

# CONTENTS

[Other eBooks in the Star Trek™: Starfleet Corps of Engineers series from Pocket Books:](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[About the Author](#)

[COMING NEXT MONTH: Star Trek™: S.C.E. #39](#)

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#38:Orphans by Kevin Killiany

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ORPHANS

Kevin Killiany



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# CHAPTER

## 1

### Eve of the Quest

Naiar stroked Striver's arching neck, following the rough pull of the currycomb with a soothing palm. His mount's blue-black coat already glistened in the source light streaming through the stable's doorway, but youth and beast enjoyed the ritual.

"Tomorrow," he murmured, Striver's ear twitching at the sound of his voice. "Tomorrow, the quest."

The riderbeast seemed unimpressed, but the creatures were not known for their sense of adventure. Naiar set the grooming tools on the shelf and checked the level of the feed trough. With a final pat for his mount, he let himself out of the stall.

In the stable yard he paused, his eyes following the curve of the world up and up until it was lost in the haze of the sky. Some mornings, just as the source breached the Dawn Mountains, Naiar knew the fabled lands above the sky could be seen, just for a moment, in the morning glow.

Until three fours of days ago, he had thought his destiny lay there, above the sky. That had been the goal of his proving quest.

But then the gnomes had appeared, stumbling out of the mountains near a fallen hollow. Strange creatures, shaped much like People, but short and hairless, or mostly hairless. Strangest had been their faces, with eyes above the nose, squeezed down toward the bottoms of their heads.

They had stayed awhile in his father's House, though they ate nothing they had not brought with them and drank only water, and that after they had added strange herbs of their own. The Doctors believed the gnomes feared some binding curse that would hold them to the land of the People, but Naiar, who had nearly choked when he tried a bite of their food, suspected the gnomes simply did not eat as People did.

The gnomes had said, in the days before they lost their speech, that they were seeking access, though to what was not clear. They had been fascinated by the stories of the hollows of the Builders and made much of the mirrors purchased from the Barony of Atwaan. The two who might have been female had listened for hours as Nodoc recounted the histories of mad giants and children who had wandered from the depths of the world generations before.

When they could no longer speak as People—their powers, the Doctors said, fading in this world—the gnomes had left the Tetrarchy and the borders of the known world. They had followed the direction of the source—duskward, away from the mountains—seeking the origins of the old stories. His father had given them writs of safe passage, though how far that would carry them in the wilds was uncertain. Not every House and Hold loved the Tetrarchy when the Tetrarch's armymen were not present. Most thought the gnomes to be mad, but Naiar knew now his destiny was to follow them, to learn the secret of this access.

The lands above the sky had always been there. They would be there still for him to explore when he returned from his proving quest. Though he was heir in his brother's stead, it would be many fours of seasons before his training in governance became intense. Time enough to pursue his dreams.

Turning away from the main compound, he made his way to the clan's birthing pool, sheltered in a hollow far from casual eyes. Ignoring the inviting scent of the water, he circled the pool to the memorial field beyond. The stones of the stillborn were unmarked, but he had long ago decided which were those of his clutch brothers.

"Tomorrow I go on my quest," he told the three stones slightly apart from the others. "I know it is a shadow of the great Journey the People are on. Less than a shadow of your journey. But..."

He paused, not sure what to add to that. After a moment's thought, he pulled a leather pouch from his belt. Transferring his flint and tinder to his tool pouch, he scooped a thick handful of soil from the center of the triangle of memorial stones and filled his fire pouch.

"I'll bring it back," he said, "and you'll see where I've been."

The source was nearing the end of its journey. Soon darkness would come. Already the hollow of the birthing pool was deep in shadow and a chill wind, working its way among the rocks, ruffled the sleek hair of his neck and arms.

"Tomorrow," Naiar promised again, and turned toward the house.

The yard in front of the great house was abustle with grooms and servants unloading the packbeasts of a modest caravan. Naiar recognized the sigil of Tolan, the second house of the Tetrarchy, and quickened his step. To see Miura before his proving quest...

"Ho!" The shout brought him up short at the threshold.

"Uncle!"

"No rush, son." The older man slapped his rounded shoulder, propelling him the rest of the way into the hall. "She's not with me this night."

Naiar lidded his eyes for a moment, embarrassed he'd been so transparent. Uncle Tolan laughed as he shed his heavy coat.

"No coat, boy?" he asked as a servant took his.

"You'll catch your death yet."

Naiar shrugged; the remark was not worth comment. Everyone knew the young, those who survived their birth and avoided the withering, did not feel the cold the older generations complained so much about. Still, he never met a relative who did not comment on his light jerkin and vest within a minute of their greeting. He hoped he'd be less predictable in his old age.

Torches lit the hall, though the source was not yet gone. The traditional quiet evening with close family before the quest was being replaced with a hasty feast in honor of his uncle's visit. Naiar minded not in the least; he greatly preferred hearing news of other households to the lecture on his House's history and their expectations of him as heir that he'd been dreading.

Miura across the table, her down golden in the torchlight, would have made the evening perfect.

At the moment the feast table was still being assembled, trestles and planks added to the everyday sideboard. Naiar suspected the kitchen was frantically adding fruit dishes and quickbreads to the modest feast prepared for the family of the House. Uncle Tolan would not care, knowing how close to dinner he'd arrived, but Cook would never let it get back to Tolan House that Nazent House had not excelled at a moment's notice.

Two servants entered from the family door, bearing a padded chair between them.

"Nodoc!" Uncle Tolan cried out with the same joy he'd had at the sight of Naiar. He towered over the tiny gray form of Naiar's older brother nestled in the chair, but seemed unaware that anything was amiss.

The servants lowered the chair, and Uncle Tolan dropped casually to one knee to be eye to eye with his cousin's oldest son.

"You've tales to tell, I'll wager," he said. "Consorting with gnomes, from what I hear."

"We all consorted," Nodoc countered cheerfully.

"Many spent as much time with them as I."

"But none have your keen eye and wit. I'll have the whole story from you before the evening's out. And a tale of my own to trade," Tolan added, glancing up at Naiar to include him in this last.

"What sort of tale?" Nodoc asked. "We've time before dinner."

Tolan cast his eye about the hall, gauging the state of readiness, and nodded. Naiar hooked a basket with his foot, overturning it to make a stool. The stream of servants flowed around their island without comment.

"A beast, a magical beast, by all accounts," Tolan said, "has been seen in the foothills of the Dawns."

"Near the Fallen Hollow?" Naiar guessed.

"At first," their uncle said, "though it's been seen elsewhere since, following the path of the source."

"How is it magical?" Nodoc demanded.

"It is very like an insect, but blue as an ice flower, with only eight legs."

"A blue insect is new, not magical," Nodoc said.

Naiar nodded, content to leave the conversation in the hands of his learned brother. The insect, hardly a beast, did not sound too remarkable to him.

"Even an insect that cries out in a voice like ringing bells?" Tolan asked.

"That we've never seen an insect with a voice does not mean all insects are silent," Nodoc answered.

“And missing a four of legs could merely mean an injury.”

“Did I mention,” Tolan asked innocently, “that the beast is the size of a packbeast colt?”

“You did not!” accused Naiar.

“When you say it cried out,” Nodoc asked, his mind leaping to another trail, “did it merely give voice or did it attempt to speak?”

“On that our witnesses are divided,” Tolan admitted. “But—”

“Tolan!” Nazent’s voice cut through the industrious murmur of the hall. “Where are you?”

“Here.” Tolan rose. “The slackness of my host forced his sons to hold court in his stead.”

“Ha. Then you are in good hands,” Nazent said. “I can retire in peace.”

“Not before we eat!”

The cousins linked arms, making their way toward the head table, which was arrayed with an overabundance of food. No doubt the Householder had delayed his entrance to give Cook time to present this feast. Thus is the loyalty of servants earned.

As Nodoc, borne in his chair, followed, Naiar made a business of righting the basket and returning it to its place.

A magical beast, perhaps following the gnomes? If friend, a valuable ally. If foe, a worthy opponent. By the time he reached the sideboard, the nature of Naiar’s proving quest had undergone another change.

## CHAPTER

## 2

### Four fours of days before the Quest

Theda Vinci was spiraling madly.

Centered on the main viewer was a dark blue-gray cylinder, nearly invisible to the naked eye against the blackness of space. With nothing to provide scale, its size was impossible to determine, but there was an unmistakable sense of mass. The thing was huge. Beyond it the field of stars was a sheet of diagonal streaks. At irregular intervals the image of the cylinder would jerk minutely and the streaking stars changed angle as Theda Vinci altered orbit.

Captain David Gold sat in his command chair and tried to convince his inner ear that the spinning sensation was all in his imagination. By trial and error he had determined this was most successful when he remained seated.



“Sensors are still unable to penetrate beyond the outer levels,” Lieutenant Commander Mor glasch Tev announced from one of the aft science stations. “We’ll have to get closer.”

Gold could tell from the set of his shoulders that Songmin Wong did not like the idea. He didn’t blame the conn officer; he knew enough about piloting to appreciate the concentration needed to hold the *Vinci* in a circle less than a light-second in diameter at warp one.

“What will that gain us?” he asked his second officer.

The Tellarite stifled an impatient sigh. Gold doubted Tev would ever lose his arrogance—he’d earned it honestly—but it was good to see him learning to curb expressing it.

“It will not be possible to determine that until we have gotten closer,” Tev replied. “But based on our last course adjustment, sensor efficacy should increase by four percent.”

“Wong?”

“We’re near tolerances now,” the young lieutenant replied, leaving the implications hanging.

“You recommend?”

“Pulling out to sixty-three thousand kilometers,” Wong answered promptly. He’d clearly been giving the matter a lot of thought while fighting to hold the *Vinci* in place.

“Faugh,” said Tev. “That’s no better than leapfrogging.”

Gold sat for a moment, considering the four percent. They needed more information; he wanted to have at least the outline of a plan in hand before the others arrived. But it would do him no good if he damaged his ship getting it.

Perversely, his left hand itched. It had been doing that when he was frustrated ever since he got the biosynthetic replacement after Galvan VI. Knowing it was psychosomatic, and knowing it was a common experience with prosthetics, did nothing to make the sensation go away.

“Your choice,” he said to Tev.

“Continuous scans offer the best chance of penetration.”

Gold nodded. “Wong, take us out to sixty-three thousand kilometers and continue spiral.” He stood up, resisting the urge to scratch his prosthetic hand as he made his way to the turbolift. “I think everyone’s had a chance to chew on the data. Haznedl, notify the team we’ll be meeting in ten minutes.”

“Captain!”

The urgency in the tactical officer’s voice brought Gold up short.

“What is it, Shabalala?”

“There’s a Klingon”—he paused for a moment, evidently rechecking readings on his board—“warship approaching at warp five. It has not responded to hails.”

“Better make that fifteen minutes, Haznedl,” Gold said as he returned to his chair. “And call Gomez to the bridge. It seems the other half of our team has arrived ahead of schedule.”

“Faugh,” repeated Tev.

“Let’s not make them try to match orbits, Wong,” Gold said. He was aware of the turbolift opening and Commander Sonya Gomez, the ship’s first officer and leader of the S.C.E. team, taking up station behind him. “Jump five light-minutes ahead of the colony vessel and drop from warp.”

On the viewscreen the spinning star field executed a jarring pinwheel and righted itself. For a moment the streaks of starlight radiated in comfortingly straight lines from the center of the screen as the *Vinci* leapt ninety million kilometers in a matter of seconds. Then, for the first time in what seemed like months to Gold, the stars became steady points of distant light. They were in normal space.

“Let’s see who the Klingon Empire has sent us, Shabalala,” Gold said.

The image on the viewscreen shifted, and for a moment the bridge was silent as the crew regarded the ungainly shape bearing down upon them.

“Haznedl,” Gold said at last, “is there anything in our database about pregnant D-7s?”

The operations officer tore her eyes from the bizarre ship and rapidly tapped her console.

“Nothing fits that specific configuration, sir,” she reported at last. “But that does seem to be a modified D-7 attack cruiser.”

“Shabalala?”

“Sensors indicate the ship is constructed from components of various ages, evidently from other vessels.” The tactical officer paused, considering his readings.

“The flattened oblate spheroid under the engineering section is a troop transport module. Those were never used on attack vessels.”

Gomez frowned. “That looks a lot stubbier than the D-7s I remember.”

“You remember D-7s?” Gold asked. “I would have thought they were at least a century before your time.”

“From the Academy,” she said. “History of ship design.”

“Ah.”

“Obviously, the mass of the troop transport module alters the dynamics of their warp field,” Tev said impatiently. “They shortened the central pylon by twenty percent to compensate.”

The moment Tev said it, Gold saw it was true. The central pylon, what he thought of as the “neck” of the ancient Klingon cruiser, was indeed shorter than it should have been. Combined with the “flattened oblate spheroid”—which looked to him like nothing so much as a huge loaf of pumpnickel—it created a silhouette unlike any ship he’d ever seen. No wonder the database had not been able to identify the vessel; he was impressed it had recognized it as Klingon at all.

“Any response to hails, Shabalala?”

“No, sir, they’re—”

“What the hell?” Wong’s exclamation cut him off.

On screen, the Klingon cruiser swung about in a leisurely arc and took up position off the huge cylinder’s beam. Wong brought up an inset tactical display that showed the Klingon’s warp field in place as the pair passed the *theda Vinci*.

“Refresh my memory, Wong,” Gold said. “What is the minimum speed of a ship at warp?”

“Lightspeed, sir.”

“And they are at...?”

The tactical inset flickered as Wong reset the sensors. They flickered again.

“Point seven six light,” he said at last.

“Theories, Tev?”

“They are violating several physical laws,” the Tellarite growled. “And ignoring fundamental warp mechanics.”

“So noted,” Gold acknowledged. “Haznedl, pipe this information down to engineering. Tev, I want you and Conlon working on figuring out how they do this.”

“Why?”

“Because these are Klingons,” Gold said. “Unless we can prove we’re at least their equals, they’re going to ignore us.”

“Why not let them?” Tev demanded. “The object is heading into Klingon space, that’s why they’re here. Why not leave and let them handle the situation?”

Gold tapped his fingers lightly on the arm of his command chair as he watched the mismatched pair of ships on the screen. “Because I’m not altogether sure I’d like the Klingon solution to the problem of a giant colony vessel on a collision course with *Qo’noS*.”

## CHAPTER

### 3

By now, Nancy Conlon had steeled herself against Tev’s appearance in her engine room. Within the first few weeks of his arrival on the *theda Vinci*, she came to realize that he would never recognize that he was in her domain. From Tev, she would get no courtesy, nor would she even be treated as a colleague. True,

he had more experience and a higher rank, but it was still her engine room. Tev's predecessor, Kieran Duffy, had always treated Conlon's predecessor, Jil Barnak, with due deference whenever he came down here, and Barnak as a result gave Duffy a fair amount of latitude in the engine room. Tev, though, acted as if Conlon owed him that latitude.

When she stood to greet him, therefore, she expressed no surprise when he came around her desk and took her chair without comment as though she'd relinquished her position. He briskly cleared her screens without glancing at them, not noticing the relevant data she'd organized nor her preliminary sketches, and without a word of greeting, launched into a summation of the problems facing them as though she were a classroom full of freshmen.

"What the Klingons appear to be doing is impossible," he pronounced, busily adjusting her screens and pulling up some of the same data he'd just removed.

"Therefore what they are doing is not what they appear to be doing."

Conlon listened with half an ear as he ran through a list of warp and physical principles which precluded a stable warp field at sublight velocities. Moving to an auxiliary panel, she called up an inventory of ship's stores. It took her a matter of moments to locate the components she wanted and flag them. With a few quick taps, she routed her list and orders that they be brought to engineering ASAP.

"What makes the Klingon feat look impossible is the limitations of human perception," Tev's lecture broke in on her consideration of necessary parts they didn't have. "And instrumentation that assumes the observer is human."

He was focused on her desktop display and she realized he was drafting a diagram as he spoke. Though she couldn't see the image, his gestures were quick and sure. Despite herself she was impressed with his ability to multitask.

"Human senses perceive any event which takes less than a fifteenth of a second as instantaneous," he explained. "Tellarites can discern events as brief as one twenty-fourth of a second."

And Klingons a thirtieth of a second, Conlon added mentally, and Vulcans something just under a forty-third of a second.

"As soon as I saw real-time data—numbers, not images—I realized what was happening." Tev spun her desktop display around so she could see his diagram.

She was not surprised to see it was very similar to her own. There was no getting around the fact that for all his pomposity the Tellarite knew what he was doing.

"Not bad," she said. "But it's clear you're not a ship's engineer."

"Oh?"

If she had been less sure of herself, the frozen tone of Tev's single syllable would have stopped her.

"You've got the theory," she said, tapping contacts on the auxiliary board, "but your design assumes unlimited matériel and ideal efficiency."

With a grin, she rotated her screen, showing him the schematics of her own design.

“We have components for three complete assemblies, which my people are already working on,” she exaggerated slightly. “If you have some ideas on what we can substitute here and here”—corresponding points highlighted—“we can have a fourth.”

Too late she kicked herself for not having a visual recorder going. Tev’s stupefied expression was priceless.

## CHAPTER

## 4

Bart Faulwell was literally two steps from the observation lounge when the meeting was announced. So far there was no need for a linguistics or cryptography specialist on this mission and he’d been prowling, pen and paper in hand, too restless to sit as he worked on his latest letter to Anthony. The process had become more protracted over the years, which suited him fine. The longer he took, composing the letter by hand the old-fashioned way, then recording the actual subspace message, the longer he could hold on to the feeling of spending time together.

He considered a quick dash to drop the pen and paper off at his cabin, but it didn’t seem worth the trip. Besides, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d been the first one to a staff briefing.

He expected Tev to be next, but it was in fact Soloman. The Bynar favored him with a preoccupied nod before settling down and focusing on a padd of his own.

Domenica Corsi and Fabian Stevens arrived together, and Faulwell was startled by a sudden stinging of his eyes at the sight of them separating at the door. It took him a moment to realize it had reminded him of Kieran Duffy and Sonya Gomez holding hands under the table in staff meetings—one of their near-comic efforts to keep their romance under wraps.

He shared the incident and his feelings with Anthony, knowing his partner would understand. When he looked up from his writing, he was surprised to see everyone but Tev had arrived; Pattie was just sliding onto her specially made chair. Across from him, Elizabeth Lense met his startled gape with a smile.

Captain Gold opened the meeting. “All right, people, we’ve had two hours, but now the other team has arrived. What have we got to show for our head start?”

“A multigenerational deep space vessel of classic cylindrical design,” Gomez recited briskly. “Propelled by a very basic ion drive. Nuclear rockets rotated the ship, the angular acceleration providing ersatz internal gravity. Right now neither is working; it’s coasting and spinning on momentum.”

“‘Coasting’ at two hundred and twenty-eight thousand kilometers a second,” Stevens said. “With that technology, attaining point seven six lightspeed required centuries of acceleration.”

Faulwell knew that maddening velocity, over three times full impulse but well short of lightspeed, had created a navigational nightmare for the *Vinci*. They had spent an hour repeatedly jumping ahead of the colony ship at warp and scanning it as it passed. Then for the last hour and a half they had been corkscrewing insanely around the axis of its course at warp one to stay abreast.

“Also considering the technology,” Pattie chimed in, literally, “at least a century went into its construction as well.” She touched a few controls. A schematic diagram of a circle comprising several interlocking rings appeared on the main screen. As she spoke, several sections of the diagram lit up. “The outer hull comprises several hundred meters of fused nickel-iron, probably an aggregate of asteroid material. This is reinforced by a gridwork of dense alloy similar to duranium but with an odd spectral signature.” A molecular model, with a few gaps, and a matching spectral band appeared below the schematic. “The decks we can scan below the outer hull”—Pattie interrupted herself with a crystalline sound of amusement—“or, from their perspective, above the outer hull, are of similar construction and appear to be filled with myriad large, inert items. One would guess long-term storage. The weight distribution problems in spinning something this size are enormous.” The schematic rotated and elongated, becoming a side view of the huge cylinder. Pattie continued to tap controls as she spoke, an apparently random pattern of bright green dots spread across the image. “The builders dealt with it by installing over one thousand nuclear rockets to govern rotation. They seem to have simply been mounted on the surface of the completed ship. Notice spacing is not uniform; their placement reflects internal mass.”

Pattie paused and on the screen green dots began to go dark. “At least five hundred years ago the system began to fail.” She looked to Gold. “Commander Tev was investigating how and why.”

“He’s working with Conlon on something,” Gold said. “Is his input essential right now?”

“No,” Pattie said. “Just curious.”

She turned back to the panel and tapped a few more commands. What Faulwell took to be stress or force calculations appeared along the top and bottom of the screen. Lines connected the equations to points along the length of the ship that glowed an ominous purple.

“Without the balancing thrust of the rotational rockets, the entire system is unstable. At this scale something as slight as a point-zero-one difference in density between sections could cause dangerous torque shears.” Pattie paused for a moment, her good humor of a moment ago gone. “Without more complete structural data I cannot say precisely when, but sometime in the next year at most...”

The numbers bordering the image changed as the purple points became a network of jagged lines. With surprising speed the image of the ship broke apart.

No one spoke for a moment.

“What makes that important right now is the interior,” Gomez said at last. “Based on what we could scan through the ends of the cylinder during our initial leapfrogging, the inner surface is designed to emulate a Class-M planet.”

“The whole thing can’t be full of air?” Faulwell asked.

“No,” Gomez assured him. “Angular acceleration keeps the atmosphere within a kilometer or so of the surface.”

“A kilometer or so,” he echoed. “Exactly how big is this thing?”

“Computer models indicate there are just under twenty-six hundred square kilometers of planetary surface in there.”

Faulwell's mind boggled slightly at the figure.

"Inhabited?" Gold asked.

"We think so." Gomez nodded to Lense.

"Analyzing the life readings, I've definitely identified half a dozen animals analogous to Terran mammals," the chief medical officer said. "Their groupings and proximity would indicate some are domesticated animals and others are the domesticators, though that's conjecture."

"Conjecture you think is accurate," Gold said.

Lense nodded, then glanced around the table at the others. "Extrapolating from what we saw through the bow, there are anywhere from thirty to sixty thousand colonists aboard that ship."

## CHAPTER

### 5

#### **Three fours of days and two before the Quest**

Terant, son of Terant, grandson of Terant, Baron of Atwaan, pretended he did not notice Rajho and Vissint enter the Hall of Memory. He knew they would indulge him this rudeness in his grief.

Through glassless windows above him the source light streamed in golden shafts to illuminate the brass marked tombs set in the far wall. He could hear faintly the bells of mourning and the choir of Doctors chorusing a song of comfort. The sounds were of another world. Closer above him he heard the chirp and rustle of birds for whom the rafters of this hall were home. From them he gained greater solace.

This hall had been one of the first great works of his grandfather. The first Terant had conceived of it as both monument and audience chamber for conducting ceremonies of state. From the rafters hung banners, faded slightly now with dust, of the Houses and Holds that had sworn the new baron fealty.

Terant the eldest was known to have seen the future and to have been the first to realize access to the hollows meant power. When he, a mere border warden, had deposed the old baron, it had been widely accepted that the blessings of the Giants, and perhaps through them the Builders themselves, had rested upon him. He had gathered others to his banner with promises of wealth, and gained control of all the hollows between the Wilderness and the Great River.

Terant's able government and shrewd business skills had brought prosperity to Atwaan. His armymen—the best paid duskward of the Tetrarchy—provided protection from dangers within and without. In exchange for their comfort and security, his subjects rendered the baron and his son and now his grandson their complete obedience and their lives.

There was no dust on the trophies, Terant noticed idly, nor droppings from the birds above. For all its air of abandonment, someone kept the hall clean. He wondered who had ordered that.

Along this wall, in niches and on pedestals, were treasures of uncertain value, oddities no one could identify wrested from the hollows of the Builders. The barony's wealth sprang from the trade in these curios; treasures of the Builders were highly prized as art and jewelry and even talismans. In the days of pomp, the crowds had kept to this side of the hall, avoiding the misproportioned sepulchres along the farther wall.

There were no court functions here these days. Terant now did as his father had done and held audience like any Holder, before the house where all who had business could see and approach. His grandfather's hall was a disused monument, a mausoleum that did nothing to calm his spirit.

He rested his hand for a moment on the throne of the Builders, a plain chair of massive scale, far larger than his grandfather's ornate seat atop the dais. Only his grandmother had not been foolishly dwarfed by its dimensions.

As a child he had explored the Hall of Memory seeking mystery, thrilling himself with the fear of ghosts. Now again he came seeking... something. And if there be ghosts, he would be glad for the comfort of their company.

But there was no comfort here; even the air smelled dead.

He'd had too much of death.

Rajho and Vissint were still waiting, carefully just beyond the edge of his vision. The Doctor General and Chancellor of State would not impose lightly on his solitude, and the two coming together boded something pressing, something that needed his attention. Stifling a sigh, he squared his shoulders and turned to face them.

Both nodded deeply, not the bow his grandfather had required, but the chin to chest of his father, not breaking eye contact. When authority is absolute, one need not add debasement to obedience.

"What news?" he asked.

Rajho looked to Vissint, who nodded for him to proceed.

"Baron, your wife is in good health," the Doctor said. "The water of the pool is pure, the herbs and unguents fresh and free of poisons."

"Wherein then lies the fault?" Terant asked.

"Perhaps"—Rajho hesitated—"something occurred during the pregnancy?"

"That—" Terant shouted, then stopped himself, biting back the next words. A deep, cleansing breath; a second. "That is what you said last time," he said, aware that the preternatural calm of his voice was more terrifying than any rant. "And the time before that; and the time before that."

He stepped toward the Doctor. To his credit the smaller man did not shrink back.

"In four attempts to conceive an heir we have followed all of your directions. Tell me"—his smile was slight and cold—"what have we to show for your advice?"

Rajho wisely said nothing.



“Sixteen memorial stones,” Terant answered his own question. “Sixteen stones in three years. Is this not remarkable?”

“Baron?”

Terant’s eyes snapped to his chancellor. Vissint understood he had thrown himself between Rajho and a spear. A bold move by a good man. Somewhere beneath his grief and rage, Terant recognized these men were not his enemies. He made the effort to modulate his voice.

“Yes, Chancellor?”

“I wish with all my heart your tragedy was unique,” Vissint said, “but it is not.”

“How do you mean?” The anger was shocked back into Terant’s voice. “Four pregnancies have ended in death—four fours of my children are dead—and you say this is not unique?”

“There have been no live births in all of Atwaan,” Rajho blurted in a rush, then flinched under the baron’s glare.

“Is this true?” Terant demanded. Then, when neither man spoke: “Is. This. True?”

“Yes, Baron,” Vissint answered. “No infant has been born alive in over a year.”

Terant paused, remembering the crowds, neat and orderly about the pavilion, picturing in his mind the populace. When was the last time he had seen a family with a clutch of infants? Not a four, no, not in the years since the withering had begun; but three or two or even one? He could not remember. There had been no babies. . . .

“And I was not told?”

“We sought a cure,” Rajho answered. “And forbore to tell you until we were successful.”

“And you did not warn me? Did not warn my wife?”

“We thought that of all the People,” Rajho said, “you would be spared.”

Terant raised his hand, forestalling words. He knew the Doctor was not flattering him idly.

Along the opposite wall, half concealed by pillars, were the sepulchres of the Giants. Mad, they had been, and dying, but they had caused all that was now Atwaan to be. Had caused him to be.

His grandfather had been young, newly made a border warden for the barony, when the Giants had emerged from the hollow of the Builders. His grandmother had been among them, a girl on the threshold of womanhood, the only one to survive the killing fever.

Young Terant the eldest had married her when she was of age. She had been head and shoulders taller and half again as broad as the brawniest champion, beautiful despite patches of skin left bare by the fever, and he had loved her. As their son Terant had been devoted to her and as he—who remembered his grandmother as a great, looming gentleness—had adored her.

No one breathed it aloud, but in their hearts the People believed the Giants were descendants of the Builders. And on the strength of her blood in his veins, the Doctors had conspired to keep from him a tragedy that scourged his people.

Journey! Had they thought to find the cure in his children?

“Dispatch riders,” he said. “Dawnward and duskward, upwater and down. Under my marque inform them of our plight—”

He caught himself.

“Do not reveal its totality, but hold back no medical detail. Inquire of their Doctors for any theory of cause or program of cure.” He raised a finger. “Make clear to them that there will be a reward commensurate with the usefulness of their information.”

“At once, Baron.”

Terant did not acknowledge the parting salute. His eyes, narrowed in calculation, were fixed on the sepulchres of the Giants.

## CHAPTER

## 6

### **Three fours of days and three before the Quest**

Conlon wrestled the two-meter section of power transfer conduit around in the much-reduced free space of the engine room. There really was no other place for the assembly. Her staff had rerouted everything that could be rerouted to auxiliary panels and were keeping as much out of the way as possible. When completed, the plan allowed sixty centimeters of side space along either side, but for now the entire central floor area was occupied.

The PTC looked deceptively light, but it was constructed of six phase-transition welded layers of titanium and transparent aluminum; the mass was considerable. She wished there was room for a nullgrav grapple as she muscled the conduit into its coupling. Bracing it in place with her shoulder, she triple-checked the fit before engaging the molecular seal.

The assembly was low-tech but complex. Not a combination that inspired confidence, but it was the best they could do outside of a shipyard.

A transfer shunt directed the plasma that would have gone to the nacelles into the rotating secondary attenuation chamber. The rotating chamber matched up with each of three constrictor segments, which magnetically narrowed—and intensified—the plasma stream. The constrictor segments each connected sequentially with one of four lengths of PTC, rotating like the barrels of a Gatling gun. At the far end was a collection chamber that split the flickering energy into two fixed PTCs—or would when she got them in place. These two longer bypass conduits carried the twin streams back to the nacelle channels.

With gross mechanical rotation, exact alignment was always a problem—nearly an impossibility when tolerances were measured in microns. Tev had earned them an extra margin of error by devising ablative stents for the floating couplings. Any flash would vaporize the sleeves harmlessly without refracting back into the peristaltic field. Their elegant practicality almost made her take back her remark about his not being a ship's engineer.

Almost.

At the moment Tev was checking her work on the constrictor assembly. She heard his surprised grunt at the first readings and listened as he recalibrated his tricorder and tried again. This time his grunt was approving.

Conlon smiled grimly as she tightened the duranium collar around her latest connection. In operation the system would be surrounded by a containment field running off the impulse drive. At this level of energy—and risk—she was going for every scrap of protection she could.

Turning, she was surprised to find the first section of bypass conduit at her elbow. Actually, it was only one end of the conduit; the other, some three and a half meters away, was in Tev's hands.

Humanly impossible, she thought as she grabbed the conduit.

"Work will proceed faster," Tev said, "if we dispense with the progressive assessments."

Conlon loose-fit the PTC into the collection chamber without comment and waited while Tev made his connection before beginning the sealing process.

"Dispense with the progressive assessments," she thought, her smile grim. Not checking my every move is probably the highest compliment in that prig's repertoire.

## CHAPTER

## 7

### **Three fours of days and two before the Quest**

This time Faulwell was not the first to the meeting, he noted as he slid into the chair beside Carol Abramowitz. Tev and Nancy Conlon were by the main viewscreen, which showed an animated tactical schematic of the Klingon cruiser taking position alongside the colony ship. Scuttlebutt had it the Klingons had moved back and forth over the entire cylinder at close range before taking up position near its leading edge. This was a subject of some annoyance to those still trying to discern the colony ship's secrets from a maddeningly corkscrewing distance.

"The point, of course," Tev was saying, "is that no stable warp field can do what the Klingon field seems to be doing."

"Which means it can't be a stable warp field," Gomez said.

“Right,” Conlon said. “Their warp bubble is blinking on and off twenty-four times a second.”

“They are actually at warp less than half of each second,” Tev said. “But because they only move minutely with each warp, the net effect appears to be that they are moving through normal space at point seven six light.”

Stevens looked like someone had spit in his soup. “Hang on, a single warp drive can’t strobe on and off that fast.”

“It’s a series of warp fields.” Tev adjusted the screen, and the Klingon’s warp field began cycling rapidly through a rainbow of hues. “But not separate warp drives.”

“The warp signature clearly shows a single core,” Conlon said. A wave pattern appeared across the bottom of the screen. “But with a variety of harmonics.”

“Six of them,” Tev added.

“What they are using is six separate actuation assemblies,” Conlon said, “shunting between them in rotation.”

Faulwell wondered if he was the only one fighting off the impression that Tev and Conlon had become Bynars.

“How?” Gold asked.

“Imagine six parallel sections of primary plasma transfer conduit, each with its own constrictor segment,” Conlon began.

“Power is routed through each sequentially,” Tev took up the thread. “But just as it fully engages, the plasma is shunted to the next.”

“They’re riding the clutch,” Gomez said.

“Right.” Conlon grinned at the first officer. “But to do it without frying their transfer plate, they have to use six separate clutches.”

Faulwell shook his head. Every time he thought he was up on his engineering terms, at least enough to follow the conversations in this room, somebody would go and raise the bar on him. He didn’t understand a word Conlon or Tev had said.

“Why doesn’t everybody do this?” Gold asked.

Gomez answered this one. “Because eventually the on/off cycle will crystallize the plasma injectors.”

“Exactly,” Tev said.

Gold frowned. “Define eventually.”

“Two hundred hours, maybe more in a pinch,” Conlon answered. “And with anything over a hundred and sixty I’d want everything checked out by a starbase before we went on any long journeys.”

“You say we can do this?” Gold arched an eyebrow. “You’ve already set this up?”

Tev and Conlon practically beamed at each other.

“Chief Engineer Conlon devised the original design,” Tev said.

“Lieutenant Commander Tev figured out how to make it work,” Conlon interrupted.

“A detail,” he said modestly.

Faulwell saw Gold and Gomez exchange glances as others around the table straightened slightly.

“The engineering staff is conducting final tests now,” Tev added. “Though this is a formality. Chief Engineer Conlon and I assembled the system ourselves.”

“First Corsi and Stevens...” Abramowitz said under her breath.

A single bark of startled laughter escaped before Faulwell caught himself. He was just able to muster an expression of polite inquiry by the time everyone else in the room looked his way. He tried to kick Abramowitz under the table, but she had shifted her legs to the other side of her chair.

“We had four matched sections of PTC in stores,” Conlon went on after a slight pause, “but only three constrictor segments, which was a problem because at least four assemblies are needed to make the system work.”

“Three plus the existing drive...” Gomez began.

“I didn’t want to use ship’s primary systems any more than absolutely necessary.”

“Of course.”

Again, Conlon smiled. “Lieutenant Commander Tev solved this by putting the constrictor segments and PTCs on separate rotations.”

“So we’ll be strobing in three/four time?” Gold said.

“Exactly.”

“How long until you’re ready?”

“Thirty minutes,” Tev said. “The conn officer will need to be briefed on navigation under these conditions.”

“We’ll need to drop out of warp for eighteen of those minutes,” Conlon added, “to switch from the primary plasma transfer assembly to the strobe device.”

“Let’s get to it,” Gold said. “Everyone else get your ducks in a row. We meet the Klingons in forty minutes.”

\* \* \*

“Steady, Wong.”

On the screen the colony ship and its Klingon escort bore down on the *Vinci* at three-fourths the speed of light. Intellectually Gold knew the image was enhanced, altered to suit human eyes. At this range the dark-gray-on-black vessels would have been invisible. Even visible, their velocity would have distorted their shape to human eyes. But to Gold the sight of the mismatched pair was real enough.

They’d jumped five hundred and forty million kilometers, half a light-hour, ahead of the colony vessel to prepare for this rendezvous.

“Conlon, everything still go?”

“Spindizzy’s running hot and true, Captain,” came the instant reply over the intercom. “Ready when you are.”

The corner of Gold’s mouth quirked at the chief engineer’s nickname for the... well, what was a proper name after all? He envisioned the rapidly rotating lengths of plasma conduit interlocking sixty-some times a second, with constrictor units spinning independently at some ungodly speed of their own. “Spindizzy” seemed as good a name as any.

“Then bring Spindizzy online at your discretion, Conlon.”

“Engaged.” A pause, then: “All readings nominal. We’re good to go.”

“Come about,” Gold said to the conn officer. “Match speed and take up position on the opposite beam. Show them what we can do, but don’t make a challenge out of it.”

“Matching course and speed, mirroring position, aye,” Wong said.

*Theda Vinci* arced gracefully into its new heading. Gold saw the stars streak briefly as Wong held the warp field stable, interrupting the flicker for a fraction of a second to accelerate into position. A moment later they took up station on the colony vessel’s port beam, or port beam relative to its course, Gold amended mentally: neither ahead of nor behind the Klingon ship.

“We are being hailed,” Shabalala said almost immediately. “They say prepare to be boarded.”

Gold didn’t need to consult his granddaughter’s Klingon fiancé to know that was imperious even for Klingons.

He did not for a moment think their coming to him was meant as a courtesy. They wanted to see his ship without showing him theirs. He considered refusing, but keeping them out would require him to raise shields, something that could only devolve into a confrontation. Though some military historians might be interested in how a modern *Saber*-class starship would fare against a heavily modified, but still ancient Klingon ship of the line, he couldn’t imagine how that would help the colonists they’d come to save.

“Haznedl, have all personnel directly involved in the mission report to the observation lounge,” Gold said, heading toward the turbolift. “Shabalala, transmit the coordinates of our transporter room and tell them they will be welcome in five minutes. Then tell Corsi to send some people to transporter room one and warn Poynter that we’re about to have guests.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Oh, and tell Corsi to have Blue’s chair removed from the observation lounge. I don’t want to insult their captain by not putting him on an equal footing with me.”

Shabalala smiled. “Understood, sir.”

## CHAPTER

### 8

Kairn looked about with interest as the Federation vessel’s transporter room materialized around him. He was careful to betray no excitement, of course, emulating the weary professionalism of Captain Kortag. The captain made this seem completely routine, which, as far as Kairn knew, it might be.

Not so Langk, ostensibly second in command of the engineering team Kairn led. Head and shoulders taller than the others, Langk stood like a chieftain taking possession of a prize.

Langk was of the powerful House of K’Tal and destined for greater things—chief engineer of the Sword of Kahless within the decade, to hear him tell it. He obeyed as a warrior should, but let no one forget his social status. Where Kortag’s uniform was supple with years of service, Langk’s was polished to high luster, squeaking with his every movement.

Kairn hoped that whenever the young warrior managed to make a complete fool of himself, he’d do it without dishonoring the Empire.

For his own part, Kairn wore more cloth than leather, his only badge of status the Master’s dagger across his heart.

Facing them now were four humans, one male and three female.

The captain was instantly apparent; though not as grizzled as Kortag, he was just as gray. The practice of giving nursemaid tasks to senior warriors whose honored prime was past seemed common to both cultures.

The gray human surprised Kairn by speaking in precise, if heavily accented, Klingon. “I am Captain Gold. Theda Vinci is my ship.”

“Kortag, captain of the Qaw’qay’,” Kortag answered. Then, not to be outdone, he continued in the Federation’s language. “Commander Kairn, leader of the engineers, and Lieutenant Langk, his second.”

Kairn nodded in acknowledgment; Langk raised his chin a notch.

Captain Gold indicated the darker-haired female, then the golden one. “Commander Gomez, leader of the S.C.E. team. Lieutenant Commander Corsi, chief of security.” Then he indicated the woman behind the transporter console. “And Transporter Chief Poynter.”

That surprised Kairn; a mere technician would never be introduced to officers. Kortag grunted in unsurprised acknowledgment, evidently familiar with human custom. Langk turned his shoulder to the

technician.

“If you will accompany us to the observation lounge,” Captain Gold was saying, “we can discuss strategy.”

As he stepped from the transporter platform behind his captain, Kairn stole a quick glance at the light fixtures and another at the fit of the control console. The technician caught his eye and smiled, recognizing the professional appraisal.

Kairn cocked an eyebrow, engineer to engineer, before falling into step with the human engineer.

As they walked side by side behind the captains and ahead of Langk and the security officer, Kairn was very aware this was the first time he had been so close to a human. He clasped his hands behind his back to avoid accidental contact, content in her apparent decision to walk in silence.

His senses heightened by stress, he noted the air lacked the scents of a living ship. Shifting his eyes but not his head, he saw an overabundance of ventilation fixtures, though he felt no breeze. His fingers drummed idly on the hilt of his Master’s dagger as he calculated the volume of air they must be moving.

Behind him Langk cursed. Kairn turned to see the warrior staring, his hand on the hilt of the *’k tahg* at his hip. A huge blue arachnid stood on the threshold of a cross corridor. However, Kairn noted that a Starfleet communicator was attached to the apparition’s upper body. The beast must be a member of the crew.

“I have heard of Nasats,” Kortag’s voice carried from behind him. He and Captain Gold had also turned at the sound of Langk’s curse.

“Pleased to meet you, too,” said the creature in a voice like crystalline bells.

“This is P8 Blue,” Commander Gomez introduced. “She’s our structural engineering specialist.”

Langk compensated for his first reaction by nodding to Pattie as an equal. Every now and then he surprised Kairn into thinking there might be hope for him.

The Nasat mirrored the nod solemnly, curling its—her—antenna nearest the humans. As the group resumed its way to the observation lounge, she fell in beside Kairn.

“What do you make of the energy source?” she asked conversationally.

“Energy source?”

“Large source of radiant energy.” She took his obtuse question in stride. “Appears just below the forward hull every seventeen or so hours, then seems to fade.”

Kairn considered for a step. Much of this was to be discussed openly in a few moments, so there was no point in secrecy on this issue.

“An apparent artificial sun,” he said neutrally. “It takes just over eight point five standard hours to traverse the interior of the vessel from bow to stern.”

“I was afraid of that.” P8 Blue made a sound like a breeze through copper wind chimes. “A



seventeen-hour day will play hell with our sleep cycles and won't convert easily at all to standard time. We're going to spend a lot of energy wondering what time it is."

Kairn was still considering whether this was Nasat humor when they entered the observation lounge.

There were a half-dozen other Federation personnel already there, standing to greet the visitors, but Kairn barely registered their presence. His attention was completely captured by the huge windows. He doubted there was that much transparent aluminum aboard the *Qaw'qay'*. How complex must their structural integrity field parameters be to compensate?

Kairn did not consider the effect of using his dagger until it registered that the Federation engineers were suddenly silent. He'd meant to work quickly while they were distracted with being presented to Kortag, but the glint of his blade extended before him had drawn every eye in the room. He slowly lowered his hand until the blade was flat across his stomach.

Langk snorted derisively. Kairn saw Kortag's hand move, perhaps a centimeter, enough to silence the young warrior. He thought he saw a faint glint of amusement in his captain's eye, but no help. It was his blunder to deal with alone.

The Federation structural engineer saved him from having to speak.

"May I?" she asked, extending one of her hands.

Kairn paused. One did not surrender one's dagger lightly. On the other hand, one did not wave a blade—even a Master's dagger—in another's house without explanation. He offered it to her hilt first.

The Nasat peered closely at the dagger for several seconds, turning it over several times as she studied the blade. The other engineers seemed content to wait as she made her examination, Kairn noted. Professionals waited for information before they acted. He hoped Langk was taking notes.

Kairn knew P8 Blue had deduced the dagger's purpose when she extended her arm and began waving the blade experimentally before her. She laughed, a delightful tinkle of glass.

Turning from the window, she extended the dagger toward a stocky officer near her captain. Kairn realized he was more powerfully built than a human, with a commanding, aggressive mien: a Tellarite.

"Commander Tev, you are—" She stopped herself.

"No, that can't be right." She considered the blade a moment. "Of course," she turned to Kairn. "This is made to your dimensions."

"Every Master Craftsman fashions his own," he said neutrally.

She peered at the edge, turning it so the etchings along the flat of the blade caught the light.

"My Klingon is not good, but this is a scale, and these conversion factors, while this"—she flipped the dagger and sighted at an angle along the opposite side of the same edge—"handles proportion and ratios."

She looked around the lounge at her teammates and seemed to realize she'd lost them.

“It’s a measuring tool,” she said. “Depending on which edge he uses and what angle he holds it at, Kairn could use this to tell you how many square centimeters of fabric are in your uniform or the displacement of the da Vinci.”

She reversed the blade, offering Kairn the hilt.

“Before we part company,” she said, “would you instruct me on fashioning one of my own?”

Kairn’s hand hesitated midmotion. He knew Captain Kortag’s heart; there was little chance the two ships would part on friendly terms. He lacked the guile to smile as he retook his dagger.

Commander Gomez presented the remaining Federation engineers, introducing four more humans, a lone Bynar, and the Tellarite. Though Kairn did not retain names, he was impressed by the range of specialties included. What role would a cultural specialist or a physician play in engineering? This team was obviously intended to deal with a wide range of situations without support.

He introduced himself and Langk when she finished. Captain Kortag had already identified himself to the only person aboard the Federation vessel who mattered.

The courtesies attended to, Kortag took the proffered seat, identical to the Federation captain’s facing him from the opposite end of the table. Langk and Kairn sat at either side of him as Gomez and the Tellarite flanked their own captain.

In Federation fashion the others attempted to leave the visitors enough space, crowding toward their end of the table. However, even with their security chief standing by the door, there simply was not enough room for formal separation. Kairn found himself elbow to elbow with the Nasat, which, he decided, he did not mind at all.

For the next forty minutes the technical data flowed freely. The Federation engineers had done a thorough job of modeling the alien vessel. They had missed the entry ports, but their deep scans revealed much of the structure that had eluded the Qaw’qay’.

Even Langk was not immune to the spirit of cooperation, questioning the Tellarite’s assessment of some detail, then conceding the point. Kairn could not remember the last time that had happened.

Kairn found himself comparing the two captains. Both followed the multiple conversations with evident interest and comprehension, but offered no comments of their own. Clearly each was comfortable with letting the specialists under their command work in their own way. The two looked to be of an age, but he knew nothing of how human longevity compared to that of Klingons. For all he knew, Captain Gold was twice as old as Captain Kortag, or had only half his years.

When his captain shifted slightly in his chair, Kairn knew the period of conviviality was about to end. Langk realized it, too, straightening in his seat and resuming his imperious warrior’s air. The others, of course, noticed nothing.

“Have you determined their point of origin?” Kortag demanded.

“No,” the Tellarite, whose name, Kairn recalled, was Tev, said shortly.

“No,” Kortag echoed, and waited.

Kairn knew his captain understood why they had been unable to discover the colony ship's home system. He wondered whether Kortag thought the Federation was withholding information or simply using the issue as a pretext for confrontation. Both seemed likely.

"From its current heading, we know the vessel passed through the Dancido system about six hundred years ago," the Tellarite said. "Where it was attacked, apparently over a protracted period of time, by the Dancidii."

"Six hundred years ago?" asked the smallest human female. The cultural specialist, if Kairn recalled correctly. "That was during the Dancidii unification. They hardly had space flight then. Their armament would have been—"

"Primitive nuclear missiles," Tev finished.

The image of the colony vessel on the viewscreen rotated, shifting from a schematic diagram to a graphic representation. Centered in the screen was a ragged trench about a third of the way back from the leading edge of the cylinder. Kilometers wide, it formed an uneven collar ringing half the ship's circumference. Several craters of various sizes were grouped around the trench.

"There was apparently a structure here which the Dancidii took to be the control center," Tev said. "It was the target of at least fifty low-yield nuclear warheads."

Kairn knew from their analysis of the rotational rocket control network, something invisible to the Starfleeters' distant scans, that the Dancidii had been right. He did not need to look to his captain for guidance; he knew to school his face to remain blank. This was information they would not share.

"A navigational array would make sense," Gomez was saying. "The ship's rotation would provide continuous triangulation."

"That's a lot of firepower for a fledgling space force to deliver," the black-haired male—tactical systems specialist?—observed. "I wonder if this ship was the common threat that unified the Dancidii."

Tev shrugged, dismissing the speculation. "Either their impacts turned the vessel or the crew attempted evasive maneuvers. In either case the ship's course was altered. Extrapolating from the age of the ship and its limited maneuverability renders eight possible points of origin, all beyond the range of Federation exploration."

Kortag grunted. Clearly not satisfied, but resigned to accepting the Federation's limitations.

"You will download these speculations and all of your hard data to memory crystal," he ordered, rising. Kairn and Langk rose with him. "We will collect it in four hours. The Empire will remember your efforts."

He strode toward the door. For a heartbeat, Kairn thought the security chief was going to block their way. But responding to either an unseen signal or her own judgment, she moved well clear of their path.

"Explain yourself." The human captain's voice, speaking again in Klingon, caught them just as the automatic door opened.

Kortag paused just within the room. "It is a Klingon problem." He stated the obvious without turning. "Klingons will deal with it."

“The ship is in Federation space,” Captain Gold pointed out. “And will be for eight more days.”

“Your Federation asked us to come.”

“To work with us,” Gold said. “This is a joint mission.”

Kortag gave no sign he heard the words, much less granted their validity. He stepped forward.

“Our intent is to save the thousands of beings aboard that vessel,” Gold stated flatly. “You are welcome to either help us do that or get the hell out of Federation space.”

The human’s voice lacked Klingon heat, but so did a knife blade.

Kortag whirled at the threshold, his eyes blazing. Langk and Kairn stepped clear, but their captain didn’t charge. Instead he stalked back to stand behind his chair at the head of the table.

“The Klingon Empire does not exterminate helpless peoples,” he growled; his raised hand forestalled response. “Do not insult me by denying your insinuation.”

“Your choice, sir,” Captain Gold said in the same flat tone. “Do you go or stay?”

Kortag swept the Federation engineers with his glare, coming at last to the Starfleet captain.

“We have a common goal,” he said at last. “What do you propose?”

## CHAPTER

# 9

### Three fours of days before the Quest

I’ve done this before, Fabian Stevens told himself as he watched the giant cylinder rising under his feet. This is no different from landing on the Plat.

On the other hand, the Kursican Incarceration Platform had been spinning in orbit, not streaking through deep space at some ungodly fraction of the speed of light. And he had approached it, not hung in front of it like a Lilliputian matador taunting a planetsized bull. Well, maybe hung was not the right word. He—along with Kairn, Tev, Soloman, Carol Abramowitz, Pattie, and Lauoc—had been beamed into space directly in front of the colony ship moving at exactly the same speed. The plan was to slow down just enough to soft-land.

Stevens found it hard to brake; far too easy to imagine himself smashed to a monomolecular film on the spinning surface. Forcing the remarkably vivid mental image aside, he focused on aligning his flight with the garish, eight-pointed star that had been beamed to the center of the twelve-kilometers-wide plain of metal.

The visual target was intended to provide both orientation and a sense of scale to help them judge their

descent. For Stevens the kaleidoscopic effect also added motion sickness, but now did not seem like a good time to bring that up.

Stevens cringed at his own unconscious pun.

Kairn seemed to have no qualms about colliding with the gigantic ship. Stevens could see the coal black Klingon environmental suit “below” him and to his left, plummeting with apparent disregard for danger.

Tev’s white Starfleet suit, stockier than the usual cut, was perhaps a heartbeat behind. Stevens was glad to see the others—including Lauoc—matching his cautious approach. At least some of the away team was sane.

Lauoc Soan was their security contingent. Stevens didn’t know him well, but he was glad the Bajoran was along. Not that he was concerned about any possible danger from the colonists—or would they be “natives” on a ship so large? Tev was already showing signs of not adjusting well to being under Kairn’s command. The two might need a referee and he wasn’t up to it.

Domenica had wanted three security officers on the mission: herself, Lauoc, and Rennan Konya. The Klingon captain had rejected Konya out of hand; he didn’t want a Betazoid “mind reader” near his officers. Nor had he liked the idea of a security officer who outranked the mission leader being along.

But Lauoc, chin high on most people and muscled like a piece of beef jerky, had impressed the old Klingon. Part of it had been the web of scars from a Breen neural whip rising from his collar to just below his left eye, and a lot of it had been that Lauoc had served on the *Abraxas*, but it was the way he didn’t blink when Langk had threatened him that earned him the nod.

In fact, when the big lieutenant had scoffed at the idea of a Federation runt coming along to protect him, Kortag had surprised the hell out of everybody by pulling him from the mission. The warrior had started to puff up in protest, but the look in his captain’s eye had deflated him pronto. Stevens had the impression he’d be scrubbing induction coils by hand for the foreseeable future.

The second surprise had been Kairn’s tapping Pattie instead of one of his own to fill the vacancy. Except for that big guy, these Klingons were not running true to type.

With a start, Stevens realized he had daydreamed his way to within a hundred meters above the spinning nose of the giant ship. Wouldn’t do to meet oblivion mid-musing. He tapped his nav boosters lightly, slowing his rate of approach a bit.

The rotation was slowest at the center, but it was still enough to send Stevens stumbling as he touched down. He noted only Pattie and Lauoc seemed oblivious to the spin. In fact, the Bajoran seemed to land mid-stride on his way to the center of the target. With a few quick motions he erected the homing beacon.

“Da Vincito away team.” Shabalala’s voice crackled in his helmet.

It should not have crackled at this range. Instinctively Stevens looked for the *da Vinci*, but quickly looked down. The spinning canopy of stars was impossible to look at. He made a mental note to keep his eyes on the ground as much as possible.

Hull, he reminded himself, not ground. Though it was hard to think of a surface a dozen kilometers across as anything but the ground. It was a dark gray-blue he noticed, now that he was looking at it, and

pebbled, with wide, feathery arcs of light gray and white.

“Boarding party here,” Kairn said.

“You’re about four kilometers from the entrance,” Shabalala said. “Bearing one four seven.”

The bearing was of course relative to the homing beacon. The spinning surface made any objective reference system irrelevant.

Without a word, Kairn strode in the indicated direction, clearly expecting the others to follow.

One thing about Klingon leadership, Stevens thought, they don’t micromanage.

Abramowitz exclaimed suddenly.

“Problem?” Tev demanded.

“Footprints,” she said with a shaky laugh. “But they’re ours. I thought the gray was part of the hull material, but it’s dust.”

“Micrometeorite debris, held to the surface by the vessel’s forward motion,” Pattie said. “The spiral drifts are caused by its rotation.”

“Restrict transmissions to mission specific information.” With that, Tev ended the conversation.

Tellarites, on the other hand... Stevens did not complete the thought.

For the next twenty minutes he heard nothing except his own breathing and the almost subliminal whine and clank of his suit’s magnetic servos as the away team trooped across the metal plain. At first he divided his attention between watching where he put his feet and the directional readout, but that quickly paled.

These things should come with libraries, he thought. Then, being an engineer: Okay, wise guy, where would you put it?

He began running a diagnostic, more an inventory than anything else. These suits were so well thought out, finding space for a library without redesigning...

“Sir?” he said abruptly.

“Yes?” Tev and Kairn chorused.

Stevens paused for a moment, waiting for one or the other to say something else. When neither did, he went on: “My suit is using more power than it should.” He double-checked his figures on the heads-up display inside his helmet. “Every task is using about four percent more power than normal.”

“Your suit is malfunctioning?” Kairn asked, his voice ominously neutral.

“No, sir.” Stevens bet Klingons regarded their suits as part of their arsenal; failure to maintain a weapon

probably carried the death penalty. "I can't localize it, but the drain is coming from outside my suit."

"Halt," said Kairn. "Suit diagnostics."

Soloman was the first to answer. "Confirmed. My suit is also experiencing an additional drain on all systems."

"My suit is fine." Pattie's chuckle was crystalline.

Abramowitz snorted and Stevens grinned as he shook his head. Impervious to vacuum, the Nasat engineer was of course naked to space.

"However," Pattie added, "my utility harness seems to have lost about eight percent of its reserve power."

Stevens frowned. Her harness, which included the vibration microphone which allowed her to speak and magnetic boots along with a selection of potentially useful tools, used only a fraction of the energy a full environmental suit did. On the other hand, most of that energy was used in highly active systems.

"Double-check, everyone," he said. "Is most of your loss through active systems or storage?"

His theory was quickly confirmed as everyone reported active system drains.

"Energy collectors," he said. "Or maybe just one big one. Something that sucks power out of active systems. That's why our communications are breaking up."

"Aceton assimilators?" Kairn suggested.

Stevens shook his head. "Aceton assimilators project the energy they steal back at the source as deadly radiation. Ambient radiation levels are unchanged."

"On the other hand," Pattie said, "either we've traveled six hundred kilometers, or the beacon's signal is being absorbed as well."

"The pull of such accumulators is usually exponential," Tev said. "High projective energy devices such as tricorders should be used sparingly."

"That means our phasers are probably useless," Lauoc said.

Stevens nodded inside his helmet. Tkon accumulators absorbed phaser fire so rapidly the beams never reached their targets.

"We should go to minimum power levels," he said, "to reduce drain."

"Agreed," said Tev.

There was a pause as everyone made their adjustments.

"Tactical systems specialist," said Kairn.

"That's me," Stevens answered.

Kairn grunted and resumed his march toward the entrance.

Effusive in their praise, these Klingons. Stevens trudged behind. I'll try not to let it go to my head.

\* \* \*

With a final twist, Stevens activated the pattern enhancers.

Without waiting for a system check, Kairn gave the order: "Transport now."

"Transporting," Shabalala confirmed.

A shielded generator appeared, gravimetric grapple already engaged to grip the spinning surface.

If we had beamed one guy down with a pattern enhancer, Stevens thought as he helped Lauoc break the framework back down again, the rest of us could have beamed straight to the surface without risking our necks on the landing.

"Recharge." Kairn was speaking to Pattie, who was being held to the surface by Tev and Abramowitz.

"Gladly." The Nasat tethered herself to the generator before connecting the power feed. Almost immediately her boots clicked firmly to the surface.

Two kilometers from the edge, "forward" had become distinctly "down," and they'd had to engage gravimetrics to keep their footing. Pattie's harness, using a larger fraction of its smaller power reserves, was almost completely depleted.

"How is the power drain, Specialist?" Tev asked Stevens.

"About three percent of what she draws is disappearing." He watched the readout for a moment.

"Now it's four percent. I don't think we have much time."

Each of the others recharged their suit's systems in turn. Kairn was last, and by the time he hooked to the generator, less than ten percent of its energy was going into his batteries. The rest went... elsewhere. Stevens still could not determine how the siphoned energy disappeared.

The generator shifted position as Kairn disconnected.

"It's losing its grapples," Stevens said. "Better get it out of here."

"Let it go." Conlon's voice was barely recognizable through the static over the communication from the ship.

"Huh?" he asked brightly.

"Chief Engineer Conlon is correct," Tev said. "If the energy tap has locked on to the generator, beaming it aboard the da Vincimight enable it to access ship's systems."

They stood back as the massive device began sliding along a curving path toward the edge of the ship, two kilometers distant. It was lost to sight in moments.



A blue-gray wall, six meters by six meters, jutted abruptly from the surface, blotting out a section of streaking stars. Between them and it was a hole, also six meters square, discernable only as a featureless blackness against the dark blue-gray of the surface.

What sort of culture would make the entrance to their world a simple tunnel open to space? Stevens wondered. Then again, he had to admit, they had no idea what might be waiting just inside. He was fairly certain that once they crossed the threshold, the energy-absorbing field would block all communications with the Vinci.

Well, the mission design did call for them to be completely on their own for six days on the inside. With luck, sufficient time to survey possible locations for the control center. It would be at least that long before anyone called them, anyway.

By now, “down” was emphatically toward the outer edge. The danger of the hole was not falling in, but loss of contact that would fling them into space. They gave the square void a wide berth, approaching the wall from the side. Stevens noted it was only about ten centimeters thick and wondered if it could support them. A simple tricorder scan would have told, but might also have drained its energy. Best to save active scans for something more critical.

Kairn evidently had similar concerns. He used hand signals to order the others to remain, then stepped onto the wall alone. He stood for a moment, horizontal from their perspective, then gestured the others to join him.

Stepping to a perpendicular surface was awkward, but it was a relief to Stevens to reorient himself as they set his boots down onto the structure. Instantly the forward drag he’d been fighting disappeared as the wall became a ledge, “down” now firmly and comfortably toward the soles of his feet. The surface they’d traversed was now a wall stretching endlessly above them, while the stars...

Stevens turned quickly back to face the ship.

“Magnets,” said Kairn.

He paused as everyone switched off their high-energy gravimetrics, then entered the tunnel. With their suit lamps at the lowest setting, the away team followed him into the darkness.

## CHAPTER

# 10

Ahrhi uncoiled from the crouch, sword hand bracing her shield as she thrust upward with all the power of her thighs and back. The heart of her shield slammed her opponent’s elbows and its metal bezel caught his wrists, interrupting a double-handed down stroke meant to split her in half. The raider reeled backward, the broadsword flying from his ruined grasp.

The second raider lunged from her right, but he was a step too far and out of position, his shortsword still raised to hack down on her crouching form.

At the top of her leap, her weight barely on the balls of her feet, her belly floating free, Ahrhi spun to her left, away from her attacker, and reversed her sword. There was a moment's thrill of terror as the hilt spun freely about her lower thumb, but she caught it firmly, blade now flat along her forearm, as she came down.

She dropped to one knee, bending all the energy of her fall to thrusting her sword upward and back. Her heavy belly threw her balance off, but she jammed the point of her shield into the dirt, bracing herself as the bandit threw himself on her. She felt her sword pierce his unoled leather armor with a corn-husk crackle, the impact rocking her painfully forward against her shield and stomach. His weight fell across her back, one limp arm flailing across her shoulder to fling his sword into the dust before her as his face bounced against the crest of her helm.

Twisting her blade, she pulled and spun, rolling the corpse from her as she stood to face the third raider. Again her unaccustomed weight threw her off and her sure stance was flawed by a momentary stumble.

But the last of the border raiders was retreating, his back to her and his weapon undrawn as he labored the driver's switch to hasten the laden packbeasts down the trail. If he hadn't insisted on taking the plunder with him, she'd have been inclined to let him escape. As it was...

To her left her first opponent was struggling to gather up his sword, at least one arm clearly shattered, and scuttle to whatever cover the hillside provided. She left him to a lingering death and loped after his fleeing comrade. Her light shield swung from her forearm as her right arm cradled her belly.

Suddenly from behind her came the thud of riderbeast hooves galloping on the dirt trail. She turned, expecting to see Joac or even Lithal in the livery of Rowath Hold.

Instead a fourth raider, mounted on a rangy riderbeast of the lowlands, bore down upon her. Their rear guard. He had stayed concealed beyond the same out-crop of rock that had allowed her to catch the others unawares, waiting until she was exposed on the trail before charging. He wore not armor but peasant's homespun—evidently a disguise, for the deadly steadiness of his leveled longsword marked him as a practiced warrior.

Part of her brain noted she was not the only left-handed fighter on the trail this day as she assessed her situation. Here the pass was too narrow to evade him and cover was too many steps behind. Her only choice was to meet his charge. She stood tall, feet planted wide with sword hand again braced behind her shield, the blade angled down and to her right, clearly prepared for his frontal assault.

The rider thundered straight toward her, bent low over the pommel of the saddle, his sword aimed like a lance. For a long breath the classic cavalry charge against the classic foot defense seemed to play itself out in the morning source light. In the last heartbeat the outlaw stood in his stirrups, swinging the sword above his head, ready to slash down from over and behind her shield.

Timed as though they had rehearsed this moment a hundred times, Ahrhi leaned right, left leg straight as right bent low, and raised her right arm above her head. Her sword was slashing low and wide even as his split her shield. A backhand swing in the direction of the horse's charge did not carry as much force as a frontal blow, but it was a cut impossible for a rider in motion to block.

The riderbeast screamed as the sword tip sliced a shallow furrow along its ribs and the severed stirrup flew to clink metallically off the stone wall of the trail. The rider's foot landed with a more meaty thump just beyond. Screaming his own agony, the rider was barely able to cling to his mount's mane as the terrified animal plunged down the trail.

A wave of fatigue swept over her, and for a moment the narrow pass swam about her. She swayed, catching her fall by jamming the point of her sword into the dust of the trail, and stood for a moment, belly pressed to sword hilt, right arm hanging limp.

Chin to chest she saw her dangling shield was beyond repair. The bezel was bent, nearly broken, and the polished leather flapped loose from the splintered wood. Dosar had made her this shield, fashioned it from stouytayr wood and armorbeast hide the season before his death. Last season, when the trees were in bud. For that memory she roused herself and reslung the shield across her shoulders.

Rowath, the Holder, had allowed her to stay in the married quarters after Dosar's death. He had hopes, more than she had, for the outcome of her pregnancy; he said she would need the room for her children. Until he moved her back to the barracks, she had a hearth and a place to hang this shield. A place of memory.

She was not surprised to find the line of packbeasts abandoned. The lone able-bodied raider had apparently made good use of his mobility, for she saw no sign of him. Dosar would have known where he had gone; Dosar was the tracker. Then again, Dosar's longbow would have brought the four raiders down before they'd known a warden was about.

The animals came easily to hand, having no more objection to retracing their steps uphill than they'd had to following the trail down. They were loaded, she saw, with ingots from Domat's mine, but not overloaded. The raiders had planned a long journey before finding a market for their booty.

No mystery there: this trail branched either duskward, past the lower birthing pool to Atwaan, which had mines enough of its own, or dawnward to the Tetrarchy. The Four Houses would use this little bit of metal in a day and had the wealth to pay twice its worth without blinking.

Come to think of it—and she did stop to think, peering first back down the trail, then up to the hills on either side—this was not enough to warrant a journey through the wilds to the Tetrarchy. These few must have been but one cell of a larger group of raiders. She wondered how many Holds were being raided today.

Had they known, she wondered as she continued up the trail toward Domat's outpost at the downwater edge of Rowath Hold, that the warden for these trails was dead? Their small number and the openness with which they'd moved indicated they had expected no opposition.

Certainly not to be brought down by a pregnant shield maiden in single combat. Even in her dark mood, that thought made her smile.

She had been proud to be a shield bearer, to excel in a craft dominated by men. She was a defender, sworn to protect others. For many years she had defended Dosar, guarded him against assault and ambush as he patrolled, searching out raiders and renegades.

It was a familiar partnership; no longbow man could protect himself in close combat and often no armsman with sword or crossbow could engage thieves and brigands before they escaped. Though, and again despite her mood Ahrhi smiled at the memory of Dosar's amusement, it was very rare for a warden to marry his shield bearer.

But she had been poor defense against a raider with a longbow. No guardsman could protect another against the shaft of a longbow. They came from too far to be seen, flew too fast to see. No one held her

at fault for her husband's death but her.

She jerked the lead packbeast's halter more savagely than the poor animal deserved when it tried to snatch a bite of trailside grass. She murmured an absent apology, and the creature tossed its head, rejecting it out of hand.

There was no marque of House or Hold on the arrow she now carried in her bedroll, but she knew the arrowhead. It was the narrow lozenge of dense black metal that came only from the foundries of Atwaan, though some said from the Halls of the Builders themselves. She doubted that last, but knew that when she was able to travel, it was to Atwaan she would go. When she found the mate to the arrow she carried, she would avenge her own.

Within her, her babies stirred. Hers and Dosar's. The shifting was not much, only enough to remind her. Enough to add a new depression to her dark thoughts.

The Holder's generosity did not extend to Doctor's price, and she had no friend or family to stand midwife. She would go to the birthing pool, and sooner than she wanted, alone. That was traditional. That was the way it had been done for generations. And yet...

She did not share the Holder's optimism about her pregnancy. She did not relish the thought of being alone when the last remnants of Dosar died within her, as every infant had died in childbirth in the last four seasons.

Her certainty of their children's deaths had placed Ahrhi on this trail this morning. She had come not seeking thieves, but the smoky pink quartz stone that caught the source light along the ridge above. Dosar had admired those rocks and had often come out of his way to watch the display of prism light they splayed across the cliff face.

As she stooped to retrieve her satchel and the memorial stones she had cut, she paused, struck by another thought. If, in the heat of combat, she had remembered the sorrow that lay before her, would she have dodged the mounted raider's charge?

## CHAPTER

# 11

His breath plumed, condensing almost to ice before the wind whipped it away. Stevens shivered. Four airlocks and a tunnel had brought them to a rocky ledge that appeared to be high on a mountain. However, it had an atmosphere, so they were no longer reliant on environmental suits that were losing power at a distressing rate.

Before them a steep landscape of heather and copses of twisted trees fell away to a rolling landscape. Stevens could make out tilled fields and cleared pastures among the rocky dales and forests.

Pretty much answers the colonist question.

Behind him a tricorder warbled. To reduce the loss of power to their tricorders, only one was being used at a time. Right now Abramowitz was taking a comprehensive scan as quickly as possible. She'd

analyze the data after cutting off the energy-hungry sensors.

From this height Stevens could make out the curvature of the world inside the cylinder. Though the natural setting strove to emulate a wide valley, the slight inward tilt of trees at either extreme ruined the illusion.

Above there was nothing. No clouds, no blue sky, only white haze that looked close enough to touch. He said as much.

“We are near the upper edge of the atmosphere.” Kairn spoke as though that explained it. He shook his head. “The stench of carbon dioxide will only grow worse as we descend.”

Stevens made a mental note that Klingons could smell carbon dioxide. Why being near the edge of an atmosphere would cause haze instead of, say, asphyxiation remained a mystery.

Abramowitz confirmed Kairn’s assessment. “Carbon dioxide two point four percent, oxygen only eighteen percent—don’t try any heavy exertions—and various trace elements, some radioactive, but nothing immediately dangerous.”

“That merely confirms our external readings,” Tev said.

“Always a good idea,” Abramowitz answered with a smirk.

Kairn grunted with apparent amusement, and Tev chose not to answer.

“Ambient radiation is high but manageable.” Abramowitz continued to read off the tricorder’s display. “However, heavy metal levels in the vegetation are lethal to Tellarites and humans, toxic for everyone else. And the water...” She made a sour face and snapped the tricorder shut. “Drink only in an emergency and only from a swift-flowing source. It won’t kill quickly, but the uranium and plutonium content is cumulative. Looks like we’ll have to carry those ration packs after all.”

“The math is beautiful,” Soloman said suddenly.

“Oh, yes,” Pattie agreed.

The two were standing at the edge of the ledge, looking out over the forest and farmland.

“What math?” Stevens asked.

“Don’t you see it?” Soloman asked. “There. And there.”

He pointed to a rocky ridge that ran perpendicular to their apparent mountain range, then a densely wooded bowl-like valley. Both looked completely unremarkable to Stevens.

“He is speaking of the geometric balance,” Tev said.

“The distribution of materials.”

“The use of apparently random natural features to create the illusion of a real world while maintaining symmetry,” Pattie agreed. “It’s really quite elegant.”

“Hmmm,” said Stevens, still not sure what they were seeing. He guessed he wasn’t seeing past the “apparent” randomness of the design.

“Here,” Abramowitz handed each of them an oblong case about twelve centimeters by twenty-four.

“What’s this?”

“Generic emergency radiation kits, complements of Dr. Lense,” Abramowitz said as she handed a blue case to Pattie and a red one to Soloman. “For your self-medication pleasure we offer hypo ampoules of hyronalin—daalisan for Pattie—triox compound, and species-specific cocktails of vitamins, nutrients, and appropriate goodies for hemoglobin production, tissue regeneration, and general damage control.”

Stevens turned the kit over until he found the clip and attached it to his belt. He noticed Kairn had attached his to a loop high on his vest and wondered what normally went there. The hanging kit covered the hilt of the dagger that Pattie liked so much.

“Is the darker vegetation along rivers?” Abramowitz asked, looking out over the view as the others attached the kits to their utility belts.

“Usually,” Tev replied.

“Then why are all the rivers parallel?” she asked.

These Stevens did see. Remarkably regular strips of blue-green vegetation running across their field of view which seemed to start and stop at random intervals.

“Ship’s rotation.” Tev didn’t actually say “obviously,” but it was in his voice. “Inertia and angular acceleration would dictate any sizable volumes of water flow against the ship’s spin. Prevailing winds will do the same.”

“We will learn nothing more up here,” Kairn said.

He stepped off down what might have been the merest trace of a trail without a backward glance.

\* \* \*

Not my idea of sitting this one out, Faulwell thought as he set the anchors on the Klingon pattern enhancer pylon. Of course it was bigger and more massive and more awkward than the Federation model. But they got here first, so we use their equipment.

The Qaw’qay’ had hard-landed two dozen locator beacons on the colony ship’s hull during its first survey while the da Vinci was still orbiting. When the repair phase began, they used the beacons as transporter targets, beaming their first wave of engineers directly to the spinning surface. (“Must have felt like a near-warp transport,” Conlon had said.) Those pioneers had then set up pattern enhancers that allowed others to beam over with much less drama.

The problem was, there were nearly three thousand square kilometers of outer hull and far too many trouble spots to keep using the “shoot and jump” method. Pattern enhancers had to be preset in strategic locations. This meant personnel not essential to the nuts-and-bolts repairs lugging enhancer grids across the surface of the ship and setting them up while the engineers worked. Since the mysterious power drain seemed limited to the leading face of the ship, the enhancers could be set up to await remote activation

whenever a team needed to use them.

“Why not just beam the enhancers where you need them to be?” Faulwell had asked when his new job was explained to him.

Gomez had just given him that weary smile engineers reserved for particularly naive questions from soft scientists and handed him his itinerary.

It was probably a perfectly good suggestion. Faulwell tightened the straps on the Klingon null-grav sled. They just didn’t want to admit they hadn’t thought of it.

Fortunately, the Klingon beacons were positioned so that every point on the surface could be triangulated. And moving from place to place consisted primarily of lifting clear of the ship, but not out of range for the gravimetrics, and letting it rotate beneath you. Hardly difficult, but definitely monotonous. He strapped himself into the driver’s seat and double-checked the next destination against the Klingon beacon grid. Muttering an Algonquin curse, he punched the actuator and the sled leapt free of the surface.

## CHAPTER

# 12

“What do you think?” Tev asked, eyeing the lace-work of ceiling cracks emanating from the pile of rubble blocking the stone corridor.

Pattie measured the wall’s lean with an improvised plumb line. “If this were a planet, I’d say quake damage. As it is...”

“Could the exterior bombardment have been responsible?” Soloman asked.

“There’s nearly a kilometer of metal and rock between the surface and this tunnel,” Pattie said.

“It’s doubtful even quantum torpedoes would have done this level of damage.” She backed toward the opening of the artificial cave, taking in every detail. “No, something inside this mountain shifted.”

“An explosion?” Kairn asked.

“Or a structural failure.”

Stevens looked out over the rolling countryside below them. The cave opening was perhaps a hundred meters above the valley floor, and at this level the curvature of the ship’s interior was not apparent. The ersatz sun had moved a considerable distance during their climb down, and the shadows of trees and ridges stretched toward them across meadows of heather.

“Hard to imagine a structural failure with this level of craftsmanship,” he said.

“An explosion,” Kairn said.

“Perhaps.” Pattie sounded unconvinced.

“A damaged area near the front of an out-of-control vessel,” Stevens said. “If it weren’t so easy, I’d guess we found the control room first try.”

“How human of you,” Tev said dryly.

“Huh?”

“Humans expose their bridge atop the leading section of their vessels,” Tev said, then added without looking toward Kairn, “as do a number of other cultures. But the great majority of spacefaring peoples follow the Tellarite example, placing it sensibly at the center of mass.” He gestured out over the valley. “We can’t pretend to understand the logic of a people who would spend a century building this. The control center could be anywhere.”

“Anywhere including the very front of the ship,” Stevens countered. “We need to check this out.”

“We need to check out every possibility,” Pattie said.

Kairn cut off Tev’s reply. “P8 Blue and Soloman, you will explore the tunnel beyond the rubble.”

“Why them?” Tev asked. “As a generalist—”

“You are less qualified than a structural specialist and a computer specialist to assess damage and evaluate control systems,” Kairn finished. “Also, they can fit through the opening without further excavation.”

Stevens braced himself for pyrotechnics, but to his surprise Tev remained silent. He wondered whether the Tellarite’s restraint meant he recognized Kairn’s wisdom or he remembered that the traditional Klingon response to insubordination was lethal.

Without further ado, two hundred meters of monofilament was affixed to each of the explorers. Lauoc presented them with torches made from stout branches he had flayed with a wicked-looking knife Stevens knew wasn’t Starfleet issue. Tev surprised him again by producing a chemical lighter.

“We knew we were entering a primitive environment,” Tev said in response to Stevens’s startled expression.

Stevens bet himself that Lauoc and Kairn carried flint and steel. If he ever needed a fire, he’d have to find two dry sticks and trust to racial memory.

Pattie went first, without a torch, so all hands would be free as she explored the far side of the rubble pile with only the light of the opening. Stevens held her safety line, letting it play out over his palms as she explored. As it went slack, he pulled it slowly in, hand over hand, so she wouldn’t get tangled on her way back. At last she reappeared and pronounced the climb safe and the floor on the far side solid.

“The air is a little dense,” she added. “A lot of dust. Musty but breathable.”

She took two torches, securing one to her harness, before scurrying down to give Soloman room to follow. He was decidedly less sure of himself as he picked his way up the pile of rocks. Stevens guessed spelunking was not a popular pastime on Bynaas.



“How do you work this lighter?” Pattie called from the other side.

“Grip the safety,” Tev called back. “Depress the gas release with your thumb, then trigger the ignition with your—”

He paused as Pattie’s crystalline laughter cut him off.

“In my case, use more than two hands,” she said. “Back up a second, Soloman. I need the daylight to find a place to prop my torch.”

Soloman backed out of the opening, Lauoc reeling in his line deftly.

“Okay,” Pattie called out. “Got it.”

A great hand swatted Stevens backward.

He staggered, barely keeping his footing as the ground rose and fell. Something slammed into his temple; pain brought him to his knees. He tried to rise, but a second shockwave of choking dust knocked him to the ground. He had a vague impression of Soloman blown out over their heads like a kite on a string as his vision faded from red to gray.

For an instant he was leaning over the hatch above a narrow access ladder, his eyes locked with Eddy’s as the *Vinci* died around them. Below her a gush of molten hydrogen from Galvan VI’s atmosphere filled the shaft, melting Lipinski and boiling upward. Before he could move, before he could shout, Eddy calmly shut the emergency bulkhead between them; saving him and dooming herself.

No! He fought up out of the blackness, his body thrashing to action before his mind was clear. Not this time!

Desperately Stevens hauled on Pattie’s safety line still clutched in his hands. The hot polymer burned his flesh, he could smell it, but he ignored the pain, ignored the weightlessness of the line, trying to get her out before the corridor collapsed completely. He grabbed empty air before he realized the polymer had melted through.

Kairn violated his own order, scanning the cave-in from where he lay.

“Solid for at least twenty meters,” he reported.

“Beyond that...”

He stood and adjusted his settings, then scanned again. At last he shook his head, shutting down the tricorder.

The sound of Eddy’s body thudding hollowly against the bulkhead echoed in Stevens’s ears.

## CHAPTER

# 13

“I’m not a doctor,” Abramowitz said for the third time, “but I think that should hold until we get back.”

Lauoc’s grip on the safety line had prevented Soloman from flying over the ledge and down the mountainside, but the Bynar had landed hard. He’d fractured a set of bones analogous to a human’s collarbone—a quick fix with an osteostimulator, if they’d had one. Instead Abramowitz had made do with a spray cast from the medkit, immobilizing his neck, right shoulder, and upper arm.

Stevens suspected getting Soloman back in his environmental suit would present a problem, but decided not to say anything until he had worked out a couple of possible solutions. Instead he focused on redistributing the supplies from Soloman’s and Carol’s packs among the other four.

Lauoc joined him and began transferring items from Pattie’s smaller pack. He nodded in grateful acknowledgment; he wasn’t quite up to dealing with Pattie’s pack yet.

“We cannot effect rescue with our current resources,” Tev said, “even if—”

Kairn cut him off. “Agreed.”

Stevens wondered for a moment if he’d just seen proof Klingons were more sensitive than Tellarites. More likely Kairn was just heading off another of Tev’s expositions on the obvious.

“Natives will be here soon to investigate the explosion,” Kairn added. “We need to move before they arrive.”

“Natives are arriving now,” Lauoc said quietly.

“What?” Tev demanded.

Lauoc tapped an ear. “Iron-shod animals on a stone road.”

“Khest’ncarbon dioxide stench,” Kairn said. He sniffed the air for a moment, then pointed. “Sixteen individuals, perhaps a hundred meters distant.”

Without a word the four men slipped into their packs as Abramowitz helped Soloman to his feet.

Stevens noted Tev had found time to fashion a quarterstaff. Kairn’s hand rested on the hilt of the d’k tahg at his belt; no doubt he did not consider the engineer’s stiletto at his breast to be a weapon. Lauoc’s hands were empty, but Stevens knew the Bajoran had that wicked knife concealed somewhere.

Unarmed, he moved closer to Abramowitz and Soloman, ready to assist in any rapid retreat.

“Left the road,” Lauoc said.

Kairn grunted as eight riders cleared a copse of trees below and split into two groups, moving to surround them.

Their clothing was a mixture of quilted fabric, leather, and metal, enough alike to suggest uniforms, and they were variously armed with swords and lances. Narrow shields hung from every saddle, and two riders had crossbows slung across their backs. The animals were enough like horses to pass for distant

cousins.

“A fourteenth-century Europe analog?” Stevens estimated, gauging the sophistication and fit of the weapons.

“Twelfth to eighteenth,” Abramowitz countered. “Don’t get too narrow until you’ve seen how they live.”

Stevens wondered for a moment where the others were, then realized eight riders on eight mounts made sixteen. Once Kairn learned to tell the smells apart...

His thought broke off as the newcomers came level and their size registered. The stirrups were at his eye level and he could not have touched the smallest animal’s withers without jumping. It was more difficult to judge the riders while they were mounted, but he estimated that their heavy belt buckles would be even with his shoulder.

If the mismatched sizes bothered Lauoc, Tev, and Kairn, they did not show it. Stevens did his best to emulate them, standing tall between Abramowitz and Soloman and the newcomers.

For their part, the two groups of riders pulled up, perhaps twenty meters distant and stared. Better than simply killing them outright, Stevens reflected, which would have been more in keeping with the European model.

“What’s the temperature?” Abramowitz asked abruptly.

“Twenty-two, twenty-three,” Stevens guessed. “Why?”

“Heavy clothes indicate cold weather,” Abramowitz said. “Could be part of the breakdown.”

“Why no gloves, I wonder?”

“Their hands will be webbed,” Tev answered over his shoulder. “Ill adapted to wearing gloves.”

“Webbed?” Abramowitz asked. “How can you be sure?”

“Note the facial features are in the top third of their heads.” Tev did not turn his own face from the natives. “The eyes and nostrils aligned just below the brow line.”

He paused a moment, evidently expecting the light to dawn. When Abramowitz and Stevens continued to remain silent, he snorted in disgust.

“Surely you’re familiar with McCoy’s Comparative Alien Physiology?” he demanded. “Low profile above the waterline.”

Abramowitz shrugged, which Tev must have sensed.

“These mammals are semi-aquatic,” he explained. “In Earth-specific terms: Your ancestors were lemurs, theirs were otters.”

At this point the natives, whom Stevens resolved not to think of as “otters,” evidently decided they’d learned all they could from a distance. Without apparent signal, the riders moved forward.

As they drew close, the two groups rejoined to form a semicircle, not so close as to be immediately threatening, but too close for casual escape. Though the swords were sheathed and the lances pointed skyward, Stevens had no doubt their weapons could be brought to bear instantly.

Without haste, Tev activated his combadge. Kairn nodded, but made no move toward his own. Stevens understood. One combadge's universal translator was sufficient to decode the native's language. As its power failed, another could be activated and the language downloaded. Depending on the energy drain, they should be able to communicate for days.

This close Stevens could see that their forearms and the backs of their hands were covered with sleek fur. Even their faces had short, down-like growth. Their eyes and nose were indeed high on their heads, but any ears they might have had were covered by leather helmets.

One native—perhaps the leader, though Stevens could see no sign of rank—spoke. His voice was a beautiful, operatic baritone and—though it was always dangerous to guess the significance of voice tone in an alien culture—he seemed more curious than threatening.

“I am Kairn, engineer in service to the Klingon Empire.” Kairn answered the most likely question. Then, pointing to each of the others in turn, he gave their name, occupation, and planet of origin.

Stevens wondered at the Klingon's uncharacteristic eloquence. Then he realized Kairn was encouraging the other by example to speak at length for the benefit of the universal translator.

The native leader spoke again, first tapping the side of his head, then indicating each of the others with an open hand. Stevens noted he had four digits, two long fingers between what seemed to be two thumbs at either side of his palm.

Introductions apparently out of the way, the leader pointed to Soloman, again asking a question.

“Soloman was injured in the explosion,” Kairn answered.

The leader motioned the two riders at the left end of the semicircle forward. One dismounted, towering even taller than Stevens had expected, and bowed to Soloman in what appeared to be respect.

With a gesture to the rest of them to follow, the leader turned his mount and the riders headed back the way they had come at a slow walk.

“It seems we've been invited to join them,” Tev said dryly.

Kairn grunted.

With no choice, the party followed the horsemen.

Lauoc hung back and Stevens turned to see the Bajoran hastily arranging stones in an arrow that pointed in the direction the natives were taking them.

He did not ask who it was for.

## CHAPTER

Domenica Corsi kept her eyes fixed firmly on the job in front of her. Just at the edge of her vision, the stars shot so quickly over the horizon she expected warp streaks. It was difficult enough to work with tools that wanted to fling themselves into space without having to cope with her own vertigo.

Though the Klingon beacon network told her exactly where she was—and that there were a dozen other workers within sight of her—over three thousand square kilometers of curving metal hull could be overwhelming. It was easy to imagine herself alone on a blue metal plane beneath an endlessly rolling sky.

She set her spanner too near the edge of the gravimetric bubble and it began to slide toward the horizon. She caught it with the absentminded skill of long practice, setting it near the personal generator without taking her eyes off the open junction panel.

This phase of the job was simple, and dangerously monotonous in its simplicity. Someday when she had the time, she'd compute the odds on a culture that had never developed active scanning technology choosing hovinga iridium to insulate their conduits. For now, the sensor-blocking compound meant all available personnel—i.e., anyone not already pulling a double shift trying to get the colony vessel's engines working—had to be on the surface checking tens of thousands of hardwire connections by hand.

Fortunately, ninety-nine percent of the navigational and control network was sealed within the duranium hull, intact except for the region the Dancidii had blasted. The network itself was integral to the hull, laid out before the builders had known where the rockets would need to be placed to balance the ship's rotation. Each unit was simply mounted on the surface and plugged into the network. That meant external junction boxes at each of the twelve hundred rotational rockets that had to be inspected.

Having external junction boxes on a system like this made no sense to Corsi. On the other hand, sending thousands of people on a two-thousand-year journey inside a tin can because there just might be a habitable world at the other end made even less sense. There was probably some perfectly logical engineering reason for the setup. Like maybe they just came that way.

Green, green, green, green, green, green, green, purple, she read the telltales. Damn.

“Corsi toda Vinci.”

“Go ahead, Commander.” Haznedl's voice came crisp and clear. This far from the bow, there was no interference at all.

“I've got a break between thrusters nine-sixteen and,” she checked her padd, “seven-two-nine.” She stood and, blocking the view of the horizon with one hand, surveyed the hull as far as she could. “No visible surface damage,” she reported.

“Confirmed,” Haznedl replied. “Disconnects have been reported between unit seven-two-nine and units seven-one-one and three-oh-six as well.”

Corsi consulted her padd again, this time checking the inspection schedule. Thruster seven-two-nine was scheduled to be checked by a Klingon team in thirty-six hours. The next step was obvious, but in any cross-cultural cooperative effort it was best to be sure everyone agreed what obvious meant.

“Bridge, seven-two-nine is less than a kilometer from here. Please ask Commander Gomez to advise the Klingons I wish to divert from scheduled pattern and check thruster seven-two-nine. Be sure to explain why.”

“Understood.” There was a hint of chuckle to Haznedl’s acknowledgment. Then she broke the formal protocols of the open-mike comm system: “Hang on a sec.”

Corsi retrieved her spanner and secured the cover of the junction box while she waited.

Who thought sixteen-sided nuts made sense?

People who think exposed junction boxes on hundred-kilometer-long colony ships make sense think sixteen-sided nuts make sense, she answered herself. She had her tools packed by the time Haznedl got back to her.

“Commander Gomez has consulted with the Klingon engineers.” The lieutenant was once again the model of bureaucratic propriety. “Your diversion has been approved, Commander.”

Corsi snorted at the lieutenant’s choice of words, imagining Faulwell’s—or even Fabe’s—turning it into a quip. She double-checked the coordinates for booster seven-two-nine and jumped clear of the hull.

She used her steering jets to move toward the left as her gravimetrics kept her lightly in touch with the ship spinning beneath her. In normal circumstances, she would have looked ahead for her destination, but motion sickness inside an environmental suit was no joke. She kept her eyes off the horizon and watched the blue metal plane slide by directly below.

When the rocket vent appeared, she toggled her gravimetrics, pulling herself down to the hull. She landed beyond it, of course, and had to walk back. She saw the problem while she was still a dozen meters away.

“Bridge, this is Corsi,” she said. “Looks like it took a rock. Half the junction box is missing.”

\* \* \*

“Tell her to let that one go,” Sonya Gomez told Lieutenant Haznedl. “The structural integrity field will cover it.”

She glanced over at Klath as she closed the connection. The Klingon engineer nodded his agreement. The two turned their attention back to the schematic diagram on the display screen.

The reconstruction command center was a standard Federation environmental hut that had been beamed piecemeal to the colony ship’s hull at the edge of what the S.C.E. team had dubbed the Dancidii Trench. Designed to house a dozen Spacedock workers and their equipment, it gave Gomez and Klath plenty of room to work.

They were fine-tuning the network of field generators that would act as stitches, holding the damaged section of ship steady when thrust was applied. She would have liked about a dozen more generators, but as Klath pointed out possible alternatives, Gomez had to admit they’d done an excellent job with what they had.

At first she had been irritated by the Klingon habit of rigging whatever was immediately available to do a

job even when the parts they needed could be easily gotten from stores or fabricated on a replicator. But now she had to admit the Federation practice of using the best available first, then devising alternatives as those ran out would have left them farther behind at this point. As it was they were coming in ahead of schedule. She thought even Captain Scott would be impressed.

Probably surprised as well, Gomez thought; she had been. The Klingon engineers had proven to be remarkably adept and patient: craftsmen who took pride in quality workmanship. Not at all what she had expected.

Some things ran true to form, of course. Like Klingon workers not mentioning dangerous situations, or staying on the job until the last reserves of their environmental suits were exhausted. One technician had finished his shift without informing anyone he had been injured. If Gomez had not noticed the field repair to his environmental suit, he would never have reported it.

She had also had her entire team model complete and redundant communication for every action or change of plan, such as the multistep conversation she'd just had with Domenica. The Klingon practice of each individual simply moving on to the next task that caught his or her eye without informing anyone else had led to some confusion—and one potentially explosive confrontation—in the first day of combined operations.

Despite this, or perhaps because of it, external repairs were proceeding without a hitch. Only the density of the hull material made the work difficult, requiring the workers to pause frequently for equipment recharges and recalibrations. Otherwise, it was straightforward engineering at its best.

Even with their best efforts, however, it was unlikely the damaged giant could survive making the skew flip its designers had intended. Rather than reverse the vessel and restart its ion drive to slow it down, the Klingons intended to attach impulse engines to bring it under control.

But that was a job for years from now.

The immediate task was to repair native systems and attach structural integrity field generators at key points. Their goal was simply to make the ship stable and provide its inhabitants with a viable environment until a more permanent solution could be found.

Unfortunately, even though they'd located over two thousand unused connection ports for the network linking the external thrusters, the system was not set up to accept external commands. And, despite exhaustive searches and scans, they had found no entrance to whatever drive or control systems lay beneath the surface. If they were going to find a way to get the ship under power again, it was up to the away team on the inside.

She glanced at the chronometer mounted on the bulkhead. One hundred and six hours since Tev and the others had disappeared inside the ship; thirty-eight until any communication was expected.

She wondered what she would be doing thirty-nine hours from now.

## CHAPTER

# 15

Suspended in the blackness, Pattie could not decide whether she was blind or the tunnel was completely dark. The question had vexed her off and on over the last several hours. Or perhaps days; she had been wandering alone for so long she was no longer sure.

Even though she knew the outcome, she repeated her ritual. She closed her eyes and waited a hundred heartbeats before opening them. The hundredth or three hundredth time she had tried that. Nothing. No difference. Either she was blind or there was no ambient light whatsoever.

She was going to have to proceed on touch. Which was what she had been doing. The last thing she had seen was that nimbus of blue flame rising from her lighter to the huge, spongy mass against the ceiling.

She'd had a long time, while feeling along walls and bumping into objects and taking chances on empty expanses of floor, to think about what had happened. The heavy mustiness she had smelled had been a cloud of spores from the lichen, or whatever it had been, filling the gaps and covering the ceiling. Just as centuries ago on Earth sparks igniting airborne flour dust had blasted mills to oblivion, the open flame of the lighter had triggered an explosive combustion of the spores.

Reflex had curled her into a ball before the biomass exploded; she never saw the fireball that singed her shell and melted most of her utility harness. The thermal shockwave had bounced her down the tunnel like a cork in a flood. If it had been a natural cave, she might well have been dashed to death against jagged rocks. As it was, the smooth walls of the corridor had scraped and beat her, perhaps—she was not sure—even knocking her unconscious.

From what she had been able to feel of the wreckage afterward, her internal bruises and contusions were a small price to pay for having been blasted out from under the collapsing ceiling. No doubt the rest of the away team, her friends, thought she was dead.

She had rested long enough.

Standing on the narrow rung, she steadied herself against the upright and flung the buckle end of her climbing rope—woven from what remained of her harness—above her head. The third time it hit the rung above and stayed. She eased the strap upward and cautiously waved another hand in the darkness until she caught the descending buckle.

If this buckle were metal, I could use it to strike a spark. Then I would at least know. . . .

Forcing the thought from her mind, she focused on fastening the two ends together. Once buckled, her climbing rope formed a loop that hung from the rung above to about waist level in front of her.

The next part of the process terrified her; she had to will herself to make each movement. It might have been easier if she were certain this giant's ladder led to safety, but she didn't have that assurance. She only knew that after possibly days of tracing tunnel walls in the dark, this ladder going up was the only thing that held any hope of being a way out.

She released her hold on the upright, and holding the straps slightly apart with two hands, she eased a foot off the rung and onto the bottom curve of the loop. She took a deep breath and, trying not to imagine the buckle slipping, pulled herself up to a standing position.

She swung for a moment, vaguely surprised she was not plunging down into darkness, then felt above her head for the next rung. Once she had pulled herself up, she sat catching her breath and repeating the



ritual check of her vision.

To her left in the darkness was something hot. She was reasonably sure it was a cluster of pipes, each as big around as she was tall, that she had felt rising out of the floor near the ladder's base. At first they had merely been warm, but the heat of whatever they carried had been increasing. There was no way to tell whether the entire column was heating up or if the contents were simply hotter toward the top.

She wished her tricorder had survived the blast. It would have been good to know what was in the dark with her.

Or where she was going.

With a sigh she pulled herself to a standing position and flung the buckle end of her homemade climbing rope into the darkness above her.

## CHAPTER

# 16

Terant sat, wrapped in a warm sleeping robe, taking care to appear at ease. Nights had not been good for his wife since the death of their children, but there was no reason for any outside his household to know that.

Vissint entered the outer parlor of the baron's private quarters in evident haste, though he acknowledged the servant who held the door before the latter withdrew. A man who understood the reciprocal nature of loyalty.

The Chancellor of State wore the formal robes of office, but with a rumpled and distracted air. Terant deduced he was at the end of a long and difficult day.

"What news?" asked the baron. He did not offer his chancellor a chair or tea from the service at his elbow.

"The gnomes have been seen on the dawnward road," Vissint said simply.

"Ah."

Their messenger to the Tetrarchy with the news of the birth blight had returned days before with word of these gnomes. They had, during the time of her visit, lost the ability to speak the language of the People. She had gleaned that the Tetrarch's Doctors were divided on the significance of this.

News that they were coming through the Wilderness toward Atwaan was interesting, but hardly warranted the chancellor's late visit.

"And?"

"And they bear letters from Nazent of the Second House." Vissint paused, ensuring that the Baron grasped the import of his next words. "The letters request that all who meet the gnomes assist them in

seeking access.”

Terant’s breath whistled sharply through his nostrils. The flesh across his back and shoulders tightened in alarm. He slowly took a sip of tea with a steady hand.

It had been fortune of the Journey that the Giants had emerged from the hollow by his grandfather’s paddock. Their arrival had driven him to deep explorations of the hollows. His miners had discovered a refined metal too heavy and dense to be worked into anything more complex than ax or arrowheads. And of course the highly prized oddments of the Builders—the luxury trade that provided so much for the Barony.

But these treasures had not been what the warden had sought. Unknown to any but his son and now his grandson and their closest advisers, the Giants in all their babbling had spoken of control. Somewhere within the hollows, very near to Terant’s holding, was a secret that would give its possessor the ability to control the destiny of the world.

If one could only gain access.

The Giants had died without describing the nature of this secret, or how it might be used. But those things Terant was willing to decipher once he held the secret in his hand.

And now these gnomes, creatures of unknown purpose and knowledge, came seeking access, seeking the secret of controlling the world. They would not ask so openly if they suspected the nature of their goal was known. For now the element of surprise was on his side. But for how long?

“Take the Household Guard,” he ordered. “Capture these gnomes. See that they speak to no one. Bring them to me.”

\* \* \*

Kairn paused for a moment, allowing the others to reach him.

The stench of carbon dioxide was becoming so familiar that it was no longer an effort to separate out other scents. Still, he was aware of it and could feel it robbing his body of strength and resiliency. What must it be like for the others, to be unable to sense what was affecting them? They would die without realizing they were under attack, simply slipping into sleep.

He shuddered in horror.

“Cold, Kairn?”

He grunted at the cultural specialist, an answer that could mean anything. For a creature nearly devoid of hunting senses, the human female was remarkably perceptive.

Behind her the human male was supporting the wounded Bynar over a broken section of the trail. Seeing that Kairn had stopped, and having finally learned that his stopping signaled a rest period, the human helped the Bynar sit. They were the two least adapted to survival in this nearly tech-free environment, but they made a complementary pair.

While it was the Bynar who had noticed the intricate design of the landscape, it had been the human who deduced its purpose. The frequent areas of rough terrain, as well as the dense forests, rushing rivers, and

mountain ridges that extended above the atmosphere, all combined to make straight line travel impossible. They'd not seen it, but a barrier or series of barriers prevented circumnavigating the cylinder. No one could simply walk thirty-seven kilometers upwater or downwater, as the natives called it, and end up where they'd begun.

A native, unaware of the design of the ship, would think the world much larger than it was and, given the difficulties involved, be disinclined to undertake long journeys.

But how had the designers managed to keep the colonists from building and maintaining roads for two thousand years? No doubt that was the sort of question the cultural specialist was expected to answer.

In rear-guard position, and taking the responsibility with admirable seriousness, was the Tellarite, Tev. Kortag had told him that many humans were amused by a superficial resemblance between Tellarites and a Terran animal similar in temperament to atarg. Kairn found little to be amused by in Tev. Of all the species he had met, and he had to admit he had met very few, the Tellarite made the most sense. Kairn suspected that Tev, like Langk, was from the Tellarite equivalent of a noble House.

A single pebble ticked off a rock to Kairn's right. Lauoc announcing his return. Unnecessary for Kairn, who had his scent, but it brought Tev's head around. Neither the humans nor the Bynar noticed.

A moment later the Bajoran appeared next to Kairn.

"Twelve riders approach," he reported. "Ornate armor, a totem bearer, and someone in what might be ceremonial robes."

"Take a dose of triox now," Kairn said. "Also any medicinals due in the next two hours."

"What happened to half rations for the duration?" the human, Stevens, asked.

"An official party that may be seeking us approaches." Kairn reflected that Defense Force protocol called for him to kill the human for making such a challenge. "We must give them no reason to doubt our strength."

Even the human did not question the wisdom of that. For the next few moments everyone busied themselves with their kits.

Kairn noticed Stevens helping Soloman to a higher position, then bracing him in place with two backpacks. He nodded at the strategy. The natives who were withered from birth were accorded special courtesies on this world. All whom they had met regarded Soloman as one such; the boarding party's treating him appropriately set others at ease.

The riders appeared in due course, rounding a curve in the trail ahead, and paused. They appeared to sort themselves out, no doubt changing from travel formation to formal greeting formation, Kairn thought. The people of this ship were too fond of formality for his tastes.

When at last the riders came on, they were spread as far to either side of the trail as the terrain allowed.

"That looks like a skirmish line," Tev observed.

Kairn loosened the'd'k tahg at his belt. He noted Lauoc had already disappeared into the underbrush.

The rider in the ceremonial robes rode in the center of the trail, the totem bearer at his elbow. He came to a stop a dozen paces before them and made a show of raising both his hands in apparent greeting. Yet even as he did so, the outriders on either flank continued on, past Kairn's boarding party to take up positions on the trail behind them.

Kairn raised his own hand in greeting.

"Tactical assessment?" he said, looking at the rider before him.

"We are well and thoroughly caught," Stevens replied.

"Agreed," said Tev.

"Their insignia match the messenger we met at Nazent's," Abramowitz added. "For what it's worth, these are the people we came to see."

Kairn nodded. Whether or not this was the baron they'd learned of before the translators had lost power he had no way of knowing. But whoever the individual was, he represented the source of the high-tech artifacts the natives were using as decorations.

Going with these natives would bring them closer to their goal. The trick would be doing it freely and not as prisoners.

That thought had barely formed when the robed figure suddenly dropped both his arms. The ring of mounted soldiers charged.

Kairn roared and launched himself at the nearest rider, d'k tahg upraised. Startled, the mount shied. Kairn's slashing blade caught the rider's thigh in passing. Part of his brain registered that the rider had not tried to kill him.

Gaining a bit of high ground, he paused for a moment to assess the situation. The riders were clearly trying to capture them alive.

Abramowitz and Soloman were both already slung across the saddles of riders. Tev was wielding the quarterstaff he had fashioned earlier, but with his back against a cleft of rock, it was only a matter of minutes before he would be taken. Stevens had secured a position on a small mound and was holding three riders at bay by hurling fist-sized rocks with remarkable speed and accuracy.

The scent of native gave Kairn a heartbeat's warning. He leapt just as a massive hand dropped on his shoulder. A native on foot had snuck up on him. Twisting free, Kairn bolted down the hill away from the trail.

Or would have, but a second grab by the native snagged his backpack.

Kairn's legs churned air as the giant lifted him free of the ground. He hooked his d'k tahg under a strap and cut free of the pack, stumbling slightly as he hit the ground running.

The native grunted, a deep, bell-like tone, and started after him.

Kairn cut right toward what looked like a narrow ravine. The larger being could overtake him on open ground, his only chance was to find a bolt-hole too small for the native to follow.

There was a sudden shriek behind him, and the native bellowed in pain. Kairn swung about, d'k tahg ready, to see Lauoc and the native soldier on the ground. Apparently the Bajoran had attacked from low cover, tripping the giant.

They were out of sight of the others. There was a chance. . . .

Before Kairn was halfway back to the struggle, the native rose, Lauoc held easily in one hand.

“Run!” Lauoc shouted. “Get reinforcements.”

Seeing Kairn so close, the giant raised Lauoc up over his head, then slammed the Bajoran to the ground. He stood for a moment, making sure his first captive was too stunned to get away, then started after Kairn.

Kairn hefted the d'k tahg, his engineer's habits double-checking what he knew. The weapon was balanced to rotate at fourteen meters, half a rotation at seven, and his opponent was twelve meters away.

Kairn gripped the d'k tahg by the tip of its blade and drew his arm back until it hung behind his shoulder. He needed the native three steps closer.

If he understood the threat, the giant ignored it. Weapons sheathed, buckler across his back, he closed on Kairn with deliberate strides.

The d'k tahg sank to the hilt just above the native's knee. The leg bent the wrong way, tendons that had to be there severed, and the giant went down, wailing in agony.

Again Kairn started toward Lauoc, but shouts from the trail told him native riders were just below the crest of the rise. The only hope of victory lay in bringing back a rescue force.

Empty-handed, without weapon, food, or water, he turned and ran for the ravine.

## CHAPTER

# 17

Pattie gloried in her pain.

Light, wonderful light, beautiful light, filled the metal chamber and sent stabs of perfect agony lancing through her skull. She laughed and cried, her crystalline voice echoing off the silver walls as she covered her closed eyes with her arms, trying to shut out the delicious brightness.

Drunk with joy, she barely had the wit to roll clear of the trapdoor before surrendering herself completely to the wonder of letting her eyes adjust. She was not blind, she thought giddily; the tunnel had been dark.

From the sound of the echoes of her laughter, she was in a large room. From the one glimpse she had had before having to squeeze her eyes tight against the brightness, the walls were made of metal. She

could hear a thrumming sound—pumps?—and the drip of liquid, and could smell metal and stone and none of that heavy mustiness that had haunted her through the tunnel.

She had been in total darkness for—how many days? She was not sure.

Briefly, fitfully, she had slept at one point, tied to the ladder in darkness, and once before that in the tunnel far below, and—she was now sure—she had been unconscious for some time after the blast. But counting sleep periods was not an accurate calendar. When one considered the effects of injuries, stress, exertion, and, she could admit it now, terror, it was highly unlikely she'd been following anything close to her normal sleep pattern.

Alone in the tunnel she had not dared dwell on her condition. With no water, food, or medical supplies it would have only served to emphasize her plight. At the moment she still had none of those things, but she had light. That gave her the courage to assess her levels of dehydration and hunger.

By the time she could discern objects around her unobscured by glare and halos, Pattie was reasonably sure it had been five standard days since the explosion. The suppleness of her injuries seemed to indicate days longer, but the constant physical activity may have accelerated the healing process.

She rose cautiously to her feet, looking carefully around her. The walls and floor were indeed metal, though a dull gray now that her eyes weren't overwhelmed by photons. The light came from polished mirrors set high along the nearest wall, reflecting ersatz sunlight.

Twelve meters away the far end of the chamber was open, revealing only the haze of the upper atmosphere. From the level of glare Pattie guessed the light source was quite close; it would be early morning in the world below.

The metal walls of the room gave way to stone for the last few meters, and the opening itself was irregular. She had no doubt it appeared to be a natural cave from the outside.

It occurred to her that if she was now level with the upper atmosphere, she had climbed the giants' ladder for over a kilometer. As near as she could tell, there was no entrance to the chamber other than the trapdoor. What sort of race considered a kilometer-tall ladder a sensible way to get from place to place?

A very tall race, she answered herself, looking at what were apparently control panels set into the walls above her head. At least four meters tall.

Only one panel was active: a row of lights and an analog gauge that seemed to be counting something down. Time would be the most likely guess, but Pattie knew anything was possible. Though she could not read them, the pattern of numbers indicated the builders had counted in base four.

The column of pipes she'd sensed in the darkness rose from the floor and curved to run parallel with the ceiling eight meters above. The pipes ended, without apparent purpose, at a row of boxy apparatus just inside the opening of the "cave."

Pattie's speculation on the purpose of the pipes ended abruptly as she focused on the boxes, or rather the surface of the boxes. The pipes were clearly hot, but the boxes were not, which in this moist atmosphere meant condensation: water.

The dripping sound she'd been hearing was cool, clear water dripping from the metal boxes into shallow

pools worn in the stone floor.

Pattie remembered Carol Abramowitz warning of the heavy metals in the vegetation and knew enough botany to know that heavy metals in plants indicated heavy metals in the water. But metal poisoning was cumulative and five days of thirst was immediate; she did not hesitate. The water tasted dusty and metallic and was the most delicious thing she had ever drunk in her life.

Not wanting to lose all the wonderful water to nausea, she paced herself and forced herself to sit back between sips.

She was leaning back against a wall, considering a nap before making her descent from the cave, when the pumping stopped. She sat up, wondering if she could recognize a problem—or what to do about it without tools—with the alien equipment.

Above her the metal boxes groaned and clanked in unison and a deafening roar almost drove Pattie into a defensive ball. Huge columns of steam blasted from the row of pipes, shooting far out over the landscape below.

Of course, Pattie thought. The atmosphere is too shallow for real weather. We're making rainstorms.

Meanwhile spillage from the pipes cooled as it fell in the cave. Pattie's laughter was lost in the roar of steam as she took advantage of the long overdue hot shower.

## CHAPTER

# 18

Again the splash and drip. Testing the breeze, Kairn scented water first, then a native, different from the baron's guardsmen, but clear, and something herbal. Medicinal? He wasn't sure. But someone, singular, was definitely bathing in a pool very close to the other side of the boulder.

Kairn pressed close to the stone and listened. No need to risk detection by peeking around the boulder; his ears told him all he needed to know of his quarry's movements. Scrubbing, the herbal scent strong, followed by a long silence. Had he been detected? He relaxed slightly when a sudden splash and gust of expelled breath assured him the native had merely submerged to rinse.

He knew that to attack while the opponent was still in the pool would be foolish. The water would slow him down, eliminating surprise and giving the other time to prepare. Also, his heavy clothing would put him at a disadvantage should the enemy carry the fight to deeper water. As would the fact that he couldn't swim.

Best to wait until the native was out of the water, preferably preoccupied with dressing, before launching his attack. Kairn felt certain there was no dishonor in taking every advantage with an adversary twice your height and three times your mass.

Particularly when one was so lightly armed. He balanced his Master's dagger uncertainly in his hand. The edges were of course not sharp; honing them would have distorted the measuring scales. But the point was sharp, and thrust with sufficient force should find some vital organ, even on a being as large as

the natives. His best chance was to get to whatever blade the native carried before he did. A doubtful plan since he would not know where the other's weapons were until he'd rounded the boulder and battle was joined.

For a moment he considered retreat—finding a way around the native without confrontation. But he was not mountaineer enough to scale the walls of the gorge, and backtracking to the beginning to find another way through the barrier ridge would lead him directly into the baron's forces. He had to go forward, and forward meant through the native barring his path. He hoped it could be done without killing.

In due course the sounds of bathing became the thrashing splash of a large person wading toward shore. Kairn crouched, steeling himself for battle, and waited for the first silent step on land. He was keenly aware this was not a sporting event, not a skirmish under orders. This was solo combat. He brushed aside doubt, focusing on the sounds of his enemy, straining to judge the moment of attack.

But it was his heart, not his mind or judgment, that chose. Almost before he realized he was moving, Kairn was around the jut of rock, the best battle cry of his career ripping from his throat as he closed on the enemy.

The native woman had four breasts.

Kairn's charge faltered a fateful heartbeat as the discovery registered. He had just processed that even the lower pair were above eye level when an open-handed blow shattered his right eardrum and sent him cartwheeling toward the water.

Left-handed, the tactical portion of his brain noted. The native confirmed his assessment by hefting a sword the size of Kairn's leg in her left hand and stalking toward him.

Scrambling to his feet, Kairn shifted his grip on his dagger and considered his options.

A pool of uncertain depth behind him, a massive stone barrier to his right, a steep slope with thorn-bushes to his left, and a truly enormous woman with a sword she clearly knew how to use closing rapidly from in front. Even if he managed to parry with his dagger, the sword looked massive enough to break either its blade or his grip with the first blow. Death by dismemberment seemed likely.

Then the size of the native woman registered. She wasn't just huge, she was fat; her advance was more lumber than charge. If he cut to his left, her right, he would be on her weak side. He could probably elude her first swing. If he made it up the hill as far as the first thornbushes, he could be around her and free.

Truly, he was no warrior, but in his heart he knew there was no honor in a useless death. Given a choice between dying at the hands of a madwoman and saving the lives of his comrades, even a high-born warrior of the most noble House scramble over that hill and run.

He fainted right, then dashed left. Even as he made the move, he saw she'd anticipated him. As her sword whistled, he threw himself flat, rolling beneath its arc. Only his size saved him; she simply didn't adjust quickly enough to so small an opponent.

Coming out of the roll at the run, he felt the loose gravel at the base of the slope slip beneath his boots as he clawed at the bushes to pull himself up. The thorns ripping his flesh only spurred him on. Something heavy fanned the air behind him, snagging his mane. A step, a kick, and a heave and he was above the first stand of thornbushes. He turned right, parallel to the slope, and ran as fast as the slipping soil would



let him.

Behind him, farther than he expected, the native woman bellowed in frustration and pain.

Pain?

Despite himself, Kairn pulled up, his feet slipping slightly as he straightened, and looked back.

The native woman had fallen to her knees and was leaning on her sword, holding the hilt in both hands as she moaned in evident agony. Her legs and the ground around her knees were wet with what looked like water and a rusty liquid he realized must be blood. The woman struggled to rise, but her sword tip slid in the dust and she fell forward, barely catching herself with her hands. A sob racked her body.

Comprehension dawned.

“QI’yaH,” Kairn swore.

He had no idea what Kahless would have done in this situation, but his own honor gave him only one choice. Sheathing his dagger, he scrambled back down the hill.

## CHAPTER

# 19

### Day two of the Quest

Pattie would have laughed if her survival hadn’t depended on silence.

Three deadfall traps, set with only minimal concealment, were ranged along the side of the stream. The hunters clearly did not expect bugs to be observant.

They were also not clear on what sort of bug they were dealing with, she saw. One of the traps was baited with a mound of flowers, another with cut fruit, and the third with what looked—and smelled—like carrion. From the wilting of the flowers she concluded the traps had been set just before dawn.

For a moment she considered tripping all three traps, but her sense of self-preservation won out over her sense of humor. Moving back into the underbrush, she made her way around the clearing.

Almost too late, she noticed the cut branches. Someone had made one route through the thicket slightly easier than the others, then made an effort to conceal their handiwork. Here was a hunter with more respect for her intelligence. She backed away from that path, having no interest in finding out what sort of trap had been prepared.

Unfortunately, this put her in the position of having to decide on a course of action when she could see no more than a few meters in any direction. On the other hand, her size placed her easily under the canopy of shrubs, making her at least as invisible as her pursuers.

Until three local days ago, Pattie had never regretted not having to wear clothes. Her exoskeleton protected her against everything from the vacuum of space to the crushing pressures of an ocean floor with equal ease. The only time a Nasat wore any sort of artificial covering was for aesthetic effect—a flamboyant taste Pattie did not share.

What her satisfaction with her natural form did not anticipate, however, was first contact with members of a primitive, clothes-wearing culture. The natives had no concept of alien life-forms, much less alien intelligence. To them a naked being who resembled one of their local insects could not possibly be anything other than a giant insect.

Or, depending on the nature of their mythology, if any, she might be regarded as a magical creature, like a unicorn on Earth. While the idea of being a unicorn appealed to her in the abstract, in the concrete—or rather, in the underbrush—the prospect held little charm.

In any event, her first meeting with the colonists native to this vessel had degenerated almost instantly into headlong pursuit. And after three days running without food or medicine and precious little water, she was tired. The fact that three local days was only a bit over two standard days comforted her not at all.

To her right was the stream and beyond it the trail she thought the others had followed. Even in her flight, she had been following that road without actually using it, a strategy in concealment her pursuers had evidently figured out.

That stream was a problem. In the last kilometer or so it had begun flowing faster; she was no longer sure she could ford it easily. She wondered if the natives understood how unusual a brook with a slanted surface, sloshing twice as deep along its left bank, really was. In any event, somewhere ahead of her she knew it had to either turn across her path or join a greater current flowing to her left, against the spin.

Either way, it presented a danger. Not only was crossing it problematic in her condition, she would be in the open, exposed as she made the attempt.

To her left a twig snapped. Pattie fought the reflex to flee right.

The hunters obviously knew within a few hundred square meters where she was. They were trying to herd her, trying to get her to bolt in panic in a direction of their choosing. She had to admit she was perfectly willing to comply with the bolt in panic part of their plan. The trick would be doing it successfully in a direction they did not expect.

The more she thought about it, the more backtracking made sense. They knew where she was trying to go, or at least they knew what direction she had held to for three days. And, though the concealed trail in the underbrush indicated at least one dissenting opinion, they did not have much respect for her intelligence. Doubling back now might just throw them off. She'd ford the stream farther up, above the traps where it was running slow, and move perpendicular to her course for a day or so before continuing after the others.

Her mind made up, she turned back the way she had come. She ran low, close to the ground to avoid the branches overhead. She didn't want any snapping twigs or shuddering shrubs to give away her position.

She was not following her exact route, staying a bit farther from the trail and stream than she had before, just in case there was someone following her tracks directly behind.

A native called out in musical baritone from somewhere behind her and to her right. A second answered, his voice a mellifluous counterpoint, from almost directly to her right.

I'm being chased by a humanoid opera, Pattie thought as she jiggled slightly left.

When she judged she was upstream of the little clearing with the traps, she cut left and bolted for the stream. She knew she didn't have much reserves left and put everything into a flowing scurry she hoped was too close to the ground for the giants to notice.

She came up short at the edge of the undergrowth. Forty meters of open grass sloped down from her position to the water.

Perhaps sixty meters to her left, still looking downstream to where the shrubbery grew to the water's edge, stood two natives. One had what looked like a bow, easily as long as he was tall, while the other bore a shield and drawn sword.

Pattie paused, gathering her strength for a dash to the river. She had seen natives run and knew that neither of these two could catch her before she reached the water even if they saw her break cover. Her goal was to get to the water without being seen. Her real fear was that they would catch her before she made the woods on the other side of the trail.

Taking a final breath to steady her nerves, she moved into the open, keeping as close to the ground as possible. The two natives continued to watch upstream.

She had just begun to think she was going to make it when an animal whinnied loudly to her right. On the trail, across the narrow brook, was a native she had not seen, dressed in heavy leather armor and mounted on a huge black beast. She'd been so focused on the other two hunters she hadn't even looked in this direction.

To her left the natives shouted. The armored rider drew his sword and answered, his voice sounding more angry than victorious to Pattie's ears.

For her part, closer to the water than the bushes by a dozen steps, she bolted for the water. She hoped the rider's heavy armor would...

Pattie's back legs slid to the right and she spun around, flat to the ground. For a fateful heartbeat she lay splayed out, her head toward the underbrush. Then she tried to rise. Pain radiated from her left lower shoulder.

She was pinned to the ground. But how? The mounted native was still across the river, the other two just now running toward her. It wasn't until she saw the bowman reaching for another arrow that she realized what had happened.

Prideful idiot, she berated herself.

She was an engineer, she knew a projectile of thin enough cross section could pierce her armor. But she had become so complacent in the superiority of her exoskeleton to the thin hides of softs that she hadn't even considered one of their primitive arrows a threat.

Now here she was, pinned (like a bug, she couldn't help thinking) to the ground while enemies closed in

on either side.

The rider would reach her first. His mount leapt the stream that had looked so impassable to Pattie with apparent ease. She could feel the thunder of the beast's hooves as he charged toward her, leaning far out and down out of his saddle, his sword raised. Was he so eager to be the first to kill the monster?

She clenched her eyes as his sword swung forward, and braced for the blow. Dirt sprayed her face. She heard the animal grunt and the swordswish through the air andting against...what?

She opened her eyes, turning her head to follow the mounted warrior as he closed with the two natives on foot.

The one with the sword and shield braced himself, ready to meet the rider's charge. At the last moment the mount seemed to prance, jumping suddenly sideways to the swordsman's weak side. Even as the man turned, the animal kicked out with its hind legs, catching him full on the shield and sending him sprawling before charging past.

The Bowman ducked, clearly expecting a sword slash, then turned, his back toward Pattie as the rider brought his mount around.

The beast pranced again, a strangely delicate move, then wheeled and plunged. Pattie saw an arrow fly wide, missing the wildly dancing target just meters in front of the Bowman.

The rider leaned out again, his sword raised, and again the Bowman ducked. The sword parted the air just above his head, neatly clipping the top third of the bow away.

Without a backward glance, the rider trotted toward Pattie, sheathing his weapon as he came. As he drew close he spoke, his voice lighter than the other's.

"Pleased to meet you, I'm sure," Pattie answered, straining to focus on the figure towering above her.

"Excuse me for not getting up."

Through the beast's legs she could see that the swordsman continued to lie on the ground. The Bowman, however, was running toward the distant underbrush. She bet he'd be returning soon with reinforcements.

The mounted native spoke again, this time raising one hand, palm up.

"Oh, you do want me to rise," Pattie said.

All things considered, compliance seemed in order, though she doubted she'd have much success. She pushed against the ground and was surprised to discover the shaft of the arrow had been lopped off centimeters above her back. She was able, just, to pull herself free.

The native spoke again.

"Oh, my lower left arm is shot, so to speak," Pattie said. "And I'll leak for a while, but otherwise no real harm done."

Stooping down, she pulled the arrow fragment from the turf. The point was buried nearly half a meter

down. And the point itself. . .

“See this?” She held it up for the native to see. “No wonder it cut through me. This arrowhead is durillium. From the way it’s beveled, my guess is it’s an insulating tile designed to tessellate with other tiles just like it. Someone has been dismantling a nuclear reactor.” She turned the arrowhead over in her hands. “I wonder if they realize that?”

“Atwaan,” said the native.

“Atwaan?” asked Pattie, raising the arrow high.

“Atwaan,” the native repeated, pointing in roughly the direction she—and he, she now realized—had been traveling.

Pattie could hear shouts from the woods.

“I hear Atwaan is lovely this time of year,” she said.

Then, taking a risk she wouldn’t have dreamed of moments before, she raised her upper arms to the rider.

“Give a bug a lift?”

## CHAPTER

## 20

The sky above was gray and rough, but light, light was everywhere. Lights, lamps, torches. . .

His mind shied from torches. Shadows on the sky? Ceiling. The ceiling was gray and rough. And moving toward his feet. He was floating? Being carried, gently, by giants. Where was the tunnel? He had been in a tunnel.

“Where am I?” he asked the giant at his feet, carrying the foot of his stretcher.

“We are in a medical facility, Fabian,” said the giant as it set him down on a table. A bed? But its lips hadn’t moved.

“How?”

The giants left without speaking.

“Over here, Fabian.”

Stevens turned his head and regarded a blank wall of the same clean gray as the sky. He considered this for a moment, then turned his head the other way.

There was Soloman sitting on a high bed. He must be on a high bed, too. But he was lying down and

Soloman was sitting and surrounded by books and papers.

“What’s happening?” he asked.

“I believe your hair loss and pallor indicate acute radiation poisoning in humans,” Soloman said. “Are you experiencing vertigo and disorientation?” Soloman paused, then added, “Ignore that question; they would not have carried you here if you had not collapsed.”

Stevens focused on ignoring the question. Soloman helped by ringing a bell.

The four of them had been guests or prisoners of the Barony of Atwaan for how many days? He was not sure. But he had slept at least twice, and it had been dark when he was on the surface at least twice. That was twice twice.

Tev he had not seen twice. Tev had been with the baron. Abramowitz had been in the tunnels, too, but not the same ones. He saw her more than twice and they talked.

Lauoc was... He could not remember seeing Lauoc. He was somewhere, though. Of that Stevens was sure.

He had spent most of his time underground, going as deep as he could. They, the baron’s archeologists or scientists or whatever, were exploring tunnels that were clearly engineering decks. Decks designed for beings at least a meter taller than they were.

There had been great rooms of what looked like suspended animation capsules, or maybe coffins. Hundreds of them. The natives had hurried him through those to the corridors beyond.

The corridors seemed to lead somewhere. There were signage and panels and labels he could not read and which they clearly did not understand, either. They seemed to think he should. He thought he should, but though machines had to comply with the natural laws of physics, nothing he saw looked familiar.

Or everything looked familiar, but not familiar enough.

When a giant appeared, he started, then remembered he was in a hospital room. This giant, not the one who had spoken to him, had come in response to Soloman’s bell.

Soloman held his hands flat in the air, indicating various heights shorter than giants. Then he held his arms wide and pulled them in. Hugging the air? Gathering together. Right.

The giant left.

“I’ve asked that the others be brought here,” Soloman said. “I’ve tried that before to no avail, but perhaps they will believe this situation requires next of kin.”

Stevens laughed, coughing. “Tev is my next of kin?”

“Here, he is,” Soloman said. “As am I.”

“I knew that.”

Soloman dissolved into shadow as the walls and ceiling flowed together. Stevens sat quietly on the back

porch of the Corsi farmhouse on Fahleena III until Pattie shook him awake.

“Fabe!” she shouted, sounding like Carol Abramowitz.

He laughed. That was funny.

“How’d you do that?” he asked.

But when he looked at Pattie closely, she flowed like water, turning into Carol. That wasn’t funny. Pattie was gone.

He cried.

“Stop it,” Abramowitz said, but not cruelly. “You’re wasting water.”

“What’s wrong with him?” Tev’s voice; his next of kin.

“Radiation poisoning, dehydration, starvation, electrolyte depletion,” Abramowitz answered. “And that’s just a guess, made without tricorder or medical degree.”

“Why is he so ill?” Soloman asked.

“The baron is apparently looking for the same sort of access we are,” Lauoc said. “He put us to work with teams exploring the tunnels. Stevens made a big show of being enthusiastic about going as deep as possible. He thought it offered the best chance at finding the control center. He said they’d found a region with warm walls. He was sure they were near the epicenter of whatever went wrong here.”

Stevens nodded.

Abramowitz took his belt pack.

“Hyronalin, vitamins, everything, gone,” she said. “He was keeping himself dosed to try and stay down there as long as possible.”

“Foolish.” That was Tev.

“Dangerous, yes, but not foolish.” And that was Abramowitz. “He was taking a calculated risk to follow up on the best lead we have.”

“Will my medications help?” Soloman asked. “I require far less protection from radiation.”

“No, you don’t,” Tev stated flatly.

“Thanks, Soloman,” Abramowitz answered. “I think under the circumstances if we each donated half a dose of hyronalin, we may have enough to stabilize him.”

“For how long?” Tev asked.

“If he doesn’t go back down those tunnels, days. Certainly as long as the rest of us. Relief should be here by then.”

“Relief should have been here two local days ago,” Tev countered.

But Stevens could hear him removing his medkit. Good ol’ next-of-kin Tev. He drifted into darkness.

When he awoke he had a sense that he had been unconscious for some time, but the others were all more or less where he had left them. Or their shadows were; his vision was not quite clear. He reshut his eyes and listened.

“One of the advantages of being in a hospital is that medicine relies heavily on diagrams,” Soloman was saying. “I think I have puzzled out what is happening to the infants.”

“Obviously an effect of the buildup of radioactive heavy metals in the environment,” Tev said.

“No, that causes underweight and unhealthy infants,” Soloman said. “And birth defects of the sort they think I am. I’m referring to what may be a near total infant mortality rate.”

“How can you see what their own doctors have missed?”

“Their doctors are unaware of radioactive metals and their effect on living tissue.”

There was a rustle of stiff paper.

Stevens opened his eyes and was gratified to clearly see Soloman awkwardly holding up a heavily diagramed parchment with one hand. Of course, it was too far away for him to see what the diagrams depicted, but that didn’t bother him as much as the taste in his mouth. He wished the water were safe to drink.

“I cannot judge by human or Tellarite standards,” Soloman said, pointing to something on the parchment. “But from a Bynar standpoint, the native birth practices are both unusual and dangerous.”

Tev grunted.

“Two uteri, each with two chambers,” he said. “Quadruplets are the norm, then?”

“Apparently either identical twins or fraternal sets of identical twins,” Soloman agreed. “But that’s not the key. See here? It’s how they are delivered.”

“Is the mother underwater?” Abramowitz asked.

“It coincides with Tev’s observation that they are semi-aquatic,” Soloman said. “And is the very un-Bynar portion of the process. External fluids are very dangerous to us.”

“Humans, too.”

Tev said nothing.

“The natives apparently rely on external water to, well, irrigate their system,” Soloman said. “And support the infants through the delivery process.”

Stevens heard something heavy—a book?—being shifted and perhaps the flipping of pages.



“If I understand these diagrams correctly,” Soloman went on, “childbirth on land is possible, but extremely traumatic and potentially lethal for both mother and infants. They much prefer underwater delivery.”

“Unusual,” Tev said. “And dangerous for most species. But how can what is obviously normal for them suddenly be lethal?”

“Follow the illustrations.” Soloman rustled more papers Stevens could not see. “Their culture relies on the use of a traditional birthing pool, with various medicinal herbs planted about and a sheltered cave for the mother and infants to recover.”

“Many cultures have stylized and traditional—” Tev broke off mid-sentence.

“What?” Abramowitz asked a half second before Stevens.

“There’s no way for the water to leave the pool.”

Stevens groaned.

“Fabian,” Abramowitz was at his side. “You’re awake. Are you all right?”

He nodded, tears stinging his eyes.

“The babies,” he said.

“What?”

“The pools are fed by slow springs,” Soloman said. “Hardly more than seepage from the water table. But the only way water leaves is through evaporation.”

“I don’t follow.” Abramowitz sounded doubtful.

“The water evaporates,” Tev explained, “But the heavy metals remain. After centuries of buildup, the concentrations...” The Tellarite’s expression was strangely fierce as he faced the others. “At the moment of birth,” he said quietly, “they are killing their infants with toxic shock.”

“Oh.” Abramowitz sat on the edge of Stevens’s bed. “My God.”

## CHAPTER

# 21

There was a birthing pool ahead.

Naiar reigned Striver in, standing in the stirrups to peer ahead. Yes, there was the grove of dandelion and the shielding rock and a truly saddening number of memorial stones grouped along the gentler slope of the ravine. He let his eyes travel up the hillside, looking for the traditional fall of myrtle vines that should screen the—

He froze, though there was no chance he had not been seen. Crouching on the trail to the nursing cave was something. Not a man, he was sure; not People, but...

Could it be a gnome?

He glanced back and down at his companion. The magical beast was too close to the ground to know what lay ahead. In a moment he would know whether the creature and the gnomes were friends or enemies.

Making a show of slipping the retaining strap from his sword hilt, he loosened the weapon in its scabbard. His companion asked a question in its bell-like voice, but he gave no sign he heard. Instead, he nudged Striver into an easy walk toward the crouching gnome.

A glimmer of ice-flower blue at the corner of his eye told him the beast had moved to cover in the underbrush off the trail. Prudent, given its size and helplessness.

As he neared the edge of the birthing pool opposite the path to the cave, Naiar realized the gnome was not so much crouching as sitting on his heels, a position impossible for the People. He seemed at ease; wrists resting casually on his knees and what looked to be a cane lying across his thighs.

The gnome watched his approach with apparent disinterest until Striver rounded the birthing pool. Then he rose smoothly to his feet, the walking stick across his lap revealing itself to be a sword, long for his size, as he swung it out and down to let its tip rest lightly on the ground. Though he stood less than chest high, there was something imposing in the gnome's stance.

Naiar felt Striver's muscles between his thighs tremble with sudden excitement. His riderbeast, trained to combat, sensed the challenge as well as he did.

He reigned in.

The gnome's sword looked to be a guardsman's duty arm, too short for combat against a mounted opponent. But as the thought formed, Naiar realized the gnome had positioned himself between a patch of thornwood and an escarpment at the top of a sharp rise in the narrow path. He would not be facing an enemy on riderback. If Naiar sought to engage him, it would be on foot, and the escarpment would limit the swing of his longsword.

Of course, he could just go by, ignore the gnome and continue on to Atwaan. Naiar looked to the path ahead and back to the gnome. If this gnome was not one of those which had supped at his father's House, it was of much the same type. He could not pass without solving the mystery of the stranger's presence.

With unhurried deliberation, he dismounted, keeping Striver between himself and a sudden assault. Lifting his buckler from the pommel, he hissed Striver's command to move away from the field of combat. With buckler lowered and sword sheathed, he stepped forward, ready to parlay, but prepared to fight if necessary.

The gnome watched him approach until he was perhaps a four of steps beyond reach. Then, with an unhurried deliberation that mirrored Naiar's, he brought the sword up and settled into a shallow crouch. Naiar did not recognize the two-handed stance, but the gnome's ease and confidence in assuming it assured him it had been tested in combat.

He reached for his own weapon.

“Take heed, armsman of the Tetrarchy!”

Naiar froze, his sword half-drawn.

A woman’s voice, shouting from the nursing cave?

Looking past the gnome he saw the dense screen of myr vines shift slightly and the wicked shape of an Atwaan arrowhead catch the source light. He realized she must be holding the longbow sideways to be able to draw it in a cave; awkward, but not impossible. At this short range, missing the gnome and hitting him would require little effort.

“Who speaks?” he demanded.

“A warden of Rowath Hold,” the voice answered, “who came to the birthing pool with four memorial stones and despair.”

There was a catch to the voice. Naiar did not wonder at her tears. His own heart was saddened to hear the birth blight was known in the remote mountain holds.

But if she was in the nursing cave...

“Are you—” He hesitated, not wanting to ask what could not be true. “Well?” he finished lamely.

“Two daughters live because that gnome forced the life of his own breath into them.” The declaration was raw with emotion. “Harm him and all the wealth of your Tetrarch masters will not protect you.”

Naiar eased his sword back into its scabbard and secured it.

“I will harm neither you nor your children, good mother,” he promised.

“True.”

Facing an armed gnome and a longbow, Naiar could not fault the sardonic acknowledgment. The gnome moved not at all, which made sense; he heard their voices, not their words.

“I would speak to you,” Naiar tried again, trying for a light and friendly tone. “But your champion will not let me pass.”

“Then heed my champion,” came the quick response. “And heed me: Your best path is the one you were following, away from here.”

The arrow tip wavered not at all; how long could she hold her weapon drawn? Long enough. Hand away from his hilt, Naiar took a careful step backward.

Suddenly chimes pealed in the wind. A sphere of ice-flower blue bolted from beneath the dissel thicket to the left and behind the gnome, and rolled toward him with incredible speed.

The woman in the cave screamed a warning, but did not loose her arrow.

Naiar had a panicked instant to think he would have to kill his companion. Personal loyalty held no place against protecting a gnome who could breathe life into the stillborn.

For his part, the gnome gave a shout of what could have been joy even before he turned to meet the charge. Throwing wide his arms, he dropped to one knee as the ball burst open to become Naiar's creature, its own arms thrown wide.

The two came together, not quite an embrace, but clearly not combat. Their voices mingled in rapid exchange, a crystal bell and gourd of gravel uttering syllables unintelligible to any but themselves.

Naiar stood for a moment watching, his own mind racing. He sensed that events had moved beyond the confines of his own personal Quest. He was certain this gnome was one of the party from his father's House and had clearly been through some ordeal that had separated it from the others. If the others still lived. The time had come to set aside the protocols of tradition.

"Good mother," he called. "I am Naiar, son of Nazent, heir to the Second House of the Tetrarchy. As our companions are clearly allies, I suggest we join forces to face whatever lies ahead."

The screen of myr vines parted and a woman of imposing height stepped into the open. Her right arm steadied a sling that held two small forms to her lower breasts; her left hand held an arrow.

"Well met, noble youth," she said. "But now what shall you do for your proving quest?"

She grinned and Naiar shut his mouth. He had not meant for his realization that she'd never had a bow to be so comically clear.

## CHAPTER

## 22

"The gnome does not eat," Ahrhi said as she accepted a joint of the plith Naiar had roasted over the campfire. "I don't think he knows how."

"Not know how?"

"He offered me a bit of every plant in the hollow trying to find something I would eat." She licked the grease running down her wrist. "Cut his hands to tatters making adissel salad."

Naiar laughed, nearly choking on his water.

"They do eat, I saw them at my father's House," he said. "Though only food they carried with them."

"He has no pack."

"Nor does—" Naiar broke off, embarrassed. "I've been calling it 'Magical Beast,' but now I think it's neither."

“A gnome,” she agreed.

“I think our food may be poison to them.”

“Then it is the smell of our cooking,” Ahrhi said, “and not our company that keeps them so far upwind.”

Tossing the bare bone back into the flames, the mother began adjusting her infants’ slings, shifting them from upper breasts to lower. Naiar averted his gaze, offering her a privacy she did not seem to need, and listened to her cooing to her children as he watched the two gnomes deep in their own conversation some distance away.

The Doctor gnome had used some unguents and potions from the purple case he wore at his chest on the...other gnome. It had seemed to gain some strength, and he was certain the sudden bursts of crystal raindrop sounds were laughter.

“I think this Doctor is one of the gnomes that supped at my father’s House,” he said at last. “But he does not seem to know me.”

“How many gnomes have you met?”

“Six.”

“You have met only six gnomes and are not sure he is one.” He could hear the grin in her voice. “How many People do you think he has met?”

“But People are different,” he protested.

She didn’t bother to answer.

Striver nickered.

Naiar saw that Ahrhi’s sword was in her hand as swiftly as his. The Doctor gnome was also on his feet, though he didn’t bother to draw his little knife. Instead he shooed the blue gnome into adissel thicket, then stood between it and whatever was coming.

And several somethings were coming. Too many riderbeasts for Naiar to count by the sound of their hooves were coming up the trail he had followed.

Ahrhi cursed and resheathed her sword. Running to the Doctor gnome, she pulled her nursing slings over her head and handed her infants to him. Gesturing to the startled creature that he should get down behind the bushes, she turned and hurried back to Naiar’s side.

Together they moved away from thedissel grove, out of the firelight.

Naiar heard the leading riderbeasts round the rise that concealed the birthing pool from the trail. They pulled up, allowing others to join them.

“I’ll get to Striver,” Naiar said quietly. “You get the others up to the cave.”

“And then what?” Ahrhi asked. “Hold them at bay with my arrow? I count three fours at least. Wits, not swords, will get us out of this.”

In the darkness they heard the riders spread out, clearly angling to block off any escape from the hollow. Naiar's mind raced. Knowing one had to survive by one's wits and actually formulating a plan were two very different things.

Suddenly, strange lanterns in the hands of some of the riders threw broad beams of white light across the clearing. It took only a moment for the lights to find Naiar and Ahrhi, illuminating them from a four of angles.

The light bearers held position while the others came on. As they neared, Naiar realized there was something wrong with their silhouettes. The riders were the size of children, many with strange and ungainly packs on their backs.

"Gnomes!" Ahrhi hissed a heartbeat before Naiar made the realization.

The lead gnome rode into the light: a female almost without color. She reined her mount in a four of paces distant and with one hand leveled a crossbow of bizarre design at Naiar's chest.

Naiar was vaguely aware she was flanked by a gnome maned like the Doctor, head and shoulders taller than she was, and another of her size with no hair and rich brown skin, but all he saw clearly were the alien eyes regarding him along the length of the weapon.

He heard Ahrhi sheathe her sword. Not daring to break the leader gnome's gaze, he followed suit.

The gnome spoke, her words unintelligible. A heartbeat later, the strange box mounted on her shoulder said: "[explanation/cause] should I [kill/destroy] you not?"

Naiar recognized the strangely stuttering grammar. The gnomes at his father's house had spoken thus when unsure of shades of meaning.

Before he could formulate an answer to the question, however, the crystal peal of the blue gnome's voice came out of the darkness.

The box on the leader's shoulder intoned flatly: "Because he saved my [shell/legs/life]."

The lead gnome gasped as Naiar's traveling companion stepped into the light.

"[noise/name 'Pattie']," the box said. "You look like [waste material]."

"Tactful as ever [noise/name 'Corsi']." The box did not capture the laughter Naiar heard in the blue—in Pattie's—voice. "Put up your toy before you have a [glandular poor judgment]."

The leader gnome—Corsi—nodded to Naiar as she ported the weapon.

A second female gnome, this one with dark hair covering only her head, stepped into the light. She had a large backpack connected by wires to what looked to Naiar like a flagon and a hand mirror. Ignoring everyone else, she studied the mirror while passing the flagon over Pattie's body.

"[Everything transcribers] and [unknown]," Pattie said. "How do you [source]?"

"The [source-eaters] cannot [see/feel/touch] living [source]," said the maned gnome beside the leader. "I

tailored [germs/rot/sickness] into [life-source-fuel-units].”

“[noise/name ‘Langk’], I’m impressed,” said Pattie. Then to the dark-covered female: “[Ignore] me. There are two newborns you should examine.”

“Newborns?” She looked up from her mirror. “Where?”

“Here.” The Doctor gnome stepped into the light, an infant in either arm.

“[noise/name ‘Kairn’], are you now a [servant/nursemaid]?” Langk’s scoffing tone needed no translation.

Ahrhi’s sword sang from its sheath. A single step brought her within reach, her eyes level with the mounted gnome’s.

“Jest not, dwarf,” she said. “My daughters live by his breath.”

Langk’s hand stopped halfway to what looked to Naiar like a curved blade without hilt strapped to his back. The gnome was fighter enough to realize no undrawn weapon could stop a ready sword.

“Wisdom, Langk,” said the Doctor Kairn. “Now apologize to the [beatific noble-born female] before she eats your liver.”

“[Waste material],” said Corsi. “I forgot the [doomed] [object] was [atop/active].”

From that point Naiar and Ahrhi found themselves caught up in rounds of introductions and explanations. Names and stories were exchanged as the translation device became more adept. Ahrhi introduced Naiar as an apprentice armsman, by her example assuring him his violation of the code of the Quest would remain their secret.

Tolan and a force of the Tetrarchy’s armymen were perhaps a day behind, and they advised the gnomes to wait for them in the hollow. The birthing pool was already within the borders of Atwaan. Ahrhi had chosen it because she had planned on going to Atwaan in search of vengeance after she had buried her four children.

The Doctor gnome Lense pronounced Ahrhi’s daughters “strong as Brikars,” though Kairn attributed their health to having Klingon hearts. The Doctor described Kairn’s administration of potions as “overkill,” which, given their survival, must have been a mistranscription by the speech boxes. She had also clearly expected Ahrhi to be somehow weak from childbirth and repeated her Brikar assessment.

Ahrhi and Langk earned each other’s grudging respect sparring with their disparate weapons, while Naiar devoted himself to learning all he could of the gnomes’ many devices.

As they had suspected, the stench of gnome food made the infants wail.

## CHAPTER

## 23

Tolan won the Battle of Atwaan without leading a single charge. His victory was complete without a blow being struck.

The tales of war and battle told around campfires are things of violence and blood. Yet the story of Tolan's victory was a favorite retold for generations. Though no sword was drawn nor arrow nocked, it was a model of valor and wisdom in the face of deadly peril.

At the van of Tolan's advance onto the plain before the city of Atwaan, Ahrhi, the shield maiden of Rowath Hold, sat astride Tolan's finest charger. To her left was the Master gnome Kairn, holding the reins of her mount, for as a girl of the mountains she had never ridden. To her right rode an apprentice armsman without rank—and here the listeners would exchange smiles around the campfire—with a marvelous blue being riding the pommel of his saddle.

Behind these came the vanguard, two elder gnomes—captains in their tongue—flanked by four fours of battle gnomes. These wore strange and varied regalia, bristling with strange weapons and all manner of mysterious devices.

And well behind them, astride his second finest charger, came Tolan. At his back were mounted four sixty-fours of Master armsmen of the Tetrarchy with four times as many guardsmen afoot.

But it was not this show of force, nor the strangeness of the gnomes, which caused the armsmen and guardsmen of Atwaan to give ground. They fell back, opening a broad avenue to where the baron sat prepared to direct his forces at the sight of the two infants alive in their mother's arms. Not one of them would have obeyed an order to attack.

Nor would Terant have given it. Even as the invaders marshaled themselves before him, he had eyes only for the two youngest People in all the world. Tolan had to speak his name twice before he looked away.

“Gather all of the women who are with child,” Tolan had said without preamble. “The gnomes will ensure their infants live. After that, we will talk.”

There was more to the story, of course. Every child, and there were many children, knew how the gnomes had cleansed the water and the air and most of all the birthing pools. The gnomes had calmed the accumulator which in ways mysterious had prevented the Giants—the crew—from waking and keeping the world safe and rightly on its path. And the crew had awakened and the world was safe and once again upon its path.

But the gnomes had left and the giants had returned to their slumber beneath the hills and the world was again home only to the People.

And it was their heroes the People remembered. Two warlords, each at the head of a mighty army and each with cheeks matted with tears at the sight of living newborns. Two leaders and one promise: “We will talk.”

On that foundation was the Alliance formed. With those words the last war of all the Journey ended.

\* \* \*

“Do you suppose the Klingons will ever tell us how this ends?” Gomez asked.



She was standing to the right of Gold's command chair, watching the screen as the People's vessel—they had no name for it—spun in the darkness. Theda Vinci was so close there was a definite sense of “down” to their perspective. The new navigational array swung into view, then off the screen in a matter of seconds.

“According to Kortag, it won't end for another two centuries,” Gold said. “That's how long it will take the People to reach the world the Empire is giving them.”

“That strikes me as uncharacteristically generous,” observed Tev from the aft stations.

“No exploitable resources, no strategic value, no animal life above trilobites, and it stinks of carbon dioxide,” Gold said. “It's exactly the sort of world they'd want to give away.”

“Lieutenant Conlon reports that the plasma injectors are fit to carry us as far as Deep Space Station K-7,” Haznedl reported. “We can get under way at any time.”

“Any unfinished business here, Gomez?” Gold asked.

“Pattie?” Gomez passed the question to the structural engineer at the auxiliary science station next to Tev.

“Structural integrity fields and thruster network are both operating at optimal efficiency,” Pattie answered, her daggerticking against her breastplates as she turned from the diagnostic display. “Our mission is technically complete.”

“Personally, I'd like to spend another month,” Gomez said. “Just to solve the mystery of where the People came from.”

“Spectral analysis of their artificial sunlight does not match any of the suspected source systems,” Tev said with the air of one pointing out the obvious.

“Occam's razor indicates they are refugees from the Luri Cloud. More precisely, a planet orbiting the sun that exploded to create the Luri Cloud.”

“That would make the ship close to two thousand years old,” Gomez said. “Why would they lock their descendants into a medieval culture for two thousand years?”

“You'll have to double-check with Abramowitz,” Gold said, “but maybe they thought that was a viable level of technology for colonizing an uninhabited world. Once the crew got them down, they could survive on their own. A higher tech society would need support till it was established.”

“Maybe.” Gomez sounded unconvinced. “But it left them helpless in the face of radiation poisoning.”

“The builders assumed the crew would always be on hand to deal with mechanical problems.”

“They also assumed neighboring solar systems contained uninhabited Class-M planets ripe for their colonization,” Tev observed. “Was that hubris or a lack of imagination?”

“More likely lack of choice,” Gold said. “They were building a lifeboat, after all.”

“Message from the Qaw’qay’, sir,” Shabalala said.

“They remind us we are fourteen minutes from Klingon space.”

Tev snorted.

“Wong, lay in a course for Deep Space Station K-7,” Gold said. “We’ve got work to do.”

## About the Author

KEVIN KILLIANY lives in Wilmington, NC, with his wife Valerie and their three children: Alethea, Anson, and Daya. Kevin has been writing since grade school, and writing Trek since he first discovered fanfic in 1972. However, because he “knew” one could never make a living at writing, he never pursued it as a career. Instead, he earned his living as an actor, soil technician, photographer, bus driver, special education teacher, warehouse manager, and media distribution specialist (paperboy)—not necessarily in that order and often concurrently. During those years he did write, and since 1990 his essays and articles on topics ranging from race relations to education to spirituality have appeared in local newspapers, webzines, and (once) a national magazine. As the second half of his first century loomed, Kevin realized that writing was what he wanted to do with his life. When he told his wife, she shrugged matter-of-factly and said: “It’s your dream; make it work.” Today Kevin, who is also a minister with the Soul Saving Station, works for an agency that provides support services to people with special needs by day, teaches adult basic skills at Cape Fear Community College by night, and—during lunch breaks, long red lights, and predawn hours—writes. In addition to Orphans, Kevin’s stories have appeared in Star Trek: Strange New Worlds Volumes IV, V, and VII. His short fiction set in the BattleTech universe will be out later this year.

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