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BUYING TIME

Robert Greenberger



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Chapter

1

No sooner had Susan Haznedl's head hit her hard pillow than the door to her cabin swooshed open. Dantas Falcão, her roommate and the ship's new medical technician, entered their small cabin, shook her mane of dark brown hair, and began unzipping her duty jacket before she even cleared the frame.

"What a shift." Falcão grinned at her new friend, showing nearly perfect white teeth set against olive skin. Haznedl sighed, since all she wanted was some sleep. Clearly her roommate was too energetic to let that happen. Propping herself on an elbow, she made a face that told Falcão to elaborate on her statement.

"Starfleet may think they're done with the refit," she said, slipping into her nightclothes. "But we're constantly recalibrating the medical sensors, so something's wrong."

The U.S.S. da Vinci had been nearly destroyed a few months previously and had been only recently returned to active duty. Half the crew was lost in the terrifying hours trapped within a gas giant star, and both Falcão and Haznedl were among the replacement crew. Haznedl had had roommates on her previous posting, the U.S.S. Burbank, but none had Falcão's excitability.

"At least I've gotten to meet more of the crew," Falcão continued, brushing her shoulder-length hair. "Dr. Lense insisted on fresh medical workups for everyone, to keep the databases current. We'll be done by tomorrow, I figure. Hey, let me ask you, have you been able to get the story on Bart Faulwell?"

Haznedl blinked. "I've talked to him in the mess a couple of times. Seems like a good guy, very hard-working. Why?"

"I find him very attractive," her roommate replied.

"Songmin tells me that Bart's been in a long-term relationship with an officer on Starbase 92 for quite some time, so you're out of luck." Haznedl was referring to the alpha shift conn officer, Songmin Wong, whom she sat next to on the bridge, and who had been on the ship since the Dominion War. He had proven a useful source of shipboard gossip. "Do you like older men?"

Falcão plopped herself at the foot of Haznedl's bed, causing the ops officer to groan inwardly. She liked

Falcão, she did, but wasn't up for a lot of girl talk right now. Sickbay was not the only area experiencing shakedown concerns. She thought ops was acting sluggishly and had spent her entire shift tracing each circuit to find the problem, with little success.

"I like all kinds of people, truth to tell. Well, good for Bart," she said and then seemed thoughtful for a moment. "What about Sabrina Simon?"

Haznedl rolled her eyes and knew it was going to be a long night.

* * *

The following morning, Haznedl was once again concentrating on the operations diagnostic. According to the tricorder, the console was operating within Starfleet specs, but instinctively she knew that something was wrong when they left the Sol system a week ago. She tapped some controls and focused the tricorder on a particular junction grid. A-ha, she thought. There was something amiss—one of the isolar chips was in danger of burning out, causing relay signals to intermittently die out before completing their connection.

Tev, their new second officer, was pacing the rear of the bridge, watching the alpha shift go about their business. Tellarites had a reputation for being arrogant and blustery, but Haznedl had served with a few in her time, and none fit that stereotype. Tev, however, more than made up for that. He always seemed to know one thing more than the station officer, and didn't hesitate to share that knowledge. True, those bits of knowledge had come in handy; she just didn't want to acknowledge it to his face. On the one hand, she knew he, like Haznedl and Falcão and the other replacement crew, was just trying to fit in, but on the other, he was too smug for his own good.

At tactical, Anthony Shabalala was frowning at an incoming signal. He toggled a control and beckoned to Tev.

"We have a signal from Starfleet. I've already alerted Captain Gold," he said crisply.

"Very good," Tev said, his voice deep and mellow. He always sounded like that, but managed to slip in a superior tone whenever possible. "He and Commander Gomez should be en route, so he can take it in the ready room."

"I've already routed it there, sir," Shabalala said.

"Of course you have," Tev said. "Carry on."

Shabalala and Haznedl exchanged looks and brief smirks before Tev, now taking the center seat, could see either of them, at which point they put their poker faces back on.

Moments later, Gold and Gomez entered the bridge and immediately went to the ready room together. They were in there for several minutes, and Haznedl went back to focusing on her repairs. The faulty chip had been replaced, and now she was tracing other circuits.

Finally, the captain reentered the bridge. "I'd like to see the S.C.E. staff in the conference room, Tev," Gold said, then turned to the fore of the bridge. "Wong, set course for Ludugia, warp five."

"Yes, sir," Wong said. That got a pleased nod from the captain and then he was gone, headed to the observation lounge.

“That’s not far from Ferengi space,” Wong said.

“Yeah, it is,” Haznedl replied. “Wonder if this is one of their scams.”

“Hey, not all Ferengi run scams, you know.”

Haznedl grinned. “How would you know?”

“Well, let’s just say I’ve come across a few lately,” Wong said, a gleam in his eyes.

* * *

Minutes later, Gold took his place at the head of the curved meeting table. To his right sat Sonya Gomez, to his left, Tev. Dr. Elizabeth Lense, Domenica Corsi, Fabian Stevens, Carol Abramowitz, and Soloman filled out the sides of the table, with P8 Blue in her specially modified chair opposite Gold. To the captain, the odd part was expecting the late Kieran Duffy to be on his left and seeing Tev’s porcine features instead. He chastised himself for not moving past Galvan VI where Duffy and half the rest of his crew met their deaths—it wasn’t fair, especially to Tev. Rachel, his loving wife, had told him it would take time. She just never said how much time.

“We’ve gotten a signal from Starbase 9,” the captain said once everyone was settled. “Commander Uthlonicam reports complaints from several trading ships regarding navigational hazards near the asteroid belt in the Ludugia system. According to her long-range sensors, they’re chroniton particles.”

Gomez’s expression immediately deepened into a frown, the lines marking her normally smooth skin. Gold could tell just about everyone around the table stiffened at the mention of chroniton particles. Despite the rise of time-travel incidents over the last century, few seemed comfortable with the problems and paradoxes these opportunities presented. In fact, he had hoped to have nothing to do with time travel during the remainder of his career.

“Based on her readings, Starfleet was able to match their frequency to the waves encountered by the first starship to make contact with the Guardian of Forever. We’re being asked to find a way to the chroniton source.”

“You do understand what it means if a second Guardian is discovered?” Tev’s expression was expectant, his dark, sunken eyes agleam.

All Starfleet personnel knew of the ancient Guardian, found over a century earlier, a device with artificial intelligence that could enable people to travel anywhere in the past. Given the problems it could cause should immoral people make use of the device, it remained one of the most carefully guarded items within the Federation. Unlike that object, this one was in a busy sector of space, near highly traveled spacelanes. Gold could only imagine what would happen should it prove to be true—the political fallout would be intense as well as the belief that if there were two, there might be more.

Tev interrupted his train of thought. “If I recall, the starship managed to enter orbit despite the temporal waves.”

“Yes,” Gold replied. “But these seem to be harsher and can pierce standard shielding. It’s a navigational nightmare.” The captain looked around the table. “We’re a day out of the system, so until we learn more, everyone else can relax. I wouldn’t stop your tournament, Doctor.” To help the crew better integrate

given the large percentage of newcomers, Lense had organized a board game tournament that had begun only a week earlier, shortly after their Venus mission.

“Well,” Gomez said with a smile, something the captain had seen all too rarely since Duffy died, “I was about to trounce Bart. Permission to make two moves?”

“In your dreams, Commander,” Faulwell said with a grin. “I’m just lulling you into a true sense of security.”

“Then you’re doing a very good job,” Gomez dead-panned.

Gold added, “And you know Temporal Investigations has already caught wind of this.” There were animated wincing indicating the almost universal dislike of that particular division of Starfleet.

“Anything else we need to know?” Corsi asked.

Gomez said, “We won’t be that far from the Ferengi Alliance. I’m sure there’s a Ferengi or six who’ll think this is a great business opportunity.”

Chapter 2

A day later, the *Vinci* neared the Ludugian system, with its small Type-O star. It had small planetoids circling it, plus the asteroid belt seventeen AUs from the star itself. Gomez stood at one of the aft consoles, Tev alongside her, as the captain instructed Wong take the ship out of warp a safe distance from the edge of the chroniton wave field. She monitored the readings, trying to figure out exactly what was being affected, when, and how.

“Commander Uthlonicam has cleared the area of all traffic, so we should be able to operate by ourselves,” Gold said. “Confirmed,” Shabalala said from the tactical station. “Best guess is the last ship was in this area eighteen hours ago.”

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” Gomez admitted softly. “Sir, can we ride the wave for better readings? It’s a trick I learned on the *Enterprise*.”

Gold turned to look at his first officer with some measure of surprise.

Gomez continued: “I’m not asking to put the ship at risk, but sometimes you need to feel the problem as much as you need to study the readings.”

“Tev?”

“Well, I for one don’t see what we can learn, but I doubt we’d be in danger.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Gomez muttered. Tev was certainly taking some getting used to. It didn’t help that he questioned her authority on their very first post-Galvan VI mission to investigate the Shaniel Cabochon in San Francisco, never mind that Gomez’s indecision following Galvan was affecting her abilities. She had enough to prove to herself without being put in a position of having to do the same with her second-in-command.

“Go ahead, Wong,” Gold said. “Edge us closer so we can feel the distortion, but be ready to pull us back on full impulse.”

The young lieutenant acknowledged the order and the *theda Vinci* moved forward. Silence filled the bridge as the moments ticked off until finally there was a shimmy, building into a crescendo. Gomez felt the vibrations through her boots and instinctively grabbed on to the bulkhead to her right. The vibrations continued to grow until there was a visible distortion on the screen, and then they dissipated.

“Conlon to bridge. What’s going on up there?”

“We’re indulging Commander Gomez,” Gold lightly replied.

“Good thing we’re using new rivets. We should hold together, but next time we could use a heads-up.”

“My apologies,” Gold replied. “We’ll tell you the very next time we surf chroniton waves.”

“Well, what did your finely tuned senses tell you?” Tev asked, looking directly at Gomez.

“I’m not sure yet,” Gomez admitted through gritted teeth. She studied the readings from the sensors, fine-tuning two of the readouts. Before she could complete her next thought, the next wave arrived and it was faster and harsher than the one before.

“Time between waves?” Gomez asked.

“Thirty-seven seconds,” Haznedl answered. “The second wave was almost double the intensity, plus it confused the sensor array with excessive radiation.”

“Can you still steer us, Lieutenant?” Tev snapped at Wong.

“Helm’s a little sluggish,” Wong said.

“Pull us back,” Gold said quietly. “I hope you’ve felt enough, Gomez.”

“Me too,” she said, and looked past the sneer on Tev’s face to the viewscreen. The radiation and particles were not doing anything to distort the visuals. That told her something, as well.

Downloading the current readings to a padd, she said, “Captain, I’d like to check something with Lieutenant Conlon.”

Gold nodded in approval, and Gomez headed to the turbolift. An idea was starting to form. . . .

* * *

Time, oddly enough, seemed to pass slowly with little change to the readings before them. Wong kept the *theda Vinci* far enough away that the chroniton waves barely caused the ship to waver. Starfleet Command called to inform Gold that the starship *Yeager* had been dispatched to follow up on the region once the *theda Vinci* restored safe passage. They just had to solve the unsolvable and move on. About like usual.

Just then, the doors opened and Gomez emerged, a smile on her face. She went right to Haznedl’s

console and entered a set of figures from the padd she carried.

“We’ll have to reenter the chroniton field and let the *Vinci* absorb a significant amount of radiation,” Gomez began.

“But chroniton radiation is harmful to living tissue,” Tev said, interrupting. Gomez made a face at that and then redirected her attention to Gold.

“Yes, but as the *Voyager* discovered three years ago, you can neutralize the radiation with modulated antichroniton particles. I think we can blanket a portion of the asteroid belt with antichronitons and bring the ship to the source.”

Gold nodded. His first officer had obviously been keeping up with the reports that had been coming in from Delta Quadrant ever since the *Pathfinder* Project—now *Project Voyager*—had made contact with Captain Janeway’s lost ship.

“And has Dr. Lense signed off on the risk?”

“Not yet,” she said hurriedly. “I wanted to see how much radiation we have to absorb before we can generate the antichronitons to open up the spacelane. Nancy thinks the rebuilt ship is up to some pounding.”

“So, how much pounding do we take before we can move?”

“Presuming Songmin can keep us moving forward while being bombarded, about four hours. This is a particularly potent field of chroniton particles so the hull should absorb them quickly.”

“And how long before you generate the antichroniton field?”

“Maybe twenty minutes later. We can continue to collect chronitons from the rear hull while emitting the antichronitons before us until we find the source.”

“And do you think we can handle five plus hours of being shaken around?” The captain realized his voice was sounding incredulous, but he disliked the notion of banging up the ship so soon after the refit. They’d already taken a pounding from the *Nachri* and the Venusian atmosphere in the short time since being released from McKinley Station.

“Yes, sir, and Conlon agrees with me,” Gomez emphatically added. She sounded convincing and clearly had worked out the science behind the scheme before returning to the bridge. It was at times like this the captain had to make a command decision less on the facts and more on his faith in the crew. And he trusted Gomez wholeheartedly.

“Begin your plans,” he finally said. “Tev, have Dr. Lense do random checks to make sure no one is succumbing to the radiation. Also, let’s have Soloman down at the computer core to make certain everything functions normally. We’ll enter the field in fifteen minutes.”

Everyone began busying themselves and the commotion made for a pleasant sound to the captain. He sat back, looking over Gomez’s research and even indulged in reading the *Voyager* logs that held the answer to the current dilemma. The time passed quickly enough and Gold had already alerted the crew to secure loose objects.

“Entering the chroniton field now,” Haznedl said. Gomez was standing beside her, hands braced on the console.

“Hull absorbing chroniton particles on schedule,” Gomez announced after thirty minutes.

“Bridge to engineering.”

“Conlon here, Captain.”

“Everything holding together?”

“I guess they found tighter nuts and bolts at McKinley, sir, because we’re airtight.”

“Carry on,” the captain said.

“Sir,” Tev said some minutes later, “I’ve been able to track the waves back to their source. I’m forwarding the coordinates to the conn. We should be there in another three hours.”

“Swell,” Gold said through gritted teeth as the ship bucked under another wave.

* * *

Captain Gold was not at all surprised to see that the plan Gomez and Conlon had put together worked. It took the starship eighteen minutes longer than projected to absorb enough chroniton radiation, but there was finally a sufficient quantity to process the antichronitons required to spew forward, creating a clear passage. He was sure the entire crew was looking forward to a smoother passage to the asteroid Tev identified as the cause of the phenomenon. He now had to begin thinking about how to explore this root cause and who to send. When dealing with the Shaniel Cabochon, he was on Earth, and when they helped out Pas Saadya’s terraforming project, they were on Venus—he had the comfort of knowing backup was nearby. Here, once more among the stars, he was back to asking people to take risks without a net. Gold had lost crew before, he’d given commands that led to death, and he would again. Still, there was just a moment’s hesitation, and he knew that he had to get past that to remain effective. Here, the hesitation was forgivable; there was, ironically, time. But hesitate in a firefight, it might mean sudden death for both ship and crew.

“Ready to transmit antichronitons,” Conlon reported from engineering. She sounded confident, which pleased the captain.

“Transmit,” Gomez commanded and then watched the viewscreen. In seconds, a golden haze filled the screen as antichronitons met, battled, and defeated their counterparts.

“The waves are breaking up,” Haznedl said from her station. “We can proceed straight to the target asteroid.”

“Let’s go, then,” Gold ordered. From the center chair, he could feel the bucking lessen and then vanish. Now he could fully concentrate on what lay ahead. “Shabalala, full sensors on the asteroid.”

“Already on it, sir,” he replied. Of course he was, Gold knew. No doubt, he was eager to see what was behind all this. “I’m reading one life-form, oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere, and an awful lot of technology. I don’t recognize all the energy patterns, but whatever’s in there is big and active.”

“Tev?”

At the captain’s question, the second officer studied his readouts, making some small noises that Gold realized were quite characteristic of his new colleague.

“It seems we have a new puzzle,” he finally said. “I can’t place the readings, myself.”

“Okay, then, we’ll need to beam over to investigate. One life-form, lots of tech.” He turned to Gomez and said, “Minimal away team to start, I think.”

Gomez nodded and moved to the turbolift. “Lieutenant Commander Corsi, report to Transporter Room 1.”

“Be careful,” Gold called as the doors snapped shut.

Chapter 3

Gomez had Laura Poynter, the new transporter chief, beam them to a small chamber some ten meters away from where the life-form was located. There remained just enough radiation in the area to making identifying the race impossible. To be careful, Corsi opted to bring a phaser rifle rather than a pistol. Gomez had her tool case and a phaser tucked in a pocket.

The air was chilled, the security chief noticed. There were also two different mechanical hums working in harmony, both in the distance, heard beneath the floor plating. Gomez already had her tricorder out and began studying the composition. She shook her head at the readings, took more samples near the door, and then studied the results.

“This is at least five centuries old,” she said.

“And still working,” Corsi added.

Gomez nodded. “It’s a metallic composite I can’t pinpoint, but everything is uniformly manufactured. There’s a lot of power running beneath us, a constant flow. It’s not chroniton-based, but it probably powers the machine that creates the waves.”

“What do I need to know?” Corsi asked, approaching the door, tightly gripping the rifle.

“None of this matches what we have on record for the Guardian,” Gomez said, more to herself than her partner. “That means this is something very different—and a lot more recent. Everything seems to be designed to provide power to one main machine in the other room. I’m scanning a tremendous reservoir of pooled energy to prevent power interruptions.”

“What about the person in the other room?” Her time on the *Vinci* had taught Corsi to be patient and ask the right questions if she was ever to get anything resembling a useful bit of intel out of an engineer.

Gomez checked her tricorder again. “It’s a Ferengi.”

“Oh goody,” Corsi muttered. Shouldering the rifle so it rested against her back, Corsi went to the door,

examining it for latches or controls. Running an index finger around the frame, she found a depression on the left side and pressed.

Soundlessly, the door opened and the humming sounds grew in intensity and the air was even more chilled. For a moment, Corsi wondered how the Ferengi, with his sensitive ears, could handle such a high decibel rate. Perhaps he was using ear canal inhibitors, which would make it easy for her to approach safely.

They emerged into the larger, louder, cooler, and brighter room. Corsi, knowing her companion, paused to let the engineer take it all in. There were holographic projections with all manner of data scrolling past at three-meter intervals along two walls. The machine was directly before them. It was irregularly configured, with lots of jagged protrusions and no seating. You had to stand to control it all, and it seemed designed for a being larger than a humanoid. The Ferengi seemed to have built a platform to reach all the controls, which had pieces of tape, with the diagonal and oddly attractive Ferengi script stuck to almost every knob, lever, screen, and button.

Before the Ferengi, who was wearing the usual garish, closely tailored suits they favored, was a stack of latinum slips. He seemed to be counting and entering the information into a device. Numbers on a holographic projection before him kept rising, and he was laughing.

Corsi tapped him on the right shoulder with the phaser's tip and the Ferengi whirled about, a look of utter terror on his face. Spluttering, he said, "What are you doing here? It's mine; I found it by the rights of salvage."

"Well, we'll just have to talk about it aboard the *Vinci*," Corsi said amiably.

"And leave all this?" he asked, gesturing broadly, trying to encompass every bit of machinery in sight. He really did think it all belonged to him.

"I'll give you a receipt," she said, her tone growing sharper.

The Ferengi hopped down from the platform and shrugged his shoulders in one of the recognized forms of groveling the race had mastered over the centuries. Corsi stood behind him while Gomez studied the readouts being projected in the air directly over their heads.

They had gone no more than three feet when the Ferengi ducked and bolted to his right, moving quite quickly. He reached the far end of the room and stood on tiptoe to grab at a spheroid object, hovering above a column, bathed in an orange light. Once it was in his hands, he stabbed at some hidden control and planted his feet firmly on the floor. By this point, Corsi was only a few meters from him, figuring there was nowhere for him to go and she didn't want to fire the phaser if she could avoid it, for fear of damaging the unknown equipment. If she did that, she knew Gomez would have cardiac failure. Engineers hated it when you broke things.

Red, pink, and orange sparks filled the area around the Ferengi, each glowing brighter by the second, and the air seemed to hiss. The sparks blended as they swirled around and around, gaining speed, until he was no more than a silhouette bathed in the light.

"Do I shoot?" Corsi screamed.

"No!"

Corsi expected the response and watched, just barely hearing the tricorder's distinctive tone. Gomez was capturing the readings, which should prove helpful, in some way. Corsi herself was breathing hard, annoyed at letting the Ferengi get past her.

And then he winked out of sight. The sparks flared once more and then they too vanished.

“What happened?” she snapped.

“Time travel,” Gomez said, snapping the tricorder closed.

“Damn. I had a feeling you were going to say that.”

The two walked over to the column above which the orb had floated. They heard the sound of machinery moving and within seconds, a new orb appeared from the column's top. Slowly it rose until it lifted off the column and floated, a perfect replacement for the one the Ferengi used.

Gomez studied it for a few moments and then walked back to the main console. Stepping atop the platform, she gazed at the readouts, occasionally comparing them with the ones recorded on her tricorder.

Finally, tired of the silence and the waiting, Corsi testily asked, “Well?”

“From what I can tell, that is a portable unit for going back into the past.”

“This asteroid's past? Makes no sense.”

Gomez fiddled with her equipment, tentatively reached out to touch some controls and then checked her readings. “This isn't just a time machine—it's a long-range transporter, too. Based on what the universal translator's telling me, it looks like the Ferengi has mastered how to send himself back a decade and to Ferenginar. Maybe that's why the chroniton particles appear richer, and denser, than the ones in the databanks. Which means—”

“Oh no,” Corsi said.

“We might be able to saturate ourselves in the radiation, and also travel back to the same coordinates and find him.”

“And we want to do that why?”

“Given that these coordinates are locked in somehow, he's clearly been going back to Ferenginar and doing something. By using the equipment, and I would guess he's only been doing it for the two weeks the navigational troubles have been noted, he's been manipulating something...for his own profit.” She picked up a few slips of latinum and hefted the device he had been using.

“Of course he has,” Corsi said. “And we have to stop him instead of Temporal Investigations because...?”

“That's what we do,” Gomez said matter-of-factly. “Should he lose that node, and someone back then finds it, things could just spiral out of control. Wow, he's accumulated quite a bit of wealth in just a few weeks, if I read this right.”

“Who built this and why?”

“I wish I knew, Domenica. Right now, though, we need to tell the captain.” Quickly, the two women contacted the *Vinci* and briefed Gold on the latest developments. While Corsi enjoyed action, she didn’t like question marks. This equipment was one, and the Ferengi’s motives an even bigger one. She was somewhat annoyed that Gomez seemed more worried about the lost technology, but then again, that’s what she was trained to worry about.

“Before anyone goes anywhere, we need to find out what has changed. Let me send Abramowitz over to help you. Expect her shortly. Gold out.”

In minutes, Carol Abramowitz, the ship’s cultural specialist and closest expert on the Ferengi, arrived in the central chamber. By then, Corsi was studying the node that floated placidly above the column. Two other columns were inactive besides that one, and she had already figured out how to turn them on but left them deactivated.

Abramowitz, shorter than the others, with dark hair framing her face, nodded to her colleagues and began looking at the coordinates Gomez had translated and consulted one of several padds she carried with her. They worked fairly silently for several minutes, with Gomez occasionally explaining something about the technology. Corsi began to pace the chamber, at first looking for anything that resembled a defense system or hand weapon and then pacing because she had to do something.

“I think I have something,” Abramowitz said softly. “He’s been going back to the capital city repeatedly. No doubt he’s been using his current knowledge to enhance his fortune on the Ferengi exchanges.”

When she explained this to Gold, the next voice she heard was not his, but Songmin Wong’s. The conn officer excitedly called out, “He must be Lant!”

“Who’s Lant?” Gold asked.

“The darling of Ferengi commerce right now,” Wong said.

“How the hell do you know that?” Corsi demanded.

“I inherited a few bars of latinum last year,” he began. “So I’ve been dabbling in the markets. The financial net is filled with stories about this Lant guy’s amazing rise in prosperity. He hasn’t made an investment mistake in the last six months.”

“And now we know why,” Gold chimed in, sounding grim. “Whatever he’s been doing for six months worked, but for the last two weeks something’s been wrong. This is bad and needs to be fixed. Gomez, can you program one of those nodes?”

Gomez was already studying the tricorder translation of Lant’s postings. As she did so, Tev spoke up:

“Captain, does this become a Prime Directive issue?”

Corsi’s teeth started to grind. The only thing she hated more than engineering doubletalk was philosophical and ethical debates—especially from Tev, who, Corsi was learning, was more pedantic than the entire rest of the S.C.E. crew combined.

To the security chief’s relief, the captain said, “If they’re going back only a short time, and after contact

with the Federation has been established, then our away team will have some flexibility. But the Ferenginar of the recent past was even more male-dominated than it is now. You'll have to beam over and join the team. Assemble your equipment and head over there."

Corsi had to admit to herself that adding Tev to the team made sense. Ferenginar had only recently begun enacting social reforms to undo countless generations of female subjugation. As she recalled, women couldn't hold much in the way of jobs and were usually kept out of sight except to family.

Abramowitz completed her look at the equipment and had called up data on that era of Ferengi society, even as the stout Tellarite beamed down. He held a satchel that seemed to be filled with equipment. His black eyes looked around the chamber, taking in the equipment, and he nodded to himself.

"Aren't you a bit out of uniform, Mr. Tev?" Gomez asked. Tev was standing with a bright orange shirt, open at the neck to show tufts of fur, with chocolate brown pants that tucked themselves into nearly knee-high boots. Slung over one shoulder was an all-purpose carryall, devoid of Starfleet markings.

"To blend in on Ferenginar, I can't be in uniform. But I am prepared." He opened up the collar of his shirt, and on the reverse side was his Starfleet combadge.

"What about the rest of us?" Gomez asked, but he ignored the question and proceeded with instructions.

"The captain wants us to go after Lant, find out where he caused the change in the timeline and undo it. We might have to ruin him financially in the process," he said. "But that's an acceptable loss."

"To you, maybe," Abramowitz said. "To Lant, that's possibly worse than death. They live and die by the deal and the size of their holdings. It was a heady time for these people. Formal contact had been made with the Federation not long before, and this was seen as the opening of a huge new market. The piracy of a century previous was curtailed, and people sought business ventures, partnerships, brokering, and whatever else could be used to earn a slip of latinum."

"What I don't understand," Gomez said as she programmed the node, "is how the Federation economy grew flexible enough to accommodate the Ferengi mercantile system."

"Ever take an economics course at the Academy?" Tev asked.

"No."

"Well, that explains that," he replied and turned his attention to a display on his right.

Gomez instructed Corsi to grab the first of the nodes, letting another rise for programming. The first officer repeated the procedure until all four possessed nodes, which were small enough to fit into Tev's bag.

"Gomez to Gold."

"Gold here."

"We're ready to head back after Lant. I can't tell you how long this will take."

"Let's be careful with time. Take twelve hours and check back in. Do your best and good luck. I'm sending Blue and Soloman over to continue studying the tech."

“Good idea,” Gomez said. Corsi thought she caught a wistful tone in her voice. Corsi suspected that the first officer wanted to be the one studying the tech. However, Corsi preferred to have Gomez along on their time-travel trip—the alternative was to have Tev in charge, and Corsi wasn’t entirely comfortable with him yet.

“Tell them I’ve picked up a few anomalous power fluctuations,” Gomez added. “They might be the cause of the disruptions. I haven’t isolated the cause as yet.”

“Thanks, Gomez. They’ll figure it out. Good luck.”

“Tev, Sonya,” Abramowitz said, calling attention to her studies. “Few Ferengi had seen humans by that point, making us a cultural curiosity. Tellarites were a little more common on the planet itself. We need to be prepared to be stared at, and doing anything unobtrusive will be almost impossible.”

“Let’s get started,” Corsi insisted.

Abramowitz looked ready to say more, but seemed hesitant, which was not her nature, Corsi realized.

“What is it, Carol?” Gomez prompted.

“We’ll be women. On Ferenginar.”

Corsi and Gomez looked at her blankly.

“A decade ago.”

“So?” Corsi asked, confused.

“You’re dressed,” Tev finally interjected. He waited patiently, letting the words sink in. Corsi’s eyes narrowed with realization. Gomez caught the look, swung her head toward Abramowitz, who nodded in confirmation.

“We’ll accomplish less than nothing while we’re dressed,” she said softly. “In fact, we’ll be breaking social taboos and calling more attention to ourselves. We’ll never get close to Lant this way.”

“That’s why the captain sent me over—to take point,” Tev said. “I can be a . . . businessman, looking for some sort of deal with Lant.”

“That makes sense. And three escorts will show you as prosperous,” Abramowitz added.

Corsi shook her head. They were wasting time. She peeled off her duty jacket. Tev wisely said nothing, but simply opened his satchel.

“We have to?” Gomez asked.

“Sonya, let’s just get this over with and grab Lant,” Corsi said as she stepped out of her pants, folding them neatly and handing them to Tev. He silently placed them atop a dark console. He then withdrew a hand phaser and a strap. The security chief accepted it and considered for a moment before strapping it high on her right thigh. She hoped it looked decorative enough.

“When in Rome,” Abramowitz muttered, pulling her shirt over her head. She too handed each article of clothing over to Tev.

“And what sort of businessman should I be?”

Abramowitz struggled with a boot as she replied, “Given our advanced technology, you might make favorable inroads by peddling new gear. But you can’t really sell any of it or let them look too closely.”

“Of course not,” Tev said. “Still, I’ll need money to get started, and it’s not like we have any latinum in ship’s stores.”

“That’s easy,” Corsi said, strolling over to the main console and helping herself to the stack of latinum slips. “It’s hopefully enough to get you in the door.”

Tev placed the three pairs of boots below the console and then continued rummaging about, looking for the tools Gomez would need to handle the node and to impress potential customers.

Abramowitz continued, “We’ll be your escorts, staying close. You have to make sure the Ferengi don’t touch the merchandise....”

“Or us,” Gomez added. “It’s going to be hard to use the tricorder if I’m just window dressing.”

“We’ll make do,” Corsi said, her tone flat. “Tev, hand me the spanner.”

He handed the device over with a questioning glance. Corsi merely undid her tight bun of blond hair and quickly wrapped her hair around the device, making it look like an accoutrement. He nodded in approval.

Gomez nodded and hit a control on the console that was marked in the Ferengi language. All four orbs hummed immediately. Within seconds, though, they began to glow the same way Lant’s node worked, which made Corsi feel both relieved and more apprehensive.

* * *

On the da Vinci bridge, Gold had completed making an entry in his log and sat back. All the wheels were in motion: his people going back in time and more of the crew going to explore the device that made that absurd statement a reality. Time travel had always concerned him given the paradoxes posed by each such use. Still, with people popping back and forth in time going back to the days of the Temporal Cold War, it was no longer a fantastic notion. He still disliked the idea that a single accident could wipe out everything he knew and cherished. Sure, there were great tragedies he’d personally like to see undone, starting with losing half his crew, but he recognized that things happened for a reason. There had to be a reason, be it cosmic plan or divine intervention.

He looked at the banal image of the asteroid directly before the starship. Nothing about it looked artificial, but he knew better. And now he had four of his team risking their lives and the timeline to correct base greed. Was it worth it?

Speaking of worth... He looked at his conn officer. “Wong,” he asked, “just how successful have you been with your new hobby?”

The lieutenant hesitated in answering, which just made everyone on the bridge look directly at him.

Wong finally swallowed and gave him a sheepish grin. “Well, I now own a pleasure yacht moored in dock around Risa, so you might say I’ve been pretty successful.”

Gold let out a whistle and settled back in his chair. Some hobbies had better rewards than others.

Chapter 4

It was gray, Gomez noticed. Of course, on Ferenginar, anything but gray was considered unusual. She remembered Bart saying after their last encounter with the Ferengi on the Debuture of Triple-Lined Latinum that they had dozens of words in their language for rain, and they had almost as many to describe the lighting conditions. It was a light gray, she decided, meaning the sun was probably nearing the noon position. The air was tepid, and naturally damp. They were standing on a street slick with recent rain, some of it rainbowed from some oily substance that felt rather unpleasant on Sonya’s bare feet.

The capital city was old and overbuilt. Their architecture was scaled for the shorter Ferengi physique, so their towers didn’t seem as imposing as the skyscrapers back home on Earth. Still, there were some interesting styles on display that she would have enjoyed looking at in more depth under other circumstances.

Completely different circumstances.

She quickly surveyed the area and saw people approaching from the north. They were a crowd of Ferengi businessmen, all in motley attire, more interested in their padds than in the people around them. No doubt about it, they were going to stand out—a Tellarite and three human women.

“Now that we’re here, can our nodes be fine-tuned to find Lant?” Tev asked.

Gomez shrugged as Tev handed her a tricorder and one of the nodes. She stepped deep into a gap between two buildings while Corsi kept watch at the entranceway. Despite light traffic, no one had bothered to glance their way.

As she worked, a pair of Ferengi walked by and eyed Tev, their eyes widening further when they spotted the women. Carol and Domenica met their gaze head-on, which caused the men to continue their conversation. Sonya was grateful, as it meant they were paying little attention to her.

“Each node works the same but has a distinct signature,” Gomez finally said. “By screening out the four here, I’ve isolated just one...Lant’s. He’s due west of here, about a kilometer away.”

Tev grunted in acknowledgment. “That’s where the Tower of Commerce is and our starting point. Between here and there, we need to get our hands on some latinum; these few slips can get us in the door and that’s about it. Let’s get started.”

He held out his hand toward Gomez, who blinked in surprise and then realized she needed to hand over the tricorder. She did so, muttering a curse. She could live without clothes if she had to, but without tools, she felt truly naked.

With that, Tev strode forward, turning left onto the street. Carol and Sonya followed, with Corsi taking up the final position.

* * *

No sooner had the *Vinci*'s sensors showed the chroniton burst signaling time travel than Gold dispatched P8 Blue and Soloman to the asteroid for investigation. The chamber was silent as they materialized but was quickly filled with the whine from the *Nasat*'s tricorder.

Soloman, built approximately the same size as a Ferengi, clambered atop the platform to study the master control panel. He nodded as he quickly took in the holographic readings from the idle equipment. With tricorder in one hand, Soloman gingerly sampled controls and waited to see what happened. Like Commander Gomez after Lt. Commander Duffy's death, one reason he remained with the S.C.E. after losing his bond-mate 111 was his desire to explore the new and undiscovered.

Even as he took in all the data through his dataport, Soloman glanced over his shoulder to see P8 Blue studying the chamber's construction. As the structural systems specialist, it was her job to find clues as to which species might have built the chamber and created the device. The supposition from the outset was that they were the same, but they needed to prove that beyond a doubt.

"It's half a millennium old," she observed, her tricorder waving in front of a support beam. "Basically sound architectural principals, some variations compared with about a dozen other planets but nothing that distinctive. In fact, it's so boring, even the Borg wouldn't assimilate it."

"Then maybe they spent all that time on their computer systems and time-travel technology. This is beyond anything I've seen before, and it's taking me some time," Soloman said. "Raw elements in the asteroid seem to be tapped to provide the tremendous amounts of energy required to power the equipment. What is the radiation shielding like?"

"Standard for space construction. They clearly were not concerned about chroniton radiation like we are. That explains some of the problems we were having with navigation. They just never screened it out. Perhaps I can do something about that with the shield modulations." Pattie used three of her eight limbs to feel around the architecture, testing the unit. Seemingly satisfied, she lifted herself up, scaling the machinery to get a better understanding of its construction and purpose.

"Interesting." With that, Soloman returned his full attention to the computer console. He had traced the connections to the backup systems and found the astronomical database. It seemed, at first glance, to be deeper and more complete than anything Starfleet had, possibly beyond the three dimensions used to map the universe. He determined a download would not be detrimental to the equipment, so he began setting up a link with the *Vinci*'s mainframe.

As he worked, he considered one way after another to delve deeper into the programming. The algorithms used to access the time and place databases were inventively constructed, and he relished the challenge of cracking them. However, before he could begin his next area of study, he heard Blue let out a noise. Quickly turning, he saw her standing before a control panel tucked in an alcove opposite the node columns.

"Soloman, we have a problem," she said.

"Don't we always?" he asked innocently.

"Not like this," she replied. "This panel is some sort of fuel consumption monitor, and it appears that Lant has left the equipment on without a required shutdown period for automatic maintenance. As a

result, an imbalance in the mineral admixture has developed and there will be an overload.”

He considered that for a moment and then offered, “Could this be why the navigation has only been difficult these last few weeks?”

“That must be what Commander Gomez found before leaving,” she added, nodding her head quickly. Soloman definitely preferred things that added up in neat sums, so connections like this comforted him.

“Can you stop it?”

“I don’t even know what minerals are being tapped to provide energy, yet,” she said, sounding exasperated. “If I read this right, it will become critical in about fourteen hours.”

“That is after the crew is due back from the past,” Soloman observed. “That gives us a two-hour margin, larger than usual.”

“Assuming I read this right and the imbalance doesn’t interfere with their ability to return home.”

“You have developed the humans’ knack for clouding positive news with negative information.”

“Comes with the job, I think,” she said. Then she tapped her combadge to report to Captain Gold.

Chapter 5

Tev led the away team toward the Tower of Commerce, and with every block the streets were filled with more and more Ferengi. Most stopped to point openly and stare at the women, many gap-jawed. Two even dared to pull out recording devices to take pictures, no doubt for private use and personal profit. The Tower’s shadow fell upon the quartet, at which point the Tellarite consulted the tricorder once more, confirming Lant’s signature remained ahead.

The Tellarite had quickly reviewed the historic database on Ferenginar politics of this time. Zek was still Grand Nagus, and it was prior to Ishka’s influence on him for social reform. There remained strict adherence to the two hundred and eighty-five Rules of Acquisition, which he had also had downloaded, but had hoped Abramowitz was familiar with them in a pinch. They would need to get to the trading floor in the mammoth Tower of Commerce, the largest structure on the planet. But to do that, he’d need more latinum to be taken seriously.

“Have any of you ever used the Exchanges?”

“It’s not exactly on the tourist guides,” Abramowitz replied. The others used silence for negative replies. “But we’ll have to brave it. What will you do once we get in?”

“I presume we’ll be given a line of credit and use that to build up a fortune, attracting Lant. He must come to us,” Tev said.

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Then, Dr. Abramowitz, you’ll have to bring him to us.”

“That’d be fun and a chance to mete out a little justice,” she said.

“Now, now, he had no idea we’d find his fortune-building reprehensible,” Tev continued. They were finally approaching the entrance to the Tower, which was truly a remarkable structure. Its top floors were obscured by low-lying fog and dense cloud cover. Etched in blocks carefully placed from the ground up, were the famed Rules of Acquisition. Ferengi wealth was literally built with these Rules, a lesson to all who entered the structure. The entranceway was brightly lit, bathing them in warmth and causing reflections to dance on the walls and high ceiling. Gusts of heated air buffeted them as they walked into the structure, which Tev assumed the women appreciated. A variety of house rules were listed on one wall, scrolling lazily down and then to the left as their language dictated. No one seemed to speak loudly, but there was a buzz of whispers that made Tev think he was surrounded by insects.

A man in what appeared to be a severely cut Ferengi business suit with muted colors approached the group and gave them a long, leering look. After a few seconds’ study, he put his wrists together, hands splayed outward, and bowed deeply.

“Welcome to the Tower of Commerce. I am Rheb, the floor manager.”

Tev repeated the gesture and bowed, not once losing eye contact. “I am Mor glasch Tev, just in from Tellar.” He hesitated for a moment, about to introduce his companions, but thought better of it. To Rheb, they were accoutrements and not worth knowing. So be it.

“I’ve come to negotiate some new contracts, but my meetings are not until tomorrow. But, as you say, ‘Opportunity plus instinct...’”

“...equals profit,” they finished together. Rheb laughed insincerely and Tev chuckled to be a good sport about it.

“You must have good instincts to be so well attended.” Rheb’s very voice seemed to have a leer.

Tev reached out a hand to stroke Gomez’s face, noting from the corner of his eye that she remained absolutely still. “I get by. My business is research tools, and now that you’re doing more business with the Federation, I suspect you will need improved portable data storage units.”

Rheb placed a withered knuckle under his chin and rubbed thoughtfully, refusing to take his eyes off Tev’s hand, which continued to idly caress Gomez’s chin. After a moment more, he nodded in agreement.

“Now, I fancy the Futures Exchange,” Tev said forcefully. “If you’d be so kind as to open up a line of credit, I can—”

The wail from Rheb startled all four Starfleet officers, and Gomez stepped backward, breaking contact with Tev. The Tellarite briefly glanced at the women and then back at their host. The look of horror on his face clearly meant Tev had made a major error.

“We donot give just anyone a line of credit,” Rheb finally blurted out. “You can’t walk in here, prosperous as you appear to be, and think we’ll let ourselves be robbed blind.”

“Now see here, Rheb,” Tev said, trying to sound imperious. “There’s no need for that sort of noise. Let’s see what sort of an arrangement we can work out.”

Rheb straightened his suit, quickly regaining his dignity as befits a floor manager. Puffing out his chest, he said, "Show me the color of your latinum and we'll be happy to make a place for you in the Exchange."

"You don't think I walk around with latinum to be picked from my pocket," Tev said, matching Rheb attitude for attitude. "This is a place of high finance, and I do not mean to insult you with a fistful of slips." Which, of course, was precisely what he had to his name.

"I appreciate you respecting this institution; I can see why you've been prosperous," Rheb replied, sounding magnanimous. "Still, our rules do not allow me to open up a line of credit without concrete proof of one's holdings."

"And how shall I do that since our two governments do not currently share economic data?"

Before Rheb could reply to Tev's question, Abramowitz sashayed past the Tellarite and bent low to whisper something in the manager's ear. She leaned in close, a fingertip tracing the rim of his right ear. The manager's eyes went wide and he suddenly seemed to be having trouble breathing, but Tev held still. When she was done whispering, Rheb reached into his coat and withdrew a slim padd. He tabbed a few controls and added a thumbprint to the bottom of the screen.

"Mr. Tev, an opening line of credit has been placed in your name on the Futures Exchange. I think fifteen bars should be a good start for you," Rheb said. "The Exchange is just this way, if you follow me."

He spun on his left heel and began briskly walking away from the group. It took Tev a few strides to catch up, and he heard the women behind him. When they were right with him, he turned to Abramowitz and gave her a quizzical look.

"I promised him delights no Ferengi had ever experienced," she said, a grimace crossing her features.

"They may wheel and deal with their lobes, but men throughout the galaxy act fairly uniformly."

Rheb kept up his brisk pace as they moved deeper into the building, which seemed far larger than Tev would have imagined. People got out of the floor manager's way, many bowing in any number of prescribed Ferengi groveling forms. He knew each had significance but didn't want to slow down to ask Abramowitz for an explanation. There remained a tight time frame despite all the time-travel nonsense they had to endure. Instead, he snickered at the almost uniform reaction to his fellow officers. He pitied them but couldn't let it impede the mission.

Finally, Rheb turned sharply to his left and stood before a massive pair of doors. The Ferengi touched some control within his garish jacket and the doors parted, allowing a cacophony of sound to rush out. Tev had studied various forms of commerce while at the Academy, but nothing prepared him for the manic energy emanating from within. Rheb, though, took a deep breath, a smile plastered to his face. This was heaven to the manager, or the Divine Treasury, as he believed the Ferengi called their afterlife. To Tev, it was just noise and desperation. Within, people were shouting at one another, padds being passed back and forth, screens flickering with information, and set against the far wall was a clock ticking down to the end of the trading session. There had to have been hundreds of Ferengi crammed inside, with movement being severely restricted. He noted the interior temperature was significantly higher than the hallway and for a moment envied the women their lack of clothing.

"Tev, I think you will find everything you need if you start with the room manager, Trotta. He'll take very good care of you. Shall I escort your, ah, associates to a waiting room?" His voice betrayed his desires,

and Tev smiled to himself.

“I think not,” he replied. “No offense, mind you, but we’re new in town and I’d prefer not to misplace any of my belongings.”

The floor manager brought his wrists together and bowed once more, backing out.

Tev returned his gaze to the dizzying room, as he pulled out the tricorder. The node signature was still nearby, probably in this very area, but he couldn’t pin it down further. Too many other signals were interfering with the reading; he shrugged and pocketed the device.

Within moments, Trotta, a much younger Ferengi in an even more garish suit, arrived and smiled toothily at Tev. He even allowed himself a long look at the women before speaking. After introductions were made, Trotta escorted the group through narrow aisles until they reached one particular station, its screens filled with a constant flow of data and imagery. Withdrawing his personal padd, Trotta sent a signal to the station, and lights winked a few times before they all flashed a dull brown.

“Your account is now active, Mr. Tev,” Trotta said, pocketing his padd. “I wish you good fortune.”

“Thank you,” Tev said and immediately ignored the man. He stared at the information coming across regarding grain production on Sherman’s Planet. For a moment he marveled at how quickly the Ferengi adapted Federation information into their commercial world. Still, “adapt or die” was a universal law, although it might not have made it in so many words into the Ferengi’s own Rule book.

He pulled out his tricorder once more and began placing orders with the man on the other side of the counter. For every order Tev managed to shout, the Ferengi surrounding him seemed able to get in five times as many. Still, a quick look at the account board showed he had placed seven orders in just under ten minutes, all of which would pay off in an hour. Based on the Federation historic database, he knew the outcomes but placed his orders conservatively, including two that would fail. This would allow him to repay his credit of fifteen bars of latinum and start his own nest egg. He would then parlay those resources into bolder trades that would be designed to attract Lant’s attention.

He couldn’t rush things, otherwise he’d raise suspicions. Instead, he’d have to waste precious time and he couldn’t even dispatch the women to hunt down Lant. They had to play their part. He could already tell Corsi was simmering, ready to lash out at the first opportunity. They exchanged glances and she nodded once, reaffirming she knew her role and would play it for now. Tev suddenly felt the pressure of the twelve-hour window, the countdown to the end of the trading session and the now-lit fuse that would result in Corsi doing something that might jeopardize the mission. If only he could place bets on that. . . .

* * *

As Tev began the time-consuming task of building a fortune, Gomez, Abramowitz, and Corsi were left to stand around, being gawked at and little more. It sat well with none of them, especially the engineer. She disliked time travel and she disliked Ferengi culture and a woman’s lack of place in it. Yet, here she was, a decade or so in the past, stark naked and surrounded by Ferengi, who would just as soon own her as look at her. She really wanted to go back to the starship. . . a feeling she hadn’t had too often since Kieran died.

“Domenica,” she said tentatively, “how’re you holding up?”

“I’d prefer smacking every Ferengi who’s looked at us, but I’m keeping my temper.”

“Figure Fabe will get some mileage out of this mission?”

“He’ll try and then he’ll discover why they nicknamed me Core-Breach.” Corsi actually smiled at the line, although Gomez winced at the image.

“How’re things between you two?”

Corsi hesitated, uncertain of the answer, which was not her style. “I think we’re okay. Once we got back to the ship we’ve been kept pretty busy. I’m not exactly used to this sort of thing.”

“Shipboard romances? Me either, except for Kieran—but don’t go by example.”

A look of pity washed quickly over Corsi’s face and Gomez inwardly winced. “What you two had was great,” the security chief finally said. “I’m not sure what I’ve got. Fabe might, but I’m still figuring it out.”

“And it bothers you, I can see that,” Gomez said.

“Yeah.”

“The not knowing?”

“That and being involved with anyone,” Corsi admitted. “I mean, who am I to suddenly have a man to complicate my responsibilities?”

“How so?”

“My duty is to Starfleet. It used to be to my father and mother, and now Fabian is part of the equation.”

“It’s not all math, you know,” the engineer said with an accompanying smile. “If I know you, it’s a little more like chaos theory.”

Corsi laughed and actually started to blush at the comment. With a glance past Gomez, though, she saw the bewildered look on Abramowitz’s face.

“What about you, Carol, ever have someone aboard ship?”

“No,” was all she said, indicating a lack of desire to continue the conversation. In fact, Abramowitz turned away from the two and directed her attention to the big board of information.

Gomez and Corsi exchanged confused expressions, each shrugging their shoulders. But Gomez knew, as first officer, that something was troubling Carol; it occurred to her she didn’t know her crewmate anywhere near as well as she should.

Before either could say anything else, they heard a slapping sound and spun around. Carol was backing away from a Ferengi, who was busily rubbing his cheek and cradling his left hand, awkwardly trying to do both at the same time. It was clear what had happened and equally clear that things were so chaotic that this was likely to occur again. The three huddled a little closer, trying to avoid any contact with rushing traders, floorwalkers, or even Tev.

* * *

“That’s fifty-four bars to your account.” The Ferengi sitting behind the desk spoke with a tone of amazement in his voice.

Tev accepted the padd back, making sure every slip was accounted for. He noted the processing fee seemed high and handed the padd back, tapping at the line of type with one well-polished and rather pointed black nail. The Ferengi looked at it as if he had never seen an error before and looked up at Tev while assuming one of the more popular cringes. The standoff continued for a few more seconds and finally the Ferengi acquiesced and corrected the deduction. Behind him, Tev noted a column of numbers seemed to shrink and he nodded to himself in agreement.

“Master,” Carol began in a singsong voice. Tev turned toward her, an indulgent smile on his face. They leaned their heads toward one another to whisper sweet nothings into each other’s ear, as far as the crowd around them was concerned.

“You’re doing well, but Lant seems to be nowhere nearby.”

“I noticed. I’ve been trading in the same sectors he has been from what Lieutenant Wong told us, and my successes should be matching his. Lant’s obviously not stupid, so he’s playing it smart and staying put. We just can’t figure out where that is. We need to do something.”

Right then, a new voice was heard and it wasn’t a happy one. “What’s going on?”

“Tev is having a good run,” the morose man behind the counter said, ignoring the speaker and processing more trade orders.

“Very well,” the other Ferengi said. He was an unpleasant-looking Ferengi with the most insincere smile Tev had seen yet. He was smartly dressed in a muted crazy-quilt jacket with a dull red shirt peeking through. By Ferengi standards, it was almost conservative.

“Ah, Mr. Tev, I see the fortunes are kind to you today,” the man said. “I am Brunt, Trotta’s adjutant. For new customers here on Ferenginar, we have a more comfortable room for you to use. Trotta suggests I escort you there. Maybe you and your, ah, party would like to accompany me.” He didn’t even wait, spinning on a heel and striding off, literally pushing people out of his way. The lack of reaction indicated this was typical behavior, so Tev refused comment, but did gesture for the others to follow him. They were led from the room to a private elevator, where a uniformed Ferengi youth stood. Brunt got in first, then the others, but before the doors closed, the attendant was expectantly looking from face to face. It was growing uncomfortable for Tev, who finally figured out the attendant was expecting some form of tip for performing his job. He glared down at Brunt, who was trying to ignore the look. Finally, he let out a small sigh and withdrew his padd. He beamed some form of latinum to the youth who heard a beep go off in his hip pocket. At that, the doors closed and the small elevator shot upward at a dizzying speed.

When they stepped off the elevator seconds later, Tev was amazed to see the comforts that awaited them: deeply cushioned plaid chairs, solid-color throw pillows the size of a bunk bed, tables laden with hot dishes of various tube grubs and a crowded bar. Beyond the bar, a handful of Ferengi were conducting business on communications devices or dealing with a far less crazed traders’ desk. The noise level was decidedly muted, the tension less palpable. It was downright civilized to Tev’s way of thinking. Trotta, concluding a conversation with two other Ferengi, saw them emerge from the elevator and came to greet them, a big grin on his face.

“You can continue your successful business from here,” Trotta said. “Your, ah, women can wait in that corner until you’re done.”

“May I feed them?”

Trotta paused, and looking displeased, nodded once, a move echoed by Brunt. With a gesture, Tev indicated the women should help themselves from the food table. Trotta watched them appreciatively and commented, “You must be very good at what you do to afford such fine creatures.”

“I get by,” Tev said noncommittally.

“I find it interesting you are finding success in the grain markets; that makes you the second one this month. Just the other week a man who didn’t seem to have the lobes to pick his own clothes comes in and scores big.”

“Really? A fellow countryman perhaps?”

“Mine, not yours,” Brunt said. “His name’s Lant. He’s amassed quite the fortune, but maybe he’s a savant. Absolutely no investment sense. He’s been storing it all in long-term growth funds.” He cackled at such a strategy. To Tev, it sounded eminently practical, but he had information Brunt didn’t.

Corsi, her plate wriggling at her with the grubs and some salad, wandered by and was listening. “This Lant must have the lobes after all. Is he here today? He sounds fascinating.”

Trotta looked at her with distaste. After all, Tev knew, women shouldn’t be heard at all when out in public. Still, he was counting on some latitude, given the money he was playing with. He tried to catch Corsi’s eye to have her stop but clearly her patience was almost at an end.

“He might be, woman,” the manager answered. “Now please, chew Mr. Tev’s food and give it to him.”

Corsi took a step closer to Trotta, and it was clear she was the taller of the two, so he had to look up to meet her eyes. At first, he refused to look any higher than necessary but Tev cleared his throat, catching the older man’s attention. Tev tipped his head upward, silently commanding respect for his property. Trotta finally looked into Corsi’s smoldering eyes. He was looking more uncomfortable by the moment and Brunt backed up two steps. Tev was amused to note that sweat seemed to appear on his prominent forehead. Well, if he couldn’t stop Corsi, he was going to at least wait and see how much more information she could get from him.

“Might isn’t good enough,” she said, steel creeping into her voice. “Tev wants to do business with him, business that might profit him, Tev, and even you. Do you know where Lant is?”

The circuits inside Trotta’s mind were working overtime, Tev noticed. Clearly, he was looking for a way to benefit from imparting the information he had. A smile began to form on his lips, and Trotta stepped even closer to Corsi so there was barely any space between them. He leaned toward her ear and whispered, “Whatever information I have might be yours, if Tev would let you and me go to my office for, well, that is, for a littleoo-mox.”

Corsi’s fist found Trotta’s stomach before Tev could even tell her to stop. The Ferengi doubled over, air rushing out of him, and then he let go a squeal that had Carol and Sonya covering their ears. The security chief stepped over the kneeling Ferengi, grabbed his collar and hissed in his ear, “Lant. Now.”

Brunt moved to help his superior, but Abramowitz and Gomez blocked his path. The others in the room looked up, stared, and then silently returned to their business. Clearly, there was no profit in participating.

“He completed trading about an hour ago and left the Exchange. He usually goes for drinks after a successful trading day.”

“How successful was he?” she asked.

A long wheeze. “Very.”

“Where does he drink?”

Trotta began to get off the ground but Corsi’s bare foot pushed him into the carpeting.

“He’s a hopper, starts at the Treasure Chest and goes from there. Now, don’t hit me again.”

“Not to worry. I think my master was planning to leave now.” She gave Tev a look that meant it was indeed time to move on. Tev signaled the others and they all headed for the elevator, ignoring Trotta and Brunt. Corsi’s glare stopped the pair in their tracks and let them leave the floor without further incident.

In the elevator, the attendant looked once more for a tip. Corsi stared him down until the car began to descend although at a slower speed than before. Tev looked angrily at his security chief. She looked back, defiant.

“She’s right, we weren’t getting anywhere,” Abramowitz said.

“And time’s a-wasting,” Gomez added.

“I had things under control,” Tev said with irritation.

“You might have a fortune in latinum, but Lant is still loose. At least now we have a trail,” Corsi said. She turned to the attendant and demanded directions to the Treasure Chest. When he hesitated, she grabbed him roughly by the collar and glared once more. He provided the location and to his surprise, Tev sympathetically tipped him four slips.

Once on the street, he noticed the skies were a darker shade of gray and a breeze was kicking up. Rain was coming and he wouldn’t be able to shield his companions, which would only make them cold, wet, and cranky. Another race against time, but he grudgingly admitted Corsi got further with a little strong-arming than two hours of trading, no matter how profitable. And it was fun, he admitted to himself. The question remained as to what he would do with his ill-gotten funds when this was all over. Pushing that thought to the back of his mind, he pulled out his tricorder. The readings indicated Lant was in the same general direction as the bar. Tev shook the random thoughts free and led the away team over several blocks west and then two north until they saw the bright yellow sign and animated image of jewels spilling from an old metal chest. He reached for the door and paused for a moment, looking at Carol.

“We’d be thrown out, so we’ll just wait here,” she said.

“Hurry, will you?” Gomez demanded. “And consider that an order, Commander.”

Inside, it was crowded with businessmen having a late lunch. There were representatives of many races aligned with the Ferengi, but he was surprised to see a cluster of Nausicaans clearly concluding

negotiations with a Ferengi. It appeared they were all enjoying liquid lunches and were acting very chummy; probably thinking each was getting the better of the other. Such were the ways of business on many worlds, he knew. The bartender was a Ferengi of indeterminate age, and he leaned over the counter to better hear Tev.

The Tellarite's padd was already out, and he keyed it to transmit ten slips of latinum. "I'm looking for a deal." The bartender's eyes lit up at that and he leaned farther over the counter, balancing on his hands. Tev reached down and held the hands in place, at the wrist.

"I'm looking for the answer to one question and these ten slips are yours. Prevaricate and you won't be able to mix drinks for the next week."

The bartender's eyes widened in fear and pain. He squirmed only a little before it became obvious Tev would prevail. He nodded once. Tev asked after Lant and got remarkably clear directions to the nearest branch of Frin's Taverns. Pausing long enough to transmit the ten slips, Tev hurried out of the bar and moved south, gesturing for the others to keep up.

As they moved down the street, he looked over at Corsi and smiled. "I tried it your way and found it remarkably effective."

"Thank you," she said through gritted teeth. At that moment, Tev noted the temperature had dropped noticeably since the skies grew darker. His pace increased.

Frin's was a brighter, cheerier establishment, with people of all walks filling the tables and lined up along the U-shaped bar. A laughing Ferengi was juggling five shot glasses, two of which seemed to be filled. Tev once more left his companions outside and was ready with the bribe to keep looking for his quarry. The tricorder had been ineffective in pinpointing Lant's signature, which proved vexing. Worse, Tev had to wait for the juggling bartender to finish his performance before being able to ask after Lant. He used the wait to scan the room, but no Ferengi was sitting by himself, so Lant was likely not here. He wondered just how far behind the time traveler he and the others were. An hour, half that?

It took him fifteen slips this time, but Tev at least got a time frame along with the information. They were fortunate; they were maybe fifteen to twenty minutes behind Lant, who had headed into an older quarter of the capital city. As they neared the third establishment on their hunt, Tev felt the first drops of rain moments before the curses came from Sonya. "Tev, give me your tricorder."

"Is that wise out in the open?"

"I don't care. I want to find this man, now," she said. He handed it over and she immediately began fine-tuning the signal. She tapped, waited, tapped again. Finally, with a grin, she handed it back to him.

"He's inside, waiting for you."

"How did you find him?"

"I narrowed the focus, screening out where he was not likely to be and then fine-tuned for the node's exact emissions—which only works in close proximity. Happy?"

"Enlightened." And he meant it. He had not been sure that Gomez was a worthy human to be serving under. He'd read her work, of course, and knew of her record, which was not of a certain accomplishment. Captain Scott had called her the best when he gave Tev the assignment, but Tev also

knew that the captain was given to hyperbole, especially regarding human females. There was also the concern over whether or not the commander had recovered from her—to Tev’s mind, totally inappropriate—relationship with Tev’s own predecessor. However, she was starting to prove herself to be tolerably competent.

“If that’s the case,” Corsi said, “I’ll circle around the back so he can’t elude us again. Carol will come with me.”

Tev considered for a moment and then nodded in agreement. He waved them off and motioned for Gomez to wait by the side of the small, run-down building. It was caked with some form of grime and seemed to actually smell. Half the lights proclaiming its name and its products were broken and he heard them buzzing. He crossed the threshold and there was a different, albeit equally unpleasant, smell within. People were huddled around tables, the bar was empty and the voices were hushed, going silent as they took note of the Tellarite’s presence. As Tev’s eyes adjusted to the lack of light, he scanned for Lant and sure enough, at a table toward the rear a man was hunched over a tall glass of something green fizzing and he was fumbling with something in his hands. He was the only one not looking at him. Cautiously, Tev stepped farther within the establishment and rummaged in his bag for a hand phaser.

The man seemed oblivious to Tev’s approach, and the bartender remained silent. Others huddled down farther in their seats, drinking in silence, which made his footsteps seem amplified. His fingers gripped the phaser, and he tried to keep it out of sight. Finally, as he was ten feet from the table, Lant looked up and grinned stupidly. It was a mix of triumph and terror, telling Tev he wasn’t being as careful as he had hoped. Lant stabbed at a control, and the node between his hands glowed with a shower of red, pink, and orange sparks. Tev threw himself at him, but landed atop the empty table, bruising his ribs for his trouble. He let out a Tellarite curse and snarled a little before getting up and checking his phaser. It was undamaged, so he stuffed it into the bag in favor of his tricorder and one of the nodes. Quickly, he rushed out the door and thrust both at Gomez.

“He’s escaped in time. We have to find him.”

Chapter 6

On the *Vinci* ten years in the future, Dantas Falcão was finishing her meal in the mess hall when Bart Faulwell sat beside her. He carried with him a leather portfolio and a small satchel that he spread out on the table. She watched in fascination as he pulled out a sheet of parchment paper and an elegant pen. Setting it down, he rose and went to the replicator, returning a minute later with a plate of cookies and a mug with steam rising from the top.

“We haven’t met,” he began, a broad smile on his face. “I’m Bart Faulwell. You’re Dantas Falcão, the new medtech. So tell me, how are you enjoying the ship?”

“How’d you know who I am?” she asked with some confusion in her voice.

Faulwell just grinned and returned to his letter.

Dantas frowned for a moment and then glanced at the letter he was writing. “Wow, I haven’t seen pen and parchment in a long time.”

“Well, they say the old tools are usually the best tools,” he said.

“Which they?”

Now Faulwell frowned at the simple question and took the opportunity to bite into a cookie. He finally shrugged and replied, “There’s always a ‘they,’ I’ve been told.”

“Who told you?”

He stared at her in surprise and then said, “You’re messing with my head, aren’t you?”

Dantas grinned at him and swiped a cookie from his plate, took a bite and chewed happily. Bart looked at her, his pen, the plate, and finally back at her.

“So, there’s always a ‘they’ and someone’s always telling you things. How long has this been going on?”

“What?”

“These voices? What does Dr. Lense say about it?”

“There are no voices,” he said.

“Then who tells you these things?”

“What things?”

“Things like old tools being the best tools. You ask me, I’d prefer our computer interface to pen and ink.”

Bart broke into a grin. “Ah, now there you’re wrong! Ever since pen and ink and parchment came together on Earth, nothing has replaced it. Having something to hold, and keep, in someone’s own hand is far more personal, and if I might say, romantic, than a voice on an isolinear chip. What do you find romantic?”

She paused, stopping a reply from being uttered. Clearly, she had thoughts on the issue, he noted, but he was willing to have her think this one through. He sipped from his mug and wrote out a few more words while she pondered.

“To me,” she began slowly, “romantic acts are more spontaneous. A sudden present, a surprise for dinner, running away from home and going for a picnic. I guess my kind of partner acts more from instinct than careful planning.”

“Well, I guess it’s a good thing I’m taken,” he said with a grin. She blinked at him in surprise.

* * *

Down on the asteroid, P8 Blue was shuttling back and forth between consoles, checking readings and tentatively triggering controls. Soloman knew she was increasingly concerned over the imbalance that was building on the schedule she charted hours earlier. There was less than eight hours to go before things grew critical and the asteroid was likely to explode.

“Soloman,” Pattie called out. It was the first time she spoke in quite a while. “This new set of readouts makes me think things might implode instead. Something changed in the intermix.” She scuttled up the computer a bit to better read one of the displays, and she seemed to be rechecking her work. The Bynar waited patiently even though he began to feel the sense of impending danger, a feeling he had grown accustomed to, but was never happy about it.

“The batteries are all drained and the computer is still active, so it’s increasing its draw from the asteroid; that’s what’s making things change,” she called out. “In fact, because of the constant drain, the asteroid is becoming less and less stable. Its increasing brittleness may cause the implosion.”

“This is not a good thing,” Soloman said, trying to keep things light. He had noted that his S.C.E. colleagues had been having more trouble doing so since Galvan VI, so he felt the need to increase his own efforts—especially in light of his own ostracism from mainstream Bynar society, underlined by the prejudice of the Bynar pair on the Ishtar project.

Time felt slow to him, which was odd given the countdown that continued inexorably downward. P8 Blue previously theorized the metallurgy employed by the race that constructed the chamber was uninspired, just a slightly different blend of ores than standard Federation construction.

“Pattie,” Soloman called out. She turned toward him, lowering her tricorder. “I wanted to ask you about your visit home.”

P8 Blue closed the tricorder and returned to the floor, obviously collecting her thoughts. While colleagues, the two were not close and he feared he was being inappropriate with the question.

“It was not what I had hoped for,” she finally said, her voice sounding small. “My time in Starfleet has opened up my eyes and my mind, and suddenly my people seem a troubled lot.”

“As I understand it, your opinion was discounted until it was almost too late.”

“That it was,” she agreed, coming closer. “The Citoac was believed a myth until physical evidence proved otherwise and my people had to adjust accordingly. They had forgotten their promises and needed to learn a painful lesson.”

“Would you go home again?”

“Why do you ask?”

Now it was Soloman who grew silent. How could he explain what it was like, recently working with paired Bynar who then rejected him as aberrant? The pain of losing 111 was fresh again, and, coupled with the rejection on Venus, he seemed to dwell on his fate with increasing regularity.

“I am not sure I am welcome on my homeworld anymore,” he finally said.

Pattie’s expression changed to one of total sympathy. “Oh, Soloman, that can’t be true.”

“It might be, I don’t honestly know. Unpaired Bynar are seen as unfit for society, and the bigotry I experienced on Venus makes me unsure about ever returning home.”

“Do you regret the life you chose?”

“No, I do not,” he said with conviction. “What I traded away in functionality I have more than made up for in life experience. It’s just that I do not know if I would be welcome by the society at large.”

“You and I, I think, are explorers and pioneers in our own ways. Our lives apart from our societies allow us to bring much-needed perspectives to the homeworlds. I had hoped that after the Dominion War our people would see a need for reexamining our place in the galaxy, but the conversation has not even started. However, there are more Bynar on Federation worlds and, I truly believe your people will come around once presented with the overwhelming evidence that there’s more than one approach to life.”

Soloman considered her words, taking comfort in them and in P8 Blue’s willingness to open up. He had hesitated in even starting the conversation but needed to help crystallize his thinking. Before he could continue that thought, a flash of bright light caught his eye.

“There’s been movement,” Soloman called out. Pattie quickly moved to the main console and watched over his slight shoulder. He gestured at a small display on the right that seemed to pulse. “Lant’s temporal node has advanced three years, two months, and eight days in the subjective future.”

“You mean he’s only seven years behind us now?”

“Exactly,” he answered. “This is his first time in that period, if I read these screens properly.”

“And that says he’s still on Ferenginar?” She pointed to the adjacent screen that did not flicker, pulse, or change.

“It appears that way. But why would he do that?”

“A new market? Checking his bank account? He has a hot date? How should I know?”

His reply was interrupted by an alarm from Pattie’s tricorder. She quickly looked at it and then craned her neck toward the fuel consumption monitor. Her look darkened and her soul shrank.

“The time jump changed the rate of decay, the imbalance has grown exponentially,” she reported. “That’s why the batteries ran dry before.”

“But we still need to retrieve him,” Soloman said, fingers tripping over themselves as he reprogrammed the command center. “It appears that I can send these new coordinates to the temporal nodes used by the away team and they can follow.”

“And if they do that,” she said slowly. “The rate will change again.”

“How much time will we have left if the four pursue him?”

Pattie paused, doing mental arithmetic and entering other numbers in the tricorder. Slowly, she looked up at the Bynar, her expression pained. “Maybe an hour, and far less when all five come back here.” She made one of the odd chimelike noises that characterized her species. “So much for the margin of error.”

“It never lasts. You had better brief the captain,” Soloman finally said. “I’ll relay the coordinates.”

* * *

In the past, Gomez was working with her node and the tricorder, attempting to lock on to the chroniton trail left by Lant's sudden absence as Tev paced back and forth. Abramowitz and Corsi huddled together for whatever warmth was possible as the light rain continued to fall, making the streets slick. She had to give the Ferengi credit for designing one of the best drainage systems she'd ever encountered.

Tev rubbed his sore ribs and seemed agitated, but she couldn't indulge his bruised ego for the moment. Now that the need for disguises was over, she resumed her command persona and concentrated first on the mission. Lant's node didn't transmit coordinates she could trace, but she had hoped to once more lock on to the particle signature and figure out where—or when—he went. She grew frustrated at the lack of success but refused to let on to her team.

A beeping sound caused everyone to turn around and stare at Gomez. She was studying her node carefully and then grabbed for the bag by her feet. Carefully, she removed the other nodes and the beeping sound increased in volume. Carol came over to watch and was given a node; another went to Corsi, and a third node went to Tev. All studied it while she concentrated on her node and the tricorder.

"Interesting," she said. "We've received entirely new coordinates. These things must be linked at all times to the asteroid's machines. Okay, we're back on the trail."

"What makes you think they can be trusted?" Tev asked.

"I'm willing to bet that these came from Pattie and Soloman. Yes, there's a chance these are from Lant and we'll end up in the middle of a prison riot, but I'm willing to take the chance."

"We stay or we go—those are the options, right?"

"Yes, Domenica."

"Then let's go," she said.

Sonya saw that Carol also nodded in agreement, which emboldened her. "Tev, Domenica, phasers out. Carol, you handle the baggage. On my mark, we jump to the future."

"How far forward?" Abramowitz asked, shouldering the bag.

"It looks like a little over three years," she answered. "I can't imagine he's doing this for any reason other than escape. He probably doesn't know half as much about how these things work as we do."

"But we really don't know that much about them, do we?"

"Actually, Carol, if we pooled our knowledge, the answer is yes. But if it were just you or Lant, I'd say things were pretty even."

Abramowitz made a face, which caused Gomez to smile for the first time in hours.

"Ready. Mark." Her right thumb triggered her node and the light show began again as her eyes shut. There was enough noise surrounding her that she suspected all four nodes were in use. Funny, she thought, the lights didn't generate any heat, nor could she feel them on her damp skin. And yet, they were bending the rules of physics and letting her slip through the years. It was enough to make her head hurt, which was one reason she tried to avoid temporal physics.

The blinking from the bright light stopped peppering through her eyelids and Gomez risked opening one eye. They stood on the same street as they had before, but it seemed even dirtier, if that was possible. The rain was harder than before and was even colder. Passersby who saw the light show begin were running away, some squealing in shock. Maybe a siren was going off in the distance, but Gomez couldn't tell. Both eyes open, she was pleased to note all four of them arrived together. Better yet, Lant was only a block or two ahead of them, running for all he was worth.

“Corsi, go!”

The security officer didn't need to be told twice and she was off like a beam of light. Her longer legs and grim determination allowed her to quickly close the distance. The engineer admired how the security chief managed to stay upright despite moving quickly, bare feet slapping on rain-slick streets. It wasn't even much of a race, and Lant was too busy running to even consider using the node to jump through time once more. With just a few feet between them, Corsi reached up and pulled the spanner from out of her hair. In one fluid motion, it came free and went flying directly between Lant's legs, tripping him. He went sprawling and then skidding on the wet street, making for a comical sight. No one, especially Gomez, felt like laughing.

Corsi sat on Lant's back, collecting the spanner and keeping her hand phaser pressed to the base of the Ferengi's enlarged skull. She was actually grinning when the others arrived. Carol crouched and collected the fifth node and stuffed it into the bulging bag.

“All right, Commander,” Tev said, actually puffing a little from the exertion. “Can you program this to get us home?”

Gomez had been pondering that very issue, especially considering the amount of time she had to just stand around. Still, she speculated there was a simple return button rather than actual time and date to input. She was examining the device carefully and was about to ask Lant to confirm her hypothesis but the siren sound grew, breaking her concentration. Like many things that were seemingly universal, police sirens were among them.

“Everyone remain still. Let's avoid adding to our problems,” Gomez said.

Sure enough, five Ferengi security personnel arrived in a vehicle, purple lights strobing. Their reflections off the street hurt Gomez's eyes, forcing her to squint. They each brandished hand weapons, although one had an energy whip out and ready. With a gesture, Gomez signaled for Corsi to get off Lant and let him stand. She nodded toward Tev, indicating he should resume a dominant role, and then prayed he could talk his way out of their predicament.

“What's all this then?” the lead officer asked, his voice deeper and rougher than any Ferengi voice she had ever heard.

“Well, this man—” Tev began.

“You be quiet. I'll hear from my fellow countryman first. Speak.”

Lant was wringing out his jacket and trying to tidy himself despite the rain, taking a moment to collect his thoughts. No doubt he would try to extricate himself from the police despite the lack of temporal node. Finally, he placed his hands on his lapels and cleared his voice. “I am Lant, perhaps you've heard of me.”

“Can't say as I have,” the officer answered.

“Well, if you check the current accounts, you should see I am one of the Ferengi Top Fifty,” he said with confidence. Gomez could only imagine how much wealth he must have socked away to be able to make a boast like that.

“And these...” he seemed at a loss for words to describe Tev and the women, so he took a different tack. “Any man of means, such as myself, is always vulnerable to common thieves, and worse, swindlers. I’ve used my fortune to tinker. I fancy myself quite the inventor and was attacked as I tried to bring my latest creation to the Commerce Council.” He gestured toward the bag on Carol’s shoulder.

“What is it?”

“What is it? What is it? Well, I’m not entirely sure you would understand something of such a complex scientific nature, Officer. In fact, I can scarcely describe it myself without all the schematics and technical specifications. Can’t even think up a short enough name for the functions it performs. Truth to tell, I was hoping to work with the Trademark Board on coming up with something catchy.” The Ferengi proceeded to spout double-talk for the next four minutes. All Gomez and the others could do was stand still, occasionally wiping rain from their eyes, and look as innocent as possible.

Finally, as Lant wound down, Gomez watched him casually reach into his jacket and withdraw his padd. She surmised that his patter lulled the police enough that such a move would not arouse suspicion. Worse, she fully expected him to bribe the police with whatever it would take to get free, with the bag. Frantically, she tried to think of an explanation that would exonerate them, or forestall the bribe.

“No doubt, your fine force is seeking additional funding to create better protections against Borg incursions,” Lant began, entering a number onto the padd. Gomez did a quick calculation and realized that the Ferengi, like all other races in the Alpha Quadrant, had had their first serious taste of the Borg three years earlier—ironically, only a month or so after the time period when they were on Ferenginar last. A Borg cube had made it all the way to Earth, wiping out two score ships at Wolf 359 along the way, before the Enterprise stopped it. With a pang, Sonya realized that, even as she walked the streets of Ferenginar now, she was on the Oberth, having transferred off the Enterprise and broken it off with Kieran, still on the latter ship.

Kieran’s still alive right now.

Lant’s patriotic blathering brought her back to the “present.” The Ferengi was offering the police a lump sum for them to do with as they pleased. She quickly turned toward Tev and widened her eyes, silently pleading with him to do something.

Tev cleared his throat, attracting everyone’s attention. Once he had it, the Tellarite seemed uncertain and then finally plowed ahead. “Thank you,” he began. “I think it’s fair to note that we have yet to be given the opportunity to explain our side of the story. After all, I believe Ferengi justice acknowledges there are two sides to each negotiation. Before anything further transpires, perhaps our version of events will sway your thinking.” Tev continued soothingly, sounding absolutely confident that his story would be more favorable than Lant’s. As he chatted, Lant’s arm lowered, and the police officer continued to look directly at Tev, eyes seeking something. Finally, it became apparent that Tev would be allowed to move, slowly, and he did so, taking his own padd out of his pocket. Quickly he tapped in a number and prepared to transmit it to the officer’s unit.

Gomez prayed Tev was not going to be cheap about the bribe.

The officer thought for a moment and then signaled to one of his men to retrieve both padds. Once both were brought to him, he studied them thoughtfully and then handed them back to his colleague. A smile revealed well-filed teeth, and Gomez's heart sank. If they got out of this, she was going to kill Tev.

"I truly appreciate the fine contribution our otherworldly friend has offered our defense treasury," the officer began. "Perhaps his version of events would be fascinating to hear. But right now, with this rain, we have other safety issues to explore. I'll leave you to sort out your disagreement." He bowed slightly and turned away, signaling the men to return to the vehicle.

Lant stood in the rain, gape-jawed, while Gomez revised her plans toward the Tellarite. Quickly, she pointed at Corsi and the security chief once more stood intimidatingly close to Lant.

"He took both bribes!" Lant squealed.

"Can we go home now?" Tev asked.

"Actually," Carol interrupted, "we need to undo Lant's actions. His manipulation of the markets created wealth that never should have existed. The adverse effect on the Ferengi economy may be severe. I didn't have enough time to study things to make a determination, but we cannot take any chances."

"You mean we have to goback and lose all of Lant's money?"

"Exactly, Domenica. And we can't do it quickly, otherwise we'd set off a financial panic."

"Can't we just lose the latinum here and now, rather than three years ago? Could it have that much of an effect?"

Tev had a point, and Gomez was wet and tired and grumpy enough to go with the simplest solution, rather than indulge in a discussion on the merits of temporal ethics. No doubt the away team would be sanctioned by the Department of Temporal Investigations—a debriefing she wasnot looking forward to—but right now, she didn't care. It was going to be her call.

"Lant, how much do we need to lose to return your accounts to what they were a month ago?"

The Ferengi mentally did the math, fearfully eyeing Corsi, who stayed right beside him. "I'd say about eighty-seven percent of my present holdings."

"And, to follow Carol's advice, how long do we need to properly lose the money without setting off a panic?"

"Well, if I lose half of it immediately, that should reduce my holdings enough so the Dominion War panic in a few years should wipe the rest out," he said wistfully.

"How long?" Corsi demanded.

"An hour, maybe two if I make lots of little buys."

"Let's go to the Exchange," Gomez said. She began leading the group toward the bright tower before them, only a few scattered floors obvious through the rain and haze. "The next session should be starting in a little while. First thing we do, though, is get dry."

“Amen,” Carol said.

Chapter

7

Pattie noticed the chamber had grown warmer as she struggled with the workstation that was directly tied to the power processing machinery. She had been working with it steadily for fifteen minutes, coaxing the computer commands to reroute some of the building energy. Right after speaking with Captain Gold, she set to work on recharging the batteries. Soloman helped her to reestablish the links and then the Bynar took over, coming up with the commands that would get the mainframe to respond to Pattie’s orders. It was tedious and slow, beyond what Pattie was used to, and she fretted over the time remaining. As it was, Fabian Stevens, back aboard the *Vinci*, was monitoring the power outputs and had estimated that even with recharging the batteries, they had bought themselves maybe an extra hour.

It would have to do, Pattie concluded.

“Have your people ever done anything this reckless?” she asked Soloman. He looked surprised at the question, looking up from the master console. Unlike Pattie, he was looking uncomfortable. Bynars apparently didn’t sweat, a humanoid trait she was grateful he lacked, all things considered. Still, after their chat earlier, she felt more comfortable around him than ever before. Not bad for a couple of outcasts, she mused.

“No,” he answered. “While my people have studied and grasped the basic concepts of time travel, it is not something that we have found appealing. I remain amazed that humans find tampering with the timestream of any interest. The repercussions are enormous and, as we have seen, have changed the core timeline on more than one occasion. We have even theorized that the constant use of time travel threatens the stability of this core timeline.”

“I’ve read some of the research papers,” Pattie said, tapping a final set of commands. The holographic screens blinked with new data and everything matched Soloman’s instructions. “The original Temporal Accord was strictly intended for research. While there are those who have used time travel to find out information lost to the ages, it has also been used to save a planet. There was an alien probe that sought information from an extinct species of marine life on Earth and some captain went back hundreds of years to bring back samples to answer the probe. Not only was the planet saved, but an extinct species was revived. The argument can be made that time travel can be used effectively.”

“But what of the Temporal Cold War?” Soloman asked. “Technology from the future was handed to a race ill-equipped to handle it and there were disastrous effects felt throughout the quadrant for decades. It can be equally said that time travel can be used recklessly. Better we stay in the here and now.”

Pattie glanced at the readouts, watching the alien characters change, obviously counting down. “Well, the here and now isn’t looking that good to me.”

* * *

Little had changed in the Tower of Commerce, Tev observed, as the odd group reentered the trading floor. It being three years down the line and later in the day besides, he hoped there was a different floor manager on duty. The fewer who recognized him and the women, the better. The level of activity seemed as cacophonous as before, but there were definitely fewer stares. The Ferengi were an adaptable people,

he knew, and the sight of Federation citizens—dressed or otherwise—was more commonplace. Good, he concluded. Keeping close to Lant, he guided the hapless trader to a thin spot in the action and gave him a slight push.

“Okay, I just need something to lose on,” Lant muttered. “Oh the pain. We’re not supposed to try and lose our money, we’re not built that way.”

Tev snarled. “You are today.”

“Of course I am,” Lant said slowly, scanning the scrolling figures, catching on to the day’s rhythms. He withdrew his padd, checked the account balance and then beckoned to a mauve-jacketed trader. “Ten bars on thekanar crop yield,” he ordered.

“I can’t stand that stuff,” Abramowitz offered.

“Well, you’re in luck,” Lant said archly. “Blight decimated the annual crop on Cardassia and the reports should be coming through any minute. Prices went through the roof and I’ll lose. Okay, that’s one loss on the books; let’s see what else is a sure thing....”

Tev refused to let Lant move more than a foot away from him, and they inched closer and closer to the trading pit. The Ferengi’s voice grew shriller as he placed order after order, ranging from octotriticale to trillium, as the greedy trader accepted them all without comment. As the first hour neared an end, it was obvious Lant was losing lots of money, but the traders said nothing. The pace was dizzying and Tev couldn’t keep track of all the activity, but he watched Lant’s padd and saw the numbers steadily decreasing. This time, no one was approaching them and offering a private room. Losers could remain in place, he concluded, and that was fine with him.

Tev did notice that even though human women were less an object of curiosity, they were nevertheless an infrequent sight in the Tower. Quite a few businessmen and traders strolled back and forth, sneaking peeks at Tev and his “assistants.” The occasional expressions of disgust showed that social mores remained in place and most would prefer the women be kept at Tev’s hotel, naked but still out of sight. He could tell from their expressions that they too shared the sentiment—but they could not separate now. Timing would prove critical.

The second hour passed and Tev grew impatient with Lant’s rate of loss. It should have been over by now, but even a time traveler can be surprised. There was a forgotten rally inkevas that handsomely profited the group. Lant would have to make more transactions to dump the profit and each action seemed to take greater consideration or, perhaps, there was greater reluctance. Tev loomed over Lant and asked about the timetable.

“I’m going as fast as I can to avoid detection,” he explained.

“Now, why would a fine businessman such as yourself want to avoid detection?”

The group turned to see the approach of a familiar-looking Ferengi who seemed to have a perpetual sneer on his face. “My name is Brunt, and I am with the Ferengi Commerce Authority. Have we met?”

“My name is Tev, and I am working with Mr. Lant here to make some investments to improve my portfolio.”

A look of recognition crossed Brunt’s face and he smiled wickedly. “If I recall, we met a few years back

and you were quite successful. Has fortune abandoned you?"

"My business is my business," Lant snapped.

"Losses of your magnitude might become my business," Brunt responded. "You've lost quite a bit in several major markets. I've been dispatched to look into this in case this is a scheme of some kind. While it defies conventional theory, new ideas always seem to arrive that make us rethink economics, eh? Now, can you explain your goal here today?"

Tev anxiously looked at Corsi and nodded briefly. He wanted to avoid a scene at all costs, but an investigation by the officials would slow them down and possibly ruin their return. The security chief returned the nod, took a deep breath and sidled toward Brunt. She laced her fingers between those in Brunt's right hand and stroked his ear ridge. He tried to stifle a shiver and his eyes rapidly darted between Lant and Corsi, much to Tev's amusement. Corsi leaned into Brunt, whispered something into his ear, and squeezed his hand tight. Brunt let out a small yelp and looked at her with a touch of fright. She returned it with her Core-Breach stare that no one had managed to withstand, Brunt included. He withdrew his hand and stepped back.

"I'll ask you to leave the Tower in the next five minutes," he stammered and turned on his heel and moved quickly out of the area.

Tev looked at Corsi with a grin, but her stare remained.

"Don't ask," she said, and stepped back to the protective huddle of Abramowitz and Gomez.

"Have you lost enough, Lant?"

Glancing at his padd, Lant's shoulders sagged, which told Tev that enough damage was done to the fortune. While he excelled at most things, he was not an accountant and would have to trust that the plan would work. He'd have Wong do a more detailed analysis later.

"Win or lose," Lant said to himself, "there's always Huyprian beetle snuff."

"Personal credo?" Tev asked.

He shook his head. "Rule of Acquisition number sixty-five."

"Stupid rule," Gomez offered.

"Maybe," Tev said. "But our work here is done. Can you get us home?"

"Sure, just get me someplace private." She smiled at her colleagues and Tev knew they were all ready for this particular mission to be over. He led the group, with Lant tucked between himself and Corsi, out of the Tower and down the block. It was dark, and there was a chill in the air. Rain threatened, as usual. At the first alley, he gestured for them to step in. Abramowitz pulled out a light and Gomez quickly worked through all five nodes, inputting the return commands to make certain everyone would properly return. She checked them a second time and then handed them out.

"Say good-bye to Ferenginar, Lant," she said as she leaned over and activated his node. A moment later, she thumbed her own amid the lights blaring from the temporal ripples already being formed. The light show looked right to him as his surroundings shimmered, blurred, and finally winked from the cool

street to the too-hot chamber.

Chapter

8

Soloman was bent over the master console, using his tricorder to trace an unusual circuit that captured his interest. He had done what he could and it would be a matter of, well, time, before the asteroid imploded or the *Vinci* was able to leave. Rather than waste time, he wanted to learn as much as he could from the unusual computer before it was vaporized. He felt triumphant having gotten it to do as much as it had, given how long it took to crack the computer language. That in itself was worthy of study after the mission was over. Something about the computer code thwarted him, and he discovered he disliked being stumped by machine language. It felt...wrong.

Bright lights suddenly appeared all around the chamber, winking and blinking in no discernible pattern. Quickly, he presumed this was the temporal effect and closed the panel cover, just in case. Within seconds, five distinct shapes appeared and coalesced into familiar forms, although he was fairly certain he had never seen his crewmates naked before.

Pattie had seen the effect, but rather than watch, she had hurried over to a corner and grabbed up a handful of blankets and uniforms that had awaited their owners. As soon as the effect ended, she began handing out the clothing, receiving grateful grins from each of the women. Soloman was fairly certain he had also never seen Corsi smile.

Tev escorted the Ferengi toward him, and his expression indicated a mix of frustration and disgust.

“What’s the situation?” Gomez asked.

Soloman glanced at the ever-changing readouts, and worry covered his expression. He rapidly hit several buttons and actually slapped once at an interface. The hologram readouts changed once more and then froze in position. “Lant caused a power imbalance that we’ve been forestalling, hoping you would return in time. We have less than fifteen minutes before this entire construct implodes.”

Gomez was already back in her pants, struggling again with a boot, but knew enough to look worried. “Get us out of here, Soloman!”

“Soloman toda *Vinci*.”

“Gold here.”

“The away team has returned intact. Beam us over, please.”

* * *

Seconds later, the seven beings on the asteroid were snatched by a transporter beam. The chamber was suddenly silent, its holographic readouts continuing to chart the power imbalance. The heat grew more and more intense but there was no one to inconvenience. It did, though, cause the computer systems to begin malfunctioning, including losing control of the batteries. Unchecked, the batteries discharged their stored energy that hastened the overall collapse of the system. As a result, the entire asteroid imploded six minutes, twenty-five seconds earlier than Soloman estimated.

Later, the Bynar would note this was a final indignity heaped on him by the alien computer.

* * *

“And what’s to become of me?” Lant demanded.

Corsi looked actually amused at the pathetic Ferengi, as he slumped lower in the chair. The two were in the lone brig, a small, cramped space that had been added during the *Vinci*’s refit. To Corsi’s amusement, it was the lack of anything to do with DaiMon Phug of the *Debenture* that led to Corsi’s petitioning to have a brig installed on the ship, and now its first guest was another Ferengi.

The asteroid ceased to exist only minutes earlier, but the *Vinci* had already cleared the system, safely away from any aftereffects. She was feeling comfortable for the first time in what seemed to her to be days. She rarely noticed her uniform but today Corsi liked how it fit her, keeping her warm and protected.

“For starters, we’re doing a credit check to make certain your calculations were correct.”

“I’m insulted.”

“You should be,” she agreed. “If you want to launch a complaint, I’m sure we can find someone from the FCA to help you investigate the situation. Or we could contact the Ferengi ambassador.”

“I really don’t think either action is necessary,” he said hastily. Without the node or a stockpile of latinum, Lant reverted to the persona of a poor Ferengi, which was genuinely pitiful. As much as she wanted to care, she just didn’t.

“What did you have in mind?”

“Now that you mention it, Commander, I was thinking of starting a new line of business and could use a pretty face to help present it to investors.”

“Give it up, Lant.”

“No partnership?”

“There was never a chance. Captain Gold, though, was thinking of returning you to Ferengi authorities with copies of our log entries. No doubt there are penalties for what you tried.”

“They’ll ruin me!” He buried his sizable head in his hands and stayed that way.

“From what Lieutenant Wong has determined, you were pretty much that way before you stumbled onto the asteroid. How long did it take you to master the computer?”

He snorted in disgust. “It took me longer to translate than anything else. Any idiot could have traveled in time.”

Corsi smirked and figured justice would be served. She walked out, locking the conference room door behind her, feeling at last that something was completed.

* * *

Dantas entered the mess hall, her shift having just ended. At one table, Bart was once again sipping from a mug and munching on a plate of cookies. Carol Abramowitz was seated with him and they were having what looked to be an intense conversation. Still, she was surprised to see him wave her over. She was introduced to Abramowitz and invited to sit with them. Helping herself to a shortbread cookie, she sat next to Carol.

“I gather it was a pretty successful mission,” she said.

“It had its moments,” Carol admitted. “I was just telling Bart about it.”

“It should make for a good letter,” Dantas offered.

Bart smiled and shook his head. “I don’t tell him everything. Besides, I wasn’t needed once. The translations proved pretty simple, I gather.”

“I’m not so sure about that. Soloman swears the computer kept changing things on him. And, well, it was embarrassing enough without having everyone on the asteroid.”

“How so?” Dantas asked.

Carol shivered briefly with memory and then looked at the young ensign. “It’s one thing to read about a culture, entirely another thing to be in the midst of it. Some of their mores are personally offensive to me.”

“If I recall, they’re pretty harsh to their women,” Dantas said.

“True. It’s better today under Grand Nagus Rom, but back then... well, I’d rather not be parading around nude for a race of leering capitalists.”

Dantas’s brown eyes grew wide and she felt herself blushing. “You had to be nude?”

“The entire mission,” Carol said in distaste.

“Wow, it’s a good thing you have the body for it,” the ensign said. “Well, that is, I think so, not having seen you naked and all.”

“We’ll just keep it that way,” Abramowitz said coolly. She and Bart exchanged glances that obviously conveyed a lot between the friends. How Dantas envied that kind of connection.

“I hear you think I’m hot,” Bart said, changing the subject. “Thanks.” Dantas looked at him, stunned silent. “Of course, I also hear you put me and Sabrina Simon in the same category. Clearly, that’s not possible. I’m far more enchanting.”

She continued to stare at him.

“I’m flattered, Dantas—”

“My friends call me Dani,” she said. God, how’d she get herself into this conversation?

“Okay, Dani,” Bart continued. “There’s nothing requiring you to find a partner on the *Vinci*. We’re a

small ship and such combinations don't happen that often. Just make friends and let things happen.”

“Thanks, Bart,” she said, her mind racing. A moment later, she was determined to get even with her gossipy roommate. Somehow, somewhere, she would.

* * *

“I can't believe it,” Tev said as he entered the bridge.

“It's true,” Captain Gold said. “We're being ordered to Starbase 410 so you can be debriefed by Temporal Investigations. They haven't had anything this juicy since....”

“...at least next week,” Gomez added as she joined them in the command center. “I guess our tricorder records and log entries won't be good enough?”

“Not with that bunch,” the captain admitted. “You both did superb work. From what we can determine, the extent of the tampering is negligible beyond some hiccups in the Ferengi economy. Lant is pretty much back to where he should be on the economic scale. He's maybe a few bars to the better, but nothing that should be of concern.”

“I wish I had time to look at the chamber in depth,” Sonya said. “Pattie tells me it was an odd construction. I'd much rather have been poking around that than wandering the streets of Ferenginar with nothing to hide.”

“As hides go—” Tev began, but cut his comment off at the sharp look from Gomez.

About the Author

ROBERT GREENBERGER is a senior editor at DC Comics in their collected-editions department. Additionally, he has extensive writing credits ranging from nonfiction books for young adults to a smattering of original fiction to lots of Star Trek. The latter includes the novels *The Romulan Stratagem* and *Doors Into Chaos*, the short story “Hour of Fire” in *Enterprise Logs*, and much more. His short stories “Lefler's Logs” and “A Song Well Sung” will appear, respectively, in the 2003 *Star Trek: New Frontier* anthology *No Limits* and the 2004 anthology *Tales of the Dominion War*. Also in 2004, he will pen two *Star Trek: The Next Generation* novels, *A Time to Love* and *A Time to Hate*. His previous *Star Trek: S.C.E.* eBook, *Past Life*, is available both for download and in print form in the omnibus *No Surrender*. Foolish mortal, he is a lifelong Mets fan. He makes his home in Connecticut with his wife, Deb, and children, Kate and Robbie.

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