

Chapter

1

Sonya Gomez came back to the universe slowly. Echoes of the Big Bang rolled around inside her head. Flashes of formless light slowly took shape as her consciousness struggled against the cobwebs that entangled it. Like a ship fighting against the clutches of an inescapable gravity well.

Seizing on this thought, her mind brought her back to the Demon.

There had been a distress call, she remembered. A subspace signal degraded so badly that she and Mor glasch Tev narrowed it down to ninety-three years of broadcast travel. Impossible. Or so they thought, until Captain Gold ordered the U.S.S. da Vinci into action and brought the crew up to the edge of a nearby black hole. The Saber-class ship trembled and shook as it resisted the Demon's gravitational pull, staring down into that black, baleful eye. And nestled deep within the gravity well, across the photon sphere and close- so close- to the event horizon, they discovered the Resaurian space station.

Sonya's team of Starfleet engineers set immediately to work on the problem. Any ideas that the station had accidentally fallen into the clutches of such a monster were quickly disproved by discovering a gravitational anchor holding the station in place. It had been intentionally set within the black hole, for whatever reason, and now it was in trouble. The distress call originated with the station, crawling up its anchor line with stubborn resiliency. Sonya and Tev had collaborated on a method to send an away team to the station and return it with any survivors.

The plan had been half-perfect.

Tev's half, no doubt, as the Tellarite would certainly explain smugly if she ever made it back to the da Vinci.

Sonya groaned. Whether from her prediction of another insufferable lecture by her proud subordinate or due to the painful jog of footsteps that pounded through her brain, she couldn't be certain.

Footsteps!

Wrenched back from the abyss of memories, Sonya opened her eyes and tried to sit up and reached for her phaser, all at once. The result was not pleasant. Pain hammered at her temples. Her arm slipped out from beneath her, tingling with numbness, and she collapsed back against the cold steel deck, striking the side of her face and shooting fireworks off behind her eyes. About the only thing she accomplished with her action was a brief glimpse of one of her captors.

Resaurian. One of the snakelike beings her team had discovered living on the station. So far she had seen Resaurians with coral red scales, others with greenish black, and even one of dull gold. This one had looked pale blue- almost an Andorian coloring- and sat-stood with typical Resaurian posture, resting back on a thick tail and using thin legs for tripod stability.

Sonya also thought it had looked a good deal smaller- only three or four feet tall- but that was hard to tell from the floor.

Cautiously this time, she opened her eyes. No one.

She lay on a cold steel floor, her face bruised and aching along her left side. The deck was filthy with a thick dust of dried skin from Resaurian shedding mixed with metal granules and filings. The sound of footsteps and the scraping brush of scales against deckplate came from behind her and above her, and every few moments the entire station trembled a deep shudder. Her tongue felt swollen. She dry-swallowed several times, tasting old blood.

Still alive, though. Always a step in the right direction.

She stared into the open bay of an old transport lift. Somehow she simply knew the lift shaft ended behind a welded set of doors on the station's bridge. Near where she had been, her team working with the da Vinci to haul the station out of the black hole. The doors had blown inward.

Weapons fire.

Shouting.

P8 Blue had been knocked across the room and Sonya had... she'd...

Stop this, she ordered herself. What do you remember? What did you see?

Very clearly she recalled the beam-over, materializing in an open area near the station's bridge. Her seven-member team had been surrounded by Resaurians with makeshift weapons: plasma torches and crudely made lasers.

Domenica Corsi, the da Vinci's chief of security, must have given a signal, because Rennan Konya slipped forward to incapacitate one Resaurian before anyone else was aware of what was happening. The fight ended fast and decisively, with the Resaurian leader, S'eth, finally regaining control of his people.

A mistake, he promised, welcoming the rescuers and putting the Resaurian prisoners to work alongside Sonya's S.C.E. team.

Political prisoners. S'eth had been quick to point out the difference.

"We were free thinkers," he'd said. "Progressive diplomats, teachers, and engineers. The Council quaked in their nests when our eggs hatched."

A fact which Captain Gold later confirmed through his dealings with a Resaurian vessel on the outside of the black hole. Twelve hundred, culled out of the population and anchored within the Demon eight hundred years ago, kept sterile by an additive in the food supply. The hidebound Resaurians had banished a new generation's leadership to this limbo existence, thinking to preserve their way of life by enforcing a "traditionalist" agenda.

S'eth had shown the engineers the station's upper levels. Rigging a way to contact the da Vinci, using a relay system of probes set out by Tev, a plan had been formed. Two plans, actually. The first, hers, had involved sliding the da Vinci along the gravitational anchor, bringing the vessel down into the Demon to bump shields with the station and transport survivors aboard. It would have taken several trips, with over a thousand lives to save, but possible. In the Starfleet Corps of Engineers, a can-do attitude was not just a help. It was required.

Tev, of course, lived and breathed that ideal. He one-upped Sonya's plan by coming up with a way to uproot the station's gravitational anchor from outside the black hole, and then use it like a lifeline to simply haul the station up and out.

Simple. Direct. Brilliant.

Disastrous, as it turned out.

Everything had gone wrong so very quickly, it was still a jumble in her head. Her team's efforts to keep a stable field around the station had failed as power relay stations blew under the stressed load. The anchor slipped, caught, and then slipped again.

And then the attack came.

No other explanation. The old, welded-shut doors had burst inward- under directional charges, she guessed- and Sonya had been caught in the concussive force. After that, it all turned hazy.

She remembered the shouts. Seeing Konya swept back away from an arcing panel... and Corsi going down under an assault of weapons fire.

Hands grabbing at her shoulders and legs. Lifting her. Carrying her into the old lift.

Taking her prisoner.

"What kind of mess have we fallen into this time?" she asked aloud, her words breaking inside a parched throat.

"Very bad mess," a soft voice hissed from behind and above.

She hadn't expected an answer. Especially one from so close. Sonya blinked hard, banishing the last of the fog from her vision and thoughts. With a great deal of effort she rolled onto her back.

A Resaurian crouched over her, looking very tall and unhealthily thin, with mottled, red scales and dry, dead black eyes. She felt at her hip. No phaser. "But I'm still alive," she said aloud, as if confirming that fast.

"Yesss..." The Resaurian nodded. "But not for much longer," he said, reaching down for Sonya. She tried to fend him off, but he was quick, striking down to grab her under both elbows, hauling her to unsteady feet.

"Not unless you do as Es'a says."

Chapter

2

The backslash of gravimetric waves continued to pummel the da Vinci. A tough vessel, able to weather a harsh pounding, the ship nevertheless felt the immense stress as the Demon attempted to wrench it from its position and pull it down to oblivion.

Tev snuffled, his fingers dancing over the console. Only five minutes ago he'd faced the specter of failure. When the station's gravitational anchor had slipped from the da Vinci's grasp, he'd considered it the low point of his otherwise bright career. Captain Gold's quick action, taking the ship deeper into the black hole's embrace, had given him a second chance. Instead of grabbing at the anchor again, which just was not possible, he'd used a modified dekyon beam to "spear" the anchor into place. A tense and troubling moment.

One he would never face again if he had any say.

He leaned forward against the console to help balance against a particularly harsh wave that slewed the ship one way and whipped it back another. Even Tev found it difficult to believe the dekyon beam held. Then again, Tev found it difficult to believe most of what had occurred in the last short while. He'd never been in such dire straits, with ten things demanding his attention and all of them critical to success. His mouth felt like sand had been scraped across his tongue and his eyes ached as though he'd been staring at an A6-class star without polarization filters.

"What have you got for me, Tev?" Captain Gold's voice interrupted. Tev continued to stare at his monitors, drawing their information like a poison from a wound: analyzing, detecting, compartmentalizing, scrutinizing. However, the more he looked, the more he realized that to fix an error, he might have made a worse one.

"Tev?" The captain's voice rang loud, filled with all the years of command at his disposal. The Tellarite blinked once, and looked up at the captain.

"What?"

Gold slowly stood and walked over to within a foot of Tev, an amazing feat considering the ship slewed twice. "Tev, I need you here. Now. The ship needs you. My people on that station need you. You stopped the station falling; now I need to know how to pull us back out."

The physical intrusion of the captain into his space, along with his rude comments, simply didn't scratch Tev's exterior. Only the tone of voice and the look in Gold's blue eyes left an indelible mark. Later he would admit (only to himself) that at that moment, Gold had had a more commanding presence than any Tellarite officer he'd ever served under.

Tev blinked, his coal black eyes giving none of this away. "I had to reroute power from the rear shields, Captain, but by increasing the dekyon beam threefold, we seem to have 'speared' the anchor in place."

"If it's speared in place, how can we pull it out? If you unspear it, won't that simply allow the anchor to slip once more?"

"That is a problem," Tev admitted. "Though I believe I've found an answer." He didn't mention that he still believed even this answer to the problem would only make it worse in the end. The proverbial cure that is worse than the disease.

Gold stared hard at Tev. "Out with it."

He'd simply waited for a command. Why had the captain's tone changed? "I'm going to attempt to split the dekyon beam into two streams. The first will stay attached to the anchor, while I'll attempt to spear a second beam into subspace .0025 light-seconds farther above

the photon sphere than the first beam. I will then remodulate the beams, creating a synchronic sine wave that will merge the two beams. Provided the modulation is correct, the wave will merge the first beam to the second, not the other way around, and leverage the station and anchor approximately seven hundred fifty kilometers farther out of the gravity well. Obviously this will need to be repeated numerous times; I should be able to increase the distance between the two beams before merging, the higher above the event horizon I drag it, accelerating the process."

Only after finishing did it dawn on Tev that he'd actually used an if/then statement. For the first time since his cadet days, he'd given a qualified answer about whether the modulation of the dekyon streams would be successful. He realized with irritation that if Commander Gomez had been present, she would have already verified his findings. With so much splintering his concentration, such a confirmation would have been welcome, even from her.

"Bootstrapping. Gevalt. Only you would find a way to bootstrap a station out of a black hole."

What did a boot- or a strap for that matter- have to do with what he'd just said? He raised his bushy eyebrows, continued. "Captain, the only real issue is one of power. I already had to redirect most of the power from the rear shields just to increase the dekyon beam enough to spear the anchor. To create two streams with sufficient intensity for our needs, I'll need to divert most of the power from all the shields, as well as drawing from life support."

The captain paused and glanced toward tactical, where Piotrowski had relieved Shabalala after the latter had been taken to sickbay. The tactical officer had been thrown into a bulkhead by the wash of gravimetric waves after they (admit it, Tev, after you!) had lost the anchor. Tev knew what the captain had to be thinking. If the shields were lowered to such a level, it would leave them open to a possible attack by the Resaurian ship.

After a review of the data, Tev no longer believed that the Resaurians had tried to disrupt the first rescue attempt. A failure on the station also fit the circumstance, and additional data pointed more strongly toward that solution. Still, the aliens had shown themselves unhappy with the da Vinci's interference, and the fact was that dampened shielding might tempt them into a permanent solution. Gold would be laying the vessel bare for the fire and spit. Tev didn't envy the captain at this moment.

Not at all.

The ship lurched and yawed as though it had struck a sandbar; only the lightning quick reflexes of the captain in snagging the edge of Tev's console kept Gold from stumbling. The rest of the crew had strapped themselves fully into place after realizing the inertial dampers simply could not compensate for the awesome forces being unleashed by the black hole's backslash. Even so, Gold still found his feet almost above Tev's head for a moment, before he dropped like a stone to the deck and stumbled to one knee.

"That's it. Haznedl, divert all shield and life support control to Tev's command. We will not lose that station. Piotrowski, you will keep your eyes glued to that Resaurian ship. If they even so much as turn on a landing light, I want to know about it."

"Yes, sir," came the instant responses.

A quick shifting of schematics on Tev's monitors showed Ensign Susan Haznedl's competence as the shields and life support controls were handed over.

Gold glanced at Tev and nodded. Go.

With a deep breath and another stab of annoyance that Gomez's absence meant he could not reverify his calculations, Tev reached out and began to massage power away from the shields. At thirty percent power, he halted; any further and they might not hold up to the thrashing the gravimetric waves were handing out with relish. Verifying that the specified cargo holds contained no personnel, he locked them down and drew additional life support power.

Having reached his predetermined requirements, he fed the algorithmic calculations into the computer. The tension of the moment, his own frustration at losing control of the situation and at Gomez's absence began to ease as the computer took his finely crafted formulae and extrapolated them as necessary. After a final deep breath, Tev tapped another interface, and a brilliant beam of ghostly energy tore through near space and punched a hole into subspace. Though no visible distortion could be seen on the main viewscreen beyond the beam's simply ceasing to exist, the subspace monitor went haywire as overlapping energy fields showed the displacement of local subspace and the terrible forces the dekyon beam poured into the region.

Though separated by .0025 light-seconds, the interference between the two beams caused whorls in subspace that began to show that his initial assessment, regardless of his wish to deny it, had been correct. His fingers rekeyed the modulations and initiated the sequence to draw the two beams together.

As the beams began to slowly merge, his worst fears were realized. The distortions in subspace, along with the initial spearing of the anchor by the dekyon beam, were beginning to shred it. And try as he might, Tev simply had been unable to determine the anchor's makeup, much less how he might replicate it.

"Captain," he began, while his fingers keyed back the dekyon beams and cut off the secondary stream of energy; how much additional damage he'd just done he did not know. However, he did know with absolute certainty that if he'd continued, the anchor would've torn apart completely, leaving them absolutely nothing to use in stopping the fall of the station.

"What, Tev? Why'd you stop?"

For the second time in a day, failure reared its ugly head: a bitter pill that tasted vile going down. If Gomez had verified his calculations, he would've been able to determine the extent to which the gravity anchor's structural integrity would be affected. Bitter tonic for hindsight.

"The anchor is shredding, Captain." He took a deep breath, stood, and faced the captain. His to take responsibility for. "My solution is no solution at all; it has only further damaged the already weakened anchor. The twin streams are no longer a viable solution."

"What are our options, Tev?" Tev could feel the disappointment radiating from the crew.

He tried not to gag on the words. "We should follow Commander Gomez's original plan. Transverse the photon sphere and overlap our shields with that of the station and transport the lot of them. And it must be done quickly, before the anchor shreds away to nothingness."

Chapter

Rennan Konya, the Betazoid security man, leaned out over the dark, gaping shaft, one hand wrapped around the emergency ladder, the other holding a tricorder up to his face. Faint tones whistled and lights danced on the dark screen. The readings were faint, and might not have been much more than an interference spike peeking through the station's dampening fields. They might also be life signs. Human.

Sonya Gomez.

A rope tugged at his waist. The lifeline Vinx held. "In a moment," Rennan said. He leaned farther out over the abyss. A tremor shook the station, and the ladder trembled.

The rope tightened and hauled him away from the drop. Rennan felt the physical move coming at his shoulder, ducked, and sidestepped right, falling back into a ready stance.

"Easy, Konya." Lieutenant Commander Domenica Corsi frowned, dropping her hand back to her side.

Vinx stood behind her, the sturdy lotian still holding the safety line. Off to one side Fabian Stevens conferred quietly with P8 Blue. Stevens went back to work over his own tricorder, inputting data. The Nasat returned to her study of the lift mechanisms. She rose up on her back four legs, half-crawling up the wall to study the weld-cuts that had sliced open the doors.

"S'eth would like to speak with us. I want you there." Corsi's gaze strayed to Rennan's hairline. "You should get that looked at."

Reaching up, he probed carefully at the large swelling peeking out of his dark hair. Pain answered every light touch. Dried blood flaked off beneath his fingers. "I'm fine, Commander."

The da Vinci's chief of security looked torn between ordering him to see Dr. Lense and physically compelling him. Her rank gave her command with Sonya Gomez missing in action. She was also quite obviously spoiling for a fight. No Betazoid training was required to detect that. He saw it in the angry flush spreading out of her blond hair, her shorter breaths, and the hard set of her blue eyes.

She also might have the juice to take him. They worked out together occasionally, aboard ship, and so far his Betazoid touch had barely been able to keep pace with her reflexes and greater strength. But this was not the time or place for a contest.

"There's too much to do," he said.

She exhaled sharp frustration. "All right." Backing off, she waited while he untied the safety line and handed it to Vinx. "Keep an eye on things," she ordered the lotian.

Vinx set the coil of line to one side, unslung his phaser rifle. "You bet, doll. I got the drop on 'em." He took up a position near the two engineers, making sure that any nearby Resaurians could see him.

Rennan felt Corsi tense with the familiar address, an involuntary response to the lotian's freewheeling attitude, but she overrode the need to correct her subordinate here and now. Instead, she gestured Rennan to follow alongside her as they left the alcove.

The station's bridge was still in shambles. The wounded sat against one wall, tended by Elizabeth Lense and one of the snakelike Resaurians. Blood stained the doctor's uniform, though none of it apparently her own. Resaurians slithered back and forth, bringing tools and replacement parts to damage control teams. The station trembled again, and everyone stopped, looked down, as if waiting for the end to come. When it did not they rushed back to work. Panels lay out in the middle of the floor, away from antique workstations where Resaurians burrowed back into nests of wiring and conduit to reach damaged components. These stations had not looked in prime condition before the attack, showing many dark screens and jury-rigged repairs. Now, piles of smoking circuit boards and twists of blackened fiber-optic cable littered the deck. The ozone stench of electrical fires and suppressant powder hung in the air, left an acrid taste in the back of his throat.

Or maybe that was the taste of failure.

Everything had happened so fast. The power relay station blowing up into a fireball, throwing Pattie across the bridge. That was when Gomez went down. Rennan managed to dodge two Resaurians armed with crudely made cutting lasers, trying to reach her side, but a third swung a simple bar of metal into his path.

He didn't duck quite fast enough.

"How much of a read do you have on the Resaurians?" Corsi asked, quietly. She nodded toward where S'eth directed repairs. The Resaurian leader stood near the main viewscreen, which looked out of the black hole's photon sphere. Stars gathered in a small, intense circle in the middle of the screen. Bands of blue-shifted light marked each Einstein Ring. The rest: nothingness.

Rennan slowed, buying time to think. Explaining Betazoid training was difficult in most textbook cases. His position was more unique.

"My skill is in tapping the motor reflex area of the brain, not the thought process. I knew before that our 'host' was keeping something from us, and I communicated that to Commander Gomez, but he never exactly lied."

"What does that mean, 'never exactly lied'?"

"If S'eth believes what he is saying, even if he shades his explanation, I cannot distinguish between a fervent wish and the truth."

"Wonderful."

Corsi separated slightly from him, giving both of them free space in case sudden violence became necessary. Rennan wasn't too certain that it would not. There was a great deal of hostility in the Resaurians now. And fear. He felt both in their muscle twitches and agitated pacing. The two never mixed well.

S'eth saw them approach, tucked his legs back and slithered over, meeting them halfway. Greenish black scales protected him from blunt-tipped nose to tail. His vulnerable underbody usually had a more emerald cast to it. Rennan saw that those scales had paled to a pea green. Shock, blood loss, or something else? S'eth had a shoulder wound from the earlier fighting, bandaged quite efficiently by Dr. Lense.

"Lieutenant Commander." He bowed low, nictitating membranes rolling up to protect his coal-dark eyes. "Have you found any sign of your Commander Gomez?"

"Other than a blood trail and some impressive damage to the wall back there? No." Corsi did not sound in any mood for diplomacy. "Maybe you should tell us what we're up against, S'eth. Why did your people attack us?"

"Not my people!" He reared back, much like a snake preparing to strike. Rennan tensed, but S'eth simply rested back on a thick coil. "Es'a, the nest-breaker."

The name sounded familiar. Rennan remembered hearing the Resaurian mention it before. "Maybe you should give it to us from the top," he suggested, playing "good cop."

S'eth hissed a long, drawn-out sigh. "For decades, our... we... thought to escape. Equipment was dismantled and reassembled. We learned. We planned. But the traditionalists were careful. Our theories always fell short of resources, and we slowly resigned ourselves to our fate. This became our world.

"Except for Es'a. He... was a young engineer, and insane. He would risk all our lives for any mad gamble to escape. His plan involves major alterations to the shield generator controls, which are all that anchor us inside the Demon. To prevent this, several decades ago we seized the bridge and many upper levels, including life support. Es'a and his followers control the lower levels- most of our hydroponics and our fusion reactors. We have a stalemate. We survive."

"Yet you worked with us to escape," Rennan said.

"You have outside resources. The risk seemed acceptable."

Did it? Then why did S'eth's muscles contract tightly as he said this? Rennan felt the Resaurian's tension, but sensed no impending hostile action. He nodded, and Corsi asked, "Why did Es'a take Commander Gomez?"

"So that he too may control new resources. The nest-breakers will let us know his demands." He ducked his head, in apology it seemed. "We will not bow to him. I am sorry."

Rennan stepped on Corsi's impending outburst. "So are we," he said calmly, nodding his commander back and leading her away from the Resaurian leader. When she started to speak, the muscles in her jaw loosening, he simply shook his head. Not yet.

Not until they were back at the lift shaft. Vinx stepped back, letting them pass. Then he swung back on guard like some kind of brute enforcer, with a Starfleet-issue phaser rifle. Stevens and Pattie waited for them in the alcove. The sounds of repair from the main floor were slightly muted inside the alcove, and the smell of burnt wiring not so prevalent.

"What?" Corsi demanded shortly.

"He lied to us. For the first time I can be certain. Right there at the end. But I can't say what he lied about."

The intimidating blonde looked ready to march back in and wring answers from the Resaurian. "Is he dangerous to us?" she asked.

"Everyone is dangerous, Commander. You know that. It's only a matter of what pressures set them off, and how they choose to act." Rennan shook his head. "I am certain that he will not help us recover Commander Gomez. We will need to mount our own rescue attempt."

Corsi gestured to the engineers. "What have you got?"

Pattie shrugged. For a Nasat, the gesture involved multiple sets of legs and a lowering of her antennae. She had examined the lift doors carefully, but had very little to report. "Obviously the doors were cut away," the structural specialist said. "Some kind of torching compound, hot enough to cut through steel but without the concussive force of shaped charges."

Stevens agreed. "I saw it come down. Right in the middle of the attack." He ran fingers back through his short-cropped black hair. "Welding sparks drew fast lines around the entire edge of the door."

Rennan had seen the same. He'd been on the move, to assist Pattie. If he'd veered over in time...

"Fabian?" Corsi asked. "What about the station? Where are the repairs?"

"No one is saying much, so it's hard to say." That had to be hard for the engineer to admit. "The damage is extensive. There are many redundancies built in, but the way the power grid selectively blew... I don't know. I'd almost swear it was done deliberately."

Corsi nodded. "The timing of the assault came right on the heels of that first power rupture. It certainly is suspect."

"Well, we have some time," he said. "It looks like the anchor grabbed hold again. But the station's trembling has them worried. We may be slipping farther into the black hole. Or the shields may be failing, which means that gravitational tides will rip us apart. We've no word from the da Vinci, and zero fail-safes if that anchor gives way."

"We have to assume that Captain Gold has the rest of the ship bent toward rescuing us. In the meantime, I want options. How do we reestablish contact? What can we do on our own? S'eth mentioned that the lower-decks faction had a plan to use the shield generators in a plan to escape. Look into that."

"What about the commander?" Pattie asked. Like Rennan, her concern seemed to be with the recovery of Sonya Gomez. "We could split into two teams-"

And though he knew it wrenched at Corsi's gut, the security chief shook her head. "We have no way of knowing where she's been taken. It's a big station, and our tricorders are all but useless with the shields' dampening effect. Commander Gomez would agree that our first priority is to get free of the Demon."

"I don't know," Fabian said. He squirmed, obviously uncomfortable speaking against Corsi. His attraction to her was just as plain (to Rennan) as his respect for the chain of command. "Sonya would be the first one on point if it were one of us missing."

"You mean she'd be running solo while the rest of us worked on the problem at hand. But we don't have the resources. We can't spare you and Pattie from the repairs. Dr. Lense won't leave her patients. And you all need security to watch out for trouble." Corsi stared them all

down. "I don't like it either, but that's where we are."

Slowly, sullenly, Stevens and the Nasat peeled away to head back to work. Which left Rennan with his superior officer. "It should be me," he said.

Corsi blinked. It was her only physical reaction, and the lack of response itself was enough to convince Rennan that he was right. "I don't know what you mean," she said.

"I felt your muscles ease when you mentioned Commander Gomez running off alone. And you are clamping down on your own fight-or-flight impulses even now. You're going off after Gomez. Or you think you are. But it should be me."

Corsi glanced back from the alcove, checking that Fabian had moved far enough that they would not be overheard. "No. It shouldn't. Our responsibility is to the engineers still here, still working to get us home. Ordering out a solo security guard would be irresponsible."

"And going it alone is not?"

"My career," Corsi said. "My choice."

Rennan took a step closer. He sensed that this might come down to physical action, and wanted to negate Corsi's longer reach. "I have the best chance to find her. You know that. Tricorders aren't reliable. Now you have a choice. Try to stop me, or not."

He waited for her to make the first move, felt it building in the sudden flood of adrenaline in Corsi's system, but then a slight easing as she deliberately pulled herself away from the edge. Captain Gold did not suffer fools, or a chief of security who gave in to blind aggression, it seemed. He stepped away from Corsi, giving her his back and putting a hand on the shaft's emergency ladder.

It was a long, long way down.

"Do you even know if she's alive?" Corsi asked. He did not need to look to know that she had not turned to watch him go.

He paused for a moment. Corsi, he knew, would prefer the truth.

"No," he said. "But I feel it."

Chapter

4

The broken power coupling sparked. A shower of splintered light cascaded across half the bridge, briefly illuminating the dimmed region. Flicking his tongue, Captain S'linth tasted the dread; it coated his tongue like the vilest skin leavings of an unproductive. Another gravimetric wave inundated the Dutiful Burden, and the inertial dampers, already stressed beyond their means, failed once more; scaled bodies vaulted, landing in disheveled heaps of silent pain. Only one hiss spoke of anger. Of desire to overcome.

Using his tail to rebalance, S'linth's tongue flicked: First Navigator Th'osh. The rest of the bridge crew were almost incapacitated with the stunning events that had upset their carefully controlled lives. For cycles they had traveled in near space to the nest, tasting the fruits

without the labor. Now the predator had come calling and most of his crew's colors showed loud and clear. Except for Th'osh. He knew the First Navigator had the spark within him.

"First Navigator. What's our situation?"

Within moments Th'osh regained his seat, his nose buried in his sensors.

"I believe the worst of the gravimetric backslash has abated, for the time being. We've lost partial power, with most sensors off-line. Shields, however, are holding at fifty percent."

The taste of smoke tinged the air; intolerable on his ship. "Science, I want full power within five minutes and this cleared immediately." He jabbed his hand into the air for emphasis.

"Yes, Captain." Weakness. The voice held terrible weakness, but she had responded. A start.

"First Navigator, where's the alien ship?"

"She's still five thousand ris units off our bow. Sir, their dekyon beam has ceased."

S'linth stiffened. "Get the main screen on." He nictitated several times, still annoyed with the acrid stench of slightly burned plastic housing. Within moments the screen burst to life, only a slight distortion showing the damage it had sustained. Th'osh magnified the view several times without prompting. Yes, Th'osh would do well indeed.

The alien vessel appeared to be listing. To his trained eye, the vessel had obviously suffered damage as well. Where before the bright stream of energy had cleaved the darkness, now only the ship remained.

"Why did the beam stop, and where did the backslash originate from?"

"I cannot say, Captain. What I can say is that the dekyon beam appeared to... flounder... almost immediately. They lost their hold on the gravity anchor, which is when the backslash began. Twenty-eight seconds later, the ship emitted a dekyon beam of a different modulation; one that interacted with subspace in a way I do not understand. A second dekyon stream emitted, then stopped."

S'linth gazed into the void, wishing his tongue could span the distance and taste the alien air. Feel their emotions. Find what drove them. What had happened? "You said they halted the other beam. Why?"

Behind him, S'linth could hear a rustling of robes and scraping of scales on deck as someone approached close to his command chair. Only one person had the audacity to approach like that; he ignored him. He'd pay the price later.

"I cannot say, Captain."

"Is the ship dead in the void?"

Lithe, clawed fingers moved smoothly across the console- clenched in frustration. "I'm sorry, Captain, but full power has not yet been restored. Most of our sensors are still off-line."

S'linth glanced once more at the ship that to all appearances looked dead. Another, very

slight gravimetric wave rolled and yawed the Dutiful Burden. Barely enough to notice. The alien vessel, much closer to the original location of the gravity anchor, tossed about more actively.

A silence descended, broken only now and then by the whisper of scales on metal. Reviewing all that had come before, he made a decision. "Ahead, one-quarter impulse." A rustle of clothing and scales exploded; terror turned to horror on the air, forcing him to snap shut his jaw or choke on the miasma of feelings.

A hand descended to touch his forearm. He could no longer ignore the presence. Turning his head, S'linth brought Third Councilman Sha'a into view. The reddish hues of his polished scales blended almost seamlessly with the carmine robes he wore. The way he carried his neck spoke of power and authority, of one accustomed to being deferred to without question.

Only hours before, S'linth had not only bowed his head, but had nictitated as well. No requirement for such a show of respect, but Councilman Sha'a had been a champion of the captain's crèche for cycles. But now, too much had come out from under the rock into the harsh afternoon light. He had come to know that his ancestors had built a station within the photon sphere of the black hole called the Demon, and had left political opposition there to rot for all eternity. What's more, they had kept it from the general populace. The entire Council, along with their hated appointed overseers for every starship, knew this truth. All the years of sending gifts into the Demon's maw were a subterfuge, a blatant lie.

No. He would incline his head as a dutiful egg of the nest, but respect? He no longer had that for Sha'a.

The councilman snapped his tongue against his nose several times. "Captain S'linth. What are you doing?"

He ignored the rebuke. "The alien vessel appears to be in distress. We will render aid."

"No, Captain, you will not."

S'linth's attempt at not stiffening failed miserably. In the course of events in the last several hours, he'd run up against the brutal truth that he held a figure-head status on his vessel. The real power lay with the Council. However, in the past, the overseers, even the hated Suliss, had managed to couch their orders in suggestions, leaving the captain, and more importantly, his crew, with the illusion he held power on his ship. Without such illusions, only chaos would follow. Now, the truth had bared its fangs and revealed itself to his crew as well.

From the egg, Resaurians were taught to obey the Council; it was almost a genetic imperative. Not even the Klingon occupation of their homeworld had interrupted this devotion. But this? How could he obey this command? When a distress call went out, you responded. A code beaten into every aspirant within the captain's crèche. The two necessities warred within him.

Sha'a casually turned away and began to move sinuously to where Overseer Suliss had begun to collect himself from the pitiful heap he'd collapsed into.

S'linth looked around the bridge at the crew members who would not meet his gaze, until he found First Navigator Th'osh. He had moved soundlessly to his tail and now stood upright, meeting S'linth's gaze with a firm one of his own. S'linth tasted the air and felt the conviction

of trust. Sha'a would notice any moment; Th'osh bowed his head deeply, nictitating several times to S'linth. Not to the councilman, but to his captain. Only a moment's more hesitation and S'linth tailed to his full height, radiated an affirmation of reciprocated loyalty, and turned toward the third councilman.

"First Navigator, I said ahead one-quarter impulse."

Sha'a stopped and slowly turned around; he did so gracefully, considering this may have been the first time in his life someone had directly contradicted one of his orders. Beyond him, Overseer Suliss had begun to shake and hiss; overzealous fury washed the room, and he began to spit.

"How dare you. You cannot-"

"Third Councilman," S'linth began, ignoring the nictitator, "that ship appears dead in the void. I have a sacred obligation to come to its aid."

"Don't ignore me, Captain. You will answer-"

"What's more, if we do not go to the aid of this vessel, we will ignore what we are. It does not matter that they are aliens. All our codes will mean nothing if we knowingly let the helpless die."

"You will be-"

"We will be no better than Klingons."

The last phrase fell like a photon torpedo, detonating and sweeping all other conversation into nothingness. The occupation had ended nearly a millennium ago, but still the Resaurians remembered. S'linth kept his eyes locked on those of Third Councilman Sha'a. He had no need to taste the air to feel the malignant hatred of Overseer Suliss. The tableau held for several heartbeats until Suliss had mastered his emotions enough to once again begin his tirade.

"Treason!" Suliss spat at him. But like a thrown switch, Suliss cut off with a small raised hand from Sha'a.

"Captain, I have always admired you for your truthfulness and integrity. However, those are strong words you speak. And once spoken, they cannot be taken back. Once the fang has punctured, the poison is set, regardless of regrets. I believe I gave you a-"

"Captain," Th'osh interrupted. Both turned to find out what could possibly have driven him to interrupt a councilman. "The ship, Captain. We have partial sensors back on-line, and she is hurt. Badly. However, she's attempting to move into the photon sphere."

"What?" Twin voices echoed.

"I cannot tell you anything else, but she's limping down toward the photon sphere."

"Is it a deliberate move? Or is she falling into the gravity well?"

"I cannot say."

S'linth turned back to Sha'a, but spoke to Th'osh. "Ahead one-third impulse, and prepare the tractor beam."

Suliss shook as though preparing to molt into another stage and started to speak, only to be cut off once more.

"By all means, Captain, proceed." Sha'a's words might as well have emerged from the Demon for the confusion they caused.

S'linth knew Sha'a had been on the verge of ordering him to remain clear of the alien vessel. What had changed? "Proceed?"

"As you say. You have a moral obligation. A 'sacred trust,' I believe you called it." The councilman smiled. "We'll save the humans, even from themselves."

Chapter

5

"Wong, take us in." Captain Gold couldn't help the shiver that prickled his skin and left his fingertips tingling. Try as he might, he could not banish the nightmare that had been dogging him before this whole mess had even begun. However, though he liked to pretend he was not superstitious, he could almost hear his beloved wife putting on her rabbi voice to tell him it had nothing to do with superstition at all.

He'd been given a premonition, and shouldn't he be thankful?

In his nightmare he had been worried about the life of his grandchild. Now, as the photon sphere approached, he knew the premonition had been for himself. Perhaps even for his crew. Or even for the da Vinci. He had to keep reminding himself that other starships had managed to escape the depths of black holes in the past. But with the ghastly mouth of the universe's most awesomely powerful force ripped wide to savage anyone stupid enough to get caught in its maw... well, he found it difficult indeed not to feel very, very stupid right now.

But there were seven of his people across that fearsome barrier he would not let down.

"Yes, sir. I can only get one-quarter impulse right now, sir."

"Then that's what we'll use." Gold turned toward Tev and found the Tellarite with his nose buried in his instruments. Considering the devastated look on his face (which meant it had to have been a scream for a human, since Gold couldn't read his face any better than he could a Vulcan's) following the failure of Tev's bootstrapping idea, he found such dedication impressive. Comforting. Even in distress this crew, even the newest member, pulled together.

"Tev, how does it look?"

Without his usual pause, or the need to be asked twice, Tev responded. "The gravity anchor appears to be holding, but I cannot say for how long. However, when I managed to spear it, it had almost reached fifteen Schwarzschild radii."

Gold shook his head for a moment. "Remind an old man- Schwarzschild radii?"

Tev glanced up, snuffled, and said, "I'm sorry, Captain. One Schwarzschild radius is the size of the event horizon. For a black hole of this size, fifteen RS is four thousand five hundred kilometers."

For a moment Gold almost didn't hear what Tev had said as his surprise blocked it out. Tev had apologized. The captain tried to remember if he'd actually heard the Tellarite apologize before. He didn't think so. Could he be coming around, finally? A member of the crew? Perhaps this hell would have a silver lining.

If they could get the away team home.

"The station?"

"With the loss of our probes during the backslash, I cannot tell for certain; too many sensors are still off-line. However, I calculate the station is still a safe sixty kilometers above the Demon's event horizon."

"Safe!" Gold couldn't help the guffaw.

"Why, yes, Captain. There is no reason to believe that the shields on the station are not still fully operational. It has held itself against the tidal forces for several centuries now."

Gold smiled. Leave it to Tev to break up the tension. And do so without even knowing. "I trust your calculations completely, Tev," he said, cutting the Tellarite off. He ignored those raised eyebrows that reminded him of the hairbrush his sister had used so many years ago.

The ship lurched and stopped, almost spilling him to the floor. He regained his feet quickly. "Wong, that didn't feel like a gravimetric wave."

"Captain," Piotrowski interrupted. Gold turned.

"What?"

"It's the Resaurians. One moment they're holding off at a distance, and between one eye blink and another, they've closed and have us in their tractor beam."

Gold was suddenly all business. "Are we certain this time?"

"Yes, sir, and they've got us tight."

"Tev, the tractor beam. Can we break it?" Though Gold noticed a moment's hesitation as he asked Tev to break his concentration in midstream and fly in a new vector, the Tellarite moved with the flow.

"Not right now, Captain. As I said, most of our systems are still off-line. Even if we could, they've a strange tractor configuration I've not seen before. If I took some time, I could break it." He looked up expectantly.

Gold hid his smile. There's the arrogance we've grown to love. "Get working on it, while I see if I can talk to our friendly neighborhood Resaurians." He turned toward the viewscreen; he noticed peripherally that Ensign Haznedl had come at Tev's call. "Piotrowski, get me that ship."

"Hailing frequency open, Captain."

"Captain S'linth, this is Captain Gold of the da Vinci. I would appreciate knowing why you've latched on to my ship with a tractor beam." He knew full well why the captain had done it, but he remembered Carol Abramowitz's briefing on the Resaurians' trouble in trusting other races after being conquered by the Klingons. He tried to moderate his tone, keep it civil.

The viewscreen sputtered and then materialized to show the dim interior of the Dutiful Burden's bridge. A crewman or two were in view, but Third Councilman Sha'a captivated the attention like a siren song. Regardless of how alien he might be, he's got chutzpah. Power. Standing in his carmine robe, he had one hand casually resting on the back of the empty captain's seat.

It took an instant longer for the import to set in. What's this? Where's Captain S'linth? The casual way Sha'a touched the captain's seat could not hide his possessiveness. Gold finally spotted S'linth standing at the back of the bridge, head bowed but back ramrod straight. Gold's job had just become a lot harder. The one Resaurian he might have been able to reach, one captain to another. Gold shuddered at the idea of a slimy politician seizing control of his own vessel.

"Captain Gold." Once again Gold felt the revulsion most humans have for snakes. However, this time around, he didn't feel shame. Not for this particular snake. "Captain S'linth will not be dealing with you directly at this time. However, I'm here to answer any of your questions."

Politician's words. "Why have you latched on to my ship with your tractor beam?" Gold didn't feel like bandying words.

"I told you why. This is our station. Our internal affair. You have no right to interfere, Captain. I sympathize with your plight. You attempted to rescue a station you felt was in need and have crew there now. For such actions I thump my tail. However, I simply cannot allow you to go any farther."

Gold felt his temper spike even harder. He glanced sidelong at Tev, and then shook his head. "We'll see about that," he said.

* * *

"We simply don't have the power to break the tractor beam," Tev said in a low, frustrated voice at Ensign Haznedl's continued optimism. The sound of the captain's voice, raised in anger, a static in the background.

"Okay. What about the dekyon beam? Could it be modulated to splinter the tractor beam? Or weaken it?"

"No, tractor beams don't work that way. The dekyon would have no effect." Tev snuffled. What did they teach at the Academy if this was an example of their education?

Then a thought bloomed within Tev, spreading like a virus and engulfing his intellect. Quick as firing synapses, he had the solution. "A second dekyon beam! We don't have sufficient power for the warp drive to attempt a forced break. However, we do have enough energy to create a second dekyon beam, which can be modulated to ensnare a gravimetric wave on its sine toward the black hole."

Haznedl blinked confusion, but then seemed to catch on. She began to calibrate a second beam.

Tev approved. "Captain," he called back, and nodded once, decisively.

* * *

Gold interrupted the useless argument with the councilman to turn toward Tev. The Tellarite nodded once and Gold smiled. Tev may have been kicked, but now he was kicking back. Gold nodded in return; Tev would be ready.

He turned back toward the councilman. "Third Councilman Sha'a. This is my last warning. Release my ship, or suffer the consequences."

"Captain, there is no reason to resort to fang-baring. We are both civilized. Nevertheless, you cannot rescue the station. It does not need rescuing."

Gold didn't know exactly what to expect, but just in case, he made sure he sat back down and held on. "I think, Councilman, if you asked those on the station, they just might have a different opinion from yours."

"That is no longer a worry," Sha'a said.

"But I think it is. Tev, engage."

A slight keystroke and nothing happened.

If it were possible, Sha'a's grin grew wider on his reptilian face. "As I said-

Both ships lurched forward with horrific speed as the hand of the universe smashed them down into its maw.

Chapter

6

Standing inside a crawlspace conduit, Sonya Gomez leaned out from the open maintenance hatch, sweat stinging at the corner of her eyes as she strained to reach the microspanner that lay among a spread of tools on a nearby table. Her fingertips brushed the narrow handle, shoving it a few millimeters farther away. In her other hand she clutched at a pair of power regulator feeds, pinching them together at just the right place, and she dreaded the idea of letting them go now.

Eyeing one of the nearby Resaurians, she licked her dry, chapped lips. "A little help here?"

Ulsah turned away from her own workstation, uncoiling very carefully and moving slow. She saw which tool Sonya needed, picked it up, and gingerly handed it over as if it were the most delicate thing in all the world. The grip felt odd in her hand, created for the more delicately boned fingers of a Resaurian. She would make do.

"Thanks."

Ulsah nodded. She glanced nervously at her station's panel of displays, hugged herself

around her middle with long, thin arms. It was a familiar gesture. "Is there anything more I can help with?"

Sonya wiped sweat from her brow with the back of her hand. Her skin felt greasy, and far too warm after an hour in this oven of an engineering space. "Iced tea?" she asked. Ulsah studied the tool spread, as if trying to figure out what that might be. "Never mind. Not until I need another tool."

Delays like this were costing her, in time as well as a rising frustration level. Her engineering sense told her that the tool tables were mounted perfectly for the wide Resaurian shoulders, accessible from any one of three possible maintenance panels. Sound ergonomics, really. But she was also used to her equipment being laid out a certain way, where she could snag the exact tool she needed without looking. She needed an assistant, but hadn't thought to ask for one at the time. And other than Ulsah, only the guard at the door with his plasma welder wasn't extremely busy.

Hopefully he would remain that way.

Bending back to task, all of her aches and bruises protesting, Sonya fused the power regulators together in a way that their small electromagnetic fields would complement each other rather than work in competition. A small victory, yet a possibly vital one. She bit down on the spanner's handle, holding it in her teeth while she used a small tester from her back pocket to test the output. Perfect.

The tester went back into her pocket. The microspanner she let drop from her mouth, and then licked the taste of machine oil from her lips and spat dryly. "Dirty job." But someone had to do it.

Es'a waited at her shoulder when she turned back. Sonya started at the appearance of the frail-looking Resaurian, then swore. "I wish you wouldn't do that."

"We learn to move silently," the alien lisped. His voice was frailer than most, full of a hissing accent that reminded Sonya of a serpent's warning. "It is hard to give up." He took the spanner from her, replaced it on the table, and handed her a fusion cutter when she glanced at it. He was very good at reading body language.

"Thank you. Have you learned anything more about my friends?"

"No. Reports from the upper decks come down slowly. We have no time to waste. This must get done before your friends alter the shield strength again."

That much Sonya agreed with, especially as a new tremor shook the station. The station's fusion reactors provided power along one of three different trunks. If she could not calibrate their flow patterns to within a micron, Es'a assured her, bad things would happen. She turned away, using the fusion cutter to open a flexible conduit along its entire length. The work was slow, but not taxing. "You know, you could try talking with S'eth. Make him understand your position."

"More than one hundred years, my people struggle against his people. No talking is possible."

Sonya shook her head. A century of stubborn refusal to negotiate. A hostile stalemate where each faction waited for the other to make a mistake. S'eth in control of life support and the

shield generators. Es'a with foodstuffs and the fusion reactor rooms. What kind of division could turn a people so savagely against each other? "Is S'eth really so unreasonable?"

"He listens to none of us. His way is to keep things as they have always been. Our way is to search for a better life. To improve and to grow and to escape!"

"And another generation of traditionalists and radicals are born," she said.

She felt S'eth recoil behind her. "What is that you say?"

Sonya handed back the fusion cutter. She felt the frown hang heavy on her face, wondering why what she had said bothered the Resaurian so much. Surely they had seen this for themselves. "I said that you've created here the exact same situation that caused you all to be banished in the first place. The overly cautious. The determined forward-thinkers. Only this time, instead of Klingon occupation throwing your culture out of whack, you did it to yourselves."

Es'a looked ill. Not that he ever looked extremely healthy. The Resaurian hung his head low, letting it sway back and forth. Membranes rolled up over his eyes, giving them a white cast. "They did this," he admitted. "We have done this as well."

It seemed an odd choice of phrasing, but Sonya had too much work ahead of her to puzzle it out now. And she needed a break. Climbing out of the crawlspace, she brushed her hand against a torn and filthy uniform. She had long since discarded the jacket and was now wearing only the undershirt. Soon, the gold engineering color would be completely lost to a pallor of grease and dust-gray.

"You are finished?" Es'a asked.

"Refresher station." She held her grimy hands out, then nodded toward the door. "Getting hard to hold tools properly. I'll be right back."

He nodded. And the guard at the door stepped aside when she thumped him on the shoulder.

Down a short, dimly lit corridor she found facilities meant for the Resaurians, but she managed adequately. As well as washing out some of the grime burning at the corner of her left eye, Sonya used a handful of water to slick her hair back, wetting it as protection against the humid engineering spaces. She stared into a mirrored wall, seeing the dark circles under her eyes, knowing that she had only hours to find Es'a's problem and help fix it. Part of her mind worked on the repairs that were likely to be needed- necessary- if anyone on the station hoped to see real space again. But another part kept turning over the small clues she'd picked up over the last few hours.

"They did this," she whispered aloud, repeating Es'a's words. "We have done this as well."

Ulsah's behavior. Her awkward shyness.

A new generation of traditionalists and forward-thinkers.

No!

Sonya pushed herself away from the mirrored wall. She hit the door hard, slamming it back

with a bang, and sprinted for the engineering space and its maze of conduits and workstations. Her feet pounded an alarm against the steel deck. She knew what it was that S'eth- and Es'a- had kept from her. The stakes were going up, high enough to force either side to take the most drastic action available if they could not be brought to some kind of arrangement. She had to start things moving right away.

Which was the last thought to race through her mind, before arms reached out of an open doorway, grabbed her by her shoulders, and pulled her into a darkened room.

Chapter

7

The long, laborious climb down the lift shaft and the following search had taken a great deal out of Rennan Konya. He considered himself in great shape with his regular security training. But the emergency ladder's rungs had been set too far apart for a non-Resaurian, and the frequent tremors shaking the station forced him to keep a death grip on each rail.

By the time he began exploring the lower levels of the station, his thighs already felt tight and his shoulders ached severely. He spent a great deal of effort working his way around the many watchstations set out by the Resaurians and avoiding their patrols. Alerted to their presence by his ability to tap into the motor reflex of other beings, he was always able to find a hiding place inside empty rooms or in the overhead pipes that ran along many corridor ceilings. But the constant effort to keep his own screens down and feel every twitch and strain in those moving near him, around him, in decks beneath him- it demanded a toll as well.

So when he finally sensed the familiar ache of a human's lower back pain, he tracked in on it slowly but with a measure of relief.

Down a spiral staircase and through a large steam heat distribution venue, he approached with care, waiting to discover the guards set on Commander Gomez. He'd seen her on the way to the refresher station, but held back in the shadows while keeping an eye out. He spotted no furtive demeanor in Gomez's movement; she certainly did not look like an escaped prisoner. He had to assume she was under some kind of surveillance. He still hadn't spotted it by the time she decided to return, running as if there would be Resaurians chasing her, armed to the fangs. Chancing his own discovery, he clapped a hand over Gomez's mouth as he pulled her into the room, wanting to take her from the corridor quickly and quietly in case anyone was close. His Betazoid training sparked a warning as Gomez drove her elbow back violently, relying on conditioning long since ingrained as a natural reaction. He barely had time to shift his weight before she buried her elbow into his midriff. Air rushed out in a desperate exhale.

"Commander," he wheezed. He caught her next blow as she came around with a right hook, wrapping his arm around hers, trapping it. "Commander, it's me."

She jumped back, startled at his appearance. "Rennan? What the hell are you doing down here?"

"Keep it down," he whispered, glancing into the corridor. "Where are they?"

"Who?"

"The Resaurians chasing you."

Her black hair looked disheveled and dirty, streaked with an oily grime and slicked back from her elfin face. There was a smudge on her left ear that he wanted to wipe clean, so unbecoming an officer but quite appropriate for the engineer in her. Decorum did not stop him. The puzzled frown and the following exasperation did.

"Oh, for... Rennan, I don't have time for you right now. Come on." She grabbed his arm and pulled him into the corridor, heedless of their discovery. He felt her urgency in the tense set of her shoulders but no sense of panic. The flight-or-fight response was definitely missing from her posture and also in the way she put herself in front of the plasma welder brought to bear on him as the door opened to a new engineering space and a Resaurian guard snapped to feral attention.

"Easy," she said with unnatural calm. "He's with me."

Rennan hated having to carry a phaser. Weapons were too often relied upon by security, when diplomacy and fast thinking should have sufficed. But the danger he read in the reptilian faces, and the tightening grips on weapons and tools, made him suddenly glad for his sidearm. He moved on the balls of his feet, hands always in view but ready for quick and decisive action. A panel operator coiled away from him. Her abdomen muscles spasmed, and he jumped away from her, thinking that she had tensed herself for an attack. Instead, she wrapped arms protectively around herself and slithered back several meters.

The Resaurian who waited for them did so with ill-concealed impatience. He shifted from foot to foot, his thick tail lashing out behind him. "Should this make me nervous?" he asked with a wheezing hiss. "You did not leave here with a friend."

"Blue," Gomez exclaimed. Rennan looked around, saw no sign of that color. It was the first thought, though, that Gomez decided to challenge this Resaurian with. "Es'a. The small Resaurian you had watching me earlier had smaller scales, and blue! Where are they?"

This was Es'a? The nest-breaker? Rennan felt the alien's sickness, the fire raging within his body, burning up his strength. This did not feel like the strong leader S'eth had made him out to be. Leaders paled over the years, of course. But the Resaurian did not move as if he possessed a mature body taken over by the ravages of age. His muscles, his joints, they felt more like a stunted youth.

And his flesh crawled with a desperate flush.

"What is it you mean?" Es'a asked.

"You know what I mean. If you're willing to go to such lengths for them, S'eth will be as well. It's going to bring disaster. We've got to get this sorted out, and I mean now."

"It will not change anything," he said, glancing at the nearby Resaurian who hovered protectively at the edge of the conversation.

Rennan was still behind, but catching up fast. First and foremost, he now knew that Gomez had not been kept as a prisoner. No matter how she had been taken from the team, she had remained voluntarily. Given her appearance, there were obviously engineering concerns she felt important enough to mitigate other concerns. Es'a's reaction told Rennan that there might be one other thing going on that the Resaurian might consider even more critical. The

security agent followed the alien's gaze to the nearby panel operator. His abdomen hitched and jumped with sympathetic spasms.

And he knew.

"You're pregnant," he announced.

Gomez was right. This changed everything.

Chapter

8

Gold watched, in a detached way, as Carol Abramowitz and Bart Faulwell entered the bridge and stopped dead in their tracks. Abramowitz's mouth might just have fit a half-dozen tribbles. He'd called her to the bridge to be present when they had their next run-in with Third Councilman Sha'a. She must have been with Faulwell, who had tagged along, no doubt feeling useless in a crisis with no call for his particular skills in cryptography or symbolic analysis.

Abramowitz, however, was still in her element, as Gold wanted backup from the ship's cultural specialist in his next dealings with the Resaurians. He had no doubt he'd be hearing from the councilman soon enough, providing that the da Vinci crawled back from the brink of the Demon's event horizon. The Dutiful Burden doggedly maintained its tractor lock, though it trailed the da Vinci's fall by several hundred kilometers. Pointless, as both vessels were caught in the inexorable grip of the Demon.

He had another reason for wanting Abramowitz on the bridge, though he'd never admit to it. She was a good barometer and adviser for situations where his bridge crew would be too by-the-book and an engineer would simply default into technical jargon. There were times, Gold had seen, when being a scientist robbed one of the ability to simply sit back and observe the beauty or terror unfolding around you.

Gravimetric waves increased in frequency and strength the farther in they fell, rocking the ship with more fervor. Gold had become so used to the turbulence he'd almost forgotten about it, but not even a drunk Klingon could ignore the thrumming vibrations that rang through the whole vessel. And the farther they fell, the slower the ship moved as more and more power was dedicated to the structural integrity field. Each gravimetric wave had to be registered on sensors, and the ship maneuvered in this high-gravity soup to take the brunt along solid shield facings.

"Wong, how are we doing?"

"If Tev's numbers are correct, we'll be transversing the photon sphere in moments." All eyes fixed on the main viewscreen.

The da Vinci crawled forward at a bare kilometer per minute. And that was still far too fast. They watched as a perfectly round hole sliced through the very fabric of existence, tunneling into... nothing. Even in the farthest depths of the quadrant Gold had found existence. Comets. Nebulae. Protomatter. Ejected coronas of supernovas. Even space dust. Though much of the matter could be clocked at millions and at times billions of years old, it still existed. This, however, could only be called the antithesis of what life meant. No, Gold corrected himself. Not just life- too narrow a definition. Existence itself.

Gold knew his wife would chide him that God made everything. However, if He'd made black holes, they were the largest drains in existence, where He flushed anything He no longer needed.

Like Gold's crew, if they were not careful.

The ship continued its descent. The forward viewscreen showed absolute darkness, as though the ship were nudging into the universe's largest tar pit. Only one where the dinosaurs were still alive somewhere in its depths and their angry kicks sent crushing ripples expanding out in every direction.

"Sidescreen." If the front showed nothing, he wanted to see what they were passing through. Abramowitz gasped and Gold himself felt tingles rippling along his skin and setting his fingertips afire.

The universe had begun to crush itself. God's drain, no doubt about it. And at the bottom, the universe's trash compactor. The ultimate plunger rammed and thudded against existence, squishing the universe down into a thin band. What had once been the visible universe in front of them, now stretched in a concentric circle perpendicular to the orientation of the da Vinci. Not just the visible universe in front, but from behind them as well.

Einstein Rings. The words rang in Gold's head and he chased after it, latching on to it with all his might. That's what Tev had called them in a meeting that had occurred in another life.

Glancing over at Abramowitz, he could see the fear, naked on her face, a fear to match his own. Here they were, peeling back the very fabric of reality to show the skeletal underpinnings, and everyone immediately backpedaled in fear. Too awesome. Too grand. Too terrible. Too... simply too.

Perhaps all scientists, regardless of their outward façades, or their intellect, when they brushed up against such terrible magnificence, had to take refuge in their science. In their words and their calculations and their theories, or they'd simply collapse in fright.

Another sickening swaying lurch of the ship and the wonders of the universe continued to unfold. A second ring. Now a third. Gold had heard numerous accounts of bubble universes and other dimensions. He'd even spoken with respected, trusted comrades who had such experiences, and yet he'd never really been able to bring himself to believe.

Now, as he witnessed not simply the compacting of the universe, but its very replication as easy as one-two-three, he believed.

"Captain, there's another ship following us in."

"That's the Dutiful Burden."

Wong checked his readings one more time and then turned to look at Gold over his shoulder. "No, Captain. There is another ship besides the Dutiful Burden."

"What? Center the viewscreen on that location." The forward screen changed to show a familiar-looking vessel at some distance.

"Magnify." The screen zoomed forward several times, and Carol's was not the only gasp.

The da Vinci floated before their eyes.

* * *

"What's going on? That can't be right."

"Of course it can," Tev said.

Everyone looked toward him and for just a moment he felt irritated. Had they not been at the briefing? Did all humans have such short-term memory?

He snuffled. "We are passing through the photon sphere. The very name should explain what we're witnessing." He paused and another wave of irritation swept through, like the gravimetric waves that continued to increase in severity and duration, at their blank faces.

"Light. The photon sphere is the distance above the event horizon when the force of the black hole's gravity bends light into a perfect circumference. Our ship is sensing our ship; the forward sensors are picking up the visible light bent around the perimeter of the black hole, showing us the rear of our own vessel. If you stood outside at this moment, you'd look forward and only see the back of your head." A look of strangeness glazed most of the bridge crew's faces.

The ghost-image of the da Vinci disappeared. The stars continued to be eaten up from beneath by the encroaching black.

"Aft screen," Gold ordered. His voice was solid.

The screen switched viewpoints. Above them, the visible universe filled a shrinking hole, with outer darkness stretching across the da Vinci's side and in front. Tev turned back to his sensors.

Magnificent.

Most of the bridge crew only attempted to assimilate this experience with the weakest sensory input at their disposal. Vision would never scratch the surface of what he experienced. Looking down at several monitors, he could see the full glory.

The gravimetric waves were pulled in from every direction, across unimaginable distances, to crash and thrash. He normally did not give in to such imagery, but Tev admitted that the rage of lines on his monitor reminded him of nothing so much as living tentacles, thrashing, stretching, attempting in a futile frenzy to save themselves from the inevitable plunge into the event horizon.

Another screen glowed almost incandescent with a fountain of energy that shot millions of miles out into space from the direction of the black hole, cascading out in every direction. Hawking radiation blazed as though it desired to create a sun to compensate for the destruction occurring on such a fantastic level.

Yet another screen showed the Einstein Rings, along with measurements depicting how much relative time occurred outside the photon sphere, compared with their current position; at each forward movement, the time dilation increased.

Commander Gomez would appreciate the mathematical perfection of this event.

That last thought troubled him for a moment. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat and felt the pull of his uniform across his chest. Tev didn't like emotions and thoughts he could not pinpoint. After a moment, however, it became painfully obvious. His irritation at the crew had nothing to do with their inability to grasp the splendor around them. Of course they'd be unable to. What irritated him was that he wished Commander Gomez were here. Not simply so that he could impress her, to show that "this" is what he'd done for her lately. No, he simply wished to share this moment with an equal.

He startled. An equal.

Bartholomew Faulwell slipped up near Tev. "I wish there was something I could do," he said.

Tev nodded. He had found himself thinking along similar lines in the last few hours, and he didn't like the feeling of that one bit. "You shouldn't be on the bridge," he said, but low.

"Yes. That's likely true." He was also just as obviously waiting for Tev to order him away.

Tev shuffled awkwardly from one foot to the other. He honestly did not want Bartholomew to leave. At the last few briefings, Bartholomew was the only crew member to actively press for Tev's friendship. Most of the crew did not seem to know how to approach the Tellarite, and Tev was equally stymied when it came to social relations. He wished Gomez were here as an equal. Bartholomew should be allowed to stay as a possible friend.

"If you are going to stay," Tev said, never taking his eyes from the screen, "you might find me one of those apple rancher candies you seem to enjoy carrying about."

Bartholomew smiled, reached into a pocket, and pulled out two twists of clear cellophane. Inside was a hard, green candy. He set one carefully on the edge of Tev's panel, where the Tellarite could reach it when he wanted, when he could. He unwrapped the other for himself.

Tev reached for the candy, but then stopped when a screen lit with red tones and an incessant beeping warned of a drastic change in status. Tev's mammoth eyebrows rose alarmingly.

"Captain?"

"Yes, Tev?" His voiced sounded as though he were not really paying attention; the Demon simply held too much power. That would change fast.

"The Resaurian vessel has unlatched its tractor beam from the da Vinci."

"Why is that a problem?"

"Because it's latched on to the gravity anchor." Tev looked up to find Gold's full attention focused on him.

"But that means-"

He nodded. Why did events conspire against his every plan? "The anchor will self-destruct even faster."

Faulwell paled. The cryptographer shook his head in denial. "But... but do they realize that?" It was a good question, and Captain Gold nodded that Tev should answer.

"I do not know."

"They just might," Abramowitz said. Tev looked to find the cultural specialist's composure had returned. Only a slight wildness to the eyes indicated she stood on the bridge of a ship inside the photon sphere of a black hole.

"Remember how traditionalist they are. From what you told me, Captain, it looked as though this Captain S'linth may have been deposed by the councilman and the overseer." Another wave caused everyone to stumble. Abramowitz grabbed on to a seat and immediately continued.

"With such a desire to keep this knowledge from the general populace, they might just sacrifice the entire space station, perhaps themselves as well, to see that secret kept. How many centuries have they kept it till now? Quite easy to take it to the next level."

Tev hated it when politics intruded upon the beauty of his scientific universe, but he could not fault Abramowitz's logic. It made all too much sense.

"Tev, how quickly will we reach the station?" Gold said.

"Not quickly enough, Captain." He turned to verify with his monitor, his hands grasping the edge of the monitor as though he could pressure it into giving a different answer. Commander Gomez was on that ship.

"Wong, ahead one-half impulse."

"Captain!" Tev interrupted, rising to his feet in alarm. "You cannot do that."

Gold turned stormy eyes on Tev; one did not countermand the captain's orders.

"The gravimetric waves are too strong. Right now, at a quarter impulse, we are pushing the limits of our shields." Tev thought furiously, trying to find an analogue the captain would understand. "Imagine a boat pushing full forward through a heavy water storm. The hull would smash into the wall of the waves, instead of flowing with the movement; the hull will shatter."

Gold continued to stare angrily at him for a moment and then shook his head. "Then we've lost."

"No. I believe there is a way we can actually reach the station even faster. However, there is inherent risk- not as much as pushing forward with impulse engines, but more than what we risk now."

Gold chuckled and leaned back in his seat. How had he amused the captain?

"Tev, we're in a black hole. Everything we do is a risk. What is it?"

"Currently we are using the impulse engines to move forward, but it also keeps us at a set speed; a velocity we can manipulate. If we cast ourselves adrift, we will ride the gravimetric waves. This will create a jarring ride, but one that we should survive. One that should get us to the station before the gravity anchor disintegrates."

"Flotsam, eh?" Gold said. He looked speculative for a moment and then nodded his head. "After everything we've done, this is no crazier. Wong, I believe you heard the man."

"Yes, sir. And, Captain- I never thought I'd be trying to grab a good wave with a starship."

"I don't think any of us did, Wong. Not at all."

Chapter

9

This part of the station was the best kept, Sonya noticed right away. Clean and in good repair. Corridors painted in bright and cheerful yellows, soothing greens, and sky blues. Branching corridors ran off to either side, with the doors to living quarters standing open in warm invitation to neighbors, to friends. A warm, spiced-meat aroma filled one passage, and she knew that someone was cooking a meal nearby. Actually cooking- no replicators here.

Several Resaurians stood around talking, seemingly oblivious to the danger they were in. They evidenced little surprise seeing a pair of humanoids under escort through their living area. Only when the station shook with a new tremor did they glance around self-consciously. As if wondering what they should be doing to help.

"They don't know how bad it is, do they?" she asked Es'a.

"They know. But we've lived with the fear of this day all our lives. Panic will help no one." He gestured to an open double-wide archway. "In here."

They passed from the corridor, stepping out onto grassy lawns, looking up into an ochre sky. Fruit-laden trees spread thick branches overhead, offering rest to a number of brightly feathered birds and shade from the blazing orange sun to the Resaurian young who slither-ran and played on the pale grasses. Sonya stopped in amazement. This was the largest space-born arboretum she could remember seeing in her career, obviously coupled with holographic technology to complete the illusion of a true outdoor park.

Rennan Konya found his voice first.

"Dozens. Hundreds." He counted the smaller Resaurians with their blue-green scales and slender upper bodies. Nearby a larger youth picked at the beginnings of his shedding. Beneath a dull, waxy peel of skin, his scales were coming in dark and coral red. Rennan watched with fascination. The full implications were just beginning to hit. "There are no survivors from the original prisoners, are there?"

Sonya knew the answer, but let Es'a take it. "No," the Resaurian admitted. "Finding a way to lessen the time dilation was one of our first priorities. It gave our forebears a chance to escape before too much real time passed on our homeworld."

Ulsah slithered up and nestled against him. He wrapped an arm around her. "We solved our infertility problem not long after."

And then dealt with overpopulation concerns, diminishing resources, and the very real stress of raising families in such a contained environment. Sonya glanced over to a picnic spread

where two youngsters ate food while playing atonal music from a small portable device. It looked so normal, it tempted her to smile. "You've kept everyone conditioned for an indoor-out-door life, in case escape ever happened." She approved.

"So what is the issue?" Rennan asked her. "We get back in touch with the da Vinci, and you engineers work your miracles and get everyone out of the Demon." He looked to Es'a. "You tell your people not to sabotage the attempt this time, and we get you home."

Sonya shook her head. "For a Betazoid, you can be fairly dense at times, Rennan. Es'a's faction did not sabotage our escape efforts. S'eth's faction did. For the same reason they originally resisted the attempt to use the station's anchoring shields to attempt an escape. They will not endanger their children, no matter how strong their drive for personal freedom."

"It is worse than that," Es'a explained. "Our forebears were the forward-thinkers of their generation. Many of us- most of us- remain true to that predisposition. But some traditionalist behavior creeps back into our culture here. S'eth fights to preserve what he has known his entire life."

"And there is a real danger," Sonya admitted. "S'eth's father discovered it. The power distribution system is set up in a carefully calibrated manner that any radical change in gravitational pull outside the shielding will cause harmonic fluctuations and force a feedback surge into the fusion reactors."

Rennan looked at Sonya. "Let me guess. Boom?"

"More like a fizzle. Lights out." Which meant shields dropping that suddenly exposed the entire station to the full gravitational effects of the black hole. "The tidal forces would rip the station to pieces. That's what I've been working on for the past few hours."

"About done?" he asked with a wry smile.

Not asking for much, was he? Sonya felt a sudden urge to punch the man. She did smile this time, when Rennan stepped back into a wary stance. She also liked the way his hand came up to protect his gut, where she had earlier slipped in an elbow. Served him right.

"Just about. I'm using an application developed by La Forge and Brahms. I think it will hold up."

"You think?"

She nodded. The station shook again. Was it her imagination, or were the tremors getting worse?

Rennan shifted uneasily, then shrugged. "Good enough for me," he decided. Reaching out slowly, he rubbed a thumb against the outside of her ear. It came away dark with grease. "Since you're going to play the diplomat," he said, "you should look the part. What's your plan?"

Sonya rubbed the flat of her palm against the same ear, making certain the last of the smudge was gone, and helping hide her flush of embarrassment. Turning to business, she looked to Es'a, who waited patiently with his mate and a growing number of Resaurian adults.

"I think," she said slowly, her plans forming even as she spoke, "we should arrange for a reunion."

Chapter

10

A wild ride. That was all you could call it.

Captain Gold, clinging to his chair to avoid being dumped to the ground once more, enjoyed it. He could admit that. He'd never been surfing before, but after this, he just might take it up.

"Engineering to bridge."

Gold reached up and tapped his combadge. "Gold here. Go ahead, Conlon."

"Captain, we've almost got full power restored. This ride has actually given us the time to take the warp core off-line momentarily, recalibrate, and restart. That did the trick for most of the systems. The rest, unfortunately, are burned out and will likely need to be replaced at the source."

"Good. Keep me posted."

"Yes, sir. Conlon out."

Gold turned toward Tev. "Tev, how we looking?"

"We are closing in on the station even now; estimated contact in five-point-four-five minutes."

"And the gravity anchor?"

"I cannot be certain when it will fail, but its density is fracturing. There can be no doubt failure is imminent."

"I understand, Tev."

The Resaurian station now filled the forward viewscreen: an insignificant piece of flotsam desperately clinging to existence above God's drainpipe. Just over a thousand meters long, the station was a large one indeed. Two cylindrical objects rose perpendicular (above and below) toward its stern, while several large extensions thrust down from amidships. A particularly large extension sat amidships on the starboard side.

"Captain, we're now within fifty-five seconds of the station."

"Wong," Gold said in response to Tev's warning, "prepare to engage impulse power upon my mark." Gold leaned back, rubbed his hands on his face, and then roughed his hair. How many hours had he been without real sleep?

After all they'd been through, it looked as though they just might be on the verge of saving the ship from falling farther. Of course the problem he'd been ignoring for some time now would no longer be kept in abeyance. He sighed and glanced over at Tev again.

"Tev, when we latch on to the station, we can keep it from falling farther toward the event horizon, correct?"

"Yes, Captain."

"But how do we get out again?"

He noticed Tev straighten slightly, a small smile creasing his porcine face. "The previous plan I had for saving the gravity anchor will be able to pull us back out of the gravity well and past the photon sphere. I'm confident the twin dekyon beams- the bootstrapping you called it- will be more than adequate for the task."

"You say it will be adequate to rescue the da Vinci. But will it rescue our vessel and that mammoth station?"

Tev's eyebrows lowered until he almost couldn't see the Tellarite's coal black eyes. Obviously he hadn't made considerations for that, and it irked him. "No, Captain, it will not."

"I know you'll come up with something."

If possible, Tev became even more stiff. "Back to the drawing board, Captain."

Gold nodded, keeping his emotions tightly leashed. The worry that had plagued him as a nightmare from the start of this whole mess reared its ugly head once more. He'd lost so many people at Galvan VI. Now, it appeared as though those events might repeat themselves, with much more dire effect. The team he'd ordered onto the station had to be rescued. Had to be. But at the cost of the rest of the crew? Had he been determining his course of action based upon those dead ghosts that called to him? Had he put himself, and more importantly his ship and crew, in danger to try to make up for what had gone before?

The sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach warned him that that might be exactly what had occurred.

And in his next thought, he felt the right of it.

"Captain," Tev interrupted his reverie, "the gravity anchor has torn away. Both the station and the alien vessel have begun a freefall."

"Wong, engage at one-quarter impulse immediately. If we take a beating, the ship can handle it. We've got to make it to the station now!" Against the tidal forces at work, they would need to be right on top of the station if they hoped to stop its plunge.

As his ship thrummed with power and leaped forward, Gold couldn't help but continue his earlier line of reasoning. He began to understand the enormity of what he'd done. Gripping the edge of his seat, he swore if they actually managed to get out of here, the dead would be laid to rest at last. Rescuing members of his crew necessitated risk. And when that risk passed beyond the pale and threatened to kill the rest of the crew? Who among them would say no?

It came with the uniform. It came with the job. Gold had allowed doubts to eat away at his convictions of duty. But not again.

"Captain," Tev said, "we're close enough."

Gold stood up, unable to contain the sudden energy that flowed through him. "Engage tractor beam."

"Tractor beam engaged. We've got the station. I'm punching a reinforced dekyon beam into subspace... now!"

The da Vinci rocked precariously over on its starboard side, as if wrenched by an invisible hand. A power conduit blew beneath the tactical station, flames licking out. Piotrowski grabbed an extinguisher and fought down the small electrical fire. But the vessel held.

"Matching shields," Tev announced. "We're synchronized, Captain."

Gold tapped his combadge. If wishes could be turned into energy, she'd hear him even across the event horizon. "Gold to Gomez, come in."

* * *

As reunions went, Sonya had heard of worse. Among a family of feuding Klingons, for instance.

Es'a and his small party from the lower decks were searched and put under immediate guard as soon as Rennan led them all into the upper decks that fell under S'eth's dominion. The intervening levels had had the look of a battlefield, which they had been several times over the past century. Plasma-scarred walls, ruptured steam pipes, and exposed power conduits bore witness to that, along with the musty odors of dust mixed with old machine oil. It was a no-man's-land through which Resaurian battled Resaurian over the fate of their children: to be raised inside the Demon, in relative safety, or risked to bring them home.

Sonya allowed nothing to slow down the small group, however, even waving about her phaser (recovered from Es'a) a few times to make her point. Rennan shook his head over those theatrics, but they got the job done faster than his personal style of calm argument.

"We'll try your way next time," she promised, heavy on the cynicism. Neither of them believed that, but it kept him from complaining aloud.

From the final corridor leading up to the bridge, Sonya wondered if there were ruptured steam vents ahead as well. A great deal of hissing rolled together to make a crash of white noise. The equivalent of Resaurian shouting, she realized a moment later, as her universal translator finally made headway against the static.

Panicked shouting.

The bridge was a beehive of frantic activity. Resaurians slithered and ran, coiled into the backs of panels, and labored to rush replacement parts where they were needed. The ozone scent of electrical fires stung Sonya's sinuses. Her eyes teared up from the acrid smoke. Even as they arrived, another junction box blew out in a storm of white-hot sparks. Pattie swarmed over with an extinguisher held in each of her forward legs, spraying down the box with heavy, one-two doses of dry powder.

"Commander!" the Nasat exclaimed, seeing her commander lead the small contingent forward.

Dropping one canister and throwing the other to a nearby Resaurian, P8 Blue swarmed forward on all legs to wrap Sonya in a stifling embrace. Being hugged by a five-foot-long pill bug was no small matter. It took Sonya a moment to extract herself, trying all the while to flag S'eth over so she could calm him before he noticed for himself. Too late. One of his patrol guards made it across the room first.

"Nest-breaker!"

S'eth's hissing shout was enough to momentarily halt most of the work on the bridge. But engineers would be engineers no matter their race. The repair teams fell back to work, leaving the matter to S'eth, who abandoned his perch near the blackened main viewscreen to slither forward with reinforcements.

Rennan had caught Corsi and Vinx by now. Stevens had heard Pattie's shout, and come running with Lense. The team was back together, and everyone tried to talk at once and louder than the quarreling Resaurians.

"Your fault!" S'eth accused Es'a. "It must be your fault. Our anchor is deteriorating and it is accepting no reinforcement."

"Us?" Es'a recoiled. "You cause intentional power failures when you know the condition of our systems, and you blame us?"

Sonya held up a hand for silence. Didn't get it. She pointed her phaser at the overhead and squeezed off a quick shot, scoring a trail of red sparks. Everyone ducked except for Rennan and Sonya. Bickering ceased.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," he said with a forced calm.

"I know." Holstering her weapon, content to let Vinx and Corsi cover the assembled group, she held up her hands again. It was the work of a moment to explain to the rest of her team about the young Resaurians, and the sabotage perpetrated by S'eth's people in their first attempt to free the station from the black hole.

"Whatever your past difficulties," she said, "you have to put them aside." The station shook, violently. Some of the children Es'a had brought with them covered behind him. "Obviously the station is no longer stable. If it cannot be fixed, we have to get it out of the Demon. Now."

"Impossible," S'eth hissed. "The phase variance in our power distribution system will overload the reactors. We cannot disengage the safeties." He glared at his rival. "You are as impatient as your father."

"I've already made a start at solving that problem," Sonya told him, heading off any further shouting. "I'd be done by now if I hadn't worried that you might blow up something else as a means of delaying our escape." As if caused by her words, the bridge lights flickered uncertainly, then brightened again. "I think we can stabilize your systems, and hold them steady long enough to get out of the black hole."

"You think! Long enough!" S'eth waved away her promises. "That is not good enough, Commander."

"Okay. Then we can all stand around here glaring until the Demon swallows us whole." It was a sobering thought. One which shut S'eth up for a moment, and allowed her to outline the

basics of what they needed.

Stevens nodded at once. "You're using the La Forge-Brahms matrix. I can handle that." He retrieved his personal tools. Es'a directed one of his people to take Stevens below. Corsi so obviously wished to follow, but sent Vinx with them instead.

"It's at least another hour's work," Sonya said. "Which means Fabian can do it in thirty minutes. Can we hold on that long?"

S'eth shook his head. "Not at this rate. We've blown three junction boxes trying to reinforce the anchor. It will fail at any moment."

"Then we need to invent a new anchor. And we need to contact the da Vinci to update them on our situation."

"It cannot be done," S'eth told her, though he seemed more subdued than hostile this time.

Es'a scoffed. "Always ready to quit. Duck your head into your nest and hide from the universe."

S'eth puffed out his neck muscles. "Our communications equipment is beyond salvage. We have even lost our main viewer. It is not possible."

That worried Sonya. Her team could work miracles at times, but three impossible tasks in thirty minutes seemed beyond even her current best estimates. Just a little help would have been welcome.

"Gold to Gomez, come in." Captain Gold's voice, loud and insistent, spoke from her combadge.

Smiling with her first measure of relief since arriving on the station, Sonya held a hand up to her badge, tapped it to open a channel. "Gomez here, Captain. You have no idea how good it is to hear your voice. We have serious problems, please stand by for update." Tapping the channel closed for a moment, she gave S'eth a heartening smile. "We're the S.C.E.," she reminded him, and herself as well. "Impossible just takes an extra ten minutes."

Chapter

11

With a sensation similar to the genetically imprinted memory of the egg, the Dutiful Burden fell toward the station and, beyond it, the event horizon. Though the overseer's bowed head and twitching tail signaled his dislike, S'linth found he rather enjoyed it. A return to the universe's womb- a permanent one, if he and his crew did not find a way to arrest their descent.

S'linth purposefully moved around the bridge. Unlike the sinuous, graceful movements of Third Councilman Sha'a, or the halting, timid steps of the nictitator, he strode with confidence: proud, almost boastful leg-to-tail, tail-to-leg steps. The thump of his tail was a strong counterpoint to the anxiousness that had prevailed on the bridge for too long. Now, he provided an anchor for his crew. He portrayed confidence, and for him, his crew returned it.

He came to a stop just outside touching distance of the science station. "Science, report."

"Captain, I simply cannot replicate it. I've tried numerous different energy matrices, all with what I believe to be identical signatures. Yet, each time I attempt to incorporate the energy within the matrix, it collapses, its cohesion vaporizing before it can fully solidify. I simply cannot re-create the anchor." Frustration wafted off the Resaurian (no fear, now; a victory!), but underneath it, a hard core of determination to support his captain.

In addition to demonstrating strength to his bridge crew by stopping by each one, he also was able to taste the emotions of each and determine where their full support rested. Though some wavered, the underpinning of their emotions radiated a quiet confidence. A willingness to follow their captain wherever he led.

"If I had a cycle or so to study," Science continued, "I might be able to understand what the ancients accomplished. But right now..."

S'linth radiated confidence. He'd known from the moment the gravity anchor failed they were doomed; the science officer simply did not have the expertise to attempt to replicate the anchor. Like so much, this too had been lost to the conservatives.

Step-thump; step-thump; step-thump. S'linth continued his prowl around the bridge, all the while keeping Third Councilman Sha'a and the nictitator from direct visual contact. The rasp of S'linth's scales across the deck was a soothing susurration to the commanding impact of his tail. He stopped at Tho'sh's seat.

"First Navigator. Report."

"The Dutiful Burden is one point four ris-units above the event horizon."

"The alien vessel?"

"Point seven-four-three ris-units."

"And the station?"

"Point seven-three-nine ris-units."

"So close?"

"Yes, Captain. I'm surprised at how quickly the alien vessel managed to close with the station."

"How did it accomplish this?"

"I cannot say, Captain."

"And why? Why close so quickly with the station? To what purpose? Even if they stacked the station's occupants nose to tail they could not transfer but a fraction."

"What does it matter, Captain?"

Sha'a's voice slicked the air. Though no scent accompanied the pronouncement, S'linth still felt as though he'd been immersed in brackish liquid. The sudden heat of hate radiated from Tho'sh at Sha'a's voice. Though he reciprocated, such blatant scents were extremely

dangerous. S'linth shockingly brushed a fingertip quickly across Tho'sh's shoulder. The first navigator reined in his pheromones and bowed his head slightly in acknowledgment.

"It matters a great deal, Third Councilman." He tried with difficulty to keep his voice neutral. Too much baggage was now attached to their relationship for the easy respect of the past. S'linth turned, too sharply, to gaze at Sha'a. "If the aliens find a way to escape the Demon, we may be able to replicate it. If the solution involves the station in some way, then understanding it is also important."

"The captain wishes to rescue his crew, just as he said from the beginning. He's determined to continue to interfere in Resaurian affairs. His maliciousness in dragging us across the photon sphere is proof enough of that."

So, revisionist history. S'linth almost shook his head in disgust. Is this how it happens? Did the councilmen millennia ago also wish to hide their heads in the nest and casually change what really occurred? The thought sickened him.

"I believe the alien captain dragged us across the photon sphere because we held him against his will. It shows determination and amazing ingenuity. I have to respect him for the one and admire him for the other."

"You admire him?! How dare you-"

Lucky for the nictitator, Comms interrupted. With everything that had occurred, S'linth had reached the point where the unproductive- it had taken crossing the photon sphere of a black hole for him to see the Resaurian in his true light- would not be allowed to make such statements on his bridge without consequence. Even with the councilman aboard.

"Captain, the alien vessel is hailing us."

S'linth moved to the side of his command chair. "Respond to the hail, Comms. Captain Gold, this is Captain S'linth. How may I be of assistance?"

The bridge of the da Vinci materialized and the strangeness of numerous alien faces greeted his eyes. Their monochrome, too-smooth skin almost made his skin crawl, until he remembered what he'd witnessed. Commitment, honor, determination, mercy. Aliens they may be, but they espoused everything the Resaurians claimed to stand for. In fact, he thought darkly, more so than some.

"We've managed to latch on to the station with our tractor beam. However, though we've found what I believe to be a very workable plan to save ourselves and the station, we cannot do it alone. Since it appears you too are in dire straits, I feel we can pool our resources and save all of us."

Sha'a butted into the conversation with an imperious manner. "What if we wish not to see ourselves saved?"

The rage of hate engulfed S'linth with a suddenness that snapped his jaws shut tight and sent his tail tip quivering. It had all become too much. The vapid overseer could've broken the fang all by himself, but for the councilman to behave as though the captain were not even present? That tunneled the nest. A nest-breaker could not be allowed to remain.

The thought cooled his heat with a splash of frigid ice. Could he really be thinking of

breaking centuries-old traditions?

"Then you'll be dooming yourselves to death. We've got the key to escape and unless you've figured it out, which I doubt since you're still falling, you're going to die. I'll gladly share it with you, provided we work to save everyone. If you don't, not only will you condemn yourselves, but you'll be murdering those on the station and killing innocent aliens as well. You espouse peace and acceptance and yet you show yourselves to be as callous as the worst Klingon. Uncaring of the devastation you leave behind due to your traditions."

The words sank into S'linth like mating fangs: incessant, hot, irresistible. Though the captain spoke to Sha'a, S'linth felt as though the words were tailored for him and him alone. The echo of his previous sentiments only enhanced their barbs, making them impossible to ignore.

Sha'a continued to speak; his tone made it sound as if they were discussing the price of fertilizer in a casual afternoon meeting. "You don't know the first thing about our culture. Your specialist has scanned a cube or two about us and now you profess expert knowledge? You try and stretch a skein across a skeleton that does not fit. This is Resaurian business, Captain. I told you at the beginning, Resaurians deal with Resaurians. Even those who've spent millennia on the station would agree. Even unto death."

S'linth knew nothing of humans, but the small upward stretching of the lips looked exactly like baring of fangs. "And I said at the beginning, Third Councilman Sha'a, you should speak with them before making such a blanket statement. You see, I have spoken with them, as have my crew. And they've a very different opinion of this matter. Those grandchildren have been working alongside my away team to save the station you consigned to oblivion."

The creasing lips did indeed turn into a baring of fangs, albeit small ones; the captain's words spiked in intensity. "That's right. Grandchildren. The aliens you put on the station have been dead for centuries, and their children and grandchildren have been toiling on a prison barge that has lived centuries beyond when it should've been decommissioned. Would you like to see those children at work?"

S'linth felt as though a disemboweling fire claw had struck, spilling his insides onto the deck.

When no Resaurian moved, the alien captain shook his head in disgust and slashed his hand in the air. A new image materialized on the viewscreen. Though in slow motion and incredibly fuzzy- in a detached way he realized the recording had occurred across a time dilation- S'linth easily picked out the Resaurian young. Their size gave them away immediately. Nevertheless their blue scales stood out like neon. Young. True Resaurian young.

A miasma of disgust washed through the bridge, practically choking all. That they'd participated in keeping Resaurian young in fearful, dangerous servitude for endless cycles made them all physically ill. It didn't matter that they'd not known. The guilt hung around their necks like months-old skin sheddings, and would not dislodge.

Captain Gold's face appeared once more. "Would you consign the children to death as well?"

Fang and claw, the words struck at S'linth's soul.

"I will not stand for this deception," Sha'a finally responded, his voice low and dangerous.

"There are no young on that station, and that you would use such against us shows the monsters you are. It will be my pleasure to see you destroyed in the Demon."

A deep, long hiss burst from S'linth, forcing every Resaurian in hearing to puff out his neck muscles in a reflexive defense. Hiding in the nest when you don't like what your eyes lay plain before you. The humans knew nothing of Resaurian young and could not have replicated such a fine forgery. All they had said had been the truth from the beginning.

With a suddenness he'd become known for on his rise to captaincy, S'linth made his decision. Though it felt like shifting the weight of the nest, he moved forward and spoke words he never believed it would be possible to say. "No, Councilman, you will do no such thing."

"What?" Suliss slithered forward. "How dare-"

S'linth whipped his head in the nictitator's direction, bared his fangs, and piled out the hatred and rage that had built hour after hour. The spitting hiss caused the nictitator to stumble backward and cower against the wall; he had no wish to accept a challenge he would lose.

"Security, remove this unproductive from my bridge immediately." He turned away before watching for a response; he did not doubt his crew.

Sha'a did not realize when he'd lost. "So, you betray me. After all I've done. You would violate every tradition of our people. Betray them for aliens." At a genetic level, the voice of the councilman pulled at his loyalties. However, S'linth had witnessed too much for his conscious brain to give in to such directives without question anymore. He no longer felt under the command of the councilman.

"Security, remove Sha'a from my bridge as well. Keep them in separate holding cells until we return to the nest." He turned away without once acknowledging Sha'a. To do so would only give some validation and leave a crack open for his crew to doubt.

With the most difficult part past, S'linth turned back toward the viewscreen to find wide eyes and open mouths on the aliens; he couldn't be sure what it meant, but at this point it didn't matter.

"Captain, I believe you hailed me with an offer?"

The captain slowly nodded, closing his mouth.

"If you will trust me with your plans, I swear, we will help bring our children home."

Chapter

12

Sonya Gomez stepped through, onto the bridge of the da Vinci, before the lift doors had fully whisked open. Bart Faulwell and Carol Abramowitz met her on the upper landing. Both of them threw protocol out the airlock and folded her into an awkward three-way hug. "Welcome home," Bart whispered. His breath was warm against the side of her face, and smelled of apples.

Sonya smiled thinly. "Good to be back," she told them both. Even if this wasn't over, it did

feel good to have the familiar feel of the da Vinci around her again. A swaying feeling of vertigo washed over her, but she held her footing. "You might want to clear the bridge," she said.

"We were on our way out," Carol told her. She broke away first, headed for the lift. Bart followed after a final, brotherly squeeze on both arms.

The bridge felt tense, but together in a way Sonya had never felt on the station, with warring factions and secrets being kept. Joanne Piotrowski nodded a greeting from tactical. Even Tev's natural surliness seemed light by comparison to what she had lived through, though he did not welcome her back with the same enthusiasm that her friends had. He merely grunted at her arrival.

David Gold was no more forthcoming with his feelings. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Of course, with the main viewer open onto the bridge of the Dutiful Burden, she expected her captain to maintain a respectful distance. The three-way alliance he'd put together was built on intimidation and the threat of imminent death for all concerned. He did shift around in his seat, looking back at her. "Keep it smooth, Gomez," he said, sotto voce. "Not too many bumps." And he tipped her a casual wink.

The confidence in his gaze, regardless of what he might feel inside, warmed her. "Yes, sir."

She moved to the main panel, pulled up readings on the Resaurian station, the Dutiful Burden, and the da Vinci's position within the black hole. A small, green candy sat on the edge of her lower panel, still in its twist of wrapper. From the side, a hand covered in coarse, brown hair crept in to pluck the candy from its resting spot.

"That's not exactly regulation," she said, seeing in her peripheral vision that the Tellarite still stood there.

"Faulwell," Tev said, as if that explained everything. In a way, it did. "He rode across the photon sphere on the bridge."

She glanced sidelong at Tev. Most times, the stodgy engineer would have demanded nonessential personnel to stand clear of the work areas. Then again, there had likely been a great deal more to worry about than a quiet cryptographer and a cultural specialist standing nearby. "What was it like?" she asked. She did not need to specify, Sonya knew. Not with Tev.

"Magnificent." He nearly let it rest with that, then, "You should have been here to see it."

Sonya nodded, sensing that the Tellarite had just offered her a very left-handed compliment. "I'll see it on the way out," she told him. "Ready?"

"Always, Commander." He moved back to the science station, unwrapped his candy, and popped it into his mouth.

Sonya checked in with Stevens, who continued to monitor the power systems aboard the station, and Pattie, standing by aboard the station bridge. Both reported they were as ready as they could be. "All hands report ready to go, Captain."

"Can we pull anyone else off first?" Gold asked, a measure of concern laced into the

request.

"Fabian can't leave the reactor distribution venues, in case new calibrations become necessary. Pattie insisted on staying behind as well. This three-way anchor is our weak link, especially given the station's sheer bulk. She'll make it work, sir." She didn't bother to tell Gold that Corsi was unlikely to leave the team unattended on a station surrounded by potential hostiles without anything short of a direct order, and perhaps not even then, and Rennan was backing up his superior.

"Make it happen, Gomez."

Sonya passed along her orders, and Tev loosened the da Vinci's grasp on the station just enough to allow the vessel to climb against the Demon's intense gravitational pull. Using his "bootstrapping" technique, he punched one dekyon beam into the curved wall of space-time, then another farther up, and slowly merged the two. The extra pull allowed the da Vinci to struggle along several dozen kilometers.

"Hang on, Tev. Dutiful Burden, go."

The Resaurian vessel performed the exact same wall-climbing maneuver while the da Vinci anchored the station in place. Once they were at an equal position, the anchor was tightened and the station slowly dredged up from the Demon's maw.

It was working!

This time she gave the Resaurian vessel the lead position, sending them scaling up the warped space-time ledge. Like a pair of rock climbers hauling an injured partner up a cliff face, first the Burden edged its way back toward normal space, then the da Vinci, and again the station levered itself up once both vessels had hammered in their dekyon pitons.

At one point during its turn at hauling, a gravimetric wave broke over the bow of the da Vinci. The small Saber-class vessel weathered it as though it had been a large sneaker wave crashing over the prow of an old ocean-going vessel; the ship gave a shake and a roll, and then burst forward with an extra kick from the engines.

At one-point-four-five Schwarzschild radii the raw gravitational force had lessened to the equivalent of twelve billion Earth-gravities. Lessened! Sonya almost laughed at such an idea. The gravitational tide between vessels and station was approximately two hundred million gravities. The da Vinci groaned and labored against the pull, but up the station came.

"Coming up on the photon sphere," Tev called out.

Sonya spared her engineer's curiosity only ten seconds, glancing between her monitors and the main viewscreen. She saw the Einstein Rings bulge out from the compacted starscape. The troika of vessels now hung on to the division between eternal night and a universe of possibilities.

Another gravimetric wave slammed into them, bucking the ship.

The Demon was reluctant to release its prey.

"Not my ship," Gold muttered, his deep voice carrying across the bridge. "Not today."

Slowly, painfully, the starscape crawled down toward the bottom of the viewscreen. Sonya watched, coordinated, and worried. The irony did not escape her. Starfaring vessels, each capable of traveling across light-years in short order, clawing and scrabbling for simple kilometers. Ten here. Twenty there.

At three complete Schwarzschild radii, an impressive nine hundred kilometers from the singularity's center, she began to breathe easier. Tension eased from her shoulders, and she dry-swallowed some life back into her throat.

At five radii the ships had shed two orders of magnitude in gravitational pull, and she lengthened each leg of the journey, allowing the da Vinci and Dutiful Burden to eat away a full hundred kilometers on each stride, then a thousand. Soon they were able to drop the dekyon beams and proceed under normal propulsion, fighting their way past an orbit of one thousand kilometers, a simple fifteen thousand gravities. Gold passed the word to bring his own people back from the station, and then shifted screens aft.

A dark circle of night shrank from the da Vinci as stars reclaimed the sky. And from out of the Demon's mouth came the Resaurian station.

"Gravitational pull falling past one hundred fifty G's," Sonya reported at three million kilometers' distance from the Demon. Both vessels were under full impulse, racing away, the danger past. She used the back of her sleeve to pat the sweat from her brow. "Let's not do that again anytime soon, please."

"No promises," Gold said, but he was grinning ear to ear. "Not in the S.C.E. Wong, put us in a very distant orbit around the Demon, please." He thumbed open an all-hands circuit. "Stand down from alert, investigate all spaces and make damage control reports to the bridge." To his main bridge crew he said, "Rest easy, everyone."

Haznedl slapped Wong on the shoulder. Piotrowski kept to herself at first, though she whooped a moment later when Corsi led Konya and Stevens out of the turbolift.

"Everything's in okay shape on the station," Stevens reported. "A bit bouncy, but we made it through."

"Lot of engineers and extra security crowding my bridge," Gold complained with a smile. There was no mistaking the relief in the captain's voice. "Why don't some of you get cleaned up and rested?"

Sonya nodded wearily. "I volunteer for that duty." She felt grubby and bone weary, but also a great deal of pride in a job well done against overwhelming odds. After a shower, she expected to feel even better.

Tony Shabalala entered the bridge, a small bandage on his head, but otherwise apparently fit for duty; he relieved Piotrowski, who followed Fabian and Rennan toward the lift. Sonya trailed, and was stopped briefly on the upper landing when Tev put a large hand on her shoulder. "Yes, Tev?"

The Tellarite paused, shuffled from one foot to the other, then snuffled a short laugh. "Good to have you back, Commander."

Sonya smiled, felt it reaching up into her eyes. "Thank you." She headed for the lift, still looking forward to that shower.

But she doubted it would make her feel any better than she did right now.

Chapter

13

Gold stood in the transporter room and felt like a cloth bag of loose bones that might break if he set any one angle down wrong. How long had he been up? His mind had passed beyond caring.

Before him, Captain S'linth and the frail station leader Es'a both stood on the low stage, ready to transport to the Dutiful Burden and the fate that now stood before them. They both looked at him expectantly.

"Captain S'linth," he began, trying to ignore the film of too many hours awake on his teeth and the oily feel at the tip of his hair. "I must say, I can only imagine what it is you've done today, and yet it impressed the hell out of me. I also know a captain is only as good as his crew, and for them to follow you into what surely will be trouble speaks even more about you."

The Resaurian closed his eye membranes and bowed slightly. "It is I who am honored. You showed me not all aliens are to be feared, or despised. You have shown the Federation holds its morals in deeds, not just actions. This has brought me hope for our future, as we continue to explore the regions near the nest."

Gold couldn't help the raised eyebrow. "You think you'll be able to continue to explore space with all you've done? Don't get me wrong, I'd love to run into you at any corner of the quadrant, but... just seems like you've stirred up a hornet's nest and a whole heap of trouble to boot."

"I don't know exactly what a hornet's nest is, but trouble, yes, I believe I have broken the egg and then some."

"Captain," Es'a interrupted. "There will be troubles, no doubt, but please do not worry. I and those with me shall see the Council is far too busy to deal with Captain S'linth." Though the Resaurian was frail and unassuming, Gold immediately changed his mind about him. A lot of steel there, no doubt about it.

"Then good luck to you both, and I wish you well in the new world you're about to create."

After their departure, Gold found himself walking down the corridor of his ship, satisfaction radiating its usual warmth of a job well done. It was the kind of warmth that might carry over into solid, dreamless sleep. He stepped out of the turbolift to the bridge. Looking around, he saw that beta shift was on watch. Ironically, that meant that Piotrowski, having already done a chunk of alpha shift substituting for Shabalala, was now back on duty. The captain almost stepped back inside and then decided he might as well sign off on his log entries for the day. As he crossed to his ready room, he noticed Gomez and Konya, standing together at the rail, watching the Demon get smaller on the viewscreen.

It was the work of moments to pull up the log entries regarding this incredible day, and copy his signature over them. He passed back through the bridge on his way out. "When you're comfortable, Rusconi." The instruction to the conn officer was his only order. It was enough.

Sometime later- it actually unnerved him that he'd never recall how much time later- he sat on the side of his bed, having just finished prepping for sleep. The warm embrace of the bed called to him, and for once in a long while he knew there would be no dreams. The nightmare that had awakened him so many hours ago would not trouble him. Just as the ghosts of lost crew would no longer trouble him either. He'd finally come to terms with it and laid them to rest. Where they should be.

With a sigh of contentment, knowing his ship (and of course his granddaughter) were safe, Gold closed his eyes and fell asleep before he could even command the lights off.

* * *

Having watched the turbolift doors whisk shut behind Captain Gold, Rennan Konya relaxed, resting forward on the bridge's upper landing rail next to Gomez. The commander had refreshed herself since their time on the Resaurian station. Her black hair was neatly back in place. She smelled of soap and had donned a clean uniform without grease smudges or dusty cuffs.

A small abrasion on her temple and a split fingernail seemed to be her only physical reminders of the entire adventure. Rennan had a good-size egg on his forehead from the steel pipe, and a nice bruise over his solar plexus to remind him that it just wasn't a good idea to grab Sonya Gomez unannounced.

They'd all gotten off easy.

On the main viewscreen, the Demon looked over the bridge with its dark, baleful eye. "I've never been one to endow inanimate objects or stellar phenomenon with human traits," he said. "No 'happy suns' or 'hostile weather.' But I would almost be willing to swear that it hates us." Almost.

Gomez shrugged. But it was an uneasy shrug. "Back on Earth I once had a motorized scooter I named Lucifer. It was always breaking down and stranding me someplace. I'd take it apart and put it back together, trying to make it work. And it would, for a while."

"How old were you?"

"Twelve. I knew very early that I wanted to be an engineer."

At the conn, Robin Rusconi plotted a course back to their original assignment, ready to go to warp once all gravitational effects from the black hole had diminished to safe levels. Piotrowski was back at tactical. She looked bored, and was resisting the urge to crane around to look at Gomez, ask her about the station, or just simply gossip. No Betazoid training necessary to detect that; Rennan had seen the two women get along well on and off the bridge. And beta shift was rarely an exciting time.

If Gomez had shown any desire for it, he would have turned back to his security station and left her to entertain the young ensigns. But the commander seemed perfectly content to relax with him. Wanted something from him, in fact, he sensed. A shield, perhaps, to prevent her from having to talk about the event so quickly.

Of course, it could also be a piece of wishful thinking. He could delve into her surface thoughts, see if it happened to cross her mind, but just now he preferred to have his nice,

safe little mystery.

"I never did thank you for coming to look for me," she said suddenly. "Did I?"

Rennan shook his head. "Now that you mention it, no. Though at the time you were most forceful with your... opinion."

"Sorry about that."

Silence reigned for a short time. The Demon's eye shrank down until it could hardly be discerned from the dark voids that fell between stars. Rennan finally shrugged off her apology, then asked, "What about Lucifer? That motor scooter? Whatever happened to it?" It wasn't that important. It just seemed a good piece of trivial conversation.

"I finally took it apart and never put it back together. So I guess I got the last word in, didn't I?" She laughed, low and throaty. "But it kept its secret to the end. That was one of the other things I learned early on. Some things we just aren't meant to discover."

"That seems a fairly odd sentiment for an engineer."

She smiled a secretive little smile. "I never said I liked the idea." Gomez glanced sidelong at him. "For that matter, you're not typical security either, you know."

"I know."

"Well, for what it's worth, I'm glad. Leaves any haphazard shooting that needs to be done to those of us who don't know better."

That sounded like another apology. And a heartfelt one, he knew.

"Commander," Ensign Rusconi called out. "Ready to go to warp."

"Go ahead," she said. "Get us the hell away from that thing."

Stars stretched out for a brief moment, then snapped into fast-paced light that slipped away quickly toward the da Vinci's stern. The Demon was gone. And Gomez breathed a heavy sigh of relief. "I appreciate it, Rennan," she said, then turned for the door and an escape from the bridge. "Good night."

Rennan watched her leave, hands still braced around the upper rail, until the lift doors slid shut. Then he shoved himself off the rail and toward his own station. So she had wanted company until she saw that the Demon had been vanquished back among the stars. Maybe borrow a bit of his companionship, but nothing more. Did that help her feel safe? Or simply not so alone? He glanced back at the retreating stars once more. Either way, he decided, that was fine by him.

That was security's job.

Chapter

14

Tev stomped down the corridor and wondered if he was making a mistake. He'd thought

long and hard about this decision. However, logic seemed to play a much lesser role in this situation than he found comfortable.

Instead, his feelings demanded the overture, regardless of what his rational mind tried to say. Hence he stomped down the corridor, disgusted with his inability to simply say no. The simple fact that he had begun arguing with himself appeared to be a good indicator that he needed some type of resolution. But could this be what he was looking for?

He had already tapped the chime for the cabin Bartholomew Faulwell shared with Stevens before he could back out of it. A moment later Bartholomew stood before him, surprise spreading his features into a ridiculous parody of human emotions.

"Tev? What brings you here?"

Tev stepped from one foot to the other. "Well, if you don't want me here, I'll be going."

"No, Tev. Please. That's not what I meant. You just- you surprised me. That's all. Please, come in." Bartholomew's tone, from what little Tev had been able to determine about humans in his time among them, appeared to hold no hidden agenda, just pure sincerity. As Tev entered the room, the cryptographer happened to catch a glimpse of the small package the Tellarite carried.

"What's that?"

"This?" Tev said, raising the small box up. Why had he wrapped it? It made no sense. It didn't change the value of the gift in any way. Nevertheless, it had felt important to do so. Like so many subtle things he'd missed in his time so far aboard the da Vinci, he'd begun to realize that sometimes the little things were important too. Just as a point oh-oh-five fraction of variance in a warp field could have devastating results, so too could coworkers have difficulties if they were not calibrated appropriately.

And sometimes such calibrations required a brightly colored bow.

"Here," he said, without more preamble.

Bartholomew responded with an easy smile as he tore into the box.

"It's nothing. Really. But, you've been nice enough to share your candy with me. I felt it appropriate to share something with you. A present, if you will."

The human laughed. Not the brash harshness of mockery, but the hearty, good-natured laughter shared by friends. "You really didn't need to do this. We're friends."

Tev felt a small warmth spread within him and realized it came of this small step of acceptance. Eventually he'd understand how to take such steps with Sonya Gomez, and with others. In the meantime, little steps.

Bartholomew finished opening the box and pulled out the chip. "Um, I don't mean to sound dense or anything, but what is this?"

"I know that you enjoy writing letters. I also happened to hear from Dr. Abramowitz that you've created a program that will allow you to generate a replication of your letter. Well, this program will allow you to dictate the letters like a log entry, and when they replicate they'll do

so in your own handwriting." It had been such a little thing and yet he felt immense pride.

The cryptographer held it up and smiled that easy grin again, then chuckled. "Tev, I appreciate this. I really do. But, well, it kind of does away with the whole reason for writing a letter."

Tev blinked in surprise. It had never occurred to him that the human might actually enjoy such a laborious process as writing on paper when there were so many other ways to communicate.

Bartholomew spoke again, as though the silence made him uncomfortable. "Tev, I really do appreciate this. I know what you meant and I accept it."

Tev smiled back. "Thank you, Bartholomew." He reached out in the human gesture of a handshake. As he departed the room, he felt optimistic. He'd not quite gotten it right, but he'd tried nonetheless, and his error ratio had only been off by a small margin.

If he kept trying, he'd nail it.