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THE DEMON  
BOOK I

Loren L. Coleman & Randall N. Bills

  
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## Chapter

### 1

Captain S'linth tasted the air. The bridge of the Resaurian ship Dutiful Burden smelled of fear-sweat and musk. The hard plates inside his mouth secreted digestive juices that burned with an acidic taste at the back of his throat.

He stepped to the fore of the bridge, within striking distance of the massive viewing screen. Trusting his crew to navigate the spit, S'linth allowed himself a moment to stare into the Demon's face. Oblivion stared back. The maw opened wide as the Resaurian ship descended, the Demon snarling at the stars above, showing its hatred for all life. His Burden trembled as a new wave broke over the bow.

"Tenris -units and closing, Captain," said First Navigator Th'osh. "Gravimetric tides are increasing. Perhaps we should make our offering now."

An idea that would not sit well with the ship's Council-appointed overseer. Looking back, he saw Suliss

stir, rising out of his self-induced torpor.

S'linth pouched his neck muscles. "Your scales are dry, Th'osh," he snapped at the navigator. "Control your fear, or slither back to your quarters. Tradition dictates our offering to be given at no farther away than tworis -units."

Calming, Suliss nodded. Among Resaurians, tradition held the full weight of law. Th'osh bowed his head, nictitating membranes rolling over black eyes in a gesture of submission. "My apologies." The ship shook again, and Th'osh thumped his tail against the deck.

"Accepted," S'linth told him, not wanting to ruin the Resaurian by frightening him out of service. Th'osh was young, barely over his second adult shedding. By comparison, the soft scales on S'linth's belly were larger and darker than the armored ones on Th'osh's back. The youthful navigator had several centuries of life to look forward to, and would live better helping to maintain the small Resaurian fleet than he would coiled up in a planetside nest.

"Any other difficulties?" S'linth asked. His obsidian gaze roamed the bridge.

Only his communications officer, Lyssis, met his gaze. "I am still detecting the subspace signal on our emergency bands."

He faced back toward the front of the bridge. The signal again. It had bothered him ever since breaking orbit over Resaurus. An inconstant, open subspace signal. This was new. New always presented a problem. "No modulation?"

"No intelligent modulation, Captain. It continues to act like an open channel, except for the slowly shifting tone."

"It is outside of tradition," Suliss whispered. "Ignore it. We will make our offering, and return home."

But S'linth refused to ignore anything that might prove a hazard. Space travel was not for the hide-bound. He continued to consider possibilities. A beacon. A nonstandard beacon, since the tone was not quite constant and would break off at irregular periods. An energy signature, warped by the gravimetric forces. Something about it felt familiar, but nothing S'linth could find in the traditions offered any help.

"Continue to monitor," he ordered. "Science station, prepare the offering."

The bridge crew functioned automatically, many following the traditional course of actions they had learned by rote. Science announced that the offering was ready. Navigation called down the distance as the Dutiful Burden crawled carefully out over the Demon's maw. This cycle, S'linth planned to take his Burden to zeroris -units. As the vessel eased to a halt over the promontory, he crossed arms over his scaly chest and spoke the Council's words.

"May our offering ease any suffering, shine hope in the darkness, and keep the forces within banished for another cycle."

Science station launched the Resaurians' offering as S'linth finished the traditional speech. A crash of metal against metal leaked up through the deck, followed by an electrical scream as the firing mechanism shoved the duranium-encased load out into space. On the viewscreen, it looked like a giant, faceted-nose bullet being shot down the mouth of the Demon.

Something...

“Tracking,” Th’oth announced, busying himself with sensors feed. “Good signal. It looks as if the offering will be accepted with favor.” He paused. “Signal is flattening out. Signal is constant.” Softly, but not so softly that S’linth could not hear, the young Resaurian said, “Now we can get away from here.”

Signal is constant!

S’linth coiled about, turning his back on the Demon. Weak legs pushed out from his belly to form a tripod with his thick tail, giving him greater stability. He pointed one muscular arm at his communications officer. “The subspace signal! The beacon. Over what range does it vary?”

Lyssis recoiled, then turned her gaze back to her panel. “Over what time?” she asked.

“Since leaving Resaurus.”

“No more than twenty-five percent, plus or minus.”

Slowly, he turned back around to stare into the abyss. The Demon stared back. “And it repeats. In between breaks, it must repeat.”

“It shows no pattern in between breaks,” Lyssis said, checking the logs. “No, wait. I see a repeating pattern between the fifth and eleventh, and the sixth and twelfth recurrence. And...now between the first and fifteenth. Captain? What does that mean?”

Suliss watched him intently, no doubt ready to argue that tradition demanded they return home. Now. S’linth tasted the air, and the fear-sweat was stronger. Once his people learned that the Demon was speaking to them, the scent would be overpowering. But tradition demanded that he tell his crew.

And tradition was law.

He nodded at the viewscreen. “I know what this is.”

## Chapter 2

“I know what this is,” Sonya Gomez said, pulling her padd out of Tev’s meaty hands. “I don’t need help.”

Having rescued her work from the Tellarite, Sonya carried it over to one of the Vinci’s science workstations and relaxed into a chair, stretching her legs out, not caring that she blocked part of the aisle. She usually enjoyed the bridge during beta shift. On tired evenings when she wasn’t studying the latest journals released from the Daystrom Institute, she often wandered up. Ensign Joanne Piotrowski was the duty tactical officer, and the two of them got on fairly well.

Sonya should have read more into the deadpan face Jo gave her when the turbolift doors whisked open, and never gotten off.

“I only commented that it looked familiar.”

Mor glasch Tev had followed her. Hands clasped behind his back, with his monk’s fringe of dark hair and frosted beard, he looked like one of her old Starfleet instructors about to deliver a lecture. Theda Vinci’s second officer certainly never showed reluctance in offering his opinion. The fact that Sonya outranked him as ship’s first officer and head of the onboard S.C.E. team did little to dissuade the Tellarite.

“Fascinating quantum degradation.”

“I don’t appreciate people reading over my shoulder either.” She glanced up at him. “What I’m trying to say, in the nicest possible manner, Tev, is that I’d like to work on this solo.”

If the Tellarite was capable of showing chagrin, she had yet to see it in his first two months aboard ship. His porcine features were perfect for smugness, though. Or well trained for it.

The maddening thing was that, in general, she approved of Tev trying to be more of a team player. He’d started nicely on that road during the salvage of the *Dancing Star*. Now, though, he was going too far in the other direction, trying to be part of the team when she just wanted to be left on her own.

“All right. Let me know when you catch up.” He snuffled. “But I’m guessing that signal has been bouncing around in subspace for close to one hundred years.” He shuffled off with the air of a disappointed instructor who had just seen a promising student fail her first lesson.

Hah! This was actually a continuous signal being broadcast from only eighteen light-years distance. By subspace standards, that was barely next door. She considered pointing that out, but Tev was already back at another station working on whatever personal project he’d been on when Sonya arrived. Interpersonal Skills Assessment, maybe? She wondered what his face would show after receiving a big, fat “fail.” The way Tev acted, you would swear he had never failed at anything his entire life. Well, maybe he hadn’t.

Until now.

She wanted to point out Tev’s mistake to someone. Not just for the petty pleasure it would give her, but it might go a long way to begin making him more tolerable to the crew. Little mistakes might help ease everyone into that transition.

Except that most of the second-shift crew were stringently watching their own consoles. No one had wanted to draw the Tellarite’s attention, apparently, content to let their first officer act as the lightning rod. Only Rennan Konya from security met her gaze, and the Betazoid would already know her surface thoughts, wouldn’t he?

Konya nodded, then waggled his head from side to side as if unsure whether or not to agree with her previous line of thought.

So much for that. She climbed out of her chair for a quick trip by the replicator, tucked her padd under one arm while making her selection. “Hot tea, Earl Grey.”

With a light hum, the replicator materialized a bone china mug filled to the brim with her steaming beverage. She picked it up, warming both hands around the mug, blew steam from the top and sipped carefully. Perfect.

The Betazoid glanced over at her. “That’s not hot chocolate, is it?”

From the other side of the security, Tev snuffled. “You are two meters closer than I. You must have heard her order. It is Earl Grey tea.”

Sonya groaned. Her run-in with Captain Picard—quite literally—had taken on all the hallmarks of Starfleet legend. Yes, she had spilled hot chocolate all over the captain of Starfleet’s flagship while serving aboard the Enterprise. Yes, she had taken to drinking Earl Grey—Picard’s favorite—as penance, and then discovered how much she liked it. Some days it had seemed the entire galaxy was bent on making her remember that awkward encounter, but the ribbing finally ran its course.

Then Galvan VI happened.

Two dozen crew replacements and months of grieving later, Sonya now wasn’t certain what was worse: that the hot chocolate incident had resurfaced as a running joke among the crew, or that Tev couldn’t even appreciate the humor.

She walked back to her station via security. “For a Betazoid,” she told Konya, “you’re pretty insensitive at times.”

“Why do you think I opted for security?”

Of course, Sonya knew that wasn’t really the truth. Rennan made a great security officer precisely because he was sensitive, in every sense of the definition.

Sipping her tea, letting the light brew slide down her throat, Sonya fell back to task, analyzing the signal the *Vinci* had pulled out of subspace. She double- and triple-checked her results, chewed on her bottom lip for several minutes, and then kicked herself back out of the chair to find Tev.

The Tellarite was comparing the technical specifications of Romulan and Klingon cloaking shields. A little light reading, no doubt.

“Ninety-three years,” she told him without preamble.

“Ah. Well, I only had a glance at the data, after all.”

Sonya shrugged her apology. “The data is in the computer. You could have pulled a copy for yourself.”

Tev turned away from his viewer, looking at her with his deep-set black eyes for a very long moment. “You are my superior officer. You made it clear—doubly so—that you did not desire my help.”

“Right.” She turned back for her chair, caught herself. No, dammit. She’d build a bridge over this river if it killed her. “Except we both see ninety-three years of degradation, according to the quantum shift, and the signal originates only eighteen light-years distant.”

She had Tev’s attention. He scowled. Another expression for which his heavy-jowled face was tailor-made. “The data does not make sense.”

“That’s what I’m saying.”



Tapping commands into the touch-sensitive console, Tev brought up the communications logs and a variety of sensor readings. “Let us see if we can find your mistake,” he said.

Sonya gritted her teeth.

But Tev could not find a way to reconcile the data either. A minor victory, and one that did not appear to sit well with the overachieving Tellarite. “Can we reconstruct the original signal?” he asked, a touch of wounded pride to his voice.

“I’ve been trying to do that,” Sonya said. “At five hundred percent compression the signal approaches something that might be an audio waveform, though it’s too far gone for the universal translator to match up with any known language files.” She dumped her padd work back to the main computer and pulled up audio at Tev’s station. It sounded like a lot of hissing, broken apart by a lot of static.

She supposed it could have been the other way around just as easily.

“Computer,” Tev said. “Return to original signal. Repair using the Telek System and then recompress five hundred percent. Search language files and translate.”

“Telek?”

“Romulan,” Tev told her, and managed to do it in a way that suggested she should already know. “He made contact with Voyager several years ago. Through a wormhole. I told you the signal looked familiar.”

“Ready,” the computer answered.

“Begin playback,” Sonya snapped, annoyed at Tev all over again.

A wash of static burst from the station, followed by a raspy, metallic tone. “...ellllf...aussz...”

Sonya leaned in. If she had heard right... “Computer, compress another twenty-five percent. Begin playback.”

Close enough. The static was a sharper, more painful burst, but the voice clearer. “...help uz...”

They had the attention of the entire beta-shift bridge crew. “Help us,” Tev repeated, loudly.

Sonya nodded. “We have a distress call,” she said, then tapped a lighted square on her console to summon Captain Gold.

## Chapter 3

Captain David Gold had never been prone to nightmares, but the one he raggedly clawed his way out of left him gasping for air. Not trusting himself to speak for a moment, he remained in his darkened quarters, his deep, faltering breaths creating strange echoes that only heightened his uneasiness.

“Lights on,” he finally managed and blinked rapidly several times as his quarters flooded with light. Though not large by any stretch of the imagination—he could cross corner to corner in about six quick

strides, provided he didn't bump into his small desk or the bed—its familiarity nonetheless began to calm his nerves.

Glancing at the chronometer, he saw that its uncaring surface displayed 0300 hours; he'd only been asleep an hour.

Slipping his legs out from under the covers, Gold sat on the edge and rubbed both hands vigorously across his face, as though the effort would scrub away the last vestiges of the nightmare. He stopped when he realized that it still felt as though someone else were rubbing half his face. They'd told him that the hand replacement was almost a perfect match and that his mind and body would quickly come to accept it as his own. Yet, months later, on mornings like these, he could still tell. Holding out his hands, he saw they were still shaking.

“Gevalt,” he said and slowly stood up. His wife Rachel might need multiple cups of tea, but once he was up, there was no going back for hours.

After a quick shower and shave he returned fully dressed and sat at his desk. “Viewscreen on,” he said, and perused crew reports and duty rosters for the coming days on the small desk-mounted console. He continued on for some minutes before the realization struck that he was hiding from his nightmare. With disgust he turned off the screen and faced what had awakened him so early; he'd never backed away from the truth and he was not about to start now.

His granddaughter was just fine. There simply was no reason to believe otherwise. For a moment he pondered the possibility of actually contacting Rachel back on Earth, but then realized the ludicrousness of such an act. He couldn't help but smile at the thought of the ribbing his wife would give him for such a call. For a rabbi, Rachel had a mean streak in her. Better to face a Breen armada than years of that kind of torture, regardless of its good-natured fun.

But if Esther had been hurt...or was sick...No. Rachel would contact him at once.

A chime sounded, interrupting his debate. “Gomez to Gold.”

Clearing his voice with a rusty cough, he put on his captain's voice and tapped his combadge. “Gold here. What's up, Gomez?”

“Sir, we have a distress call.”

“I'm on my way,” he said.

Looked like there was something to be doing after all.

Both Gomez and Tev were on the bridge when Gold arrived; as usual, his best officers were already on the case.

“What do we have, Gomez?” he asked before he'd even finished stepping onto the bridge.

Gomez punched up the signal and let it do the talking for her.

Static. Then, “We are trapped inside the Demon. We are running low on resources. Help us.”

“The Demon.” Gold tapped a finger against his chin. “Nebula? Plasma storm?”

Sonya glanced at Tev, then admitted something that was obviously difficult for the both of them. “We don’t know.”

“Well, it’s a distress call. Why aren’t we moving?” Another captain might already be reprimanding his crew for negligence, but he’d come too far and been through too much with the remaining crew after Galvan VI not to trust their judgment. Especially Gomez. If they weren’t moving yet, she had a good reason.

“Because there is some doubt about its validity. It has a quantum flux that’s right off the charts.”

As usual, he waited for Gomez to continue; he knew when she had something further she wanted to say, but had not yet figured out how best to present it to a nonengineer. He stifled a yawn that threatened to crack his composure; he hid it behind a scratch of the nose and a quick glance around the bridge at beta shift’s watch officers, who all looked calm.

He had a feeling that would change in a hurry.

Like he’d had a feeling that his granddaughter was in trouble?

“There’s a resonating...no, more like a multiphase gradient to the signal that is causing the computer to determine that the signal, well...is about ninety-three years old...give or take a few months.”

“Why is that so unusual?” Even in a quadrant filled with almost real-time subspace communications, there were still enough prewarp sentient races out there to have standard radio signals (some of which were distress calls) still crisscrossing the void with regularity.

“Because it’s a subspace signal,” Tev said with his usual bluntness.

Now that was unusual. Subspace made for almost real-time space communications. To discover one that the computer actually tagged as being a century old...didn’t make much sense at all. He had a vague recollection of a course in the Academy where the professor had droned on and on about the theory of a subspace signal retaining its cohesion and field strength in a self-renewing loop that would allow it to travel across quadrants, if not across the entire disc of the galaxy.

Could they have stumbled across such a signal, originally from an unimaginable distance away at the outer rim of the farthest side of the Milky Way?

As he continued to look at Gomez, he realized she had something more to say and was waiting for him to assimilate the first bit of news. He was never sure whether this habit of hers annoyed him or amused him.

He quirked an eyebrow. “What’s the rest of it?”

“The signal degradation puts the point of origin at only eighteen light-years away.” She glanced down at the screen as though to verify the information once more.

“Even I know that doesn’t make any sense, Gomez.” He moved to his chair and immediately began to warm up to the problem. “What do we know about the region of space around the point of origin?”

“The sector is designated 221-H. It is close to the recently fallen Thallonian Empire,” Tev spoke up as

though the question had been cast for his ears alone. Gold saw a flicker of annoyance wash across Gomez's features and vanish as quickly. Tev, while continuing to speak, was not even looking in their direction. "It is a region of space the Federation has not been welcome in for very long. I believe there are now two Federation starships assigned to the area."

"The Excalibur and Trident," Gold said. "And they're hip-deep in local politics. Anything else?"

"Tellar dispatched a science vessel toward this sector to study astronomical anomalies, which is as detailed as the Starfleet report gets on the subject. But they will not arrive on station for another six months or more."

"So we know virtually nothing about this sector. No Federation outposts or colonies, and the region's littered with astronomical anomalies that have so far defied the Federation's ability to define. Would that sum it up, Tev?"

"That is correct, sir. Until the Tellarite vessel arrives."

If one thought about it in the right light, such comments were almost amusing. Gold glanced at Gomez, and saw that she hadn't found this new way of thinking yet.

"What about the message itself? What language did it arrive in?"

"The language banks mark it as Resaurian." Tev shrugged. "There are no immediate references available in the computer's archives."

"Well, regardless, it's a distress signal and we're obligated to respond. Even if we end up being one hundred years too late."

"Nintey-three," Tev reminded him.

Gold swiveled his chair toward the Tellarite. "Yes, of course." He swiveled back. "Rusconi, set a course for that destination point, maximum warp."

The conn officer answered with a professional, "Yes, Captain." She adjusted their course with efficient movements. Gold took a moment to glance out the forward viewscreen. Stars chased themselves through the slipstream wash. He hoped he never tired of the beauty of warp speed.

He turned back toward Gomez but as usual, she was already ahead of him.

"I've already got my people working. Carol and Bart are digging into the computer, looking for any files related to the Resaurians. Fabian has a theory that the signal itself may have been caught in a subspace-generated stasis field that only recently ruptured, allowing the signal to continue. I'm not so sure that is the case." She glanced at Tev, almost as though waiting for him to interrupt. "The quantum degradation is simply wrong for...um..."

Gold knew that he was becoming very adept at appearing to be interested in the technobabble of his engineers, but with Gomez, he just couldn't seem to fool her no matter how often he tried.

"Sorry Captain," she interrupted herself with a slight shake of her head. "We'll get right to work, and see what answers we can pull in for you before we arrive."

“Thank you, Gomez.”

With that, she departed with Tev in tow and Gold moved with purpose. He needed to inform Starfleet that they'd be delayed in their current mission.

## Chapter 4

Sonya shook her head. Amazing the difference only a few hours can make.

Rather than the quiet annoyance of sharing beta shift with Tev, the *Vinci*'s bridge was now full of activity and energy. Alpha crew, alerted to the situation, had taken over early. Domenica Corsi stood guard over security, pulling down files on every known race from this corner of the Alpha Quadrant, searching for threats and discussing quietly with her deputy chief Vance Hawkins, Rennan Konya, and the tactical officer, Anthony Shabalala. Songmin Wong helmed the ship, and Susan Haznedl sat next to him at ops. They were still engaged in their mental game of tri-D chess, whispering moves back and forth when they assumed Captain Gold wasn't listening.

At least they were accomplishing something.

Sonya and her team had spent several hours trying to pull additional information out of the signal, all to no avail. The best they'd managed was to clean up the audio, and being able to drop the transient intermodulation distortion to zero was no consolation.

Her one bright spot should have come with seeing Tev just as frustrated, but he never wavered. Tellarites supposedly wore their emotions on their sleeves, but either she simply couldn't register his agitation or he hid it well. He was still certain that he would figure it out before they arrived (and likely before anyone else). It wore very thin on Sonya.

Fortunately, she finally had something new to report. “I'm starting to measure appreciable gravimetric waves.” She quickly ran through several algorithmic models to verify what she already knew. “They are centered on the signal's origin.”

Gold nodded, glanced at Tev. “Astronomical anomalies.”

Or something. Sonya glanced again at a side monitor and was surprised at her findings. She'd allowed the computer to continue running models of what they might find, but the primary screen was displaying an increase in gravimetric waves that dwarfed her models; her parameters had simply been too small. They were increasing now at an exponential rate!

“Captain, we may have—”

She was interrupted by a severe jolt as the *Vinci* suddenly dropped out of warp, unscheduled. Crew members grabbed for armrests, for the edge of panels, as the inertial dampers failed. Sonya caught herself against the command pit railing. She saw Anthony Shabalala sit back with a gash bleeding over his right eye.

Gold had stuck to the captain's chair as if strapped in. Now he was up, moving fast, standing over his conn officer. “Wong, what just happened?”

The conn officer was already bent over his panel, fingers flying over the interface. “No idea. One moment we’re fine, and the next we’re at impulse.”

Sonya bounced back to her station. “We hit a gravity well. Those gravimetric waves were merely on the leading edge of it.” She chewed her lower lip, trying to make sense of the data streaming across her viewer. The captain was waiting on her. “Maybe a rogue planet, or a cosmic superstring...” Something with enough gravity to drag them out of warp.

“Damage report?” Gold asked, stabbing a direct look back to Shabalala as the ship trembled again.

The tactical officer shook his head. “Nothing major, Captain. Reports of minor injuries so far.”

“Distance to signal origin?”

Haznedl checked sensors. “Estimated one hundred fifty million kilometers, approaching at one-quarter impulse.”

“Captain.” Nancy Conlon interrupted from engineering. “Warp drive has been knocked offline. I’m reading severe gravimetric wave buildup. It’s interfering with the containment field.”

“Looks like we’ve found your astronomical anomaly, Tev.” When no response was forthcoming, Sonya looked over to find Tev still as a statue, his head barely moving as he glanced between the viewscreen and his own tricorder. She wondered why he’d use a tricorder instead of simply tapping into the Vinci’s sensors through another work station.

“Lieutenant Conlon.” Tev lowered his tricorder, typed some input. “We appear to be approaching some type of anomaly that is emanating massive gravimetric waves. Their concentration is beyond the scope of what we originally believed as we entered the region.”

He didn’t look in her direction, but Sonya still felt the sting of a reprimand. Who said Tellarites can’t be subtle? She redoubled her efforts and began running additional simulations, expanding her parameters.

“When will you have warp drive back online?” Gold asked Conlon.

“I’m not sure, Captain. A warp containment field can act pretty crazy around gravimetric waves of sufficient force. I’ll give you an update in an hour, but the best course of action would be to get us away from the problem.”

“That is not a possibility yet, Conlon. I’ll let you know as soon as I can comply with that request.” A slight tone of humor crept into the captain’s voice.

“I’m sure you will, sir. Engineering out.”

Sonya clenched her fists as the simulation she ran failed to match what they were experiencing. Perhaps she was simply looking at it wrong. She’d increased her parameters significantly but that didn’t have the effect she was looking for either.

Start at the basics. She began poring over the readings coming in. The gravimetric waves were increasing. Right. Was anything else increasing? Background radiation? Any neutrino spikes? What wasn’t she seeing?

Suddenly she realized why she was clenching her fists. She took a deep breath and called out, “Tev, what have you got?”

She might as well have been talking to the wall. He continued to input data into his tricorder.

“Tev!” she called in as close to a shout as she’d had to use with any subordinate in years. Gold glanced sharply in her direction, and Sonya’s ears burned.

Tev finally looked over. “Yes, Commander?” he asked, a placid look on his gruff face.

She gritted her teeth. Did he truly not hear her before, or was he just now willing to listen? She unclenched her fists slowly. She would make this work.

“What have you got?” She began fresh, trying to immerse herself fully into the problem, leaving behind, for now, any problems with Tev. “I’ve been running simulations and they simply aren’t generating what we’re seeing. We should expect to see energy level increases across the board with this much gravimetric force washing through.”

“Commander, there is no increase elsewhere.” He paused for a moment, as though waiting for an answer. Then he shrugged. “There is a significant decrease, however.”

“What?” she asked, startled that she had not delved into that possibility.

Tev stepped over to her station and passed his tricorder to her. She noticed immediately that it was not standard issue, but had been altered subtly; it operated as a remote station, tapped directly into the full power of the Theda Vinci’s sensors. Impressive work, actually.

“The ambient energy level in the entire region is draining off. There’s also a spectral distortion that we’ve just picked up, centered on the signal’s point of origin.”

Sonya finally understood. Of course her simulations were failing. Regardless of how many times she’d increased the parameters, they’d not be increased enough. Not by a long shot.

“Captain,” she said, wondering why Tev had not spoken up as he’d obviously figured it out before she had. She made a quick decision; it may not matter to Tev in the slightest, but it mattered to her. “Sir, Tev’s figured out what we’re up against.”

“Of course,” Tev said, as though answering her.

She fought against grinding her teeth. She’d given it to him and he’d pushed it in her face. Sonya tried to relax. Just his way. Captain’s waiting.

“Looks like the signal is originating from a black hole.”

## Chapter 5

Theda Vinci rocked slightly, buffeted by gravimetric forces, as Mor glasch Tev stomped into the briefing

room. He was aware of every pair of eyes that glanced at him in that uncertain way humans (and so many humanoid races) used to prejudge what they did not understand. They were already making assumptions that would never hold up under direct evidence. Relying on prejudice over scientific method.

Carol Abramowitz glanced back toward the door. “Glad you could make it, Tev.”

Bartholomew Faulwell, sitting next to the cultural specialist, eating from a pile of individually wrapped candies, smiled. On the other side of the long table the Nasat, P8 Blue, chittered in her way of approximating human laughter.

He did not bother to consult a chronometer. “I am four minutes early,” he stated clearly. Abramowitz flushed, and shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

Captain Gold half rose from his chair at the table’s head. “It’s a figure of speech, reserved for when someone is late, or is the last to arrive.”

Tev snuffled at the air, the Tellarite equivalent of a sigh. “I shall make a note of that, Captain.”

“Please do. No need to get your back up over a simple pleasantry.”

His back wasn’t up over anything. He had just said that he would try harder, hadn’t he? He would not even complain that Fabian Stevens had taken Tev’s seat at the left hand of Sonya Gomez. He would save instruction for later, when he could speak with Stevens alone. He grabbed the empty chair in between Faulwell and Chief of Security Corsi.

With a nod from the captain, Gomez rose and stood at the front of the room. Stevens brought up the latest scans on the black hole, including what the S.C.E. team had found inside. Tev all but felt his mind twist. It looked odd, even in a universe as varied as one that could produce cities encased in static warp bubbles and warheads to ignite gas giants into small stars. Such challenges there still were to confront!

“As near as we can tell,” Gomez began as very rough schematics flashed up on the screen. They showed a wedge-shaped construction that displaced two cubic kilometers of vacuum. “The distress call originates from this station that we located inside the black hole, which we’re currently calling the Demon—the name from the transmission.”

The screen froze, pulled down into the bottom right corner, and was replaced by magnified images of the da Vinci’s approach to the black hole. A large dark circle expanded in the center. The stars around its circumference warped away at improbable speeds, as if reflected over a concave surface.

Which, in effect, they were.

“Am I seeing double?” Faulwell asked. “There’s a diamond-pattern of stars in the upper-left quadrant, and a smaller set just like it to the Demon’s lower-right?”

Of course, as a cryptographer, Faulwell would be adept at recognizing patterns and repetitions. Tev knew about the effect, but the language specialist had beaten him to seeing it. Inexcusable. “That is an illusionary effect known as an Einstein Ring. What you see is light from the same four stars, pulled around the far side of the black hole. You will see a better example in just a moment.”

The star field slowed its expansion. “Ten thousand kilometers,” Sonya intoned. Now the da Vinci crawled forward. A moment later it stopped. “Five thousand. This is highly magnified. As large as this



singularity is, about one hundred times the solar mass of Earth's sun, its photon sphere is only nine hundred kilometers in diameter."

Several stars looked bloated, highly magnified from being dragged around the back side of the Demon, which stared straight ahead like the dead eye of some malicious entity.

The same metaphor suggested itself to Abramowitz, who shivered. "I keep waiting for it to blink," she said.

The sky shifted as most stars tracked to the left. "Theda Vinci," Gomez continued her narration, "orbiting the Demon." Her voice held a touch of awe, and Tev could hardly blame her. "At this distance, we're fighting approximately six hundred gravities to maintain station."

Marvelous. Tev noted several tense reactions around the table, though no one could tear their eyes away from the screen. It was an odd sky, the kind most explorers never dreamed of seeing (nor wanted to). The stars continued to track left, most of them, bending outward to flow around either side of the black hole. Except in a thin ring surrounding the void where the mirror images trapped in the first Einstein Ring counterrotated in the exact opposite direction.

The vessel finally came to rest, and the sky remained stable.

The table was silent for a moment, everyone lost in their own thoughts. There was a space station down inside that hell. What would they see? What kind of technology permitted them to survive? Tev's hands itched to find out.

"This space station?" Dr. Lense asked. She sat at the other end of the table, and had remained very silent up to now. She often had just as much trouble following the engineer's explanations as Faulwell, or Gold. "By 'inside,' you mean falling into?"

Gomez shook her head. "No. It is definitely anchored within the photon sphere, at approximately one-point-three Schwarzschild radii." Lense frowned and Sonya explained further. "A Schwarzschild radius is equal to the radius of the black hole's event horizon—the point where gravity goes to infinity. The photon sphere is where light can no longer escape, at one-point-five radii." She smiled grimly. "That is the point where, if you look along the plane of the Einstein Ring, light would be perfectly bent around the black hole and you could see the back of your own head."

The concept weighed heavily over the room for a few seconds. Faulwell skated a candy across the table to Lense. He pushed another over in front of the Tellarite. "So if this station is within the photon sphere, how can we see it?" he asked.

Tev ignored the candy and stifled the urge to lecture. It was not his discovery. Even though the process had been fairly rudimentary. Gomez nodded to Stevens, who took up the narrative from his seat.

"Probes. We threw one in orbit around the Demon, and then sent it and another into its mouth. Our subspace connection deteriorated rapidly, but by forming a kind of relay system from Probe One to Probe Two and back to Theda Vinci, we managed to get those basic images. They also helped us pinpoint the gravitational anchor."

Tev could not take it anymore. His large hand trapped the candy Faulwell had slid in front of him just to have something on which to concentrate. A twist of cellophane dumped out a greenish rock of square candy. "An anchor had to exist," he said, looking at the strange emerald in the palm of his hand, "or the

station would have fallen into the event horizon decades ago. Even accounting for time dilation.”

Gomez nodded. “Right,” she said, stealing back the floor. “Of course, there was another large sign, when we finally noticed. The gravimetric waves. You would expect them to radiate out in a fairly uniform manner. But they don’t.” She tapped the console in front of her, and the display shifted into a bluish tint. The black hole roiled with energy. Now it looked more like a mouth, chewing.

“This is the Hawking radiation evaporating off the Demon. It shows a large disturbance centered here”—she pointed it out with a wave of her hand—“where there is a discontinuity in the tidal forces. The station is somehow anchored to space far outside of the photon sphere, which has kept it safe. It has also created a mostly stable channel for approaching the station where the gravitational pull is far less than it should be.”

“How much less?” Lense asked.

Gomez’s voice was very small. “Somewhere around the order of one point five million gravities, as you approach the photon sphere.”

“And the gravimetric waves?” Gold asked, bringing them back on topic.

“Backsplash,” Tev said. Gomez glared at him, and he popped the candy into his mouth.

“Backsplash is actually a good way to look at it,” she allowed. “Take an ocean tide, rolling waves near an atoll. One of those waves starts to shallow, and crest, and then strikes a large rocky protuberance.”

Apple flavor washed the inside of Tev’s mouth as the candy began to slowly dissolve. Tart. Almost sour. “Momentum has a lot of force to it when interrupted,” he said, adding to Sonya’s explanation. Why not? He had tumbled to the source of the gravimetric waves before her, after all. His mouth puckered as the taste built up, and he swallowed, catching the candy between his teeth to hold on to it. Remarkable.

“Apple Rancher,” Faulwell said, leaning aside to whisper the candy’s name. He skated one to P8 Blue, who declined. Abramowitz grabbed it instead—the cultural specialist went through them like, well, like candy.

Captain Gold leaned back into his chair, steepling his fingers in front of him as he looked at some point on the wall over Tev’s head. “So we are proceeding on the assumption that this was a deliberate attempt to place some kind of outpost—a research station perhaps—inside a black hole. But now something has gone wrong?”

Abramowitz nodded. “Details on the Resaurians are sketchy. A few brief mentions in some corrupted old logs of a pre-Federation Earth ship captain named Archer, and not much else. Without more cultural details to go on, a research station seems the most logical choice. Except—”

“Except what?” Gold pounded on her hesitation right away.

“Well, the images we have of the station itself. I spoke with Pattie earlier,” she nodded to P8 Blue, “and there don’t seem to be any escape pods. Near as we can tell.”

“Or if there were any,” the structural specialist said, “they have already been used.”

The ship rocked again, and Gold waited until it passed. “Communications?” he asked. “Life signs?”

Stevens again. Tev shifted uncomfortably. “Unable to be sure. No answer to our hails, but given the nature of their distress call, I’d say no.” He leaned forward, resting against the table with hands clasped before him. “They piggybacked their anchor, using it as a kind of transmission medium, or antennae, to escape the black hole. Life signs... same answer. Our probe’s sensors couldn’t penetrate the station’s shielding, except on a very specific band.”

This was new. Tev straightened up, eager for more data. A few seats down, Gold did the same. “And that is?”

“Transporters,” Stevens said. “The shield harmonics are meant to allow transport.”

“Transporters?” Gold frowned. “Through that kind of gravimetric interference?” Gold might not always understand the engineering side of things, but he knew his ship well. Tev had to give him credit for that. “Risky.” He leaned forward, waving a finger in the air. “Didn’t Voyager fall into a singularity recently?”

The logs that had been coming in from Project Voyager—which had managed to make contact with that ship in the Delta Quadrant, where it had been all but stranded for six years—had made for fascinating reading for the entire S.C.E. team, Tev knew. They had encountered some phenomena that almost defied belief.

Stevens answered the captain’s question. “Their chief engineer rigged up a dekyon beam to reopen the ‘rift’ by which they entered. Nothing like that will work here. I think transporters are our best bet.”

Gomez nodded reluctant agreement. “I was thinking that Tev might be our answer.”

He was? Tev swallowed, the hard rock of candy forcing its way down his throat with reluctance. He coughed into a large fist, and Faulwell hit him on the back. He shrugged away from the affable linguist, able to recover better on his own. Faulwell looked wounded. “You want me to transport over?”

“I want you to rig up a transporter relay system that can get a team over there. We’ll take pattern enhancers, which should aid in recovery of any trapped crew.”

Tev blinked in surprise that Gomez was acknowledging his expertise. “A relay?”

“Through a series of probes. You wrote a paper on the miniaturizing of transporters, didn’t you? Can you rig up some kind of circuit that will pass through our patterns, without distortion?”

He snuffled. He should have thought of that. One of his specialties, in fact, and Sonya Gomez handed it to him as a favor! She certainly hadn’t wanted to share the credit, as competitive as the S.C.E. team always seemed to perform. “Yes. It can be done. Quite easily, I should think.”

“I’ll want a trio of security personnel to escort any away team,” Corsi said.

Lense nodded. “I’ll join it with medical supplies. There might be injuries over there.”

“Let’s set it up,” Gold said. “But I want it well tested before we commit any live personnel to it.” He pointed at the screen, where the Demon was frozen in timeless pause. “That is one of the most destructive forces in the known universe. We treat it with great, great respect at all times. Clear?”

Sonya answered for the team. “Yes, Captain.” She looked them over. Shrugged. “What are you waiting

for? Get to work.”

Tev felt that last comment aimed right for him. It didn't matter what he had solved yesterday, or even this morning. What mattered was what he contributed now. Commander Gomez had made that amply clear.

He stood, waiting while Gold and Gomez left first. He would have been third out of the room, by seniority, but he paused. Faulwell was gathering his wrappers. When the language specialist looked up, he found Tev standing just inside the door. They were the last two left.

“Dr. Faulwell, I was wondering?”

The slight man rubbed at his beard. “Yes, Tev?”

The Tellarite glanced back into the hall. No one. He snuffled. He needed to get back to work. He would have to try even harder. But first...

“May I have another piece of candy?”

## Chapter 6

Gold kept his finger on the pulse of his ship, constantly in touch with engineering and the transporter room. The bridge was a beehive of activity as Tev diligently worked to become a miracle worker and transport the away team down to the station through a relay system, circumventing the titanic forces of a black hole.

The captain snorted softly. It would almost be worth interrupting Tev to see what his oh-so-dry response to “miracle worker” would be.

“Captain, I've definitely verified it's an ion trail,” Shabalala said.

“How old?”

Shabalala tapped his screen with practiced efficiency. “I'm not sure. Our sensors are still catching massive interference. The best I can say is three to five days; just can't narrow it down any more. I'm sorry, Captain.”

“That's narrow enough.” He shifted slightly in his chair (would they ever make one of these that actually felt comfortable?) as he tried to accept what that meant.

“Captain,” Shabalala began as he turned a concerned look toward his captain, “that means—”

“It means that ship must have detected the signal and yet...what happened? Did they depart? Go in?”

Shabalala looked down at the sensors for a moment before answering. “The gravimetric waves, not to mention the massive flux of Hawking radiation, are making it very difficult to analyze the ion trail. Hell, we spent how many hours here before it was even detected?”

Gold tried not to read too much into the defensive tone, but his own lack of sleep had him on edge as

well.

He leaned back in his chair, staring out the viewscreen at the awesome maw before him and tried to think through the sensor readings. He began to knead the muscles of his neck when his skin prickled with the knowledge that this flesh did not belong to him; Gold almost shivered when an echo of his nightmare shimmered before his eyes, as though part of the maw itself. He stood abruptly and walked around to Shabalala's side at the tactical station behind his chair, trying to hide his agitation; that had never happened once he was fully awake. Though he felt the need to face down this specter again, he set it aside for another day.

His crew and his ship needed him right now.

He laid his hand comfortably on the lieutenant's shoulder. "What can you tell me about the trail?"

The gesture and tone of voice seemed to work, and he felt the tension draining out of Shabalala's muscles. "I can place it about three to five days ago. There appears to be a second trail—almost a mirror image—but that could simply be an echoing effect: a version of the Einstein Ring, where the trail is duplicated."

"There's no debris?"

"None."

"Then I'd say that leaves us with two possible answers. One: a ship approached, drew almost to the photon sphere, perhaps hearing the distress signal, and then departed. Two: a ship approached, heard the distress signal, and attempted a rescue by actually taking the ship beyond the photon sphere."

"Captain," Tev interrupted. Gold turned to see the Tellarite standing almost at his shoulder, snuffling.

"Yes."

"Your second hypothesis is incorrect. If the ship traversed the photon sphere, our sensors would still be able to locate its presence—or the absence of its presence. As such, for the craft to simply have vanished to the point that our sensors refuse to reveal its location, it would need to pass through the event horizon, not simply the photon sphere." The black orbs of Tev's eyes reminded the captain of the black hole: light, matter, even emotions, seemed to vanish into those depths without a trace, without a reaction from Tev in the slightest.

"That would, in effect, be the same thing, wouldn't it?" Gold could feel the shaking of Shabalala's shoulders as the tactical officer attempted to repress his laughter. Poor Tev. We humans can be more difficult to understand than Klingons or even Romulans. Nothing we say can be taken literally.

Gold's words finally seemed to affect Tev as he raised his bushy, foliage-quality eyebrows, as though shocked his own captain could be so dense. "Of course it is different, Captain. Though I could explain it in detail, the most telling difference would be the location of the ship. With the right knowledge and technology a ship might survive crossing the photon sphere. No ship could survive crossing the event horizon."

Gold raised his hand. "I'm sorry, Tev. I know what you meant. What I meant is either the ship stayed, or it passed and simply vanished. Either way there is no trace of it and we've still got our team heading across that same barrier."

Tev snuffled loudly, and Gold suddenly realized this must be a Tellarite way of clearing their throat before speaking. Could Tev actually be nervous about something?

“Captain,” Tev began. If he was nervous, it didn’t show. “The modifications are completed. I’m leaving now to monitor a test directly from the transporter room as we send a probe into the Demon. As soon as it succeeds, the away team can be sent.”

“Excellent.”

“You know that it should be me leading the away team. My theories and ultimate application allowed for this success. My knowledge and experience on this matter are greater than any other crew member’s.”

“Exactly,” Gold said. “Which is why Gomez wants you to stay on the ship. If there’s a problem, your knowledge is the only lever we have.”

“It will not fail, Captain.”

“Of course it won’t. But other problems are likely to arise, and you’re the one needed here.”

Tev snuffled and then bowed his head ever so slightly; orders were still orders. He shuffled off, and Gold watched him head toward the turbolift.

“And Tev?”

The second officer stopped and turned. “Sir?”

“The composition of the away team is Commander Gomez’s decision. You have a problem, talk to her. Don’t think you’re going to accomplish anything—with her or with me—by going over her head. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.”

As the Tellarite entered the turbolift, bound for the transporter room, Gold hoped Gomez was having better luck with Tev than he seemed to be.

\* \* \*

Sonya did not care for environmental suits. The bulky outfits weighed on her like a straitjacket. Stiff. Claustrophobic, even without the helmet on. And they always smelled of feet, though the maintenance crews promised her that just wasn’t possible. To her engineer’s eyes, they needed a good redesign. Maybe she’d take her hand to it, after this mission, but for now there was no way around them. Without any idea of a breathable atmosphere over on the station, the suits were a necessary evil.

She shuffle-stepped to one side, clearing a path to the transporter pad. Elizabeth Lense and Fabian Stevens waddled past. P8 Blue, in her self-designed suit, marched past on all eight legs, low to the ground and moving much faster than a humanoid might. Pattie carried pattern enhancers strapped to her back, which Tev didn’t feel necessary but, as he’d finally allowed, “Couldn’t hurt.” She considered it a minor victory pulling that concession from him.

Three months, and Sonya still wasn't certain if the Tellarite's extreme confidence in himself was his greatest failing, or his greatest strength.

And she wasn't the only one. As each member of her away team reported in to the transporter room, they came by to check with her that she felt confident in Tev's transporter relay system. Second, they offered whatever piece of advice they thought was prudent, or asked for clarifications based on the latest data.

Domenica Corsi was the exception. Hauling a pair from security in her wake, the intimidating blonde planted herself in front of Sonya. "We'll take a three-point perimeter on beam-over. If we split up, I want one security guard present at all times." She glanced back. "Everyone got that?"

Konya simply nodded. Next to him, a thick-necked man carrying a phaser rifle in one hand and his suit helmet in the other shrugged his arms out as if loosening up. "Ya got it, sh-weetheart." His accent was nasal.

Corsi glared. "Don't make me tell you again, Vinx."

"Absolutely, doll—er, Commander." He put on his helmet and winked, an exaggerated expression that took half his face to do. Propping the phaser rifle one-handed up to his shoulder, he sauntered up to the transporter pad.

Sonya couldn't see how the man pulled it off, sauntering in an environment suit. And living through calling "Core-Breach" Corsi "sweetheart."

"Did we take out an advertisement?" she asked, sotto voice.

Corsi shrugged with her eyes. "Totian. He's having troubles, ah, assimilating." She glanced up at the nearly packed transporter stage. "Are you sure—"

The doors whisked open, and Tev stormed in with a thundercloud darkening his face. Corsi looked over at the Tellarite, and asked the question with a raised eyebrow.

Sonya nodded. "He hasn't dropped the ball yet." Even if she wished he would. Just not this time, thank you very much.

"No engineer out of sight." Corsi reminded her. "Ever."

Sonya nodded. "No pairing up with Stevens."

Corsi started, and Sonya smiled. She hadn't been completely sure about the two of them being a couple. On the other hand, given her and the late Kieran Duffy, she was hardly in a position to object. On the third hand, look how that relationship ended. "Relax, Domenica. It's me."

"If you three are ready," Tev said from the control panel, "my probes are nearly in place."

Corsi and Konya moved past her, taking up position on the pad. Sonya stepped up onto the stage, fastening her helmet down, making certain she had good air flow. She inhaled her first breath. Feet.

"Phasers ready," Corsi ordered, drawing her own.

“Packin’ heat.” Vinx held his phaser rifle at waist level.

“Ready,” Konya answered, though Sonya saw that he had not drawn his weapon. The security guard still persisted in finding noncombative solutions. So far, no one had room to complain.

She looked over to Tev, but the command “energize” never made it past her lips. The Tellarite took it upon himself, and started the transport sequence on his authority. A high-pitched hum filled Sonya’s ears, and the transporter’s energy matrix cascaded over the away team. . .

. . . falling away as they rematerialized inside a dimly lit space. Shadows moved around them, lunging forward quickly.

Bright lights stabbed into the back of Sonya’s eyes. “Do not move!” a rasping voice ordered.

She adjusted quickly. Not that there was much she could do. They were surrounded by a dozen beings from a reptilian race, with dark scales and glassy-black eyes.

And each one held a makeshift energy weapon pointed at the S.C.E. team.

## Chapter

# 7

The fear scent was overpowering.

Captain S’linth snapped his jaws shut to close out the olfactory overload, to keep his anger scent in check. Then again, he doubted Suliss would even notice. His fear overpowered everything.

Slowly reviewing his crew, S’linth made a decision and rocked back on his tail, opening his jaws wide and puffing his neck muscles. Let Suliss scent his anger. Let his crew know of his displeasure. The Dutiful Burden was his vessel, and no Council-appointed overseer would change that. Outside of the blessed Council, if ever there existed a place where a Resaurian could be first egg, then by Demon, this was it!

“Captain,” the communications officer spoke up. Rotating his head toward Lyssis, his tongue flickered; she was as uncomfortable as the rest of the crew and yet, despite her third shedding, she performed her duty. If Lyssis moved for a challenge in the next cycle, she would have his support.

“Yes.”

“The alien ship continues to broadcast communications on numerous bands. I’m still working on translations, but there can be no doubt that most of those signals are aimed at the Demon.” Her tongue did not flicker once as she spoke the name so many, including the Demon-cursed Suliss, could not utter without a head-sway of fear.

S’linth did not need to glance at the overseer to feel his panic as a physical presence; he probably wishes to curl up in a nest with his females. Why does the Council burden me with such shedding leavings? S’linth’s anger pulsed once more, and he brazenly puffed his neck to expel his displeasure into the already torrid air.

So often S’linth had been forced to put up with the foolishness of Suliss; the Demon-cursed nestling



carried his fear on his tongue. Now, as S'linth was on the verge of discovering the greatest change to occur in the last thousand cycles, Suliss could only sway with fear, his obsidian eyes almost completely obscured with multiple membranes. As Suliss's fear moved toward terror, driven by changes he could not accept (the subspace signal from the Demon and the arrival of an alien vessel) S'linth's anger moved to rage. He knew Suliss would attempt to block all moves of contact; S'linth had never been so close to baring fangs on his own bridge.

The tableau was interrupted as Third Councilman Sha'a slithered onto the bridge. All rotated heads toward Sha'a and bowed, nictitating a single membrane; as captain, S'linth need only bow his head, yet he nictitated as well. S'linth needed to bleed off anger; it was not appropriate in Sha'a's presence. The Third Councilman would know of the emotions on the bridge regardless, but continued anger would only knock his own tail out from under him. Additionally, S'linth truly respected Sha'a. The councilman had been a full supporter of the captain's crèche for long cycles. What's more, Sha'a had to know fear from this travel (only his second departure from Nest) yet no fear scent hovered about him. This was a Resaurian to nictitate to.

"Third Councilman," S'linth said.

"Captain."

"We requested your wisdom due to the presence of a strange vessel over the Demon."

The councilman slithered sinuously toward the giant forward screen. S'linth noticed he moved entirely without the use of his front legs as he navigated the unfamiliar decking through the bridge; such grace was in high contrast with the stumbling movements of Suliss. Coming to rest, Sha'a settled back comfortably on his tail, his flowing carmine robes gathering around his form as a second skin.

"What has been learned, Captain?" S'linth had noticed no overt flickering of Sha'a's tongue, but was confident he knew all that had occurred. There was no hiding in the Nest from a councilman.

"Communications has verified that most of the signals broadcast by the strange vessel are cast into the Demon."

"And?"

S'linth paused for a moment, tasted the air to see if he could find Sha'a among the emotions that clogged the bridge (it was impossible, the councilman was too adept at keeping his own glands in check). "I would approach this strange vessel and make contact."

"And?"

Shaken from his trance, Suliss stumbled into the conversation. "Councilman...our traditions! This alien ship cannot be contacted. Other ships have come and gone, as regular as sheddings. This too shall slough. There can be no doubt. There can be no contact." He speared the ship's captain with a glare. "There cannot be another Klingon."

S'linth firmly closed his jaws, but could not keep Suliss's fear from coating his tongue with its filth. His lips trembled to peel back. To bare fangs.

He held his anger in check. "I am versed in our traditions. The captain's crèche, as it has since hatched, knows its duty and the laws. But never has the Demon spoken. And now the arrival of this vessel... The

two cannot be independent. The one leads to the other. You must see this.”

Sha’a did not even rotate toward S’linth, but the captain instantly knew he had overstepped his boundaries. This was a battle that required submission as much as aggression.

“I’m well aware of our traditions, and of the gravity of this situation,” Sha’a began, as though unaware of the raging scents around him. “However, I do believe this ship is tied to the strange occurrences within the Demon; we shall not depart until it does.”

S’linth had an overwhelming urge to peel back his lips and puff his neck in triumph; such an unseemly display was not worthy of a captain, especially in front of a councilman, and he withheld.

“Nevertheless, we have no scent of this ship. We must know more before a decision can be made.

“We shall wait.”

\* \* \*

“What the hell are they waiting for?” the captain asked, staring at the alien ship that hung on the viewscreen.

Shabalala divided his time between the screen and his panel. A gravimetric wave rocked the *theda Vinci*, upsetting the delicate sensor balance he had achieved, but he corrected for the disturbance with a light touch. The alien vessel was not going to slip away from him. Especially since verifying that its ion trail was a perfect match for the vessel that had recently visited the black hole.

The vessel was wedge-shaped. An uninspired design—with poor warp drive characteristics, he’d bet. But it had slipped up behind them, and now sat between the *theda Vinci* and open space.

“Shall I hail them, Captain?” Shabalala asked.

Gold tapped his chin in thought. Whatever was on his mind, he held it close to the vest. Shabalala liked that about the captain. No histrionics. Just good, solid leadership.

“Give them another few moments,” Gold finally said. “I want to see what they’ll do.”

Another tremor shook the bridge. Shabalala corrected sensor calibration again, but noticed that a wash of static lapped at the edges of the main viewscreen. He sighed and hoped the captain did not wait out the aliens too long.

\* \* \*

What did Commander Gomez do? Tev sniffed the air, as though his superior olfactory sense could span the distance from the *theda Vinci* to the space station and aid him in determining what error the away team made.

How did they cause his system to fail?

Sucking on a piece of Faulwell’s candy, worrying it between his teeth, Tev studied the transporter interface. His large, almost pudgy fingers moved over it with grace and ease. For what seemed the hundredth time he recalled all data surrounding the transport and could find no anomalies of which to speak. He sent a query down through the probes and back again with no difficulty.

All systems nominal.

Nevertheless, after initialization of the energy matrix and the successful transport of the away team, he'd instantly lost transporter lock. What's more, the *Vinci* had been unable to even contact the away team.

The captain, of course, was upset by this turn of events.

Tev had tried to explain that the system was in perfect working order; the tests had worked flawlessly, and he found no reason to believe that the away team had not arrived safely onto the station. Though he could think of nothing Gomez and her people could've done to disrupt the system's ability to track them, he nevertheless conceded that humans had surprised him on numerous occasions with their ability to derail the simplest protocols. This was likely the case.

Suggesting this had seemed to anger the captain. Why should the truth be difficult to accept? Tev had been slightly disappointed with Captain Gold at that moment. Especially when the captain offered to send down another crew member to help.

The man would only have gotten in the way.

He bit down on the thinning wafer, finishing off his candy with a satisfying crunch and wash of flavor—a sticky, sour but not unpleasant aftertaste that not even a drink of *jota* could fully banish.

Perhaps if he sent down additional probes, he could boost the signal and then triangulate the away team's positions? He idly pulled on his beard. Perhaps a thermal print. . . .

Tev put the transporter station on standby, surrendered it to the duty chief, and jogged toward the door. He tapped his combadge. "Transporter to bridge. Captain?"

"This is Gold. What've you got for me?"

"Captain, I believe that I can drop additional probes, setting up an imaging grid to sweep the station, triangulating on their thermal print. As the station is probably long dead, their thermal signature should be easy to locate."

"What if the station's not dead?"

Tev summoned the lift, organizing his thoughts as the doors whisked open and then closed. "Bridge," he ordered. Then, "Even if the station is fully operational, with numerous active targets, the thermal print of a *Nasat* is rather unique. It should help us pinpoint their location."

"Make it happen, Tev. We've got a situation of our own up here—stand by to hail them, *Shabalala*—so let's get our people back. Inform me when you've gotten a lock. Bridge out."

Tev did not bother to inform the captain he was already en route to the bridge. From where else did you program probes? Gold had sounded distracted, though. Hail them? Hail whom? Still trying to contact the station, which had ignored every attempt at communication since the *Vinci*'s arrival?

Not exactly. As the door to the bridge slid open, and Tev stepped out of the lift, he was just in time to see a wedge-shaped vessel dissolve from the main viewer, to be replaced by a static-laced view of an alien bridge with half a dozen reptilian beings staring back with glassy eyes and wide, blunt-edged

mouths.

Captain Gold should have informed him about this! How else was Tev to render him the best possible service and advice?

But he had his orders. As Captain Gold opened a dialogue with the aliens, Tev moved to an open science station and set about reprogramming some probes.

## Chapter 8

Rennan Konya sensed the hostility and the fear that surrounded him, scoring his psyche like twin barbs on the same lash. Part of him recoiled from the contact—had seemed to feel a shimmering of revulsion even before materializing, though intellectually he knew that was not possible. The stronger part of his Betazoid mind embraced the pain, made it a part of him, and searched for a way to turn it into a strength.

He picked up no coherent thoughts, but within seconds of materializing he already knew that the two reptilian beings nearest him were far too afraid to pull their triggers. Many of the others were strangely ambivalent, afraid to fire but resigned to do so if they found it necessary. Two of them were eager to resolve the situation with action.

Far, far too eager.

One of these stood within reach of Rennan, holding a metal rod that bled red sparks from its front end. Some kind of converted plasma welder. She covered Commander Gomez and Fabian Stevens, weapon swinging back and forth as if deciding which one should be shot first.

The other snakelike being with violent emanations stood opposite Vinx, competing in a stare-down contest with the Iotian security guard. Vinx egged him on with not-so-subtle gestures, poking toward the alien with his phaser rifle. “Are ya talkin’ to me?” Vinx taunted, his voice only slightly muffled by the environmental suit’s helmet.

“Drop the weapon!” The alien held some kind of pistol-style weapon.

Apparently Vinx wanted to get shot. Louder, he asked again, “Are ya talkin’ to me?”

This could not have a good end.

One of the uncertain beings tried to defuse the situation. “Hold,” he ordered the one facing off with Vinx. Though a head shorter than his larger companion, the alien’s raspy voice held the unmistakable air of authority. He leaned forward, catching his man in a glassy-eyed stare. A tongue licked out, tasting the air. “Rhyss, I said hold!”

Too late. Rennan’s special training allowed him to tap into the motor complex of the brain much easier than the thought process. He felt fingers tightening on triggers, knew that the leader could not stop his two makeshift warriors in time. Not both of them. As the leader lunged forward, tucking his legs back to strike snakelike toward his own man, arm coming up to grab the pistol, Rennan slid in low and sideways toward the alien who had finally decided to start with Commander Gomez, the closer engineer.

It all happened in the brief span of two seconds. The pistol-like device discharged into the ceiling, raining a shower of sparks and molten droplets over Vinx and P8 Blue. The Nasat curled into a protective ball, rolling forward out of reflex to bowl over both aliens.

The second trigger-happy alien had sensed Rennan's approach, swinging her plasma-dripping rod around to skewer the Betazoid. Using a specialty he referred to as proprioception, sensing the alien's actions and using her movement against her, Rennan dodged in, spinning to one side. His environmental suit made it harder, but not impossible. His left hand grasped the rod just forward of its makeshift stock, yanking it free, while his right arm snaked up and around the back of the alien's neck, putting her into a reverse choke hold that effectively neutralized her as a threat.

Fear roiled off the two skittish aliens, and Rennan quickly assuaged their worry by throwing the plasma weapon at their feet and holding up his empty hand in a (fairly) universal sign of neutrality. His empathic ability confirmed that he had done the right thing as the aliens hesitated, and then backed away.

Commander Corsi had her phaser out, covering a trio of aliens who aimed back in a very lopsided standoff. She tapped her combadge. "Corsi toda Vinci. Corsi to Gold!" Nothing. She swore under her breath. "Get a grip on yourselves, people. Vinx? Vinx!"

The Iotian stood over the two reptilian beings that Pattie had knocked over, his phaser rifle levered from his hip. "Piece of this action? Huh? Ya want that?" A lot of mouth but no real anger, Rennan was satisfied to note. The Iotian was in full control of the situation. The leader of the small alien band lay there, arms raised in another fairly universal gesture.

Releasing his captive, Rennan stepped over and prodded Vinx back away from the two fallen aliens.

Stevens already had his tricorder out, taking readings and occasionally tapping his combadge to see if theda Vinci answered. Gomez made placating gestures to the aliens at the team's rear, where Rennan had left the back of the team open to possible attack. Sonya couldn't know that the Resaurians were more afraid of being wrong than they were of being threatened.

Pattie partially unrolled, looking out to see if the situation had resolved itself.

For the most part, Rennan felt that it had. No one was in immediate danger of firing a weapon. More importantly, no one was hurt. Violence had been avoided.

That was security's job.

## Chapter 9

As the image materialized on the viewscreen, Captain Gold shivered. And immediately felt abashed. Humans had been exploring the galaxy for centuries, and yet the collective fears of millennia continued to haunt them like a plague.

Why did they so fear snakes?

"I am Third Councilman Sha'a of Resaurus," the figure on the screen hissed. He was difficult to see, as the ambient light on their bridge was low. The alien's reddish hued scales blended so well with his

clothing that it took Gold a moment to realize that Sha'a wore a clinging carmine robe. The councilman's tongue flickered to the right, "This is Captain S'linth of the Dutiful Burden." He spread his arms wide and bobbed his head slightly once more. "We welcome you."

Interesting that the civilian spoke in place of the captain of the ship; Gold understood right away where the real power lay.

Resaurians, as they identified themselves, looked like a thick-bodied snake with nearly vestigial legs but strong arms. Coal-black eyes stared forward with a hypnotic gaze. Gold tried to shovel his childish fears aside. Perhaps Resaurians got the willies when looking at humans. The thought helped.

"Third Councilman Sha'a," he responded, trying not to trip over the glottal stop in the name. He stood up and took his best "we are friendly and hope you will be too" stance. "I thank you for your welcome." He paused for a moment, wondering if he should bring Abramowitz up here. No time. "As your ship approached ours, I would ask what your intentions are?"

Looking not unlike a thin tapeworm squirming for life, Sha'a's tongue flicked in and out several times before he responded. "Captain, it would seem that you have picked up a distress signal emanating from this black hole. We would like to share with you what you'll find."

"We welcome any assistance, Third Councilman. May I offer the hospitality of my ship?"

A whitish membrane slid over Sha'a's eyes for a few heartbeats. Then the councilman nodded. "We will shuttle over, Captain."

"No need. Our matter transference system can beam you quite safely aboard."

Another long blink. Then, Sha'a nodded. "There will be three of us," he said. And communication broke off from their side.

Perhaps the Resaurians were not so comfortable either.

\* \* \*

Gold walked along briskly, with Carol Abramowitz attempting to match his stride; a security detail would meet them in the transporter room.

"What have you got for me?" he asked.

Carol paused before responding, trying to juggle keeping up with the captain as she consulted her tricorder. "The Federation has had a few brushes with the Resaurians, but nothing in long decades. I've tagged one or two references. The computer did come up with some corrupted files from that old Earth ship I mentioned, but not much beyond that."

"Soloman was no help?"

"Not so far. Even Bynars have their limitations when it comes to computers, sir."

"So, for all intents and purposes, this is first contact?" Of all the things going on right now, he had to run into this?

They entered the turbolift and descended smoothly down.

“I’d not call it that. More a recontact. However, indirectly I dug up some additional information. Not from our archives, but from a Klingon source.” Carol sounded very satisfied.

“Klingon?”

The doors whisked open and they headed toward the transporter room.

“Yes. It seems that our allies subjugated the Resaurians for the better part of a century, using them for their large mineral deposits. A very hide-bound and slowly developing people, according to the files. Traditions were given more weight than laws, which caused no end of difficulty with their over-lords. The Klingons kept them in virtual slavery, and then discarded them and moved on once the most accessible resources had been tapped out.”

Gold heard the disgust in her voice and couldn’t bring himself to dispute it. He knew many Klingons that he respected, but as a race... “How long ago was this?” he asked.

“The dates aren’t translating well, but when Captain Archer made first contact, the Resaurians were already long since free of the Klingons, and that was two hundred and twenty years ago.”

“So, what does that mean for us?”

“I’m not exactly sure on all points, but at the very least they are likely to be hostile toward any new race. Their encounter with the Klingons had to be devastating and they’ll most likely do everything in their power to prevent something like that happening again.”

“So why are they being so open? So friendly?”

“That’s the gold-pressed latinum question, all right.”

They arrived at the transporter room, where a trio from security already had phasers drawn and ready.

“None of that,” Gold said, motioning their phasers away. He turned toward Chief Poynter behind the transporter console. “Energize.”

The hum and light show commenced, with the energy pulsing, coalescing into three forms: that of Councilman Sha’a, Captain S’linth, and another whom Gold did not recognize.

Up close, the impression of a snake was even stronger, as their tongues flicked madly and their heads rotated back and forth, swaying, almost hypnotic. Gold immediately took a step forward. He noted a scent of dry, bitter musk.

“Third Councilman Sha’a, welcome to the Federation Starshipda Vinci,” he said and then turned slightly to indicate Carol. “This is our cultural specialist, Dr. Carol Abramowitz, Transporter Chief Laura Poynter,” he said, indicating the transporter chief, then pointed at the security guards, “and Chief Vance Hawkins, Ellec Krotine, and Madeleine Robins from security.”

Sha’a bowed his head slightly in both their directions. His arm swung out to indicate his own companions. “This is Captain S’linth, introduced previously.” The third Resaurian, “This is Suliss, overseer of the Dutiful Burden.”

Gold wondered what the difference was between a captain and an overseer—and who outranked whom. Normally a tone of voice or a facial expression could give something away, but these Resaurians were too alien for him to pick up anything. He'd simply have to proceed as he could.

“Please, we’ve a room ready for our discussion,” Gold said, still mulling over how to address this trio, and led them toward the observation lounge, which Carol had readied from what scant information they did know.

“Your hospitality is gracious, Captain,” S’linth whispered in the Resaurian’s hissing style of communication. “Of the first egg.” Several different types of refreshment and liquid had been laid out, and each of the Resaurians found something apparently to their liking. S’linth, though, seemed to be the only one enjoying himself.

“You are most welcome, Captain S’linth.”

After several minutes of pleasantries, passed mostly with S’linth, Gold allowed the silence to lengthen. Councilman Sha’a obviously wanted to discuss the topic on his terms. Gold steadily drank from a glass of cold water while Carol sat patiently, waiting. Finally, Sha’a spoke.

“Captain, it has come to our attention that you have received a distress signal from within the Demon. This black hole.”

“As you said earlier, Third Councilman.” Gold would not get drawn into a long discussion. His people could be in trouble.

“Yes, and I’m confident, from what I’ve seen, that you have already verified that there is a space station anchored within.”

“That’s correct. How do you know this?”

“Because that is a Resaurian space station.”

Gold blinked as he took that in. From the startled reactions of both Suliss and S’linth, it appeared to be news to them as well. He traced a circle through the sweating liquid from his glass that marred the table. Despite his misgivings, he began to hope.

“If that’s your station, then you’ll be able to help us.”

“I’m afraid, Captain, that is quite out of our capabilities.”

Captain Gold slowly pressed his hand down against the tabletop, reined in his anger.

“Why?”

“Because the station has been abandoned for over several centuries and we allowed the technology...to languish.”

He leaned back and tried not to let his distress show. Had the away team found nothing? Were they trapped and dying down there alone? What was happening?



“Several centuries? And it’s still there? Why did you abandon such an impressive research facility?”

“Yes,” the Resaurian said in a slow hiss, “a research facility.” He paused. “There was a plague on the station, one which drove the...the researchers toward insanity. Tradition dictated that we not allow it to affect the rest of our people if we could help it.”

Gold grasped suddenly that he distrusted the Councilman, though he could not pin it to anything; he didn’t believe himself shallow enough to distrust simply based upon those dead, holelike eyes, or the dancing black tongue that quivered. It was by far the more human traits. The hesitation. The vague answers. Sha’a was hiding something.

“Did you pinpoint the source of this plague?” Carol finally spoke up. Whether she did so of her own volition or because she detected his unease, Gold couldn’t tell.

“No. It remains a mystery to us even today. But considering the danger inherent to this area of space...”

Carol nodded. “The black hole?”

“Unable to do anything, we were forced to abandon the station, however much it pained us. We have never returned.”

It made sense, and yet still something seemed off. Gold looked toward the other two Resaurians and found nothing; they might as well have been statues for his ability to read them. He’d been on the point of informing the Resaurians about their away team, but now demurred. He simply had to find out more about this race. Of a sudden he stood, uncaring if he might be breaching protocol.

“Sha’a, it has been a pleasure. More, I appreciate your candor on this subject. Nevertheless, there are urgent matters that I must attend to.”

“Then you shall be departing?”

“Very soon, I hope. Very soon.”

Carol stood beside the captain as the Resaurians disappeared through the door, escorted by security. “That was abrupt.”

“We’ve got to find out more about them, Abramowitz. They’re not telling the truth.”

She turned toward him with a quizzical look in her eye. “How can you tell? I’ve had an easier time telling what a wall feels than those Resaurians.”

“I’m not sure, but there’s something...” He arched his neck, as though to stretch his mental faculty past the cobwebs that angry chemical spiders were weaving at a furious pace; he had to get some sleep.

But not until his crew returned.

“You and Soloman get back to work on those corrupted files you mentioned. There has to be something in there that can open a crack on these Resaurians.”

## Chapter

# 10

Sonya's job description rarely included such tasks as first contact procedures. That was left to ships of exploration, like her first posting on the Enterprise. They came through, initiated protocols or not, made a tangle of things or not, and then moved on to the next mission while the diplomatic corps or S.C.E. (or both!) moved in to clean up after them.

She felt fairly certain, however, that most of those protocols did not involve staring at each other over drawn weapons. Wars could begin that way. And had.

Fortunately, this S'eth did not appear to harbor a grudge. Just the opposite.

"Once again, I wish to apologize, Commander, for your reception." S'eth had greenish black scales from the leading edge of his blunt-nosed face to his coral-tipped tail. His chest scales were smaller and lighter, almost an emerald green. He rested back on a thick coil, his legs propping himself up on either side. It made him look smaller than he actually was, nearly a head and a half shorter than Sonya. "Your matter transference beam caught us by surprise."

The Resaurian certainly sounded apologetic. A discreet glance at Rennan Konya, who shrugged and then nodded, confirmed that the Betazoid at least felt comfortable with the alien's contrite attitude. Rennan went back to intently studying some scorch markings on a nearby wall.

For her part, Sonya was simply relieved to be out of the bulky environmental suits now that they had ascertained that the Resaurians breathed Class-M atmosphere. She glanced around the operations center where Tev had inserted her team. Panels with actual keystroke pads lay open with jury-rigged components bleeding out onto the metal decking everywhere. Lights flashed on monitors here and there. Most screens had large dark spaces that again told of age and neglect—or maybe just of an inability to repair. More than a few bulkheads and workstation hatches had carbon score marks that might have been from ruptured systems, and sloppy welds could be counted by the dozen, as if the Resaurians had been learning repair procedures as they went.

Only the main viewer seemed to work perfectly, looking out of the photon sphere. High above, the universe was compacted into a small circle of stars surrounded by bands of blue-shifted light that marked each progressive Einstein Ring.

The rest of the "sky" was dark. Nothingness.

Checking on her team, Sonya saw Corsi and Vinx standing together, talking, shoulder to shoulder and facing opposite directions so that one of them had full view of half the bridge at all times. Fabian crawled halfway into a large, darkened workstation, and Pattie inspected a welded door that looked as if it once fronted the opening for a lift of some type. Lense ran intense scans of one of the Resaurians, pausing every few seconds to recalibrate her tricorder. Of the thousand survivors who S'eth assured them still remained on the station, they had so far seen perhaps twenty. In singles and small groups they wandered in, offering a hand and answering any questions put to them.

Caught by surprise or not, the Resaurians cooperated with great eagerness now.

"Your shields were designed for transporters to penetrate easily," she noted. "I would have thought that our arrival method would be quite common."

“It was. It was. Once upon a time. But we haven’t had such an occurrence, well, in decades.”

Decades! “How long have you been trapped here?” she asked.

“A lifetime, it seems.” S’eth scratched behind his right shoulder, picking loose a scrap of dried skin that had been wedged in between some of his scales. He tasted the air, black eyes gazing about the bridge. “How long depends greatly on the time dilation, of course.”

Of course. Decades to the Resaurians trapped within this station could, objectively, translate to centuries outside of the black hole’s influence. How much time was her team losing, right now, separated from the da Vinci? “I don’t suppose a Federation star-date would help?”

“Not unless you can translate it into the time it takes Resaurus to orbit its sun,” S’eth rasped.

“Without the da Vinci’s computers, I’m afraid not. Fabian,” she called over to her tactical systems specialist, “any luck?”

“Nothing,” Fabian told her, head still stuck inside the cavernous workstation. He pulled back out, squatted against the station’s corner, and laid his head back against a nonfunctioning keypad. “This is all local station comms. I can’t find a subspace transmitter here. I’m not even certain how they sent their distress call.”

Sonya looked to S’eth. “Much of this station was automated,” he explained. “We have retaken manual control over as much as we dare.”

“And your subspace communications?” she asked.

“On a lower deck, I imagine. It was never a part of the main operating systems.”

Sonya couldn’t put her finger on why she thought the Resaurian had just hedged on the truth. It simply felt not quite right. Either way, it was damn strange.

“Can we triangulate on the transmission?”

Fabian kicked his tricorder, sitting on the deck, all but forgotten. “Useless. Or damn close. The shields around this station have a dampening effect on this side. It limits the range and effectiveness of our best equipment. Which is likely why we lost communications.” Fabian exhaled sharply. “And transporter lock.”

With no comms and no emergency beam-out after two minutes, Sonya and the rest of her team had already come to that conclusion. “Pattern enhancers?” she asked.

“Still need a basic site-to-site signal.” He nodded toward where Pattie had already set up the pattern enhancers around a clear section of deck. Vinx’s combadge, donated to the cause, rested in the exact center. “On the off chance that Tev somehow manages to work around that shortcoming, we’ve recorded a status update that will help us coordinate a rescue.” There was no talk off a rescue would be made. Only when.

Sonya had good people under her. They took quite a bit on faith, which was unusual for by-the-math engineers.

“Can we drop the shields?” she asked as Rennan and Lense walked up to join the small gathering. “That would give Tev his chance. We can easily absorb the radiation, can’t we?”

“For a time,” Lense said, nodding, but S’eth disagreed.

“Cannot be done. Our shields work in conjunction with our gravitational anchor. We drop our shields, and the Demon swallows us.”

Which Sonya translated as a complete loss of integrity as the black hole’s tidal forces ripped the station apart. “Poor engineering design,” she stated bluntly.

“Or a very good fail-safe,” Rennan said, not the least bit surprised, apparently, to hear about the integrated systems. “If you never want the station, or its inhabitants, to see the light of day again.”

“What are you saying?” Sonya inhaled sharply, turned on S’eth. “This station, and all aboard her, were sunk into the gravity well intentionally? With no way out?”

S’eth hesitated, then nodded. “That would be the case, Commander.”

“Why?”

S’eth did not appear to want to say. Embarrassed or disgruntled, Sonya wasn’t sure. But Rennan Konya had the answer. The Betazoid had waved over Corsi and Vinx, who gathered in cautiously, alerted by some signal. He nodded at the Resaurian, and then let his gaze take in the half-wrecked operations center around them. “It makes perfect sense,” he told his commander, “if you are designing a prison.”

## Chapter 11

Tev wondered what this meeting was about as Soloman took a seat opposite him. With the captain to Tev’s right, Abramowitz to the captain’s right, and Faulwell to his left, they could commence.

The captain looked strained. Stretched thin. Just plain tired. Nothing showed in his voice, however, as he spoke.

“You called this meeting, Abramowitz. What have you dug up?”

Tev sniffed at her lack of preparedness; she took a whole four heartbeats to begin as she checked a few last notes on her pad.

“Actually quite a lot. Thanks to Soloman’s efforts, we’ve decoded most of that corrupted Archer file.” She nodded at Soloman, who managed to look slightly embarrassed at the praise. If he’d succeeded, why not take appropriate credit?

“It was a simple matter, Captain,” Soloman began in his strange cadence. “After Carol met with the Resaurians, I spoke with her at some length to extract additional information that can only be synthesized in a face-to-face interaction.” He nodded right back at Carol, bestowing mutual credit. “Once I had those additional data bytes, I constructed a new set of algorithmic search patterns and set it to work on

the corrupted files. Once I'd extracted the first bytes and reincorporated them into the search parameters, the rest quickly fell into place, building a cohesive whole. Carol simply took that information and distilled it into what we have now."

"Enough with the back-patting already," Gold said with a tired smile. "Get on with it."

Abramowitz cleared her throat. "Yes, Captain. What we appear to have is a race that is steeped in tradition; traditions hold more importance than law. In fact, most traditions become laws by default. They are slow to develop and slow to adapt. Nevertheless, a progressive faction appears every few centuries and the Resaurians suddenly leap forward in their development: culturally, scientifically, technologically—really across the board. However, this doesn't last long. As a natural equilibrium reinstates itself, the progressive faction simply dissolves as their goals come to fruition and then centuries of slow, almost torporlike progression begins again."

"Okay, but how does that help us? That's a fine history lesson and we might use it to our advantage, but I'm not sure what that has to do with the station or our current predicament." For the first time that Tev could remember, Gold actually sounded slightly annoyed.

"I was getting to that, Captain," Abramowitz responded, speeding up her delivery. "This cycle progressed for who knows how many centuries. Until the Klingons."

Everyone, except Soloman, leaned back slightly as though that were the answer to everything. How many times had the Klingons been the problem? Tev could name numerous instances where he'd personally been involved in Klingon problems, much less history in general.

Abramowitz nodded her head and continued. "The Klingons practically enslaved the Resaurians for decades—I can't tell for sure how long, unfortunately, but enough time to thoroughly alter their society. When the Klingons departed, they left a hole that apparently was filled by another progressive faction. However, as upheavals tore at the very fabric of the Resaurian society, progress in sciences and technologies, most of it gleaned from the Klingons during their occupation and taken from their castoffs, spiraled out of control, advancing beyond the attendant advances of culture and the moral fiber to know how to deal with such technology."

Tev leaned forward to place meaty palms onto the table, finally able to join the conversation. "This progressive faction, so enamored of technology, did not dissipate as had occurred previously. This required the traditionalists to finally rise up and remove them from power?"

Abramowitz stared, chagrined, at Tev. She was not the only person to study societal behavior. Dealing with bizarre alien species such as humans, Cardassians, and Ferengi had forced him to such lengths, even if it was simply a small side hobby. It had neither the clean lines nor the pure form of engineering and mathematics, but the probabilities study of a sentient race's reactions to stimulation could be interesting in its own right.

"That's right, Tev. That's exactly right." She turned to look at the rest of those present, as though to assure herself she'd not been the only one to hear his words. He'd be offended if Abramowitz wasn't so far beneath his station.

"For perhaps the first time in Resaurian history, a violent overthrow of a movement occurred." She paused, as though done with her recitation. "After that, well, it would all be conjecture. I've no idea what occurred with the progressive faction, or how the traditionalists dealt with something so unprecedented. More importantly, I've no idea if the Resaurians found their equilibrium again, or whether the imprint of

the Klingons was simply too powerful and the appearance of the progressive faction occurs more frequently and with more violence than before.”

The captain finally leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table, and ran his hands back through his hair before raising bloodshot eyes to the room.

“Which still doesn’t answer our question of why they’ve been so open,” Gold said. “If everything you say is true, then our first impression should’ve been correct. They should be adamantly opposed to encountering new species.”

Faulwell finally spoke up. “Could this Sha’a you met be a part of the progressive faction? Perhaps they’ve turned up once more.”

The captain shook his head. “No. Of course, it’s hard to read the Resaurians, but if ever I saw a traditionalist, Sha’a was it. S’linth, the captain, might be something different, but it looked to me like Sha’a is calling all the shots.”

“What if—”

“Captain, this is the bridge.”

Tev snuffled—hehated being interrupted.

“Gold here.”

“Captain, we’re receiving a message from Commander Gomez.”

## Chapter 12

“Aprison?”

Sonya Gomez wandered through one of the lower corridors, between a hydroponics bay and the auxiliary generator that provided power to what remained of the functioning operations equipment. She was beginning to see a great deal more insidiousness in the welded doors and the carbon scoring that marred the walls everywhere she went. “All of this to lock up a group of political dissidents?”

“Dissidents!” S’eth shook his head. “We were free thinkers. Progressive diplomats, teachers, and engineers. The Council quaked in their nests when our eggs hatched.”

Corsi, Vinx, and Konya had taken up sentry positions, guarding the small S.C.E. team as they continued their survey of the station. They held off all Resaurians except for S’eth. Corsi shook her head. “Why not space you? A whole lot easier.”

S’eth recoiled as if bitten. “Resaurians have a long life span. To shorten it would be an inconceivable crime. Not that other races haven’t shown a tendency to do just that.” He had already told Sonya of the Klingon oppression of his race nine hundred years ago. “After experiencing that kind of brutality, we were more devoted than ever to the tradition of the sanctity of life.”

“And warming to the concept of cruel and unusual punishment.” Sonya adjusted her tricorder, fighting against the dampening field that limited its range to mere meters. Power fluctuations on the deck below. Thermal signatures in the next room—more Resaurians standing posts in the auxiliary power room, most likely. “A life of confinement, spent inside a black hole?”

“Technically, we might never die.” S’eth shrugged. “And the station had every possible convenience. With holographic technology, we might pretend that life was fairly normal.”

“A silk prison,” Fabian said. Everyone looked at him. “Old Earth history. Feudal Japan. Carol was telling me about it after that mission to the Kursican orbiting prison. You create a palacelike prison, as a show of respect for your prisoners.”

Pattie shook her antennae in a negative way. “The Resaurian definition of ‘palace’ leaves a great deal to be desired.”

S’eth slithered along next to Sonya, ducking his head in repeated apology. “It was a grand station, originally. But the...century of wear and use have stripped it down to the most basic elements. A large metal cage thrown into the darkest pit around.”

Trust was going to be a long time in returning, Sonya knew. If the S.C.E. team didn’t need S’eth in order to complete their survey and find a way to reestablish comms with the *Vinci*... She pointed out some welded doors, and the weld scorches that slashed the walls nearby. “Looks more like vandalism to me. Or damage from some of your ad hoc weapons.”

“Most of that kind of damage is what is still left over from the riots. The early years were not easy ones on the twelve hundred who were cast away. We became our own small world, with factions and struggles and even a dictator who was prepared to risk everything—all of our lives—for a mad chance at freedom.”

Lense hugged her arms, shivered. “I think I might have agreed with him.”

“Es’a, the nest-breaker, was insane,” S’eth said adamantly. “Even among the progressives, his thoughts were too radical. We looked for a saner method of escape, or of rescue.”

A century, and meanwhile nearly eight hundred years had passed outside of the *Demon*. The conversion of Resaurian cycles to Federation years wasn’t hard once they had the common Klingon calendar as a frame of reference between them. And it was just as easy for Sonya to calculate the time dilation (assuming a fairly constant standard) between the away team and the *Vinci*. One hour on the station. Eight hours aboard ship. The captain must be tearing out what was left of his hair by the handfuls, if he hadn’t already ripped his clothes and buried them.

No. Not David Gold. He wouldn’t give up hope until he saw cold bodies. Maybe not even then.

Sonya slowed, dropping back for a moment to speak with Rennan Konya. The Betazoid security officer held on to every word spoken by S’eth. It was starting to unnerve her. “Everything okay?” she asked, perhaps a bit louder than required. She didn’t want S’eth worried about the S.C.E. team. They still needed allies.

Rennan nodded slowly. “This is one of the rare times I wish I had a greater gift for telepathy. S’eth believes what he is saying. And I don’t sense any immediate danger. But there is still something he’s not telling us.” He shook his head. “Like why they still have so many weapons if these riots took place so

long ago.”

“We’ve seen one hydroponics bay that might feed a tenth of the population he claims still lives on this station.” Sonya glanced at some more scoring along the walls. “There is quite a bit our host isn’t telling us.” She drifted back forward, smiling as if Rennan had just given her good news.

“Don’t worry,” she said to the security guard. “We’ll get out of here yet.”

“Are you certain there is a chance to contact your ship?” S’eth asked.

Fabian glanced up from his own tricorder screen. “If we can find the transmitter array being used for your distress call, yes. With luck, we can modify the system and alert theda Vinci of our status.”

“And without luck?” Lense asked.

Without luck, it would be ninety-three years before their change in the message worked its way up out of the black hole. Everyone knew the answer. Vinx simply shrugged. “I can create a fizzbin deck and teach you to play. It’s good for passing time.”

Sonya smiled. Not much got theda Vinci crew down for long. “I’d rather believe in a universe that contains luck,” she said, paraphrasing James T. Kirk.

“Then you will convince your Captain Gold to climb down the anchor and, how did you say, ‘bump shields’ with us? That will let you transport everyone off the station?”

“It may take a few trips, but yes. We can manage that, I believe.”

S’eth shook his head, pouching his neck muscles in what might have been a shrug of exasperation, or defeat. “I think it sounds like you are asking for the impossible as well.”

She bristled, but it was Pattie who came to her rescue against S’eth’s pessimism. “We’re the S.C.E.,” the Nasat said. “‘Impossible’ is our stock-in-trade.”

Taken right off the lips of the S.C.E.’s overall commander, Captain Montgomery Scott, but Sonya couldn’t have said it better herself.

Fabian could. Smiling, he walked over to a nearby wall hatch. Pulling his phaser, he didn’t bother with the niceties of dismantling the hatch but instead sliced through the hinges. It fell into the corridor with a metallic clang. Behind the panel, an energy conduit pulsed with a modulated energy wave.

He snapped his tricorder off.

“Impossible takes an extra ten minutes,” he said.

## Chapter 13

The triumvirate of Resaurians faced the viewscreen, as inscrutable as ever; strangely, they were the only individuals on the bridge. Gold knew it was simply a problem of communications, but he couldn’t help



but think their emotionless faces were an act—a conscious move to hide their true emotions behind a façade.

It only enraged him further.

“So, this is how it went down,” he said, uncaring that the endless hours of frustrating failures to bring his crew home were hemorrhaging into his voice. “For millennia you’ve peacefully passed through cycles of quick progression, followed by centuries of slow evolution. Until the Klingons came. They subjugated you, enslaved you, and after thoroughly altering your society, cast you aside. With more technology than you could possibly hope to deal with, your equilibrium shattered, the progressives came into power and held sway for a hundred years. Upheavals continued as you tried to come to terms with technology well beyond your cultural or moral development. Finally, in an act of desperation, the traditionalists overthrew the progressives and removed them from power. How am I doing so far?”

Gold couldn’t care less about his sarcasm-laced words, as the trio continued to stare at him as though watching a bug they found fascinating, but ultimately would eat. He knew Abramowitz was probably having a conniption right about now, but he couldn’t care less about that either. They’d lied to him. Lied to him on his own ship, while his crew was stuck in that hell-hole they’d created.

“So, you’d overthrown the most powerful of the progressives, but you didn’t know what to do. You couldn’t kill them—the Klingons may have erased much of your culture, but that was one tradition that you’d jealously kept—so you constructed a prison inside the black hole and threw them. How long have they been down there? How long has this secret been kept?”

He stared daggers across the electronic gulf, and for the first time noticed something different. Sha’a had remained a statue during his rant and Suliss only less so, nodding once in a while as though to confirm and support everything he’d said. Captain S’linth, however, appeared agitated. If the councilman had not been so still, perhaps holding himself from giving anything away, Gold probably would not have even noticed S’linth’s movements. Now, however, the slight sway of the head, the twitch of the arms, the quiver of the lips: they all added up to a captain who was receiving the surprise of a lifetime. He’s been lied to as well. Can the whole Resaurian population be blind to this but the councilmen? Or perhaps the overseers to each ship that the Council appoints?

Gold looked again at those obsidian eyes and had his answer. “Councilman, answer me. You threw them into that hole for eternity.”

“We did not kill them,” Sha’a finally answered.

“What?” Gold launched himself out of his seat and moved to stand close to the screen; it changed nothing, but psychologically it was good to appear closer to them. “That’s your answer? You didn’t kill them? You for damn sure might as well have. It’s been nine hundred years since they were tossed into thatmishegos. The whole galaxy has changed in scope and then some since then. It would’ve been better to slit their throats and be done with it.”

Finally, he seemed to reach the councilman, as his tongue wiggled for several long seconds. The Resaurian suddenly leaned forward and rested onto his legs for the first time in Gold’s presence.

“Captain, it matters not what we did. Nor, by the egg, does it matter to you. This is our business and our station. You cannot interfere.”

“Like hell I can’t. That may be your station, but my people are on it.” Gold was gratified to finally see

some real emotion from Sha'a, as the councilman rocked back onto his tail and wove his head back and forth, quickly. That had taken him by surprise. "This may be Resaurian business, but you forgot to stick up a sign saying 'no trespassing.' We received a distress signal, we moved to assist, and now I've got seven of my crew trapped on that tin can. I'm going to get them out."

"You cannot do this."

"You don't seem to understand, Sha'a. My people are down there and I'm going to get them out. If that requires I pull out the entire space station and hand you back your exiles, so be it."

With that he motioned and the front screen went dark.

Time to bring his crew home.

\* \* \*

Captain S'linth's lips ached from the act of not baring his fangs in dismay. He'd gone seven cycles on this bridge. Seven cycles of unfailing service to the Nest and the joy of exploring the astronomical wonders in near space; how had it come to this?

Suliss and Sha'a were bent in a whispered conversation, while he stood on the side, forgotten. He'd known that the real power behind each ship was the Council, regardless of how much a captain flexed against his overseer, but only now did he understand what a figurehead he truly was. A figurehead to be cast aside when necessary.

S'linth tasted the air and found a raw, blood harshness that demonstrated a will of iron. A will to do anything to accomplish what must be done.

He did not like it. Did not like it at all.

Could what the aliens said be true? Could their ancestors really have done something so terrible? Could the Council know about it? Could the stalwart councilman (ever the captain's crèche supporter) know of this?

He stabbed the air multiple times, drawing in as much sensation as he could muster. Try as he might, he could not deny what stood before him.

Against all tradition, he slithered forward, intruding, spoke.

"Third Councilman Sha'a, what will you do?"

Suliss, the nictitater, so afraid of the events transpiring before, rose up in fury and righteous indignation with power at his side, only to be cut off by a small gesture from Sha'a.

"Captain," he hissed softly, "what do you feel should be done?"

"I simply don't know, Councilman. I don't know."

He hissed laughter. "That is what I've always appreciated about you, Captain. You are unfailingly truthful. However, I know what we must do. There really is no question." He turned to look back toward the now black viewscreen. "They must be stopped."

# Chapter 14

Fabian and Pattie had worked a small miracle, one of several, routing the phased communication array back to the station's bridge. Cannibalizing a pattern enhancer for its amplifier circuits and reverse-engineering one of the station components to meld it to Federation technology, they now had a working station that allowed for an only slightly distorted audio signal between the away team and the *theda Vinci*.

Of course, it would never have worked without Tev's network of probes, forming a strong enough reception grid that the away team did not need to rely on the Resaurian method of a ninety-three-year transmission, but that's what teamwork meant. Didn't it?

A burst transmission squealed over the speakers. Sonya captured it, pulled it out over a better length of time.

"Waiting on your order," Tev told her.

"We're still getting ready here. Wait one." Sonya reminded herself to keep it short. Due to the time dilation, which was closer to two hundred percent than the eight hundred they had believed from S'eth's story, Tev would have to capture and speed up her sentences. If she bothered with many more long-winded reports, it would be another several hours of time on the *theda Vinci* before they could attempt the rescue operation.

Another of Tev's inspirations—and a good one—was realizing that the gravitational anchor could be grabbed onto from the ship. Rather than skating the *theda Vinci* down its length, worrying the entire time if they could make the careful rendezvous and then climb back out along the extremely narrow channel, Tev would use a modified dekyon beam to uproot the anchor while Gold "threw the ship into reverse" to haul them out like some kind of shuttle-pull event.

She had not been stinting with her praise, either.

"Tev, that's ingenious." It didn't matter that Fabian had provided the initial genesis of the plan with his story about *Voyager*'s run-in with a small singularity. He had put it all together and delivered a sound and only seemingly impossible plan. The hallmark of an excellent Starfleet engineer.

His answer? "Of course."

Self-righteous prig, she thought. How many times would he knock away her hand, even when it reached out to give him some applause?

"How are we doing?" Sonya called out, checking her team's status.

Lense stood by near Sonya, no doubt hoping her services would not be needed but ready nonetheless.

Security held positions at the operations center's only two entrances, keeping a low profile as they watched for anything that might resemble more of the Resaurian's makeshift weapons. So far, things looked on the up and up.

Pattie and Fabian tore into another of the workstations. The one kept in the best working order by S'eth's crew. Three of the Resaurians hovered over them, worriedly wringing hands and making small ducking motions with their sinuous necks. This was the gravitational anchor control station, working in direct concert with the station shielding as S'eth had promised. The S.C.E. team had no intention of dropping the shields, however.

They were working to strengthen them.

Pattie scuttled out from behind the panel's open back, trailing some waveform guides that she had managed to remove in favor of Federation EPS conduit. Amazing what one could salvage from an environmental suit.

"Fabian just about has it. If we can strengthen the shield harmonics, we can hopefully 'lighten' the displacement of the entire station." She said that loud enough for any Resaurian ears. Quietly, the Nasat added, "And for all of S'eth's complaints, we are not the first ones to do this. You wondered why the time dilation was only two hundred percent? Because the shields are already running at double strength."

So the Resaurian prisoners had lived through four hundred years of captivity? Their life spans weren't that long. Or was the modification more recent? Something on the order of one hundred years? About the same length as the distress call? She looked for S'eth, and found him slithering a narrow box around Fabian's work area. What more wasn't the Resaurian leader telling her?

Mysteries to be solved later. Fabian came squirming out from under the smaller access panel. "Good as we're going to get," he said. "I got us another twenty-five percent. Any more and we might overload the circuits."

S'eth held himself rock-steady. "I would not recommend that."

Sonya could almost feel sorry for the Resaurian. "Neither would I," she said. "Let's do it."

Fabian went back to the anchoring station, Pattie to the main power supply junction in case the heavy power demands required a quick reroute. Lense moved a bit closer to Sonya, who stayed at her post at the communications panel.

Domenica and Rennan smiled their support. Vinx was picking his teeth with a small metal toothpick, slouching back against the wall as if it were just another day for an Iotian.

Sonya opened a channel. "Ready as we're going to be," she said, echoing Fabian's report. And because she couldn't resist: "Pop the clutch, Captain."

Gripping the sides of her station, she spared one more glance behind her. "Everyone might want to grab hold of something."

\* \* \*

Tev sniffed contently. Satisfaction radiated from every pore. A flow of organized chaos spun itself around him on the bridge as almost every crew member present moved to his strings. The only mar on the moment: the absence of Commander Gomez, whose attitude usually revolved around the question of what Tev had done for her lately. She would not be here to see him in his best form.

Then again, she would be rescued by his orchestration, and that held its own appeal.

“Tev.” The captain greeted him as Gold strode onto the bridge. “Well, it appears that things are well in hand.” Tev only nodded in response, too absorbed in the execution of his plan to be truly aware of extraneous details.

His pudgy fingers moved swiftly across the interface, bringing the final bits of information in. Though the away team would not be brought back without him, he admitted to Gomez’s aid in collecting and transmitting some key data. Specifics on the gravitational anchor, gleaned from this S’eth, being the most important. She’d been of some use, at least.

“Ensign Haznedl,” Tev spoke abruptly. “I need that final data analysis immediately.”

“Yes, sir. I’m finishing up the compression now.”

The operations officer didn’t have the proper deference in her voice while speaking to a superior, but Tev simply couldn’t spare a moment to instruct her. As with so many on this ship, he’d take her aside later and inform her of her error.

“Got it. Looks like the team peaked the yield at twenty-six-point-seven percent. They’ve got a good grip.” The ensign shot the data over to Tev’s workstation only after her commentary.

Pulling in the last of the data, Tev trusted nothing to the analysis of someone else. He reviewed it himself, and pulled it into shape. The puzzle finally fit...and the whole resonated within his mind at its magnificence.

A plan well thought out and about to be well executed.

“Captain,” he said. “The system is ready when you are.”

Gold ordered Shabalala to sound yellow alert and to be ready to go to red alert should the Resaurians attempt to interfere. As if that ranked higher in importance than his mission; why had the captain not waited for his statement?

“Captain,” he said louder, standing up to formally gain notice.

A few more frustrating moments passed as the captain finished debriefing tactical and then turned toward Tev.

“Yes, Tev?”

No contrition whatsoever! “Captain, the system is stabilized and ready to initiate.”

“I know you told me once before, Tev, but humor an old man and explain it again. In as simple terms as possible.”

He had no compunction about explaining it again, though he thought the captain must be attempting human-style humor again; he had explained it simply before.

“I have precise measurements on the gravitational anchor being extended from the station. Our modified dekyon beam will act as a grapple, uprooting it and binding it to us instead of local subspace. The probes

I'd previously deposited not only established contact with Commander Gomez but are now acting as a regulating grid within the photon sphere, helping to inhibit the black splash of gravimetric waves around the station and the anchor as well." Tev realized he was almost sweating with the effort of simplifying his explanation. "This will allow us to latch on to the anchor and, using the probes to synchronize the energy levels and minimize any stress waves, it will be a simple matter to pull the entire station past the photon sphere and ultimately out of the black hole's gravity well."

"It appears as though you've got every base covered."

"Of course I have," Tev responded, surprised.

"Do you see any reason not to engage?"

Tev furrowed his brow, wondering if the captain was calling him on something. Had the captain noticed something he had not? Or was this simply Gold's way? "No, Captain, there is no reason to delay whatsoever."

Gold sat down in his seat and surveyed his crew. Then with a firm nod, he said, "Good. Engage."

Tev nodded in return and seated himself once more. With satisfaction he initiated the sequence.

Power flowed down computer systems and ignited the dekyon tractor beam. Transmitted signals flashed down relays to the probes, igniting their own sequences, energy pulsing and meshing into a cohesive whole to bring the station out.

Data readouts confirmed all systems nominal, and the *Vinci*, without even a tremble, began moving backward. Data streams from inside the photon sphere confirmed the displacement of the station from its anchored position for so many centuries; it began to gain altitude above the event horizon.

Settling back, content, Tev knew there really was nothing further to do but allow the computer to execute his masterful plan.

The tension on the bridge, held at a peak for several minutes, now began to ease as long seconds passed and success seemed imminent. Just as Tev readied a vocal transmission to Gomez, a fluctuation on his data terminal caused him to pause momentarily. It had been entirely within his stress parameters, but he could not deny that it bothered him. There should not have been—

Vertigo stretched a sickening hand across the bridge, and Tev's inner ear complained. The ship lurched horribly, flinging crew around like a crazed giant tired of its playthings. Tev, wedged tightly in his seat, survived the worst of it, his grip iron-strong on the edge of his workstation, eyes bolted to the readouts.

—an entire crashing of waves splintered and shattered across his terminal—the beauty of his order shattered by chaos.

## Chapter 15

This could not be happening.

Tev frantically punched up data readouts and yet each contained the same information. As the crew scrambled to secure the ship and the pounding it was taking from the horrible backslash of gravimetric waves, Tev sat as an island of one, wholly concentrating in an effort to save his beautiful, ordered plan. The gravitational anchor that he had snared, uprooted, was loose, and slipping through subspace as it clawed for purchase. Tev fought to reestablish a hold on it with his dekyon grapple. Missed.

The captain's call to him finally intruded on the third try and Tev turned to look in Gold's direction.

"What happened?!" The discourtesy of the yell did not even penetrate.

"I do not know, Captain."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"One moment, the dekyon beam and the energy grid through the probes inside were stable and the next...chaos." For the first time in his life, Tev stared defeat in the face and it left him speechless.

"Tev!" the captain yelled once more to overcome his shock. "This is why you are here. You're the only one who can tell us what happened. You! No one else."

The praise sank in and stuck, pulling enough of him out of the stupor to ignite his fierce intellect.

Fingers once more probed for electronic answers. They had to be here. The fluctuations he'd seen were not from the ship. He could not verify that they did not originate from the station, but if he assumed competence on the part of Commander Gomez...

Tev hardly noticed another breaking wave of gravimetrics that tossed the ship about like a cork in the surf, sending Lieutenant Shabalala straight into a bulkhead.

If not the ship and not the station...Tev remembered the captain's conversation with tactical. He reset his parameters, searching...found it!

"Captain," Tev said.

"What?"

"I've found the anomaly."

"And?"

"The Resaurian ship, Captain. Its tractor beam is attempting to latch on to our ship."

Theda Vinci tumbled, and an EPS conduit blew sparks out from beneath the operations console. Ensign Haznedl fell out of her chair, her uniform scorched and torn.

Gold hung into his seat with white knuckles and a furious glare for the cause of this chaos. "Did they cause this?"

"I think it could be," Tev said. The admission was difficult. This fit the parameters, but he couldn't be certain. "Such interference could easily have shattered the dekyon beam."

Rage suffused Gold's face. As the captain dealt with that news, Tev turned to a strident alarm from his interface; the anchor was slipping farther into the gravity well, toward the photon sphere.

Which meant that the space station was falling toward the Demon's event horizon.

\* \* \*

Power failures began in the jury-rigged communications station, cutting Sonya off from the *Vinci*. She had all of three seconds' warning. Enough time to begin, "I think there's something—" and then a shower of sparks exploded from the primary power relay being guarded by P8 Blue.

The *Nasat* chirruped an alarm, sprayed down the junction with fire retardant chemicals, and then leapt for the secondary relay to work on a quick power transfer. It blew up just about in her face, shooting flame and globules of hot molten steel toward her eyes. Pattie curled up into a protective ball, and was still.

Resaurians reacted quickly, shouting for S'eth and swarming toward the gravitational anchor controls as well as to either exit. Corsi disappeared within a rush of snakelike bodies, carried with them into the corridor beyond. S'eth was one of those congregating around the anchor controls, worried that the overloads might dump power to the most critical system on the station.

Fabian stayed with him, monitoring, calling out the shift in shield harmonics. "Down ten percent...twenty-five...forty!"

Which meant the anchor characteristics were changing by the second, as was the station's subjective displacement. Sonya had turned toward Pattie, but Lense was faster and she was needed here, to get back in touch with the *Vinci*. Yanking open the maintenance access cover, she reached in to grab hold of her team's work.

Which was when the first gravimetric wave slammed sidelong into the station, bucking the deck beneath Sonya's feet. She stumbled, fell sliding. Lights died all across the operations center.

Slamming against the corner of an abandoned workstation, Sonya caught the edge against the side of her head, and stars exploded in her vision.

Resaurian alarms rang out over the bridge, sounding like metallic rattles. The Resaurians themselves slithered and ducked about in the near total dark, backlit only by one of the small electrical fires or the main screen that still, with all the failures, showed the bright circle of stars clustered at the top of the Demon's gravity well.

Another gravimetric wave shook the station roughly. Sonya's sense of balance swam before her eyes, and she felt heavier, awkward. Gravity fluctuated—or maybe that was just her head that pounded to the sound of large spikes being driven into her brain, burning where she had clipped the station corner. Rolling to her hands and knees, she tried to shake her head clear.

Nearly fainted.

"Commander!"

Rennan's yell was close by, but she couldn't see him. Blood oozed from the wound, trickling past her ear and down into her hair, over her face. A smear burned at the corner of her left eye. The sound of



shots, phasers, welders. She smelled the acrid scent of hot metalwork, looking up in time to see one of the bridge's welded doors spit a fury of angry sparks around three sides. It fell inward with a large crash, and more Resaurian bodies crashed through into S'eth and Fabian.

Then rough hands seized her, hauling her forward.

And nothingness finally claimed her.

\* \* \*

They had lied to Gold on his own ship and now the Resaurians had apparently doomed seven more of his crew to die. Captain David Gold did not entertain violent thoughts; few Starfleet captains did, or they'd not be in command of a vessel. But at this moment, as he suddenly found himself facing Galvan VI all over again, the idea of several photon torpedoes was somehow comforting.

"Captain." Tev interrupted his bloody fantasy. He turned and shucked himself of such delusions. There would be time for recompense later. Rational recompense. Right now, he had to rescue his crew.

"What have you got, Tev?"

"The anchor has completely torn away. The station is falling."

Not on his watch it wasn't! "Is there any way to grasp the anchor before it vanishes beyond the photon sphere?"

"No, Captain. A dekyon beam is not a lasso to grasp a moving target. It was only a viable option against a rock-steady target." Tev snorted. "Even then, it really was only viable because of the addition of the probes and their dampening effect. There is nothing to stop the fall of the station."

Gold nodded, his mind working furiously. A shadow walked across his grave, and he shuddered, knowing what he had to do.

He stood like a sailor of old, rock-steady on his deck as his ship bobbed among the gravimetric waves and he stared his nightmare in the face. His granddaughter had never been in danger. All along it had been he who faced death. Of course he had always known and accepted that, but never had it seemed more personal than right this moment. Gold might never see any of his grandchildren again. Might never see his beloved Rachel again, or listen to her harsh but loving ribbing.

For an instant, he wavered. He'd lost twenty-three of his crew not so long ago and he'd be damned if he'd lose seven more. If that meant he never saw his own loved ones again, then so be it.

Such was the price of wearing the red.

"Tev, we need to cross the photon sphere."

To his credit, the Tellarite slowly blinked without a word, as he considered all the ramifications and other possible solutions before nodding. "It is the only way to secure the station and recover the crew," he agreed.

Gold breathed deeply. For a brief moment he'd hoped that Tev might have another plan. Another idea that would save them from this. But there wasn't.

There was only the Demon and the best damn crew he'd ever had the pleasure of commanding.

Looking around the bridge, his eyes came to rest on Wong, who looked expectantly over his shoulder at him. Gold saw no doubt in the young lieutenant's eyes.

"Take us in," he said. "Straight into the maw of the Demon."

TO BE CONTINUED...

## About the Authors

LOREN L. COLEMAN wrote fiction in high school, but it was during his enlistment in the U.S. Navy that he began working seriously at the craft. Discharged in 1993, he went to work as a freelance fiction writer and eventually became a full-time novelist. His first novel, *Double-Blind*, was published in 1998. As of the end of 2003, he has written and published fourteen novels, a great deal of shorter fiction work, and been involved with several computer games. His latest work is *By Temptations and By War*, set in the *MechWarrior: Dark Age* universe. *The Demon* is his second foray into *Star Trek* fiction following the publication of the short story "All that Glisters..." in the *Star Trek: New Frontier* anthology *No Limits*. When he isn't writing, Loren plays X-box games, collects far too many DVDs, and trains as a black belt in traditional Tae Kwon Do. He has lived in many parts of the country. Currently he resides in Washington State with his wife, Heather Joy, two sons, Talon LaRon and Conner Rhys Monroe, and a young daughter, Alexia Joy. The family owns three of the obligatory writer's cats, Chaos, Ranger, and Rumor, and one dog, Loki, who like any dog is just happy to be here. His personal website can be found at [www.rasqal.com](http://www.rasqal.com).

RANDALL N. BILLS began his writing career in the adventure gaming industry, where he has worked full-time for the last eight years. His hobbies include music, gaming (from electronic to RPGs to miniatures to all those wonderful German board games), reading (of course), and, when he can, traveling; he has visited numerous locations both for leisure and for his job, including moving from Phoenix to Chicago to Seattle, numerous trips to Europe, as well as an LDS mission to Guatemala. He currently lives in the Pacific Northwest where he continues to work full-time (and then some) in the adventure gaming industry, while pursuing his writing career. Randall has published two novels and is working on his third; this is his first published *Star Trek* work. He lives with his best friend and wife Tara Suzanne, precocious son Bryn Kevin, utterly adorable daughter Ryana Nikol, and an eight-foot red-tailed boa called Jak o' the Shadows.

## Coming Next Month: **Star Trek™: S.C.E. #36**

**The Demon**  
**Book 2**  
**by Loren L. Coleman**  
**& Randall N. Bills**

Over the years, the S.C.E. team on the U.S.S. da Vinci has solved innumerable problems and escaped from numerous deathtraps, from the ravages of interspace to the gas giant of Galvan VI. Now, they must enter the outer reaches of a deadly black hole known as the Demon in order to rescue an away team from a hidden Resaurian prison teetering on the edge of the singularity.

But the Resaurians will do everything they can to preserve their secrets, and keep the da Vinci from getting out of the Demon alive!

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