer you to do it in private in the future, Tev, but I appreciate your input.” She smiled politely, extending a hand.

Tev glared at it as though she were making a rude gesture with it. “With your leave, Commander,” he

said stiffly, “we all have work to do.”

She controlled her reaction tightly. “Dismissed,” she said through clenched teeth. Damn—why does this keep getting harder?

* * *

Corsi squirmed within her antigrav suit, tugging at the collar. “Sorry if it’s a bit snug, Commander,” O’Brien said.

“It’s not that,” she replied. “Do we really need these cowls? They restrict head movement. Not good if something’s sneaking up behind us.”

“Well, without it your head would be three times heavier than normal. How easy would that be to move?”

“Point taken,” Corsi said, and concentrated on tucking a loose strand of dirty-blond hair under the cowl. She checked over the rest of her security team—Vance Hawkins, Rennan Konya, and Ellec Krotine—to make sure they were properly suited.

Noticing her gaze upon him, Hawkins approached. “You sure you want us both to go in? Chief and deputy chief? I mean, shouldn’t one of us stay behind in case...you know, if something should happen in there....”

Ahh. Like most of the crew, Hawkins was still dealing with the losses they’d suffered. It had been particularly hard on security; only three of them, including Corsi and Hawkins, had come out alive. And Corsi doubted Hawkins’s survivor’s guilt was in any way helped by the irony that, after having been the da Vinci’s resident punching bag on mission after mission, he’d come away from Galvan VI without a scratch.

“Listen, Hawkins,” she said firmly. “Just because we had a disaster last time out doesn’t make it any more or less likely to happen this time. There’s no reason to change the way we do things. We’re security—we’re always prepared for the worst, right?”

“Yes, sir,” he replied, subdued.

“Besides—based on our track record, disasters only happen when I’m not there to stop them.” Corsi had been in a coma during the worst of it, taken down by an alien light show that didn’t even give her anything to shoot or kick at. Rationally, there was no cause to think she could’ve prevented things if she’d been conscious; but she just knew deep down that somehow she could’ve. Right—like only Hawkins is dealing with survivor’s guilt. “So I’m sure as hell not gonna sit out here twiddling my thumbs.”

“Me neither.”

“Issue settled, then.”

“Okay.” They exchanged a look of mutual approval and support. Then Hawkins sidled closer and whispered, “One other thing, though.”

“What?”

“It’s about Konya. I mean, he’s a nice guy and all, but... a Betazoid in security?”

Corsi smirked. “Hawkins, he is a Betazoid,” she said in a normal tone. “Why whisper? He already knows what you think.” Hawkins blushed, throwing a sheepish look at Konya, who waved back insouciantly. “All I can tell you is, he came through training with impressive marks, and recommendations from instructors I know and trust.”

“Which doesn’t necessarily mean anything out in the field.”

“No. But we have to find out what he’s made of sometime, so why not now?”

Hawkins granted her point, then awkwardly wandered over to Rennan Konya, whose large dark eyes met his expectantly. “Look...”

“It’s all right,” said Konya. “It’s a perfectly understandable concern. Betazoids aren’t known for our combat skills. I know I have to prove myself; I don’t take it personally. Oh, and as for the other thing, don’t worry—I can only read your surface thoughts. I’m not the most powerful telepath on Betazed.”

“Then how did you know I was worried about that?”

“Because everyone is.”

“Oh.”

Corsi wondered if that made Hawkins more or less embarrassed.

“So,” her deputy chief asked, “does that mean you don’t feel people’s pain? Is that why you can be in security?”

“Oh, I feel it, all right. My cognitive reading’s average, but my empathy’s just fine.”

“Then how do you do your job?”

Konya looked at him contemplatively. “Why should causing pain and injury be necessary to preserve security?” he asked as though positing a topic for philosophical debate.

“Well... of course there’s more to security than fighting. Crowd control, paramedic stuff, investigation—I bet you’d be great at interrogation, catching liars and such.”

The lanky Betazoid shrugged. “I do okay.”

“But if someone’s coming at you and wants you dead, you have to fight back.”

“Fight, yes. But inflict pain?” Konya shifted easily into a loose fighting stance. “Come on—attack me,” he said, his tone as amiable and serene as ever.

Hawkins hesitated, so Corsi gave him a prompt. “Go on, Hawkins—I’d like to see for myself.”

“Okay.” Hawkins shrugged. “But you asked for it.”

He didn’t lunge blindly—Corsi had trained him too well. He read Konya’s stance—some kind of judo

variant, it seemed to Corsi, designed to turn his own attack against him with a minimum of effort. Sensible enough, given their difference in build, but Hawkins knew how to adjust to such tactics. If the new guy wants to prove himself, Corsi thought, Hawkins will make him earn it.

Moments later, he was on the ground, with Konya extending a hand to help him up. He took the hand, rose, then tried another throw.

And found himself facedown this time, his cheek a little scraped. “Ow,” Konya said in sympathy. “Sorry, didn’t see that pebble. Better than broken ribs, though, huh?”

This time Hawkins didn’t try anything when he accepted Konya’s hand up. “How?”

“Proprioception,” Konya smiled. “The body’s sense of its own position and movement. I’ve trained myself to tune into it, into the motor cortex rather than the cerebral cortex. I can feel the way your body moves as clearly as you can. I know your every move as soon as you start to make it, so I can evade it. I can sense your weak points, your most exposed moments. So I don’t need to force my way through your resistance—I can find the attack that neutralizes you most effectively with the least damage.”

“Neat trick,” Corsi said icily. “But what if you’re twenty meters away, a Nausicaan’s about to disembowel your chief, and the only weapon you have is an antique plasma rifle that kills slow and burns like hell?”

Konya’s calm wavered for the first time, the possibility clearly disturbing him. But he faced her squarely. “I’m committed to my duty, Commander, whatever the psychic cost to myself. But isn’t good security procedure about averting such situations before they arise?”

“A nice idea in principle, but reality isn’t so tidy.”

“But if we’re too quick to assume violence is necessary, will we try hard enough to find alternatives?”

Corsi loomed over him. “You want to avert violence, then you watch that lip, mister.”

“Children!” The sharp bark came from Tev, who stood there with arms crossed, looking down his substantial snout at them even though they were all taller than he was. “If you’re done playing, it’s time to go.”

Corsi had her expression composed by the time she turned to face the Tellarite second officer, but Konya’s eyes widened at what she was thinking.

Chapter

3

The first thing Gomez realized when they entered the alien structure was that there were too many tall people on her team. O’Brien, Bart Faulwell, and three of the four security guards—the exception being Krotine, a wiry Boslic with golden skin and cherry-red hair beneath her gravsuit cowl—were nearly scraping their heads against the ceilings, and having to duck through doorways. “This may not have been designed by humanoids,” Abramowitz observed.

“There are short humanoid species,” O’Brien observed. “Like Ferengi, or Kaldun.”

“But the corridors and doorways are wide and arched as well,” Abramowitz went on. “And the door controls don’t seem to be shaped for a humanoid hand.”

“That makes sense, doesn’t it?” Faulwell asked. “That high-gravity dwellers would be shorter than most species?” That was one blessing—O’Brien’s gravsuits worked like a charm, making them feel they were walking in normal gravity—although the tight suits did restrict movement somewhat, and they had to keep a firmer grip on their tricorders.

“Not necessarily,” Gomez said absently. “Long limbs would give you more leverage for fighting higher gravity.”

“Sometimes,” Pattie said. “But it’s important to stay low so falls don’t hurt as much. As for the leverage, well, you don’t think all these legs are just for sex appeal, do you?”

Somehow Pattie’s joke fell flat. In fact, all their conversation was feeling a little strange, full of awkward pauses, as though everyone’s timing was off. Gomez realized what it was—everyone kept expecting to hear a patented Duffy wisecrack, and got thrown off when none came.

“You know, I think Stevens and Commander Tev were right,” O’Brien ventured as they entered a new chamber. “This doesn’t look anything like a troop carrier or any kind of military facility. There’s practically no internal security.” He looked down the length of the room, which contained several tiers of low tables facing a podium of sorts at the front. “And I’ll turn in my teaching credentials if this doesn’t look like a classroom.”

“Then where are the chairs?” Corsi asked. “All this gravity and nowhere to sit?”

“Maybe they sit on the floor, like in Japan,” Abramowitz suggested.

O’Brien grunted. “Keiko’s decorated the house with a Japanese theme. Tatami mats, low tables, the works. Looks nice and all, and the kids love having things on their level—but my back hasn’t been the same since.” He threw Gomez a long-suffering grin. “The things we do for love, eh, Commander?”

“Wha—? Oh. Sure,” she said distantly.

The grin changed to apology. “Oh...sorry, Commander. I didn’t mean to hit a sore spot.”

She offered an apologetic look right back. “It’s okay, Chief. You’re lucky you have someone like that.”

“Well, most of the time,” he grimaced. “Some days are better than others, and sometimes...but, well, that’s nothing next to what you must...umm...I’ll scout on ahead, if it’s all right with you, Commander.”

“Go on, Chief. Thank you.”

“Hawkins, Krotine, go with him,” Corsi ordered, coming up alongside Gomez. Once they’d gained some privacy, the taller woman asked, “Are you okay?”

Gomez frowned. “You mean, am I too distracted? Not showing enough leadership?”

Corsi bristled a bit, then reversed herself, speaking with a softness few people heard. “I mean, are you

okay?”

Now it was Gomez’s turn to be embarrassed. She’d forgotten—this wasn’t just “Core-Breach” Corsi, the coldhearted, no-nonsense security chief. This was her friend Domenica, with whom she’d been through hell recently. (Come to think of it, after what had happened at Galvan VI, maybe it was time to retire that “Core-Breach” nickname—it wasn’t very funny anymore.)

“I don’t know, Domenica,” she sighed. “I mean, I’ve grieved. God, how I’ve grieved. I got it all out, I worked through it like they say, I felt better, all...cathartized and everything. Is that a word?”

“Hell if I know. Faulwell’s the linguist, not me.”

“So I got through it, came out the other end, decided, you know, it’s time to move on. Kieran’s gone. I accept the loss. It still hurts like hell, but I accept it, and it’s in the past, and what I need to do now is focus on the future. On rebuilding my life.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Yeah, but...” She gazed up at Corsi imploringly. “I don’t know how. I look at my life, at the pieces that are left, and I don’t know how to put them together into something new. They just...don’t fit. Because there’s this one huge piece that’s missing, that’s never going to be there again. And without that piece, none of the others make sense.” She shook her head. “The strange thing is...even when Kieran was around, I wasn’t really sure how he fit into my life.”

Corsi smirked. “He wasn’t exactly a standardized component.”

“Yeah, I guess they broke the mold after they made him.”

“After? I was thinking before.”

Gomez glared...but saw a rare flash of humor and understanding in Domenica’s ice-blue eyes. She was mocking her own past disapproval of Duffy, and thus in an odd way apologizing for it. Sonya accepted the apology with a look, knowing she wouldn’t want to make a big deal out of it. “Whatever. All I know is, as little sense as our relationship made to me, my life makes no sense without it. I just don’t know what to do next.”

Corsi mulled it over. “Well, I’ll tell you this, Commander: I’ve seen you take a meaningless jumble of parts and build them into something functional more times than I can count. Even if they were missing the most important piece, you found something that’d do the trick in its place, or a way to rearrange things so it wasn’t needed after all.”

“Yeah, but that’s engineering. This is life, and emotion, and...it’s not the same thing.”

“So I keep telling you guys. Well, except for the emotion part. We all know I don’t have any.”

“Of course not.” Gomez smiled.

“Well, maybe the thing to do is start with what’s in front of you. You’ve got a job to do. A team to lead and protect. Maybe a city or a planet to keep safe. Focus on solving their problems—maybe it’ll be a start to solving your own. At least...” She faltered, shrugged a bit. “At least it’ll distract you from your own, and sometimes that’s enough.”

Gomez looked at her thoughtfully for a moment, until Corsi fidgeted and shook her head. “Hell, I don’t know. First Stevens, now you—do I look like a counselor?”

“All right.” Gomez clasped her shoulder briefly, but her voice was businesslike. “So we have this job to do. This place to explore.”

“Yes, we do. And since you brought it up, Commander,” Corsi went on, becoming all business again, “dowe have any sort of a plan, or are we wandering aimlessly? A little more leadership actually wouldn’t hurt about now.”

Gomez accepted the chastisement. “You’re right. We need to find the answers to some questions,” she went on more loudly, taking in the rest of the team. “Like, where is everybody? We’ve found plenty of sleeping quarters, cafeterias, and the like, but we haven’t seen any people.”

“Theywere here,” Konya said, “and not long ago.” He gestured to his tricorder. “The DNA residue’s still fresh, and there are still heat signatures in the floor, like someone was sitting or walking on it. Odds are they were here until just before the thing appeared—maybe even shortly after.”

“Well, the building was damaged in the blast,” Abramowitz said. “Maybe they evacuated.”

“To where?” Corsi asked. “Out into the caverns? They’d have been spotted.”

“Beamed out?” asked Pattie.

“Again, to where? And how could they do it undetected? Certainly no hostile ship could’ve gotten close enough to beam them without being intercepted first.”

Gomez changed tacks. “Bart? Have you been able to get any information from their writing?”

The middle-aged linguist shook his head. “It’s hard to translate writing without some context, without knowing anything about the spoken language, the species doing the writing. I can tell you what symbols mean ‘open door’ and ‘close door,’ but extrapolating further meaning would take a lot of time, trial and error. I’ll be more help if we can meet somebody who’ll talk to us.”

Gomez sighed. So much for constructive leadership—she couldn’t accomplish much if the universe didn’t give her anything to work with. “Okay, I guess we’ll just keep looking. Maybe Scotty’s team outside will have better luck figuring this thing out.”

* * *

Blasted meetings,thought Scotty as he strode into Cemal Iskander’s mobile command center, where he’d been summoned by the director. Waste of time, the lot of them. “I’m not a spring chicken anymore, y’know! I can’t be bothered wastin’ what time I’ve got left in meetings!” He barely noticed his transition from thinking it to saying it aloud, or cared much. One advantage of being a Living Legend, and just generally an Old Cuss, was that you could get away with telling people exactly what you thought, even when they outranked you. That was a lesson he’d learned from Leonard McCoy—though come to think of it, Leonard had been just as outspoken at forty.

“I think you’ll find this a productive meeting, Scotty,” said Iskander, who sat behind a central desk filled with monitors and readouts, while Admiral Ross and Captain Gold stood nearby. “We’ve been

contacted by someone with information about the alien construct. A member of a species called the Nachri. Ever heard of them?"

"Nachri...Nachri," Scotty repeated, the aspirated "ch" fitting neatly into his brogue. "It sounds familiar."

"Probably from history class," Gold told him. "If I remember right, they were a little before your time—a two-bit empire the Federation ran up against in the late twenty-second century. I think Starfleet had a hand in overthrowing their government."

"That's right," Ross said, reading from a file he'd called up on his padd. "That was before the Prime Directive was firmly established. Starfleet backed a rebel movement that drove out the dictatorial, expansionist regime and set up a representative government. They've pretty much kept to themselves ever since, declining to join the Federation, though we've had a friendly trade relationship the whole time. Yes, I remember now; they supplied some relief materiel during the war. Nothing combat-related, though; they've left that pretty far behind."

"So you'd say they're trustworthy?" Iskander asked.

"Worth hearing out at least," said Gold.

"That's my conclusion too. I have their representative standing by." He opened the comm channel. Replacing the Federation seal on the big screen was the image of a tall, sleekly built humanoid covered in short gray fur. His head was somewhat avian, with a beaklike muzzle underneath a pair of large eagle eyes, and topped by a triangular, pterosaurian fin. He wore a uniform and seemed to be seated on a starship bridge.

"My prayers to you all in your time of crisis," he began in a rich baritone. "I am Captain Zakash of the Nachri Defense Group."

Iskander returned the greeting and introduced the others with him.

"As I told your director earlier," Zakash went on, "we observed the news broadcasts of the San Francisco catastrophe and immediately recognized the design of the alien structure. We are already en route to Earth and eager to offer our assistance against this enemy."

"Enemy?" Iskander repeated intently. "So it is a hostile force?"

"Yes," he told them solemnly. "Their species is named the Shanical. They are ruthless, hideous creatures, too alien to coexist with species like yours and mine."

Scotty frowned at that, and noticed Gold doing the same.

"My people had the misfortune of encountering them early in our interstellar age, before we met the Federation. These large domes would mysteriously appear on our colony worlds, displacing the surrounding earth and atmosphere to produce a devastating shock—an opening blow against population, infrastructure, and morale. The structures are at once a kind of homing beacon and staging area, a ready-made base for launching their invasion when they arrive soon thereafter. This is why we immediately launched our Defense Group toward Earth—you have limited time before the invasion begins."

"I knew it," Iskander exclaimed, though his voice remained level; he was too good a Muslim to let anger

overcome him.

“But why wait so long before attacking?” asked Ross.

“Presumably so that you will let your guard down.”

“Then why get it up in the first place with this initial attack? Why ruin the element of surprise?”

Zakash fidgeted. “Who can understand the motives of such alien creatures? They do not think the way we do. I concede we can only speculate about their motives, but their actions are clear.”

“How come we never heard about this Shanical menace?” inquired Gold.

“We fought a fierce war against them over two centuries ago,” Zakash told him. “It was that struggle that began our conquering period. We finally drove them from our space, but had become so used to fighting,” he went on ruefully, “that we just kept at it, finding new enemies to battle even after the original foe had vanished.”

“Vanished?” Gold echoed.

“Yes, Captain. They abandoned their strongholds, disappeared back to wherever they came from. I see now they were just biding their time. Perhaps seeing a prime target like the Federation, still weakened by recent warfare, has renewed their appetite for conquest.”

“You see, Bill?” Iskander said. “It’s as I’ve said. Now more than ever we must remain alert to enemies, to vultures hoping to prey on our weakness. The struggle to preserve our way of life is never-ending.”

“Captain Zakash,” Scotty asked, “do you know how they pull off their appearin’ act?”

“Our scientists never fully determined that, but our analyses from the time are at your disposal. Together, hopefully, we can find a way to defeat them once and for all.”

“And can you tell me...if these structures are designed for poppin’ in and blastin’ away the earth around them, how come they aren’t built to handle such a shock? And how come they aren’t defended? Surely after the first attacks, you’d have blasted the later ones as soon as they appeared.”

Zakash had grown increasingly impatient as Scotty spoke. “Director, why are we wasting time with all these questions? I’m sure my technical people and yours can work these side issues out later. Right now there is imminent danger.”

“I agree,” Iskander said. “There’s a time for analysis and a time for action. Captain Zakash, your Defense Group is welcome, as is your assistance.”

“We should be there within three hours,” Zakash assured him. “Defense Group out.”

Iskander turned to Ross. “Admiral, I recommend doubling the size of our defensive cordon around the Shanical structure.”

“I’ll begin the arrangements.”

Turning to Scotty, Iskander added, “And Scotty, you should pull your team out. It’s too dangerous for

them to be in there.”

“Cemal, they’ve seen no sign of any danger. The place is abandoned.”

“You heard Zakash. The Shanial could materialize at any moment.”

“Aye, I heard what he claimed. Whether I believe him—that’s another matter.”

Iskander frowned. “Scotty, I admit we only have his word to go on, but it’s a word we have no reason to doubt—and can’t afford to ignore. And one thing is clear—we have been struck a harsh blow. Dozens of innocent people have been killed, including some of your own.” He strode over to a window, gestured out at the onlookers. “Look at that crowd. The people are angry, afraid. Less than a year has passed since the war, and now we’ve been assaulted again. Those people aren’t going to be content to have us sit around asking questions—they want us to do something that will keep them safe. And I intend to heed their voices. That structure is dangerous, and the people who sent it are dangerous. That much is certain. We can sort out the reasons why later, but for now we have to protect ourselves. Pull out your team.”

“Not without a clear and present danger, Cemal. We’ve got a transporter lock on ’em at all times. If things get hot, we’ll pull them out in a jiffy. But unless that happens, I say they’re in the best position to give us some real answers. To confirm Zakash’s story—or not.”

“I agree,” Gold said. “They’re my crew and my responsibility.” He shook his head. “Lord knows, after what we’ve been through recently my first impulse is to yank them out at the first sign of trouble. But if I did that they’d never accomplish a damn thing. They go into danger because that’s where they’re needed, where they can do the most good. If I forget that... I betray the memory of all the ones who gave their lives doing good for others. I say they stay, as long as there’s a chance they can help.”

* * *

Stevens and Tev absorbed the information Scotty passed on to them (and to the rest of the team, over the open comm) with very different attitudes. Tev hardly seemed interested, concentrating more on reviewing the blast analysis they’d been working on when Scotty was called away. “How can you be so stoic?” Stevens asked the older officer. “It’s just been confirmed that we’re about to be attacked! I don’t know many Tellarites who’d take that sitting down.”

“First,” Tev responded, “I have a job to do, and histrionics don’t help. Second, it’s been alleged, not confirmed. I don’t place stock in intangibles—only in what I can handle, test, and prove. Third, I’ve been sitting less than you have—I should talk to the captain about enforcing the physical fitness requirements.”

Stevens gaped, but restrained himself from saying what he wanted to say. Not only was Tev his superior, but Scotty was standing right there and he didn’t want to look bad in front of the big boss. Indeed, Scotty was chuckling. “He has a point about one thing, lad—all we have is one man’s word.”

“But why would he lie?”

The S.C.E. chief shook his silvery head. “That’s for him to explain, if it turns out he is. All I know is, his story feels as phony as Harry Mudd’s handshake.”

“Leave the politics to those who can understand it, Technician,” Tev told him. “What we have here is a delightful engineering puzzle. How does an eight-story building appear out of nowhere?”

“Delightful?” Stevens echoed in disbelief. “Dozens of people died!”

“As they did on Maeglin, Eerlik, BorSitu Minor, Kursican, Sherman’s Planet, and many other places the da Vinci has visited. Tragic, of course, but it doesn’t change what we do—solve the puzzles the universe gives us. You can’t tell me you don’t enjoy the mental achievement.” He grinned. “Have I thanked you for this assignment, Scotty? It’s a dream job, the chance to go out there, pit my mind against the strangest technologies, the toughest crises. So much better than that laboratory job I almost took. Wonderful luck, that this position opened up when it did.”

To hell with respect for superiors, Stevens thought—the self-satisfied look on Tev’s face as he said that was the last straw. “That position opened up because my best friend died!” he shouted in Tev’s face. “You think that’s good luck? Do you?”

“How good is your luck, Technician?” Tev fired back. “You’ll need it if you persist in that tone.”

Stevens felt Scotty’s hand on his shoulder, his grip surprisingly firm. “Settle down, laddie. Tev didn’t mean it that way.”

“Yeah?” Stevens said, struggling to control himself. “Well, he could show a little more respect.”

“Respect for the dead?” Tev asked. “A strange custom, since they don’t care one way or the other.”

“How about respect for the loss their friends are going through?”

Tev was silent for a moment, studying him thoughtfully. Then he turned away. “Not my business,” he said brusquely. “I didn’t know the man—can’t offer any meaningful sentiments. So let’s drop it and get back to work, shall we?” He grew animated again. “We have a mystery to solve. How do you penetrate a defense grid that can’t be penetrated?”

After a moment, Scotty’s eyes widened. “Maybe you don’t!” At the others’ puzzled looks, he said, “Think about it, lads! If it’s here, inside the grid, and nothing can get through the grid from outside—”

It hit Stevens. “Then it wasn’t outside to begin with!”

“Rather,” said Tev pedantically, “it must have been placed here before the grid was erected.”

Stevens glared, but he had greater concerns. “Could the Breen have left it during their attack? Are these Shanial allied with them?”

“I have a suspicion, lad,” Scotty replied, “that it was here much earlier than that. Ask yerself—where did it burst from?”

“The sinkhole.”

“Aye, and what was there before the ground caved in?”

“The Starfleet Museum.”

“Exactly!” Scotty smirked. “Since becoming a historical relic myself, I’ve taken quite an interest in museums. I used to visit that one all the time. There was a wealth of alien artifacts there, some of which

nobody ever figured out the use of. I spent many a day tryin' to eke out some answers of my own from 'em. Many of 'em are gone forever, alas—but many were just buried under the rubble.”

Stevens frowned. “So what are you suggesting? That one of them was some kind of, maybe a wormhole terminus that opened up to let the structure through?”

“Aye, that’s one possibility. I’m sure we can come up with dozens, just standin’ here brainstormin’. But as an ancestor o’ Mr. Spock’s used to say, it’s a mistake to theorize ahead o’ the facts. I say we go to the new museum, study their records of the missing artifacts, and see what we can find that might give us a clue.”

* * *

Gomez, listening in over the comm, had winced when Tev and Stevens had gone at it. She hadn’t known which side to take—certainly Tev’s callous cheerfulness infuriated her as much as it did Stevens, but she couldn’t condone an enlisted crewman talking to an officer in that way. She could feel the knot forming in her shoulders, followed by a twinge of despair when she remembered Kieran’s massages were a thing of the past now. She was grateful that Scotty had broken it up, and changed the subject back to business. “Good idea, sir,” she told him after his museum suggestion. “We’ll start scanning in here for any evidence of wormhole generators, or similar equipment.”

“Keep an eye out for symbols, too,” Faulwell suggested. “Perhaps something at the museum has similar markings to the ones we’re finding here. I’ll upload what I’ve scanned so far to your tricorder, Captain Scott.”

“Good lad.”

“Commander?” That was O’Brien, calling from a nearby intersection. “I’m scanning something strange here. A subspace reading I didn’t get before.”

Gomez and the others gathered around him, confirming the readings on their tricorders. “Was it shielded?”

“Hard to say. Maybe just too faint to read from a distance.” They homed in on the signal and began moving toward it, fanning out as much as possible to get a better sensor baseline. O’Brien frowned as his tricorder brushed the corridor wall. “Hang on.” He placed the sensor array against the wall. “The readings are stronger in the walls themselves.”

“Are they generating it?” Corsi asked, looking around suspiciously.

“No, I don’t think so... more like the subspace waves are being channeled through them, isolated within them, so that we didn’t read them in the corridors.”

“Like a light pulse in a fiber-optic cable,” Gomez said.

“Exactly. The cortenum in the wall is confining them. We thought it was just for holding up against the gravity, but it’s more like it’s functioning as a gravitic wave guide. I think this whole structure is designed to channel gravimetric energies—which probably means it can create subspace distortions, like a warp coil.”

“It should’ve been obvious,” Gomez said, chastising herself. “The cortenum.”

“Not really, Commander. Cortenum’s useless for warp drive without verterium in the mix. As far as we knew, it was just inert building material.”

“So this isn’t a warp engine—but it must be something similar.”

“Something that went in a different direction from our science.”

“Never mind the lecture, Professor,” Corsi said. “Are you telling us this whole structure around us is active, generating some space-warping effect?”

Gomez studied her own readings. “It looks more like a resonance—like it’s picking up emissions from somewhere else, the way theda Vinci’s warp coils resonated with the blast. The actual source must be what the chief picked up before.”

“Which means,” Corsi said, “that we’re close to the source.” With a glance, she put her security team on heightened alert.

Soon they came to a large, heavy portal. Sonya placed her hand against the surface—it was literally vibrating with gravitic energies. “Bart, the control panel?”

Faulwell examined the markings and made some efforts to open the hatchway, with no success. “I don’t think we’re authorized users,” he said dryly. “Perhaps the P-38s?”

“Try it.” Gomez nodded to O’Brien and Pattie, who extracted their trusty door-openers from their kits and went to work.

“Just call me P-38 Blue,” Pattie muttered.

“Where are we?” Abramowitz asked. “Within the structure, that is.”

Gomez studied her map. “Pretty much dead center. No clear reading of what’s inside—it scanned like a solid mass.”

“Maybe...” O’Brien grunted as he strained at the portal. “Maybe an equipment core...with just some maintenance crawlways inside.”

“Then why the big door?” Abramowitz asked.

“You’re the culture maven, you tell us,” Pattie said, not panting in the least, since her speech apparatus didn’t depend on breath.

“Anyway,” Gomez continued, “whatever’s in there is no bigger than theda Vinci’s bridge. It’s probably pretty important, though, considering—”

She cut off as the door finally sprang open. They gazed inside, to behold...

A huge indoor plaza, nearly as wide and high as the whole structure they were in, its roof supported by tier upon tier of heavy columns. Through the spaces between the columns could be seen large domelike buildings, braced with flying buttresses and holding thousands of windows, many lit from within. Between the buildings ran roadways that stretched into the distance.

They all just stared dumbly, until Corsi glared at the impossibility and cracked, “So—is that a city in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?”

Chapter

4

The team advanced cautiously into the city—indeed, that was the only word for it. Corsi left Konya and Krotine to guard the door. Looking back, they saw that it was one of numerous such portals in a domelike structure some six meters high and twelve wide, serving as the base of one of the many columns that bore the weight of the roof twenty-five meters above.

“Are we...still on Earth?” Abramowitz asked as she gazed wide-eyed around her.

“Maybe it’s an illusion,” Hawkins suggested. “A holodeck simulation.”

“I’m not reading any photonic fields or projections,” O’Brien told him. “As far as the tricorder can tell, this is just what it looks like—a whole city, kilometers wide.”

“And I’m getting plenty of life readings now,” Corsi warned. “Nothing the tricorder recognizes. And something’s making it hard to pin down positions.”

“Must be the cortenum in the walls,” Sonya said, “scattering the signals.”

“I don’t care how it works, I just don’t like it. I’m going to be predictable here and suggest extreme caution.”

Naturally, it was then that the shooting started. “You think?!” O’Brien cried as he ducked behind a column.

Corsi let her tricorder drop, trusting her eyes more, watching for the source of the beams. More blasts came, from a low angle, and she returned fire, but not before one particle stream hit Vance Hawkins in the leg. He cried in pain and dropped. Corsi afforded him a brief glance—he was moving, but still in the line of fire. “Konya! Get Hawkins to safety. Krotine, cover fire!”

Sonya struck her combadge. “Gomez to Gold, we need emergency beam-out!” Nothing. “Gomez to Scott! Gomez to Starfleet HQ, come in, emergency!” Nothing and more nothing. “Damn—we’re cut off!”

* * *

Fabian Stevens was no racist. He’d never approved of the occasional wisecracks he heard about the Tellarites’ resemblance to Terrestrial pigs. Few people in this day and age meant anything truly malicious by it, but even the casual jokes and swine-related nicknames struck Stevens as insensitive and disrespectful to an entire species (though, come to think of it, that attitude in itself was probably unfair to pigs, who were surely perfectly decent sorts once you got to know them). Indeed, that was part of what had prompted his interest in Tellarite culture, his desire to learn about their full depth and texture as a people. (Said interest, of course, had led to a rather unfortunate incident in a bar, thus providing Kieran

Duffy with one of his favorite stories to tell.)

Even with his personal dislike of Tev, Stevens still would've objected to anyone making a porcine slur against him. Generally he could never resist a bad pun, but he'd never even think of accusing Tev of hogging the glory, or of saying there was something not quite kosher about him. No, the thought would never cross his mind.

Nonetheless, the metaphor came to him unbidden: As they surveyed the exhibits in the Alien Technologies wing of the new Starfleet Museum, Tev looked as happy as a hog in a wallow. His deep-set eyes gleamed as they roved over alien devices whose function remained unknown, burning with the desire to dissect them and extract their secrets. He clearly had great enthusiasm for the S.C.E.'s work, and Stevens figured he deserved some credit for that. But it seemed to be the only thing Tev did give a damn about, and Stevens didn't see any way he could work with the man. Let Tev go off on his own one-man team—he sure seemed to think he could do it all himself. Probably everyone would be better off that way.

At least Tev spreads the wealth around, Stevens thought. As if condescending to his own crewmates weren't enough, he was now haranguing the museum's assistant curator, a bearded, professorial man named Sutherland, about the inaccuracies in some of the artifact descriptions. "He can never resist telling anyone how brilliant he is, can he?" Stevens asked Scotty.

The older man shrugged it off. "Och, you know how it is with Tellarites. Honest to a fault. To them, courtesy and tact are just other words for lies. I find it refreshing myself."

"Why am I not surprised?" Stevens said.

"And modesty's no different. Tev's just bein' forthright about himself. If it comes off as superior, it's because, bottom line, he is one o' the very best. What, ye think I'd assign anything less to fill poor Duffy's shoes?" Stevens winced, and Scotty peered closer. "Och, I get it. Of course this isn't about his bein' a Tellarite."

"Of course not. I like Tellarites. They tell it like it is, just like you say. Makes them a very...dramatic people."

"What it's really about, then," Scotty went on, "is that he's not Duffy."

"It's not just that. He's the anti-Duffy. Duffy was a nice guy, easygoing, friendly. He made the team like a family. It's not just—with all due respect, sir, it's not just technical know-how that makes a good team member."

"Are you sayin' I chose badly, then?" When Scotty wanted, that avuncular twinkle in his eye could become a cutting laser. Stevens fidgeted under it for a moment, until Scotty chuckled and released him from the stare. "Fabian, lad, let me tell you somethin'. If I gave you a second officer like Duffy was, you'd keep expectin' him to be Duffy. Which would not be fair to him—or her—and would be terrible for the team, because you'd keep on strivin' after a rapport that's gone forever, and you'd never find your stride again. This way you can make a fresh start, and find a new balance."

"You make it sound so easy," Stevens said. "But then, what would you know about it? Someone on the Enterprise crew died, they always managed to come back to life. Hell, you were resurrected twice! What, did you guys do the Grim Reaper a favor or something?"

Scotty's anger returned, for real this time. "Don't you dare tell me I never lost anyone, Mr. Stevens! I lost dozens of good people on the Enterprise. Engineers like Harper, Compton, Watkins, and Cleary. Friends like Gary Mitchell and Bob Tomlinson. My own nephew died in my arms! Aye, I'm blessed that a few of my closest friends are still with me, but when I woke up from that transporter beam, it was like almost everyone I'd ever known had died all at once. So don't you presume to tell me I don't understand what it means to lose someone!"

They were both very quiet for a time after that. Finally Stevens met Scott's eyes in silent apology and entreaty, and asked in a very small voice, "So how do you manage it?"

The anger in Scotty's eyes turned to a deep sadness. "I'm afraid experience is the only way. You just have to get through it and out the other side."

"But then what do you do?"

Scotty smiled understandingly. "You find something new. Something to build, something to fix...something to give yer life meaning. That's why I took Admiral Ross's offer to join the S.C.E.—better than wallowing in nostalgia."

"But how meaningful can it be if it's going to be lost sooner or later too?"

"It doesn't have to last to have meaning, lad! Every moment it brings you a sense of accomplishment, of success, of makin' entropy's work just a wee bit harder—that's all the meaning you need."

Scotty clapped Stevens's shoulder, and the younger man smiled in thanks. Then he shook off the moment. "Okay, that's all well and good. But how do you fit Tev into that equation? He's just impossible to get along with." Stevens saw that Tev was starting back toward them, and lowered his voice. "I don't see myself building anything useful with him. There's no way he could be part of any rapport."

"That's what I thought about a certain Vulcan when I first met him oh, a lifetime or four ago. Not to mention a certain doctor with such a mouth on him I wondered he hadn't been kicked outta Starfleet the first day." He winked. "Tension's a force like any other, lad. The trick is simply findin' how to make it useful."

Stevens was skeptical, but said nothing, since Tev was arriving. "Despite the mislabelings," the Tellarite told them, "we can be confident nothing's missing from the AT collection that fits our parameters."

"Aye," Scotty sighed. "'Twas a long shot."

"Not necessarily. Alien devices aren't always recognizable as such." He showed them a padd containing a lengthy catalog of items and their descriptions. "A list of all missing alien artifacts, even those not clearly technological." Stevens groaned inwardly at the added work. At least this was one difference between Tev and Duffy that should work in his favor: Tev seemed to revel in research. He'd probably be glad to carry most of the workload himself.

Indeed the Tellarite did throw himself eagerly into the research, but it didn't make things any easier for Stevens, since he had to struggle to keep up, checking items that Tev then double-checked. When his pace flagged, the second officer prodded him to work harder, which, on top of his constant kibitzing of Stevens's conclusions, just made the human more and more frustrated. Only Scotty's weather eye upon him kept him from erupting. He just couldn't understand how this kind of tension could produce any beneficial results.

Just as Stevens was becoming convinced they were on a wild-goose chase, Scotty perked up as something in the catalog caught his attention. “Hang on a minute!”

“Sir?”

Scotty showed the padd to the curator, Sutherland. “Can you show us where these are kept?”

“Ah, yes, the Cabochons. This way, please. We, um, have them in storage. Much of the museum is still under construction, and the, ah, flashier items tend to take priority. A shame, really—I’ve always felt they were an intriguing mystery.”

Stevens was feeling the same way about now. “Sir, what are these...Cabochons?”

“Ah,” Sutherland said. “A set of small crystal spheres discovered on a dead planet in the Beta Aquilae sector in the 2180s, by the starshipKnossos, I believe. Presumably created by that planet’s civilization, but the planet had suffered some total cataclysm, wiping out all other signs of their presence. To this day we don’t know by whom they were made, or how, or even what they’re made of.”

“Aye,” Scotty said intently. “They canna be scanned clearly due to some kinda low-level subspace interference.”

“And what does that tell us?” Stevens asked.

“I’m not sure.” Scotty frowned. “There’s something on the tip of my mind, something familiar about the interference patterns.”

Sutherland led them through the museum archives, finally reaching a shelf from which he extracted a box not much bigger than a standard engineer’s tool kit. He opened it to reveal a set of fourteen glassy orbs of various sizes, though none larger than a racquetball. Stevens peered into their deep red interiors, intrigued by their inner facets, which seemed to extend to infinity. “I don’t get it. I thought we were looking for missing items.”

“Ah, but two of them are missing, including the largest one,” Sutherland told him sadly. “These were all we could recover.”

Tev was scanning them with his tricorder. “The interference patternis familiar, Scotty. It reminds me of the subspace shockwave that hit theda Vinci. ”

Scotty examined the tricorder readings, a gleam coming into his eye. “No doubt, laddie, but that’s not what I saw in it. Look closer—doesn’t that remind you of anything else?”

Tev frowned. “Some kind of primitive warp equation—Alcubierre, perhaps?”

“More like Van Den Broeck.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Stevens.

“I take it,” Tev said pedantically (and predictably), “that you’re not up on the history of warp theory.”

“I’m a hands-on kind of guy, Commander. I leave theory to the ivory-tower types.”

“Ahh, that’s how I used to think,” said Scotty. “But once I woke up from my seventy-five-year nap and saw how much learnin’ I had to catch up on, I figured I might as well brush up on the basics.”

“Ye see, lad...the problem with the earliest warp theories is that generatin’ the warp bubble would’ve taken more energy than the universe contains.” Scotty chuckled. “This was before Cochrane figured out how to tweak the subspace geometry and change the constants. Anyway, one o’ the proposed solutions was to make the warp bubble dimensionally transcendental. Big as a ship on the inside, smaller than an atom on the outside.”

Stevens’s eyes widened. “Of course! If the Shanical structure was in a microwarp bubble like that, and the field collapsed...my God, it’d be just like what happened. It’d expand from a point to full size in an instant, blasting away everything around it with incredible force.”

“Aye. The microwarp equations turned out to be useless for propulsion—for one thing, you’d be smaller than a wavelength of light and couldn’t see a thing—so they were abandoned when subspace theory came along. But who’s to say they couldn’t be used to shrink somethin’ into astatic microbubble?”

“You mean...like a subspace compression!” Stevens interpreted. “Like that time on DS9 when they shrank theRubicon by folding most of its mass into subspace.”

“Aye,” Scotty chuckled. “I heard about that. A wild tale, that one. I never would’ve believed it if we hadn’t run into such a trick back on the oldEnterprise—a scoundrel name o’ Flint shrank the whole ship down into a trophy for his shelf. Lucky for him he froze us in time, too, or you can be sure I’d’a sent a phaser beam right up his haughty snoot.”

Stevens smiled politely. Even though he’d seen plenty of strange things himself, he felt Scotty’s yarns always had an air of the tall tale about them. Tev simply ignored them both and focused on the problem at hand. “So you’re saying the Cabochons are some kind of static warp-field generators, containing these microbubbles?”

“Aye. It all fits. Which means they cannot be part of a Breen attack—they’ve been on Earth for two hundred years already.”

“But that was about when the Nachri drove off the Shanical,” Stevens countered. “Maybe they’ve been lying in wait all this time. Maybe they’re the kind of species that thinks in the long term.”

“Maybe,” Scotty said with a skeptical squint. “But consider for a minute, lad, what might happen to a static warp bubble if it were hit by...oh, say, the Breen’s energy-damping weapon?”

That brought Stevens up short. The Breen weapon had had a devastating impact on the Allies’ forces, dissipating ships’ energies into the subspace dimensions, rendering them powerless. “It would probably break down the field. But no, wait, if that were the explanation, this would’ve happened months ago.”

“Unless the fields were only destabilized.” Scotty didn’t need to say more—this was practice, not just theory. Unless stabilized by exotic particles such as tetryons, a warp field was as shaky as a house of cards, prone to collapse if jostled by too much mass or energy. “Buried under the rubble, things would’ve been pretty quiet for ’em and they could’ve stayed semistable indefinitely. But if one of ’em was dug up, handled, even exposed to too much sunlight, it could’ve been the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

Sutherland was fascinated, and moved in to examine the Cabochons more closely. “You mean...these—”

“Don’t touch that!” Scott hissed. “Have ye not heard a word we’ve been sayin’? If those Cabochons were destabilized as well, they could be bombs waitin’ to go off!”

Sutherland jerked away and began a careful retreat on tiptoe, promising to notify the authorities.

“But they’ve already been handled since the attack,” Stevens said. “Dug up, cleaned, brought to the museum—”

“The fields may have been only partially destabilized,” Tev replied. “Any further stimulus would worsen the instability. There’s no telling when the point of collapse could be reached.”

“We’ve got to beam them into space.” Stevens reached for his combadge.

“It won’t work,” said Tev. “Even this close we can’t scan the Cabochons, only their interference patterns. Impossible to get a transporter lock. We’ll have to remove them physically.”

“Can we do that?”

“If we’re careful enough, hopefully,” Scotty answered. “But that still won’t solve the whole problem.” He met the others’ gaze solemnly. “There weretwo Cabochons missing.”

* * *

The massive columns provided excellent cover against the Shaniel’s fire (assuming it was the Shaniel). Unfortunately, the team was cut off from the exit, which had closed anyway when Krotine had come through to provide cover fire for Konya. It would take more work with the P-38s to get out, which would leave them exposed to the attackers’ particle beams.

Konya had dragged Hawkins behind a column and was scanning him with a tricorder. “It’s not too bad,” Hawkins said with a grunt, critically appraising his own leg wound. “But it...shorted out the gravsuit. I can hardly move.”

“I know,” Konya said. “I can feel it all. Here—for both our sakes.” Konya concentrated for a moment. An intense pain arced through Hawkins for a split second, leaving a relative numbness in its wake. “Wha—what did you do?”

“A feedback trick—temporarily overloaded your pain receptors. Only lasts a few minutes, though.”

“Thanks. Maybe you should’ve been a doctor instead of a security guard.”

Konya studied him. “You have an unusually high sensitivity to pain, did you know that?”

“Well, I can’t actually sense other people’s pain to compare. But I’m not surprised.”

“And yet you went into a line of work that constantly exposes you to pain and injury. Why didn’t you do something safer?”

“Sometimes I ask that myself,” Vance smirked. “Here I thought my bad-luck streak had finally

broken—but no, first day back, I get shot.” Noticing Konya’s dark eyes appraising him, Hawkins searched for a serious answer. “Sometimes I wonder if it’s worth it. But bottom line—it is. If it protects other people. So I’m not going to let a little sensitivity stop me from doing what’s worth doing.”

Konya smiled. “Then we have more in common than you thought.”

* * *

Behind another column, Gomez and Corsi were pinned down. Corsi was saving her shots, carefully aiming at the sources of fire, but the shooters moved deftly through the maze of columns. Gomez glimpsed broad, squat bodies with numerous limbs, and no clear vital spots such as a distinct head. Abramowitz had guessed right—they were not humanoid.

“We come in peace!” Gomez cried for the fifth time, hoping the hoary first-contact mantra would reach the attackers’ ears (if any) over the gunfire, and get translated into terms they could understand. “We mean you no harm!” she continued, though it was hard to say it with conviction when she saw Corsi’s expression.

Still the shooting continued. “Bart! Any chance of a translation?”

Faulwell shook his head. “They’re not using any known grammar. They’re too alien.” Most humanoid species, by virtue of similar neurological evolution, spoke languages following several dozen basic grammatical structures. This was why universal translators could usually get a grip on an alien language in mere moments. The pattern even held for certain energy beings that had presumably evolved from humanoid ancestors. But these Shanical represented a separate evolutionary track. Deciphering their speech would be a slower process—if they ever got a dialogue going.

“Konya!” Corsi called. “Can you reach them telepathically?”

“I’ve been trying,” the Betazoid replied. “No more luck than Faulwell, for the same reason. Their brain structure’s hard to read, and they don’t seem to be ‘hearing’ me.”

“Damn. Commander? Any suggestions? Commander?”

“I don’t know.” Gomez met Corsi’s eyes pleadingly. “I can’t decide. What if... what if I choose wrong? I don’t want to lose anyone else.”

Corsi grabbed her shoulder. “And we don’t want to lose you, Commander. So get a grip! If you need a slap in the face I’m willing to provide it.”

Gomez gritted her teeth and tried to think of something. Fortunately (or unfortunately?), just then Pattie called, “Commander, I have a thought.”

“Go ahead, Pattie.”

“It doesn’t seem like anybody’s shooting at me.”

“Feeling left out?” Abramowitz quipped.

“Not particularly. But maybe they don’t see me as a threat. I’d like to try getting closer, so I can try to convince them to stand down.”

“But then they might start shooting at you,” Gomez said.

“With antiquated particle beams like those? My carapace can handle a few hits.”

Gomez hesitated, but Corsi raised a hand threateningly, and only half-jokingly. “Okay, Pattie. Go.”

A moment later Pattie rolled out from behind a column, curled up into pillbug mode and wheeling herself forward. Well, actually backward —she propelled herself by flexing her carapace plates outward one by one, rolling herself along in a continuous reverse somersault. Which made sense, given that the Nasat, a people prone to conflict avoidance, had evolved the ability for the purpose of retreating from danger. What Pattie was doing now would probably qualify her for psychiatric evaluation on her own world, but then, Sonya wondered, was it any saner for the rest of them to be here?

Indeed, Pattie advanced unmolested—if anything, the attackers were trying to avoid hitting her. Peering around the column, Sonya saw them gesturing to her as though waving her to safety. She vanished from view...but the shooting continued.

After a few more moments, Corsi scowled. “Now what? Commander, should we signal her?”

“No, that might turn them against her. We just have to hope she can get through to them somehow—or find a way to overpower them.”

Corsi shook her head. “Nasat aren’t the overpowering type. I hope she hasn’t gotten in over her—”

She broke off, realizing the shooting had stopped. “Pattie to away team,” came her voice over their combadges. “My head is just fine, Commander Corsi. And I think cooler heads have prevailed—though maybe ‘heads’ isn’t the right word.”

Chapter

5

“It’s a stretch, Scotty.” On the comm screen in Sutherland’s office, Director Iskander shook his head. “You’re asking me to believe that what happened this morning is a delayed reaction to something that took place nearly a year ago. That these microwarp fields were somehow weakened, but fourteen of them managed to stay intact throughout extensive handling while one other erupted after being buried quietly for all that time.”

“We don’t know what set it off, Cemal. It could’ve been dug up by an excavator, subjected to rougher handling than the others. Or it could’ve just been hit more directly by the Breen weapon, so it was closer to the bursting point.”

“And what about the sixteenth one? If it was buried in the rubble with the other, why didn’t it go critical and expand too?”

“You know I cannot answer that. It could’ve been blown farther away in the attack. Maybe some souvenir hunter found it and carried it off to parts unknown.”

“Or maybe this isn’t some bizarre accident, but a carefully planned attack.”

“Cemal, their interference patterns are fluctuating! A destabilized warp field would look just like that.”

“And is it the only thing that could?”

“No, but—”

“Scotty, if this were just an accident, why would Captain Zakash claim differently? Why bring a whole fleet here for a wild-goose chase?”

“I can think of a reason or two to bring a fleet to Earth,” Scott said darkly.

“And it would be a pointless exercise, given the level of defenses we have now. The Nachri fleet is small, underpowered, little more than an orbit guard.”

“Maybe,” Scotty said. “One thing, though—the planet where the Cabochons were found? It’s in the space once controlled by the Nachri Empire.”

“Well, that makes sense. They were the first victims of the Shanical. Perhaps these Cabochons were how the enemy struck—they snuck these harmless-looking baubles onto other worlds like Trojan horses, and then burst out to attack.”

“Except there was nobody in this one. Cemal, there’s something that Zakash isn’t telling us, as sure as I’m standin’ here.”

“Maybe so, Scotty. But I can’t afford to ignore the possibility that we’re under attack. And Zakash is our only source of information about the Shanical—at least until your team makes contact again.”

“But can we afford to ignore the possibility that I’m right? That there are fifteen other time bombs waiting to go off? Even if you’re right, if these are Trojan horses of some kind, surely that’s all the more reason to get them off the planet right away!”

Iskander needed to consider only briefly. “All right. I’m still not convinced they have anything to do with this matter, but we should take precautions. Can your people manage to move them without setting them off?”

“It won’t be easy. It’s as delicate a job as I’ve ever had to do—but we’ll figure out a way.”

* * *

“This is most interesting news, Director Iskander,” Zakash said to the human on the viewing globe. “These... ‘Cabochons’ could explain a great deal about the Shanical’s method of attack. Once we arrive, our science teams will be glad to cooperate with yours in analyzing this technology.”

“As a precaution,” Iskander told him, “we’re having them removed to a secure research facility in our asteroid belt. I’ll try to arrange clearance for your teams.”

“A wise precaution,” Zakash said, trying not to display the flush of excitement that ran through him. “The Shanical are a cunning foe, devious and secretive. I do not wonder that they’ve managed to convince some of your people that this attack was a mere accident. That is how they weaken a foe—by sowing

confusion and doubt.”

“Yes,” the human replied with a conviction that delighted Zakash. “The Dominion was the same way, eating away at us from within. We should have learned by now not to fall for such tricks again.”

“I have faith in your clarity of thought, Director,” Zakash said. “We shall arrive within a standard hour. Defense Group out.”

Once the globe went dark, Zakash clapped his fists together in triumph. “Trusting fool. Did you hear, Jomat? They’re taking the crystals off the planet!”

“Yes,” his first officer replied, “it should make obtaining them much easier.”

“And once we have them, what a weapon we will wield against our oppressors!” He rose, addressing the whole command deck crew. As the moment of battle neared, it was important to remind them of their cause, to motivate them to succeed. “Imagine what we could achieve—an army could be smuggled in a pendant. A warfleet, an invasion force could slip through a planetary defense grid as easily as a clump of space dust. The simple reexpansion would be devastating, as we’ve seen today! Our forces could destroy an entire city simply by arriving there—the rest would simply be cleanup! The whole Federation will soon be at our mercy!” Zakash basked in the crew’s cheers.

But Jomat moved closer to speak privately. “Don’t lose proportion, Captain. Our enemy is the ruling party, not the Federation.”

“It was the Federation that put them in power two centuries ago, that supports them to this day,” Zakash snapped. “The party’s alliance with the mighty Federation cows the people into submission, reduces them to a passive shadow of the glory that was Nachros. The rhetoric of democracy they borrowed from the Federation lets them create an illusion of freedom, of legitimacy.” The captain let his voice rise loud enough for the rest to hear. “Theirs is a Federation of hypocrites, Jomat. They claim such high ideals, and yet they persistently ally themselves with brutal and corrupt governments—the Klingons, the Romulans, the Son’a—anyone who suits their own interests, while turning a blind eye to their brutality and corruption, condoning it in the name of ‘diversity.’ That makes them our enemy—the enemy of all downtrodden peoples. That is why we must create a new Nachri Empire, one that enforces justice rather than paying lip service to it.”

Again the crew cheered; again Zakash basked. Jomat observed their adulation. “They would follow you into Death’s own fortress,” he said.

“Yes,” Zakash sighed. “It’s most heartening.”

“Just take care to remember it is a means and not an end.”

The captain glared at his first officer. “I lead our people where they wish to go. To the defeat of our oppressors, the restoration of our lost greatness. I am nothing without their support—and without the cause we all share.”

“Of course, Captain,” Jomat said in a yielding tone.

“Good. Now—ready the kinetic missiles and FMS drones. The first shot of the revolution is about to be fired!”

* * *

Bart Faulwell was having a great time, though he was the only one. Deciphering the Shanical language, so he told the others, was a rare challenge for him, the kind he rarely faced in this age of near-instant computer translation. Not only that, but he was presented with a type of grammar and concept arrangement new in Federation experience, one he was having to learn as he went, and could no doubt produce a fascinating paper about. “I feel like Bowring or Sato in the pioneering days of Starfleet,” he beamed.

“I’m sure we’re all happy for you,” Gomez told him dryly. “But are you actually getting anywhere useful?”

“Oh, we’re making a lot of progress,” the bearded linguist told her. “The key was recognizing how their anatomy affects their worldview—like the way that Sycclarian journal on BorSitu Minor became easier to translate once I realized that their anatomy led to a circular mode of writing. So much of the way we see things is based on a fixed sense of bilateral orientation—a definite forward and reverse direction, a right wing and a left wing, and so forth. With their radial symmetry, they see things much more flexibly. You can reverse direction and still be making progress, have foresight and hindsight at the same time...and most questions have more than two sides in their minds. I doubt they ever invented the true-or-false test.”

Gomez gazed over at the Shanical, considering his words. The two emissaries who parlayed with Faulwell and Pattie (they seemed most comfortable with her nearby) were apparently among the leaders; Faulwell had introduced them as Matriarch Varethli and Designer Rohewi. It was in fact impossible to pin down a front or back to them. Each Shanical had a barrel-shaped torso supported by four squat legs at the base. Extending from the upper part of the torso were four longer limbs, which arced tarantula-style to the ground, terminating in four thick, mutually opposed digits; these served as arms or additional legs as necessary. Atop the torso was a domelike head containing four eyes at the compass points, and above them four large ears, which seemed to be used in echolocation. There were only two mouths, but Gomez couldn’t decide whether to think of them as being on the front and back or on the sides. Though the heads didn’t turn, Gomez could see the eyes rotating within their sockets to track her movements, proving that the Shanical were watching her as well.

“So if they don’t take sides,” Corsi asked, “what were they doing shooting at us?”

“Just because they have a multivalued logic doesn’t mean they won’t protect themselves,” Faulwell said. “As far as I can tell, they thought we were Nachri, and they’re afraid of Nachri.”

“But why would they think that?” Gomez frowned.

“Same reason they weren’t afraid of me,” said Pattie. “Because you’re bipeds.”

“I get the strong impression,” Faulwell added, “that the Nachri are the only humanoids they’ve ever met. They didn’t know that it’s the dominant sentient form in the galaxy.”

“How could they not know?” O’Brien asked. “With subspace technology like this, how could they not have been spacefarers?”

“There’s a more important question,” said Corsi. “Why are they afraid of the Nachri?”

Faulwell shrugged. “I’ll need to improve the translation before we can get any clear answers.”

“Fine,” Gomez said. “You do that.” She turned away, planning to leave him to his work.

But the linguist sidled over to her and spoke softly. “Commander, I just want you to know...nobody blames you for your...moment of indecision before. We’ve all been through so much lately—”

“That’s okay,” she replied curtly, not really wanting to discuss it.

Faulwell studied her. “I remember something you told me back on Evora. That no matter what losses we endure, we’re survivors, and fighters. We’ve all lost people before, and we’ve dealt with it, and moved on, because we had our duty to keep us going.”

“I said that?”

“Words to that effect.”

She was quiet for a moment. “Well, I didn’t know what the hell I was talking about.”

Faulwell blinked. “Well...it brought me some comfort. Then, and now.”

“It was just words.”

The linguist smiled. “Words are powerful things. Especially when they come from a leader. We all look to you to give us strength, Commander. You’ve never let us down yet.”

But who can I look to? Sonya thought. Outwardly, though, she just gave the older man a tight smile and said, “Thanks, Bart. Get back to your translations now—we really need them.” He nodded and moved off, accepting the words. Are the words really enough, with no certainty behind them? How can I lead when I don’t know where to go from here?

* * *

It was refreshing to get her hands dirty.

Paradoxically, Keiko found it cleansing to get down on her knees and work with some good honest soil. It had come from life, and it sustained life—what could be more pure?

Molly and her friends had gone over to Masoud’s place, and Keiko had decided she needed to get out of the house. So she’d left little Kirayoshi with Aunt Midori and gone over to the rebuilt Academy grounds to visit Boothby. Naturally the wizened grounds-keeper had no patience for mere social visits, so he’d wasted no time putting her to work, recruiting her to help him tend some of the more exotic floral displays. Balancing the needs of plants that had come from dozens of worlds, evolved under radically different conditions, so that they could coexist in a single bed without dying or killing each other was an ongoing challenge, and Keiko was always as glad to help out as Boothby was to have an expert xenobotanist as a volunteer. The work struck Keiko as a sort of metaphor for what the Federation strove to achieve, and she figured that was why Boothby worked so hard at it—not that she’d ever extract such a sentimental admission from the old grouch.

“Careful with those windsingers!” Boothby scolded. “Plant them the wrong distance apart and the chords interfere—sounds like a transporter accident.” A Talosian windsinger was a cluster of wire-thin stems, each terminating in a single metallic-blue leaf seemingly too large for it to support. They trembled in the slightest breeze, and the air rushing across the leaves’ microserrations created a haunting chimelike

sound that rose and fell in pitch with the changing airflow. It actually did sound somewhat like a transporter chime, Keiko realized. Though their homeworld had been interdicted for some reason since its discovery, the ancient Talosians had planted them on a number of worlds during their spacefaring age, thousands of centuries ago. Past Starfleet crews had reported hearing such chimes on dozens of the worlds they'd visited, even coming to expect them as part of the ambience of alien planets. Sadly, late in the twenty-third century those same Starfleet explorers had unknowingly spread a botanical plague that had killed off most of the windsingers. Starfleet's botanical gardens were one of the few places—aside from Talos IV, Keiko presumed—where windsinger chimes could still be heard. Now they'd bred a strain that hopefully would be hardy enough to survive unprotected in Earth's biosphere. Keiko would've liked to be involved in that work, but she'd been too busy trying to build a nice, quiet family life with Miles. At least she got to participate in this small way.

Still, she realized her preoccupation with this morning's argument was causing her to make mistakes. "I'm sorry, Boothby," she sighed. (Somehow it had never occurred to her to ask his first name. Assuming he even had one.) "I just... had a fight with Miles this morning."

Boothby grunted. "I thought you'd resolved not to do that anymore," he said, with a touch of "I told you so" in his tone. "How'd he screw it up?"

"It wasn't him," she insisted. "Well... not really." She fidgeted under that glare that would brook no nonsense. Boothby's visage was as rough and gnarled as a Denevan millennium tree. Nobody knew how old he was. He'd mentioned being Martian by birth, which narrowed it down to under two hundred and seventy, but people said he'd always been here and the Academy had just grown up around him. Anyway, however old he was, his eyes looked older than Q, and certainly a thousand times wiser. They had a way of digging right down to the roots of your problems.

"I mean, most of the time Miles is the perfect husband and father. We have just the life we want, a quiet life where we can focus on being a family. No more space battles, no more religious fanatics, no more invasions."

"And then these Shanicals have to come along and screw it up for you. How inconsiderate." She didn't ask how he knew their name. He was Boothby, after all.

"It's not just them, whoever they are." She laid out the gist of her argument with Miles—how he kept finding reasons to spend time away from her, kept taking on responsibilities that weren't his.

"So you don't think he's serious about your marriage?"

"No, that's just it—I know he is. That's why it's just so frustrating. Before, back on DS9, I always knew he was devoted to me, but circumstances just kept keeping us apart. I just thought that back here on Earth, things would be... easier."

"So your marriage can only work when the conditions are perfect? Sounds like a pretty fair-weather relationship to me."

"No, of course that's not it."

"Then what is it?" Boothby asked piercingly. "If you don't think your marriage is in trouble, what's upsetting you about his little jaunts? Don't you want him to help out? You think he should just sit back, mind his own damn business?"

“You make it sound so terrible.”

“Well, how should it sound? You tell me.”

Keiko sighed, making the windsingers squeal a bit. “I don’t know. I shouldn’t feel this way about it. Miles is right; the work he’s doing is important. And I don’t know anyone who’s better qualified to do it. I just . . . wish it wouldn’t happen so often. I hoped being back on Earth would be like it was when I was growing up—peaceful and safe and serene.”

“And then you came back to San Francisco and found the aftermath of a war zone.”

Keiko acknowledged it silently. “It was like coming to DS9 all over again. The devastation, the loss, the pain all around us. I didn’t want to have to endure any more of it. But Miles threw himself right into the thick of it. Again. Every day he was away, dealing with the aftermath. And every night it was all he would talk about.

“And it just keeps coming back, over and over. I just feel so helpless, like I can’t get away from it!” Unthinkingly, she snapped one of the windsinger’s slender stems. The wiry filament cut into her fingers, drawing blood. “Oh! I’m sorry,” she began, but Boothby was already pulling out his pocket first-aid kit, tending to her cut and ignoring the broken plant.

“Seems easy enough to fix,” Boothby said as he sprayed the wound with antiseptic sealant. “Just ask Miles not to talk about it. Find other topics. Join a book club or something.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“Why not? Is he that hard to shut up?”

“No, that’s not—I mean, that’s not the problem.”

Boothby met her eyes. “Then what is it that makes you feel so helpless?”

She realized where he was leading her. “The crises themselves. It’s not that Miles is doing something about them,” she said, discovering it as she said it. “It’s that I’m not. My city, my planet, is in trouble, my neighbors are hurting, and I can’t do anything to help them. My husband is an engineer, a builder—a soldier when necessary—he can do something substantive about these disasters. I can see it in his eyes, hear it in his voice—he has a purpose. He’s scared, just like the rest of us, but he handles it because he knows how he can help. But I’m just a botanist. What can I do to help in a disaster, or a war? What can I do aside from sitting around and being afraid for the people I care about?”

Boothby quietly finished tending to her hand, and then gave it a surprisingly tender squeeze, matched by a rare smile. Then he grunted and turned back to his work. “You ask me,” he grouched, “the Breen gave me quite enough to do when they attacked. This place was in ruins. All my plants died from the fires, the radiation. Trees I’d tended my whole life, that I’d grown up with, blasted to kindling. Rare specimens from a hundred worlds vaporized. And did the Breen care? Hell, no. The plants never did anything to them, but they killed them all anyway, just innocent bystanders that got in the damn way.

“That’s the part of war people don’t talk about much. Sure, the loss of life is horrible—the Breen took a lot of my friends that day. And the property losses, okay, those are bad too. But it’s a damn sight easier to rebuild a lecture hall or an office complex than it is to regrow a Gordian oak or a sahsheer crystal. And who got stuck doing the hard part? Me, that’s who!” Boothby shook his head. “Humph. I should talk—at

least I still have a breathable atmosphere to do my work in, and soil that isn't poisoned. Other worlds the Dominion invaded, they weren't so lucky. Look at Cardassia—it'll take decades for all the dust and the smoke from the fires to settle out of the atmosphere. Their plants are starving for light across the whole planet. The acid rain is poisoning the water, too. A century from now there might be nothing alive on Cardassia larger than a vole. Who's going to clean up that mess? That's what I'd like to know."

Boothby turned back to his work, muttering under his breath, while Keiko pondered silently. Then she hugged him and kissed his cheek. "Thank you, Boothby—you're a lifesaver."

Chapter

6

Faulwell had gotten the translation algorithm to a point where normal conversation with the Shaniel was possible. The rendering was only approximate, not to mention delayed, since Bart was filtering it through his tricorder and modifying some of the translator program's word and grammar choices. "Trust me, it's better this way," he'd insisted. "Our grammars are so different that a more literal rendering would just be too awkward. Good translation is more about capturing the overall sense of the material, choosing whatever phrasing conveys that sense best even if the specific words are very different."

"Come clean, Bart," Pattie had joked. "You're just trying to give yourself more to do."

Still, Faulwell's system seemed to work, though Gomez was concerned about what might be lost in the translation. "We never knew of other worlds," Matriarch Varethli told them. "The ceiling hid them from us."

"Ceiling?" asked O'Brien. "Have they always lived indoors? No, that's silly, how do you evolve indoors?" He corrected himself. "Underground, then?"

"I'm not sure the word came through right," Faulwell said. After some discussion with the Shaniel, he reported, "I think she means clouds. Sounds like their world has a dense, constantly clouded atmosphere. They couldn't see the stars."

"But you know about the stars now? About space travel?" Gomez asked.

"Yes," said Designer Rohewi, the darker-hued male who was apparently Varethli's partner, though whether professionally, politically, or personally was unclear. "The Nachri came through the clouds. We learned from them that other worlds existed, that vessels moved between them."

"But they didn't just bring knowledge."

"No," Varethli told them, her four arms (upper legs?) twitching in agitation. "They killed many Shaniel. They sought to align us in one direction."

"Sorry," Faulwell interposed, "I think that's a metaphor for trying to conquer them."

"They wanted our technology," Rohewi continued. "We and they did not progress the same way. They, like you, used subspace for travel, to find new worlds for their growing population. Our population grew as well, but we made our own new territory by creating subspace pockets."

Rohewi, apparently the lead engineer of the Shaniel and innovator of much of their subspace technology, began to explain the specifics. It wasn't long before the engineers caught on to the nature of the microwarp bubbles. "Like a subspace compression," O'Brien grimaced. "Just great. I'm tiny again. I hate it when that happens."

"But how could they have warp technology without spaceflight?" Corsi asked.

"I can see how they might just have a knack for it," Faulwell mused. "With their flexible sense of direction and movement, their ability to reconcile opposites, I bet they have an intuitive understanding of the subspace dimensions, the way they're curled up inside space and vice versa at the same time." The others stared at him in surprise. "What? I'm a linguist surrounded by engineers. I listen to the jargon and pick up the meaning."

Apparently there was a whole network of microbubbles, externally encased within stabilizing crystals, yet connected to each other through subspace wormholes, one of which the team had passed through to reach this city, the hub of the network. "The Nachri wanted the microbubbles as a weapon," Rohewi explained, "to smuggle armies and fleets, or destroy cities through their reexpansion."

"We would not do this," Varethli said. "To destroy those you disagree with, rather than finding a new way forward for both, is insane."

Gomez smiled. As Bart had said, their multivalued logic kept them from seeing things in black-and-white terms. If two sides clashed over something, they could just reorient their perspectives and negotiate a settlement. It apparently made for a very peaceful society.

"We sought a common orientation with them, but they would not change direction. The Nachri began to destroy our world! They thought it would make us do what they wanted. But this was a direction we could not move in. So we turned inward. We encased what we could within subspace pockets, intending to hide within them until the threat was gone."

"So you've been living in these pockets for two hundred years?" Sonya asked.

"No," replied the designer. "Resources and power are finite. And we knew our world would take millennia to recover. We compressed the time dimension as well."

"You mean...for you, hardly any time has passed?"

"Days."

Gomez's eyes widened. That meant that the devastation these people described, the destruction of their entire world, was not something that they'd studied in the history books—it was a firsthand experience, the memory still fresh. Something was indeed being lost in the translation—the anguish and grief the Shaniel must be enduring. She couldn't read their body language, so she'd had no idea. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. "We, too, have suffered many great losses in recent times. Though nothing as great as what you've lost. I..." She trailed off. She had no idea what she could say to them that could sound remotely meaningful.

"Gratitude," Varethli said simply.

"But the course has altered," Rohewi said. "Time is uncompressed again. The emergence of one pocket

back to the outer universe has reconnected the network to normal timeflow. And clearly we are not on Shaniel anymore.”

“What caused the pocket to emerge?” O’Brien asked.

“An abrupt power leakage into subspace weakened the stabilizing crystal. We do not know the cause.”

“May I take a look at your readings? I have an idea about that.”

Once O’Brien got a feel for their readouts, it didn’t take long. “Just as I thought—looks like they were hit with the Breen’s energy-dampers. These crystals we’re in must’ve already been in San Francisco when the attack happened.”

“Probably in the museum,” Abramowitz said.

“My God,” Gomez said. “How many of these crystals were there?”

“We only managed to generate sixteen,” Rohewi replied.

“And have the others suffered similar power drains?”

“Yes. We are searching for a way to reverse them, with no success.”

“We believed it was a Nachri attack,” Varethli added, “which is why we reacted defensively to your entry. But now we see it is you who needs defense.” She paused, dealing with unreadable emotions. “We mourn the loss of life our accidental emergence caused.”

“Not your fault,” O’Brien assured them. “We’re all just delayed victims of a war that already ended. That’s the way war always is—goes on killing long after the fighting’s supposed to have stopped.”

“But the tragedy will be far greater,” Rohewi said, “if we cannot halt the power drain of the other crystals.”

“You said it,” Pattie chirped. “If a complex this size underwent instant reexpansion, the blast would totally destroy San Francisco—and blow enough dust and smoke into the stratosphere to cause a global ice age.”

“Wait,” said Rohewi, studying his readouts. “The other crystals show anomalous readings.”

“Are they about to rupture?” Gomez asked.

Rohewi absorbed the data for a moment. “Borderline, but holding. They seem to be in motion, but something from outside is damping its effects.”

Abramowitz turned to Gomez. “Do you think Scotty and the others have found them?”

But Gomez addressed the designer. “You said the other crystals. Not this one?”

“No. We remain stationary.”

“We need to get in contact with our people right away. Can you arrange that?” she asked the Shaniel.

“You must return to the facility you came here from,” Rohewi told her. “Sending a signal through our warp field would require altering its geometry, and it is too tenuous to risk that.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

“May we accompany?” Varethli asked. “Perhaps by combining our knowledge we can solve this crisis. We have only just discovered the richness of the universe beyond our clouds—it would be tragic to die before getting to explore it.”

“It’s always tragic to die,” Gomez muttered. “All right, come on.”

The matriarch and the designer came up alongside her as she strode toward the exit. Despite their bulk, they made excellent time, and she had to jog to keep up. She tweaked the antigrav suit a bit to reduce her weight some more. “Is there really a Federation of hundreds of worlds, coexisting in peace?” Varethli asked.

“Yes, there is.”

“And all these peoples are different?”

“Well, most of them are humanoid like us, but yes, there are many different kinds.”

“Amazing. When we entered these pockets, all we knew of was the Nachri and their empire. Now there is a great union of worlds in which the Nachri play no part. While we have locked ourselves away, standing still in time, so much has happened, so much has changed. Perhaps we were too hasty to cut ourselves off from the universe. It is not as dark a place as we had thought.”

Gomez chose not to argue the point. She simply fell back to the rear of the group, and let Faulwell and Abramowitz monopolize the Shaniel. But soon O’Brien fell back alongside her. “The gravsuit working okay, Commander? I saw you fiddling with it earlier.”

“It’s fine, Chief. Thanks.” She let him see the readouts on the wrist panel, knowing a fellow engineer would need hard data.

O’Brien nodded approvingly at the readouts, but kept pace with her. “It’s always something, isn’t it, Commander? Goes with the job, I guess. Do well fixing one crisis, they send you to fix the next one. Some reward, huh?”

“It never ends,” Gomez murmured, more to herself than to him.

“Be glad it doesn’t,” O’Brien said, catching her eyes intently.

“What?”

The chief fidgeted. “I don’t mean to intrude, Commander...but I’ve known people who...well, after suffering a loss, or a bad crisis, they...maybe were too ready to see it end. To give up.”

“To take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them”? Is that what you mean?” Gomez smiled reassuringly. “Don’t worry, Chief. I’m not suicidal. I’m just...” She searched for a word. “Stuck. I feel like the Shaniel—frozen in place while the universe is going by around me. I want to get back in

motion again, but I just don't see how."

"Sure you do. Just take one step forward, then the next, and so on. You're just not letting yourself do it."

"And what would you know about it?"

He shrugged. "Been there. I once... well, I once went to prison for twenty years."

Gomez stared. "Chief... I haven't known you twenty years."

"It was a virtual prison—twenty years of memories dumped into my brain in a few hours. But it felt real. By the end of those few hours, I was a changed man. I'd gotten used to thinking I'd lost everything. And I... well, let's just say I sank into some pretty deep despair.

"Then I came out, and I found the life I'd lost was still there. I could have it back—my wife, my daughter, my friends, my career, my youth, everything. But the despair still had its grip on me, and so I didn't reach out to take it. I even—" He broke off.

Gomez shared an understanding look with him. "I guess it got pretty rough for a moment or two."

"Yeah," he acknowledged. "Anyway, well, I've never had much use for headshrinkers, but I have to admit, Counselor Telnorri did help me understand how depression works—how it tricks you into thinking there's no hope, blinds you to everything you've got in your favor. And I realized something else, too—life's short, and you never know how long happiness will last. So you need to make the most of every moment you have. Don't let yourself miss opportunities—don't let yourself fall into a rut, or worse."

"That's just it," Gomez said. "I thought I'd learned that already, after Sarindar. It was even that decision that made me..." She sighed. "Made me start things up with Kieran again."

"So you tried it that way, and it ended badly. It's no wonder you'd have second thoughts after that. But let me ask you something, Commander: Did it end that way because of anything you did wrong?"

"No," Gomez had to admit. "There was nothing I could've done."

"There you go. The problem wasn't in your approach—so if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

He makes it sound so simple, a part of Gomez scoffed. But she was beginning to recognize that voice for what it was. That's because it is simple, she told herself. You can't succeed if you don't try—so you might as well try.

She gazed up ahead at their newfound friends, who were chatting enthusiastically with Faulwell and Abramowitz, pumping them for information about the galaxy. "Look at the Shaniel," she said. "They lost their whole world, just days ago by their count. And yet they're excited about all the new worlds they've suddenly discovered."

"I guess it's like Mr. Faulwell said. They don't see much difference between backward and forward. So a setback can become an advance, with just a little shift in perspective."

"Do you think humans can learn that?"

O'Brien smiled encouragingly. "I've seen it happen."

* * *

"Are we there yet?" Stevens asked.

He, Scotty, and Tev were aboard shuttlecraft Haley (on loan from Starfleet HQ), transporting the Cabochons to Vesta Station in the asteroid belt. Theda Vinci could've gotten them there faster, but Scotty had insisted on a shuttle; not only would it mean fewer people were at risk, but the shuttle had less mass and fewer energy sources to jostle their microwarp bubbles. The starship was escorting the shuttle, but from a comfortable distance—just within transporter range, in the slim hope of being able to save the crew if the crystals ruptured.

Even though Tev had done most of the work designing the stasis-field apparatus that now encased the Cabochons and cushioned them against external stimuli, the Tellarite had insisted on sitting in the front of the shuttlecraft alongside Scotty, relegating Stevens to the back, and incidentally putting him right next to what were currently the deadliest objects d'art in the known galaxy. Of course it would only make about a femtosecond's difference in how soon he'd be killed, but it was the principle of the thing.

So Stevens had decided that if Tev was going to stick him in the backseat like a little kid, he might as well act the part. He was tired of being at a disadvantage, letting Tev make him angry and frustrated. It was time to take back some control, redefine the terms, and start giving as good as he got. He couldn't fight back openly without getting himself cashiered out of Starfleet; but there were always passive forms of resistance, and humor was one of the most tried and true. If Tev took himself so blasted seriously, then Stevens's best option was to stop taking him seriously at all.

Besides...it's what Duff would've done.

"Are we there yet?" he asked again, for the fifth time. "I'm hungry."

"Quiet back there, or I'll turn this thing around," Scotty shot back with a grin.

"We can't risk going faster, or the engine emissions will overwhelm the stasis," Tev said, apparently missing the joke. Well, to be fair, he couldn't be expected to know hoary Earth clichés. "At this rate we're several hours from Vesta." He turned to skewer Stevens with his deep-set eyes. "So perhaps you should consider taking a nap."

Ouch! Stevens realized he may have underestimated his opponent. Well, that just made it more interesting.

* * *

As soon as they emerged from the hatch, Gomez hit her combadge. "Gomez to Scott."

"Commander Gomez, this is Director Iskander," came the reply. "Where have you been? Is your team all right?"

"The team's okay, sir, but we have an emergency. Where's Scotty?"

"Captain Scott is escorting the alien artifacts off-planet. We've discovered there's a risk—"

“We know, sir, that’s the emergency. The crystal containing the largest Shanical city is still on Earth somewhere, and they can’t stabilize it. If it reemerges like the first one, San Francisco’s off the map and Earth becomes another Cardassia. We need to find that missing crystal, fast!”

“Wait. You’ve been with the Shanical?”

“We have their leader and their chief engineer with us now.”

“Are you able to talk freely?”

“What? Of course, sir. There’s something else, you have to warn the Nachri off. They lied to us; they invaded the Shanical for their technology, destroyed their world when they refused. They must be trying to steal it again.”

“And the Shanical told you this?”

“Who else?”

“Commander, it’s their word against the Nachri’s, and they’re the ones who blew a fresh hole in San Francisco. I want you to place them under arrest.”

“Sir, that’s not necessary. They’re not the enemy. Please, warn off the Nachri. At least let us talk to Captain Scott and our people.”

“These Shanical are a deceptive people, Commander—you’re letting yourself be swayed by them. Bring them in for interrogation so we can evaluate their claims.”

“We don’t have time! We need to work with them to stop the deterioration, before it’s too late.”

At that moment, a division of armed agents rounded the bend in the corridor—Federation Security, not Starfleet. “Cooperate with the agents, Commander,” Iskander instructed. “Even if this threat is real, I don’t trust the Shanical to be in control of this power.”

Gomez cursed to herself. “What was that, sir? I’m losing your signal, it must be the subspace instability.” Catching on, O’Brien started making akkhhhhhh noise. She glared to make him stop—not only was it entirely lame, but it was threatening to make her giggle. She just cut off the badge. “Come on, back inside!”

“What about Scotty and the rest?”

“Good question,” Gomez said grimly.

* * *

“Da Vincito Haley,” came Gold’s voice over the comm.

“Haley.Scott here.”

“Folks, we’ve been hailed by the Nachri Defense Fleet. They’re in-system, and volunteering to have their lead ship join the escort.”

“Tell ’em to keep their distance,” Scotty warned. “We don’t want any unnecessary emissions clutterin’ up our space.”

“But we could use their help at Vesta,” said Stevens. “They’ve dealt with these Shanial before.”

“Aye, so they say,” the Scotsman answered skeptically.

Tev said, “It might be wise to have another set of transporters for backup.”

“Like that’s going to matter. Och, very well, they can approach to maximum transporter range. Gently! Tev—any chance o’ raising shields?”

The Tellarite’s stubby fingers were already at work on his console. “If I ramp them up gradually enough. Stevens, keep a close eye on that stasis field. If it fluctuates more than—”

“I know what to look for. Sir.”

“You’d better.”

“Watch out,” cried Gold, “they’ve fired something!” Moments later, the shuttle rocked, and Stevens’s heart tried to abandon ship through his throat as he watched the readouts fluctuate.

“My God,” Scotty gasped. “Shuttlecraft to Nachri ship,” he hailed desperately. “We surrender! Hold yer fire! Repeat, hold your fire!”

“Scotty, what are you doing?” cried Stevens. “We’re in Sol System, there are hundreds of starships around to defend us!”

“One ship or a thousand, it doesn’t matter—they don’t dare fire, not around the Cabochons. Those Nachri have us with our britches down. We have to surrender!”

* * *

Theda Vinci shuddered under another hammer blow. The Nachri had attacked them at the same time as the shuttle, and were continuing their assault even after the shuttle’s surrender. “What are they firing, anyway?” Gold demanded.

“Some kind of kinetic missiles,” Shabalala answered.

“They’re shooting cannonballs at us?”

“At eighty percent of lightspeed. They hit with incredible force. And they’re hard to track at those speeds, even with subspace sensors.” Another blow interrupted him, but Gold didn’t need further explanation. Few starships or torpedoes traveled much faster than a quarter lightspeed in normal space—relativistic effects made it troublesome, and it was more efficient just to go to warp. And natural objects rarely reached a fraction of such speeds. So the sensors weren’t really calibrated for this.

“Can we return fire?”

“I can’t lock on for sure,” Shabalala told him. “They’re jamming sensors, and using some kind of decoy drones, giving off the same emissions as their ship.” Before the attack, Shabalala had been confident in

his threat assessment, reporting that the Nachri's shields were downright primitive, a simple point-defense system supplementing their polarized hull plates. Now he and Gold were learning the hard way that their own technology wasn't really superior to the Nachri's, just specialized in a different direction—and therefore it had its own limitations. Gold would make sure the crew remembered that lesson in the future—provided there was one.

“We can't fire anyway,” Shabalala added. “The discharge could set off the Cabochons.”

“Damn. That's what the Nachri are counting on,” said Gold. “They'll keep firing until we retreat—so we have to retreat.”

Chapter

7

“Gently,” hissed Chief Scientist Mansee as the crew grappled the Starfleet shuttlecraft into the cargo bay. “One untoward bump could destroy us all in a nanosecond.”

“Then perhaps you shouldn't hover over the crew and make them so nervous,” Jomat suggested. He seemed relaxed, even cheerful, but it was more of a resigned calm—an acceptance that his fate, one way or the other, was out of his hands.

Mansee couldn't be so calm—the drawback of knowing just how probable it was that they were about to die, not to mention the precise technical details of how and why it would happen. He drew the first officer aside. “Is the captain mad, firing weapons around those things? We came to liberate our people, not get ourselves ground to molecular dust!”

“Freedom requires risk, Mansee,” came Zakash's deep voice, making the scientist cringe. “There is no safer place than a prison, provided you accept your bondage. You are sheltered, provided for, rescued from the peril of having to make choices, to bear responsibilities, to make mistakes. Rejecting that security, fighting against it to claim a hard, uncertain existence out in the cold... well, you have to be a little insane to do that.” The captain smiled charismatically. “Our people will never be free without lunatics like us to show them the way. And since I'm your leader, I must be the maddest one of all.” He moved in close to Mansee, looming over him. “See that you remember that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good man!” Zakash clapped him on the shoulder, almost knocking him down. “Now let's go claim our prize.”

Zakash's strategy, Jomat had to admit, was extremely effective, provided it didn't kill them. The Starfleeters understood the delicacy of the situation and knew better than to put up any struggle. They obligingly opened the shuttle's rear hatch as he, Zakash, and Mansee approached. But the shuttle's three occupants stood in the doorway, blocking it symbolically at least. “If you value your lives at all, you won't tamper with the Cabochons,” said the central figure, establishing himself as their leader—confirming the impression Jomat had already gotten from his advanced age and considerable girth. Surely someone that well-fed was a member of the ruling elite. Jomat recalled seeing him with the Earth official and the admiral—Scott had been his name. The Tellarite behind him, also well-fed and showing moderate age, was presumably next in the hierarchy, and the young, skinny human was surely a

mere subaltern.

Zakash smirked. “And what exactly were you planning to do with them, if not ‘tamper’? Our military scientists have been attempting to re-create this technology for two centuries. Federation arrogance aside, we are the ones best qualified to neutralize the threat.”

“Aye, ‘qualified’ enough to nearly blast us all to our rewards with that daft attack! No thank you. We don’t need that kinda help.”

“Wait, I seem to be missing something,” Zakash frowned. Then he brightened. “Ahh, yes. It was the part where you had any say in the matter.” He signaled the guards to advance and bodily move the Starfleeters aside. He had Scott brought over to him as Mansee delicately entered the shuttle to examine the stasis generator. “We are a once-glorious people, now downtrodden into virtual slavery by tyrants your Federation put into power. We are not the ones who have anything to lose here.”

The human met his gaze with equal confidence, his own devil-may-care cheer making Zakash’s seem a pale imitation. “I must say I’m impressed, Zakash. Most fanatics let their followers do all the dyin’ for them. How refreshing to see a leader who’s willing to be one o’ the very first to die.”

Zakash smiled back, unintimidated. “Then maybe I’m not a fanatic. Maybe not every government the Federation backs is ethical, and maybe not everyone who fights it is insane. Maybe they simply have good reason to be desperate. You should think about that.”

“Aye, you’re revoltin’ because o’ your oppressive rulers, who revolted against their oppressive rulers, and so on and so on. You’re just more o’ the same, if you ask me.”

Zakash’s retort, if any, was cut off by Mansee’s return. “Their stasis generator is excellent, but the crystals are very unstable. I think we can move them to the lab using antigravs—provided we shut down all nonessential power to minimize emissions.”

“Very well,” the captain nodded. “That means the brig will be offline, so seal the Starfleeters in their shuttle. They won’t risk firing engines or weapons, or using their transporters.”

“If ye’re goin’ to try stabilizin’ the Cabochons, at least let us help,” Scott insisted.

Zakash decided quickly. “Since we have a common interest in this at least, very well. You may help, Scott. The others stay in the shuttle.”

“Scotty, no!” the young subaltern cried.

“Pipe down, Mr. Stevens. We’re hardly in a position to bargain. Both of you, do your duty. Understood?”

“Aye, sir,” the Tellarite replied crisply. The one named Stevens nodded more reluctantly.

“Good,” Scott said, and he allowed the guards to escort him to the lab while Mansee delicately began moving the stasis generator.

* * *

As soon as the hatch shut them off from the Nachri, Tev spoke. “Let’s get to work, Stevens.”

“On what?”

“Our escape plan, of course. You heard the captain.”

Stevens frowned. “When did he tell us to escape?”

“‘Do your duty,’” he said. Stevens stared blankly. “Something they teach at the Academy. ‘The first duty of any prisoner is to escape.’”

“I thought our first duty was to the truth.”

“And we truly need an escape plan. Unless you prefer Nachri hospitality?”

“No,” Stevens conceded, hating it when Tev was right.

“Good. Now what do we have to work with?”

“One Type-8 shuttlecraft and all its systems. None of which we can use without setting off the Cabochons.”

“For now. If we get an opportunity, I want us ready.”

“And what about Scotty? How do we get him out?”

“Captain Scott can fend for himself.”

Stevens was shocked. “Just like that? All that man’s done for you and you’d just abandon him?”

“We can only work with what the situation gives us,” Tev replied coolly. “Do you really think two engineers can fight their way through hundreds of trained warriors to retrieve the Captain?”

“No,” Stevens was forced to admit.

“That’s why Scotty ordered us to arrange our own escape.”

Stevens grimaced. “Understood. But you could try being a little less cold about it.”

Tev sighed with impatience. “Look, Mr. Stevens. You don’t like me, I don’t like you. Fine. Can we just stipulate to that and work together?”

Stevens really hated it when Tev was right. “Okay. Now what have we got?”

* * *

With outside help not an option, Gomez had turned the group right back around—fixing the Shaniel tech from the inside was the only choice now. “I do not understand,” Varethli told her as they hurried to the control room. “Why can we not get help from outside?”

“Bureaucracy,” O’Brien said, his tone conveying volumes.

Faulwell frowned. "I'm not sure how to translate that."

"Oh, it's a universal constant."

Gomez made another attempt. "Some of our leaders believe you attacked us. They...they're afraid," she finished simply, honestly. "So they don't see the real danger. I'm sorry."

"I understand," Varethli said. "Just as we feared you when we first saw you. Yet now we see you offer us hope, and the chance to discover a rich new universe beyond our dreams. Fear blinds us all. It is in balance."

Faulwell listened carefully to her original words. "I think that means 'don't worry, we're even.'"

"Sadly, the warp fields are not in balance," Rohewi said as they reached the main console and surveyed the readouts. "The external stabilizing field is now the only thing holding the other warp fields from collapse. They are being subjected to emissions...scans of some sort."

"Scotty wouldn't be that reckless," O'Brien insisted. "Would he?"

"With Scotty," Gomez replied, "it can be hard to tell. But I don't think so."

As usual, it fell to Corsi to propose the worst-case scenario. "Maybe the Nachri have captured them."

"If so, we face even greater urgency," Varethli declared. "They will risk much to obtain this technology, putting us all in grave danger. More—if they do break our secrets, they will do to other worlds what they did to ours. This is not a direction we wish to travel in."

"The resonances are affecting our field stability," Rohewi interrupted. "Oscillations are worsening! I am trying to compensate."

"With what?" O'Brien asked, trying to interpret the displays. "Looks like tetryon fields."

"Yes."

"You'll never get enough particle density built up at the warp interface in time. Can you generate more massive exotics, like verterons?"

"What are verterons?"

"Never mind."

"Commander," Corsi suggested, "perhaps we should begin evacuating the Shaniel."

"To where?" Gomez asked. "If this thing goes up, the whole planet's devastated. And we'd never be able to beam enough people off-planet in time."

"The other warp fields' oscillations are worsening," Rohewi called. "Resonance is increasing."

"Can we at least sever our link with them?" Sonya asked. "Maybe we can't save them, but we could at least save the Earth."

“It would not halt our own field decay. We—” He stopped. It was hard to tell, since they had eyes all around their bodies, but it seemed that he and Varethli exchanged a significant look. “Yes. There is a way. A way to prevent the collapse of all the warp fields.”

“Well, what is it?”

“We can reduce our interface with normal space to zero dimension.”

Gomez’s eyes widened. “But that would mean pinching the warp bubbles off completely—severing your connection with our universe. You’d be trapped in here forever, adrift in subspace.”

“It is the only way,” Varethli said.

“But sooner or later your resources will run out,” O’Brien cried. “You’ll die!”

“We can place most of our people into temporal-stasis pockets, increasing the resources for the rest. Those will search for ways to reconnect us.”

“Once we lose our link, it may be impossible to restore,” Rohewi said. “But there are other sources of energy in subspace. We may be able to tap into them and prolong our existence indefinitely. Perhaps even expand our pocket universe to greater size and complexity.”

“But you’d still be alone,” said Gomez. “You’ve only just discovered the universe, and now you have to lose it. You never even got the chance to know what it’s like.” Just like I never got the chance to know...

Varethli took Gomez’s hand in one of her own very alien ones. “Your sympathy moves us. But do not grieve. The universe does not always let us move in the direction we wish. So we simply move forward in another direction. It is still progress. It is better than standing still, yearning for the path we cannot take. Only the dead stand still.”

“Systems ready,” announced Rohewi. “Collapse is imminent. If you do not wish to be trapped with us, leave now!”

“Go,” Varethli told them. “Go forward in your path, as we will in ours. Go forward and live!”

Something in Sonya still resisted. She needed time, it demanded, time to linger in her memories, absorb her losses, indulge her regrets to the fullest. Anything less would seem like a betrayal of those she was losing, had lost. But now another part of her spoke up—the real betrayal would be to lose herself along with them. Life pulled inexorably forward, and staying in one place, letting herself be trapped in the past, wasn’t living at all. She had to move. “Move. Move, move, move, people!” And she ran, faster than she’d ever run in her life. And it was exhilarating.

* * *

“You’re crazy. It’ll never work!”

“The equations are basic. Brilliantly simple. There’s little that can go wrong.”

Stevens grimaced. “Famous last words.”

“Besides,” Tev said reasonably, “you’ve seen the proof of concept yourself, with the Rubicon’s

subspace compression.”

“Yeah, but that was down to toy size, not subatomic size!”

“That’s the only scale on which the Van Den Broeck equations can work. Besides, it means we can slip right out through their hull like a quantum black hole, at most leaving a tiny leak they’ll barely notice. Since they don’t have full shields, we can get away cleanly.”

“Yeah, but we won’t be able to see where we’re going.”

“We only need to go a few kilometers.”

“But generating this field would collapse the Cabochons, guaranteed! You want to just kill Scotty?”

“I don’t want to kill anyone. But if we use this, it means that either Scotty’s neutralized the danger himself, or the Cabochons are collapsing anyway and we have a split second to escape.”

Stevens stared. “Tev, you are depressingly pragmatic.”

“I thought you preferred solid realities over intangibles like theories and ideals.”

“So I contradict myself,” Stevens shrugged. “I’m not as large as you—well, as your ego—but I contain multitudes.”

Suddenly a strident alarm sounded outside. The two engineers tensed. “Are the fields collapsing?” Stevens asked.

“I can’t get a reading. Even the interference is gone! I can’t read the Cabochons at all!”

“What does that mean?”

Suddenly there was a knock on the window. They looked up—to see Scotty making urgent faces at them, mouthing “Let me in! Hurry!”

Stevens wished shuttle hatches wouldn’t open so slowly. But Scotty, showing unexpected spryness, clambered onto the hatch before it touched the ground. “Have ye got an escape ready?” he demanded.

“Yes, sir!” Tev replied crisply.

“Then use it now!”

“But the Cabochons—” Stevens began.

“Not a problem. Go! ”

The shuttle jerked as Tev applied the new field equations. The warp engines weren’t designed to shape this kind of field, and the crew felt every instability. But then it snapped into place, and everything was calm. Stevens didn’t feel any smaller—but there was nothing outside but blackness, with a few intermittent flashes as the odd high-frequency gamma ray fluoresced against the warp envelope. After fifteen or so seconds, the shuttle began to vibrate again. “Field’s destabilizing,” Tev said. “Shutting down.”

And the Haley popped back into normal space just a kilometer or so off the da Vinci's starboard flank. Tev showed no surprise as he angled the shuttle around on a docking approach. "Oh, don't you dare tell me you meant to do that," Stevens moaned.

"Believe what you will," Tev replied cheerfully.

Scotty reviewed the console readouts. "You made your own microbubble! Very clever, lads."

"Well..." Stevens decided to be big about it. "I can't take the credit. It was the commander's idea. Tev, I have to admit, I could never have pulled off anything like that."

"Well, of course. I am a craftsman. You are a mechanic."

Stevens stared at Tev for a moment, then shrugged it off. "Fine. If you need me, I'll be at my anvil, pounding horseshoes." He moved over to Scotty, throwing him a what's a guy to do? look, but the S.C.E. chief just shook his head and chortled. "So tell us, Scotty, how'd you solve the Cabochon problem?"

"Och, I wish I could take credit, but all I know is, they just suddenly shut down. The interference vanished and all that was left"—and he reached into the pocket of his old-style uniform jacket and pulled out a handful of Cabochons—"was a pile o' pretty baubles. I managed to salvage a few for the museum. The Nachri are welcome to the rest—they went to all that trouble for 'em, after all," he laughed.

"But sir, how did you get away from the Nachri?" Stevens insisted. Scotty just glared at him as though it were a stupid question.

Chapter

8

"I was a fool," Cemal Iskander said as he gazed up at the Shaniel dome, now the only physical evidence, aside from the empty Cabochons, that they had ever existed. "I can't believe I was so blind."

"It's understandable, Cemal," Scotty told him. "You had no way of knowin' who were the good guys and who were the bad guys."

"But I was far too quick to condemn the Shaniel. I presumed them guilty, accepted the Nachri's lies that supported my prejudice, and refused to listen to the true innocents. Maybe if I had, they wouldn't have had to make such a sacrifice. At least some of them could've been evacuated in time."

"Or maybe not. They only had minutes to spare by that point."

Iskander shook his head, unappeased. After a long pause, he sighed. "You know that jihad doesn't truly mean 'war,' right? It's the struggle to defend what's right. Sometimes, yes, that means defending your community against invaders or oppressors. But the greater jihad is the one we wage every day against the weakness, doubt, and folly in our own minds. Scotty, I got so caught up in the lesser jihad that I failed in the greater. And so I violated one of the most basic commandments of jihad, never to strike against a nonaggressor. That makes me no better than the fanatics of past centuries who twisted the rhetoric of

jihad to justify their betrayals of it.”

“Cemal, you’re bein’ too hard on yourself. Aye, you made a mistake. We’re all entitled to a few. What really matters is what you do afterward. You can wallow in regret and second-guessing, or you can move forward and build something new out o’ the ashes, better and wiser than you were. From what I’ve been told, that’s likely what the Shanical are doing right now—tryin’ to build their pocket universe into something bigger and better. Who knows? There are other domains in subspace, whole other universes we cannot even reach yet. Maybe the Shanical will be able to travel between ’em, invent a whole new type of exploration.”

“Maybe,” the director said quietly.

“And look around you—folks are rebuildin’ this city, just as they did before. ’Tis a cliché to say that life goes on, but the fact is, it does.”

“And you should know, eh, Scotty?” Iskander teased, smiling a bit at last.

He looked up at the structure again. “I’m going to propose keeping this here permanently, as a monument to the Shanical’s sacrifice, and to those who were tragically lost.”

“That’d be a realmitzvah,” said Captain Gold, coming up alongside them. “You should make it a museum of their world—send archaeologists there, learn what their civilization was like before the Nachri attack.”

“You’re right. I’ll talk to Admiral Ross, see what can be arranged.”

“And what have we heard from the Nachri about all thismishegoss, anyway?” Gold asked.

“They insist Zakash is a rogue,” Iskander told him. “That their legitimate government and military had no involvement in the attack. They’ve asked us to return him to Nachros for trial. Given Zakash’s own claims to be leading a revolutionary movement, I suspect they’re telling the truth.”

“About that, probably,” Gold said. “But people generally don’t revolt against just, benevolent, fairly chosen leaders. If you ask me, the Federation should send observers to that trial, make sure it’s fair, and do some general fact-finding—and think about whether we really want them as allies.”

“I’ll see to that myself.” Iskander nodded.

* * *

“What’s so funny?” O’Brien demanded, breaking off from recounting his adventures.

“I’m sorry, Miles,” Keiko chuckled. “It’s just... I know how you feel about being small. After the Rubicon thing,” she told the S.C.E. team, “he had Dr. Bashir measure him every day for a week to make sure he was back to normal.” The others laughed, and O’Brien fidgeted. “Don’t worry, honey,” Keiko teased wickedly. “You know I’d still love you whatever size you were.”

After a moment, O’Brien gave in and accepted her good-natured teasing. Then he led her aside from the others. “The thing is, Keiko... I haven’t exactly been big in other ways today. I’m... sorry about this morning.”

“No, Miles, that’s okay, I—”

“No, I mean it. I’ve been thinking about this. You’re right, sweetheart—I haven’t been spending enough time with you and the kids lately. I’ve been forgetting how precious the time we have is—how we need to make the most of every moment. So I’m going to be a different man, starting now. No more volunteer work—my time is for my wife and children.” He broke off. Keiko didn’t seem as happy as he’d expected she’d be. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, Miles...the fact is, I’ve realized something too. I don’t begrudge you the time you spend helping people. On the contrary, I admire it! I just felt bad that I couldn’t do the same. So I...I’ve applied for work at an agricultural lab. They’re working on engineering fast-growing crops, high-yield oxygen producers, and other new flora for the planets that were hit hardest in the Dominion War, like Cardassia Prime and Gaylor VI. It’s a way I can make a tangible difference, help rebuild the same way you do.” Those beautiful eyes gazed at him apologetically. “But it means I won’t have as much time for you and the kids.” She studied him, waiting for an answer. “Miles? Are you okay with this?”

“Well...I mean, sure, it’s...” He hugged her. “Keiko, I’m proud of you.”

“And I’m proud of you.”

“It’s just...are we ever going to manage to have that nice quiet life together?”

She smiled. “Life always seems to have its own plans. We can only make the most of what time we do have.”

O’Brien smiled. “I’m free tonight. What did you have in mind?”

Her smile was much wider, and promised a greater adventure than the one he’d just lived through.

* * *

Gomez gazed wistfully at the hastily departing O’Briens. “I’m glad somebody’s had a happy ending today.”

Corsi studied her. “And what kind of ending has your day had, Commander?”

Gomez pondered. “Bittersweet, I guess. I’m sad for all the people who lost loved ones today, and I’m sad for the Shaniel. But they’ve all shown me something.”

“What?”

“How to rebuild. How to start putting the pieces together. It doesn’t matter if you don’t know what they’ll be when they’re assembled—you just have to go ahead and start doing it, or you’ll never find out.”

Corsi pursed her lips. “I’m starting to think we’re driving the engineering metaphors into the ground here.”

Gomez laughed—her first laugh in quite some time. “You’re right. That means it’s probably time to wrap this up and go home.”

“One more thing, though—did they ever find that last Cabochon?”

Gomez shook her head. “Could be anywhere. Buried underground where we’ll never find it; sitting on some construction worker’s shelf somewhere; blown out into the Pacific when the first Cabochon erupted. Maybe it wasn’t even still on Earth. It doesn’t matter now; it’s just a harmless crystal.”

“I know...but I hate loose ends.”

“You’ll just have to live with this one.”

“I guess so.”

Corsi and Gomez then beamed back up to the da Vinci, both of them ready to face the S.C.E.’s next mission.

About the Author

At the age of five-and-a-half, CHRISTOPHER L. BENNETT saw his first episode of Star Trek, believing it to be a show about a strange airplane that only flew at night. As he continued watching, he discovered what those points of light in the sky really were. This awakened a lifelong fascination with space, science, and speculative fiction. By age twelve he was making up Trek -universe stories set a century after Kirk’s adventures (an idea years ahead of its time), but soon shifted to creating his own original universe. He eventually realized he did this well enough to make a career out of it. Years of rejections failed to disabuse him of this arrogant notion, and the magazine Analog Science Fiction and Fact fed the delusion by publishing his controversial “Aggravated Vehicular Genocide” in November 1998 and “Among the Wild Cybers of Cybele” in December 2000. Meanwhile, Christopher made two separate passes through the University of Cincinnati, thereby putting off real life as long as possible, and earned a B.S. in physics and a B.A. with High Honors in history in the process. Aftermath is Christopher’s first novella-length publication and his first eBook. His second work of professional Trek fiction, “...Loved I Not Honor More” in the Star Trek: Deep Space Nine: Prophecy and Change anthology, will be published in September 2003. At this rate, he may never recover from his delusions.

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