

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[About the Author](#)

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FAILSAFE

David Mack



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Chapter

1

The sky was a blackish purple bruise, filled with banks of swollen storm clouds that dragged heavy coils of rain across the barren plains. Crashing thunder echoed off the distant mountains and rolled away into gritty rumbles. The cold, bitter wind smelled of dirt, and for a moment it dispelled the thick stench of rotting flesh that rose from the hastily excavated pit in front of Venekan Army Trooper Genek Maleska.

Wind-whipped dust stung his face. He lowered his goggles and lifted his face mask, both of which became caked with a mix of brown dust and chalky lime powder from the pit. Maleska could barely see an arm's length in front of his face, but he heard the growl of the excavator's engine as it revved up. He listened to its heavy treads grind forward then stop. A moment later the ground shook as the gigantic industrial vehicle filled a quarter of the pit with fresh-dug black earth.

The falling load of dirt kicked up its own gust of wind and blew most of the lime off the overlapped rows

of X'Mari corpses that lined the bottom of the pit, four layers deep.

Maleska coughed. He felt his chest tighten and knew he was moments away from a second taste of his breakfast. He planted the butt of his rifle on the ground as he dropped to his knees and pulled his face mask down and out of the way.

His vomiting didn't last long. The acidic bile burned in the back of his throat. He licked his teeth and spat twice to expel the sour taste from his mouth. He lifted his arm to sleeve the flecks of food and spittle from his mouth and chin, but he stopped as he saw that his uniform was shrouded from head to toe in a thick coat of dust. He put his mask back on.

Another load of dirt made a trembling impact in the grave pit. Then the sky darkened as if a giant black curtain had been pulled across it. A loud clap of thunder was followed by a scattered fall of fat raindrops sweeping in from the plains. The sky broke in a sheeting, heavy downpour. The dust coating his uniform turned to mud and washed away in slow, dirty rivulets, revealing the gray-green patterns of his camouflage fatigues.

The excavator work lights snapped on. The huge machine pushed another mound of soil into the pit. The other piles of dirt began to gradually melt away as muddy flash-floods. As another segment of the pit was filled in, he looked down at the rain-cleansed faces of the dead X'Maris. Their midnight-blue skin and coppery hair lay tangled together, their bodies intertwined like broken, tragic sculpture.

He removed his goggles, mask, and helmet and let the rain wash over him as he pulled his light-blue fingers through his silvery hair. He hoped that the war would end soon, so he could go home and be a civilian again.

A fiery streak sliced through the canopy of storm clouds and blazed across the sky, passing over his squad and racing toward the horizon. Work halted as the two dozen Venekan soldiers scrambled to the northeast edge of the ridge to watch the burning object make planetfall. It had almost reached the horizon when it hit the ground and was swallowed into the perfect darkness of the mist-swept landscape.

"Radio!" Maleska shouted. His radioman jogged over to him and handed him the digital two-way handset. Maleska pressed the secure-frequency switch. "Sync-Com, this is Five-NineJazim, over," he said. He stared into the darkness, in the direction of the fallen fireball, while he waited for Synchronized Command to respond. A few seconds later, a tinny, digitally processed voice squawked back over the radio.

"Five-NineJazim, Sync-Com. Go ahead."

"Sync-Com," he said, choosing his words carefully, "we've sighted an unidentified aerial object traveling north-northeast over our position. Estimate touch-down approximately eighty-five tiliks from our current location. Please advise, over." Raindrops pelted his helmet with a rapid-fire deluge for several long seconds while he awaited Sync-Com's answer.

"Five-NineJazim, hold your present location for dust-off. Twenty-third Mech Lance'll lift you out of there as soon as the storm breaks. You'll help them recon the UAO crash site. Over."

"Sync-Com, we confirm, holding for dust-off and recon. Five-NineJazim out." He stowed the digital radio handset in the radioman's backpack. The rest of the soldiers were still gathered at the edge of the ridge, staring into the rain while trading rumors, guesses, and wagers among themselves.

“Snap to!” he barked. The soldiers turned to face him and straightened to full attention. He prowled in front of the men, his bootsteps splashing in the broad puddles that were growing steadily larger and deeper. “As soon as this storm breaks, we’re being lifted out,” he said. “Norlin, get back on that excavator and fill this in before it turns into a lake. Everyone else, standard cleanup and perimeter watch. Move out!” The squad scrambled back into action.

Maleska watched the excavator push another wet heap of dirt into the last uncovered segment of the X’Mari mass grave. As the dark-blue faces of the dead vanished beneath a tide of mud, the young noncom feared that the object he’d just watched fall from the sky had been a Venekan military aircraft—one whose crew and ordnance were now in enemy hands.

He glanced at his watch and sighed. Sunrise was more than an hour away, and he could already tell this was going to be a very long day.

* * *

Ganag crept forward in the pouring rain, fearful of the strange and smoldering tube-shaped object that had just gouged a ragged wound across the Kelvanthan Plain and come to a stop here at the base of the Scorla Hills. The X’Mari teenager kept his rifle aimed squarely at the object as he moved closer to it.

His cautious footfalls were all but inaudible through the pattering white noise of the storm. From behind him, the beams of his two friends’ handlights crisscrossed in tight formation as they lit his path, casting mirror-twin shadows of his gangly adolescent body in front of his feet.

He knelt beside the battered, black object and held his hand above its surface. No heat radiated from it. He touched its cool, slick wet surface and ran his hand along it, feeling its scuffs, cracks, and other points of damage. Resting his rifle against it, he leaned closer to study the emblem etched onto its flat top surface. He had never seen anything like it, not on any flag of the world.

“I don’t think it’s Venekan,” he said over his shoulder.

“Whose is it, then?” Lerec said, his voice quavering. Ganag wondered whether Lerec was too young to be in the field. Most of the scouts had been at least fourteen years old before they picked up weapons. Lerec was only twelve. The boy had insisted that he was ready and had gone out of his way to prove he could shoot, run, and spot as well as the older scouts. Now, less than ten days later, the kid was losing his water during his first real field patrol.

Ganag traced the lines of the round-edged, triangular emblem with his dark-blue fingertip as he considered Lerec’s question. “I don’t know,” he said a few seconds later. “I’ve never seen this crest in any of the books. And I’ve never heard of a missile that could navigate without fins.”

“I wouldn’t call what it did ‘navigating,’ ” said Shikorn, who was fifteen, just one year younger than Ganag. “If you ask me, I’d say it fell.” Shikorn had a point; the object’s descent had been very erratic.

Ganag was about to ask Shikorn for the radio when he heard the sound of truck engines approaching from inside the Scorla Pass. Without a word, the three boys scrambled to cover behind a nearby cluster of scrub bushes. They pressed themselves against the ground and held their breath as four trucks emerged from the pass and drove directly toward the fallen object. The mud-spattered vehicles’ headlight beams, dimmed by slashing rain, swept over the trio as the trucks passed by.

The vehicles came to a stop in a circle around the object. With the engines still running, the drivers and

passengers got out. Even in the stormy darkness, Ganag was certain that all of them were X'Maris. Then the leader emerged from behind the far truck. Ganag recognized him as Hakona, a war chief of the X'Mari Resistance. Ganag tapped Shikorn, who nodded his confirmation. The two youths stood up and pulled Lerec to his feet along with them. Ganag called out to the group of adults.

"Friendlies," Ganag said. "Scout TeamKalon."

The X'Mari adults aimed their rifles at the three boys. "Sector code word," one of the men said.

"Vashon-zelif," Ganag said. The adults lowered their weapons. Hakona walked toward the three scouts.

"Have you seen anyone else near here?" Hakona said.

Ganag shook his head. "No, sir. We only just got here ourselves, a few minutes after we saw it hit."

"Everybody in thezilam hemisphere saw it hit," Hakona said. "We need to get it to a safe location before the Venekans get here. Help us put it on the flatbed."

* * *

Hakona stomped on the accelerator pedal with such force that he almost expected the corroded floor of his vehicle to crumble under his feet. Every bump and divot in the road made the speeding flatbed truck rattle like a child's toy.

He glanced at the cracked mirror on his door. The other three vehicles of his convoy were close behind him, keeping pace and following his lead, down to every curve he fishtailed through at unsafe speeds. He couldn't yet see the gray light of predawn, but he felt it coming.

The downpour had ceased a few minutes earlier, making the roads a bit easier to see. He and the other drivers in his convoy had turned off their trucks' headlights and activated their night-vision goggles. He hated the monochromatic gray-green displays' hypnotic quality, and he struggled to remain focused on the twists and turns of the Scorla Pass.

He heard the first explosion come from behind his vehicle. The glare from the blast flared his light-intensifying goggles to blinding white. As he tore them away from his face, a second explosion transformed his vehicle's few remaining windows into stinging glass projectiles.

The heat of the blast shriveled his short, ragged hair and filled the cab with an acrid stench. By the time the third explosion rocked the narrow canyon of the Scorla Pass, he was aware of nothing except the dizzying sensation that the laws of gravity had been suspended.

* * *

The wind screamed through the open side doors of the jumpjet, its constant roar drowned out by the high-frequency screech of the jet aircraft's engines, which became even more deafening as the afterburners kicked in.

A seam of sky along the horizon began to show a hint of gray, a harbinger of the new day. Maleska crouched in front of the open side door, watching the ragged landscape of the Scorla Hills blur past beneath the wings.

Seated in the darkened main compartment of the broad-bodied jumpjet, their backs pressed against its

gunmetal-gray walls, were his motley-looking soldiers. Most of them kept their rifles clutched between their knees, barrels up and safeties on. Norlin, a short-timer who everyone could tell was all but burned out after spending too long in country, slumped in his harness, mouth hanging open to give his snoring free rein. The young footman's rifle was laid like a bridge across his knees, the barrel pointing toward the rear of the troop compartment.

The jumpjet banked hard to the left, and Maleska tightened his grip on the rappelling harness over his head. A sharp hiss preceded the release of a volley of missiles from the jumpjet's wings. Their smoky exhaust trails snaked inside the troop compartment, and the soldiers awoke to the bitter stench of spent chemical propellants, which made Maleska cough. Over his own hacking gasps, he heard the dull reports of the missiles striking their targets on the ground below.

The troop compartment's ruby-hued lights clicked on. The engines whined as the pilots fired the braking thrusters. The outer engines rotated into a takeoff-and-landing configuration, and the jumpjet began a quick, vertical descent.

The co-pilot's voice crackled inside Maleska's helmet headset. "Snap to," he said. "Insertion in twenty seconds."

Maleska looked at his squad. "Snap to!" he said, shouting over the engine noise. "Weapons hot. Two by two, standard cover. Search and secure. Yellik, left point. I've got right point."

The jumpjet touched down with a heavy, jarring bump.

"Move out!" Maleska said as he hopped out of the jumpjet through its right-side door, half of his twenty-four-man squad behind him, the other half following his second in command, Senior Footman Yellik, out its left side.

Maleska landed on his feet with practiced ease. His boots sank into the soft, muddy ground. He lowered himself into a crouched posture, weapon held level and aimed forward. Moving out of the way of the footmen who followed behind him, he dropped to one knee and scanned the perimeter through his rifle's targeting sight. There was no sign of movement on either side of the road ahead, or from the overturned burning vehicles that lay in the middle of the narrow, high-walled mountain pass. He looked back and saw all his footmen assembled behind him in proper cover formation. Glancing beneath the jumpjet, he could tell from the arrangement of feet on the other side that Yellik and his team were also ready.

He keyed his headset mic. "Tikrun Seven, Five-NineJazim. I've got boots on the ground, and I'm moving to secure the site, over."

"Five-NineJazim, TikrunSeven," the jumpjet co-pilot said, his voice rendered scratchy and mechanized by Maleska's headset receiver. "Acknowledged. Standing by for dust-off. TikrunSeven out."

Maleska led his squad forward toward the fiery wreckage of the four trucks. The soldiers' steps made small squelching noises as they traversed the muddy road. Inside the shattered and bent vehicles, groups of four to six corpses lay in heaps, charred almost beyond recognition by the searing heat of the Venekan "sky cutters," small missile-delivered munitions that relied on scorching temperatures and thousands of deadly shrapnel-like projectiles to quickly neutralize enemy personnel.

Maleska marveled at the obviously overwhelming firepower that the jumpjet had unleashed against the small ground convoy. Beneath the mangled vehicles, the thin crust of pavement that had long ago been laid over this neglected road was now molten and glistening behind curtains of heat radiation.

The point squads reached the convoy's lead vehicle, a flatbed truck that had been flipped upside-down and rear-end-forward by the impact of the blasts that had erupted behind it. It was the only vehicle that did not appear to have been directly targeted by the aerial barrage. The road here was not melted but was spider-webbed with fresh fissures that emanated from the fiery debris behind it.

Yellik glanced inside the vehicle and aimed his weapon into the cab. The air was split by the angry buzz of his assault rifle. Maleska shielded his eyes from the incandescent muzzle-flash. Seconds later, Yellik eyed his handiwork and signaled all clear to Maleska, who keyed his mic.

"TikrunSeven, Five-NineJazim. Site secured, over."

"Five-NineJazim, TikrunSeven. Acknowledged, site secure. Relaying to Sync-Com. TikrunSeven out."

Maleska knelt beside the overturned vehicle and glanced beneath it. Secured to the flatbed was an oblong shape wrapped in a dark tarpaulin. He looked over his shoulder and snapped his fingers a few times in quick succession to get his squad's attention. "Norlin, Pillo. Crawl under and cut whatever that is free. Get it out here so I can see it."

With sour-tempered grumbling, the two enlisted men wriggled under the flatbed and began cutting the heavy cables that secured the object to the flatbed. Maleska stood off to one side and kept his expression neutral to mask his growing impatience.

Several minutes later, while the two men were still working, a trio of Venekan jumpjets landed down the road, behind Tikrun Seven. Three squads quickly debarked from the jumpjets and fanned out in either direction, far behind and far in front of the secured site. Following them up to Maleska and the wrecked flatbed was an officer whom Maleska recognized only by virtue of his rank and a few surprisingly accurate overheard descriptions: his division leader, Commander Zila.

Zila was a career officer whose face looked like it had been hewn from the mountains of Zankethi and tempered in the fires of combat. He had a reputation for never accepting defeat in battle, and he was rumored to be nurturing lofty political ambitions. Maleska didn't believe that a high-ranking officer like Zila would leave the safety of Sync-Com headquarters and set foot inside X'Mar unless there was something critically important going on—something that would require the commander's personal attention.

Zila strode up to Maleska and spoke through clenched, sepia-tinted teeth with a voice like a rasping saw.

"As soon as your men cut the truck's cargo free, I want them back on the jumper," Zila said. "But you stay here."

"Yes, sir," Maleska said with a nod. He turned as he heard the sound of the truck's cargo falling free of its bonds and thudding to the ground beneath the truck. A few seconds later, Norlin and Pillo, now coated in mud and grease, pushed the cylindrical, shrouded object out from under the truck, rolling it ahead of them. As soon as it rolled free of the truck, it slipped away from them and began to roll toward the side of the road. Zila stopped it by planting his heel on it, like a conquering hero. Norlin and Pillo, still down on their bellies in front of him, stared up at him in awe.

"Get up," Maleska said, his voice sharp. "Yellik, take the squad back to the jumper, double time." Yellik snapped Maleska a quick salute, then barked orders at the rest of the squad as he herded them

back into Tikrun Seven.

Zila watched them pile into the aircraft. As soon as the jumpjet door slid closed, he turned to Maleska. “Cut that cover off of it,” he said. Maleska drew his utility knife and sliced the tarpaulin off the object.

The shredded fabric fell away to reveal an ordinary fuel drum—rusted, pockmarked with holes, and emptier than the promises of a politician. Beside him, Zila made a sound that was somewhere between a grunt and a growl.

As the sky overhead turned a bleak, hopeless shade of gray, Maleska’s long day became just a little bit longer.

* * *

Ganag kneeled in the stern of the long, narrow skiff and slowly paddled it downstream. The skiff sat dangerously low in the water, which threatened to wash over the gunwales and swamp the small boat if Ganag tried to paddle too quickly. In the prow of the skiff, Lerec and Shikorn lay back-to-back, sleeping fitfully beneath a thin, shared blanket of moth-eaten fabric.

The object from the sky was in the middle of the skiff, between Ganag and his friends. It was concealed beneath thick, gray sheets and sacks marked as grain but filled with feathers.

Ganag knew that Hakona and his officers were dead. He had seen the Venekan aircraft streak toward the Scorla Pass, and he’d heard the muffled explosions echoing off the hills. Just like that, every adult Ganag and his friends had known was gone.

Now it was up to them to carry this strange prize to safety—to the last bastion of the X’Mari Resistance.

Ganag stopped paddling for a moment and unfolded his map, which rustled in a frigid breeze that signaled the early onset of winter. This stream would carry him to the Ulom River within half a day. From there, he had only to let the current carry him and the skiff downriver. Once on the river proper, they would hide during the daytime and move only at night.

If we’re lucky and careful, he thought, we might reach the Resistance in four days. He forced himself not to consider what would happen if the Venekans learned that it was to him and his friends that Hakona had entrusted the object.

The first reddish rays of dawn snuck over the horizon and slashed between the war-ravaged hills of northern X’Mar. Ganag tucked his map inside his shirt and resumed paddling with quiet resolve toward his destination.

Chapter 2

Commander Sonya Gomez leaned against the washbasin in her quarters and sighed heavily. Today is nothing, she thought.

She had been silently observing the milestones of time’s passage since “that day.” The day that a routine salvage mission had become a gruesome tragedy. The day that more than half of the da Vinci’s crew had

died in the line of duty. The day that Kieran Duffy, the man she'd loved, had gone to his death.

She didn't speak of her habit with the other survivors of the Galvan VI mission, and she hadn't discussed it during her Starfleet-mandated counseling sessions. She had simply noted the passing of the days and at regular intervals reminded herself:

He's two months gone. Three months gone. Four months gone.

Today marked no such milestone. Today was just another day like any other. Another day aboard the *Delta Vinci*. Another day in Starfleet. Another day alone with her empty, shattered heart.

Today is nothing.

She had been woken only minutes ago by a com chirp in the middle of her sleep cycle.

"Bridge to Gomez," the voice had said, rousing her from a fitful slumber. After a moment of foggy-headedness, she had realized that the voice was that of Vance Hawkins, the ship's deputy chief of security.

"Gomez here," she had said, her voice halfway between a croak and a groan.

"Captain Gold needs you in the briefing room, Commander," Hawkins had said. "He said it was urgent."

"On my way, Chief," Gomez had said, then half-rolled out of bed and slouched into her bathroom.

She sighed again and let her weight rest on the washbasin. Looking up at her hollow-eyed reflection in the mirror, she wondered whether she had time to step into the sonic shower or perhaps just work some cleanser and conditioner into her dark, curly hair, which spilled in unkempt coils over her shoulders.

Chief Petty Officer Hawkins's voice echoed in her thoughts: "He said it was urgent."

She tied her hair back in a utilitarian ponytail, opened her closet, and grabbed a clean uniform. No point getting all dolled up just to get my hands dirty.

* * *

Fabian Stevens looked like something thesehlat dragged in. His hair was slightly disheveled. He could swear his eyes were filled with sand. His eyelids drooped and threatened to drag him back to sleep. His head lolled forward, and he caught a whiff of his replicated Colombian coffee.

He jerked awake, his eyes now stuck at wide-open. He took another much-needed sip of coffee and tried not to let himself become hypnotized by the sixty-cycles-per-second hum of the briefing room's overhead EPS conduits.

Captain David Gold sat at the head of the briefing room table, hands folded in front of him. Seated to Stevens's left was revoltingly wide-awake cultural specialist Carol Abramowitz, who casually scrolled through screen after screen of data on her padd.

Bleary-eyed, Stevens fixated on the steam rising from his coffee mug. Sitting opposite him was Hawkins, who leaned back in his chair and pensively stroked his dark, bearded chin.

Past the far end of the table from the captain was the main viewscreen, on which heavy-jowled and white-haired Captain Montgomery Scott, the officer who gave the Starfleet Corps of Engineers its marching orders, rolled his eyes impatiently.

“I apologize for the delay, Captain Scott,” Gold said. Scott smiled and waved his hand, brushing aside the apology.

“No need, lad,” Scott said. “I remember what it’s like living on ship’s time. It’s always midnight somewhere.”

Abramowitz put down her padd as the door slid open. Gomez entered and blushed as she saw the group was waiting for her. She took her seat at Gold’s left. “Sorry to keep you wait—”

“It’s all right,” Gold said, cutting her off. “Captain Scott, the floor is yours.”

Scott keyed some switches on his companel. The screen split to show two images: Scott on the left, and a schematic of a Starfleet Class VII Remote Culture Study Probe on the right. “About a year ago, Starfleet lost contact with Probe Delta-7941 after it encountered an uncharted astrophysical hazard,” he said. “We thought it was destroyed. We were wrong.”

The image on the right side of the screen changed to a detailed schematic of one of the probe’s internal systems.

“Four-point-six hours ago, Starfleet received a subspace signal from the probe indicating that it’s crashed—and that its self-destruct failsafes have...well, failed.”

The image on the right side of the viewscreen changed again, to a solar-system diagram. “The probe went off course and landed intact on this system’s third planet,” Scott said. “Teneb is an M-class world, humanoid population, uneven levels of technological development between its many nation-states. A lot like Earth before the Third World War.”

“And no doubt protected by the Prime Directive,” Gomez said.

Scott nodded, his expression grave. “Aye, and that’s where the wicket gets sticky. The Tenebians are a clever lot, but not as clever as they like to think. Depending on which one of their countries gets its hands on the probe’s warp engine, they might reverse-engineer the thing...or they might blow themselves to kingdom come while tinkering with its antimatter pods.”

“There’s an even worse scenario,” Hawkins said. “They figure out how to control antimatter, and they turn it into a weapon that can destroy their planet. The probe could be used to start an apocalyptic arms race.”

“Oy vey,” Gold said.

Abramowitz looked confused. “Can’t we remote-detonate it?” she said. Stevens swallowed a sip of coffee and shook his head.

“Nope,” he said. “The remote-detonator’s part of the self-destruct failsafe—which failed.” He took another sip of coffee.

“But can’t we just beam it up?” Abramowitz said.

“Unfortunately, no,” Scott said. “The crash damaged its antimatter shielding. Trying to beam it up would cause an explosion larger than anything that world’s ever seen. . . . And, there’s another wrinkle to consider. . . .”

“Of course there is,” Gomez said, and smirked ironically. Scott continued without acknowledging her gentle sarcasm.

“The planet’s dominant superpower has begun exploring space: orbital stations, lunar bases, deep-space telescopes. . . . Bringing a Starfleet vessel into orbit is a risk we can’t take. You four need to land on the planet without the Tenebians detecting the *Vinci*. You’ll go in undercover: no weapons, and with as little Starfleet technology as possible. We can’t risk any more cultural contamination.”

Gomez furrowed her brow before tossing out another question to Scott. “Captain, may I ask why this operation isn’t being handled by Starfleet Intelligence?”

“They asked us to do it,” Scott said. “If the probe could be detonated without being fixed first, they’d handle it themselves. But they don’t have anyone who can make these kinds of repairs in the field. . . . That’s why I’m sending you lot.”

“Understood,” Gomez said with a curt nod.

“All right, then,” Scott said. “I’m sending over everything in the database about Teneb and all the telemetry from the probe. . . . Are there any more questions?” Everyone shook their heads to indicate that there weren’t.

“Then Godspeed, and good luck. Scott out.”

The viewscreen blinked to a bright blue field adorned with the white double-laurel-and-stars of the Federation emblem.

Gold turned toward Gomez. “We’ll reach the Teneb system in just over sixty-eight hours,” he said. “I’ll ask Conlon and Poynter to find you a hush-hush way to go planetside.”

Gomez nodded. “Okay, good. Carol, I need you to go over all the cultural files on Teneb. Check the probe’s crash coordinates and pay particular attention to the cultures and current situations in that region.”

“Sure thing,” Abramowitz said. “I’ll let Bart know we’ll need an alphanumeric primer for the planet’s written languages.”

“Good,” Gomez said. She turned toward Hawkins. “Vance, check the database for information about the types of vehicles we might find down there. We might need to cover a lot of ground to find the probe, and I’d rather not do it all on foot.”

“You got it,” Hawkins said. Gomez turned her attention toward Stevens, who was trying to look attentive rather than jittery and wired on caffeine. He suspected, based on her bemused expression, that he was failing.

“Fabe,” she said, “you look like I feel. Go get some rest, and I’ll see you when alpha shift starts—” She checked the ship’s chronometer on a display set into the tabletop, then let out a weary sigh. “—in about

six hours.”

* * *

The landscape blurred past. Wind whipped through cracks in the fragile glass windshield in front of Hawkins. He stomped on the clutch then slammed the gearshift lever forward. He felt the vehicle lurch as a jaw-clenching grinding of metal on metal screamed from the combustion engine. The pistons seized and smoke belched from beneath the car’s dented red hood. The rapid deceleration made the two-passenger vehicle fishtail wildly, and Hawkins saw the gnarled trunk of a tree a split second before it crumpled the front end of the automobile into an accordion fold. The safety-harness strap that diagonally crossed his torso bit into his collarbone.

The simulation froze, its injury-and-mortality failsafe kicking in at the last possible moment. Hawkins’s pulse raced and sweat soaked his brow and back. There was nothing simulated about the adrenaline rush that still had him shaking in his seat. He had never understood why some of his fellow security officers felt the need to court disaster in holographic simulations. He figured there was more than enough real danger in the galaxy without bringing it into a training program.

“Computer,” he said, “load vehicle training program Hawkins Twenty-nine. Introduce random road-hazard variables and activate foul-weather subroutine.” He was enjoying this training regimen. Tenebian motor vehicles and weapons were a good example of Hodgkins’s Law of Parallel Planet Development: Many of their inventions closely paralleled those of early twenty-first-century Earth.

The environment re-formed itself around him. He now was seated on a squat, two-wheeled vehicle that was parked on a high-mountain road marked by steep grades and treacherous hairpin turns. Swiftly approaching from the horizon was a bank of storm clouds. “Program ready,” the computer said, its feminine voice unchanged since the day Hawkins had joined Starfleet.

He twisted the vehicle’s handgrip throttle and was about to launch himself down the lonely, snaking road at the fastest speeds he could handle, when the door chime sounded.

“Hey, Vance,” Stevens said over the com. “It’s Fabe. Can I come in?”

Hawkins reduced the cycle’s throttle. “Sure,” he said.

The hololab door appeared to Hawkins’s right, taking shape on the rocky face of the cliff wall. The door opened and Stevens stepped inside the hololab next to Hawkins and his loudly purring machine. “Nice program,” Stevens said, looking past Hawkins at the panoramic vista. “Teneb?”

“Yeah,” Hawkins said. “Built it from database files. The vehicle specs are at least a few years old, but I don’t think the basic operating principles will have changed much since then.” Hawkins nodded toward the road. “Want to join me? Play a little follow-my-leader?”

“Nah,” Stevens said. “Took me six weeks to master flying a Work Bug, and that was based on a system I’d already been trained on.” He gestured toward Hawkins’s motorcycle. “I wouldn’t know where to start with one of these things.”

“You don’t know what you’re missing,” Hawkins said.

“No, but I know what you’re missing,” Stevens said. “The premission briefing. It started five minutes ago. They sent me down to get you. Apparently, someone with a security clearance turned off the hololab’s

main com circuit.”

Hawkins dismounted from the motorcycle. “Computer,” he said. “End program.” The road, the vista, and the cycle all vanished, revealing the compact space of the *Vinci*’s hololab. Hawkins narrowed his eyes in mock irritation at Stevens. “Killjoy,” he said. Stevens shrugged as he led him out of the hololab and into the corridor.

“That’s the job,” Stevens said. “You don’t like it, quit.”

“I can’t quit,” Hawkins said as he followed Stevens. “I’m enlisted.”

“Yeah,” Stevens said stoically. “Me, too.”

* * *

Abramowitz switched the briefing room viewscreen image to one that displayed the national borders and prominent landmarks of an area within a one-thousand-kilometer radius around the crashed probe’s last known coordinates.

The rest of the away team—as well as *Vinci* second officer Lieutenant Commander Mor glasch Tev, chief of security Lieutenant Commander Domenica Corsi, chief engineer Lieutenant Nancy Conlon, chief medical officer Dr. Elizabeth Lense, and Captain Gold—listened as she detailed the findings of her hastily compiled research.

“This is our biggest problem,” she said. “The entire region, which the indigenous people call X’Mar, is a war zone. The country of Veneka, Teneb’s sole military and economic superpower, recently invaded X’Mar for its uranium resources.”

She switched to the next screen of information. On one side were images of Venekan soldiers in uniform. On the other side were images of X’Mari civilians and Resistance fighters.

“The Venekans,” she said, “are an ethnically diverse population, with a level of technology roughly equivalent to the best of early twenty-first-century Earth. The only Venekans we’re likely to encounter during our mission will be soldiers. We have no hope of infiltrating their military, and we definitely won’t be equipped to fight them, so we should avoid them.”

She pointed at the various X’Mari images. All the X’Maris had skin tones of dark blue, and metallic hair colors ranging from coppery to dark bronze. “The X’Maris, on the other hand, are ethnically homogenous and highly xenophobic. Their army is composed primarily of irregular militias. Our best bet for moving through the region undetected is to pose as X’Mari civilians—and pray that we don’t run into the Venekan Army.”

Gomez nodded. “Thank you, Carol.” Abramowitz sat down as Gomez looked to Tev, her second-in-command of the S.C.E. team. Even after having served with Tev for a matter of months, Abramowitz still found the Tellarite’s omnipresent air of arrogant superiority off-putting. “Tev,” Gomez said, “have you made any progress with tamper-proofing the away team’s tricorders?”

Tev looked offended that Gomez would even entertain the possibility that he hadn’t devised something unspeakably brilliant since breakfast. “Of course I have,” he said. “I’ve outfitted them with a self-destruct circuit that you can trigger with a pre-set command phrase, on a timer, or by remote from another tricorder. Also, I designed an independent tactile sensor that recognizes whether the person touching the

tricorder is human. If a non-human picks up one of your tricorders—poof! No more tricorder. I'd have brought one to the meeting except—” He held up his hands, and looked around the room. “Poof,” he said.

“Good, thank you,” Gomez said. Abramowitz wondered if she was only imagining an expression of long-suffering on Gomez’s face whenever the second officer spoke. Gomez turned her attention to Dr. Lense. “Doctor, how soon can you be ready to begin cosmetic surgery for the away team?”

“Give the word, Commander,” Lense said. “Sickbay’s ready when you are.”

Abramowitz watched Gomez fluidly shift her gaze toward Chief Engineer Conlon. “And that brings us to you,” Gomez said. “Nancy, are weany closer to formulating a plan for getting the away team onto and off of the planet?”

The petite chief engineer cocked her head at an odd angle and shrugged. “Maybe,” she said. She sounded unconvincing.

“Maybe?” Gomez said, obviously wanting more details.

“Chief Poynter and I are still running some tests,” Conlon said. “If we can iron out the bugs, we’ll have an answer for you by tomorrow at 0800.”

“I think you mean today, at 1900,” Gomez said.

Conlon hesitated, tapped her fingers on the table as she parsed the order implicit in Gomez’s remark, then nodded. “Right, that’s what I said,” Conlon quipped. “Today at 1900. No problem.”

“All right,” Gomez said. “Assuming we iron out the insertion and extraction plans by then, the away team will report to sickbay at 2100 to begin cosmetic modification. Does anyone have anything else?” A quick look around the room yielded no questions. Gomez stood up from the table. “Meeting adjourned.”

Abramowitz picked up her padd, saved her notes from the briefing, and pocketed the handheld device as she followed the others out of the room. She had long dreamed of a chance to study a new alien culture incognito and in situ. But walking unguarded into a combat zone had not been what she’d had in mind.

* * *

“Dom, wait up!” Stevens said, calling out to Corsi. She was several paces ahead of him in the corridor, which was empty except for the two of them. It was rare to be able to steal a moment’s privacy aboard a ship as small as the da Vinci, and Stevens figured he’d best take advantage of it while it lasted.

She stopped and half-turned to face him. The perfection of the blonde security chief’s tall, athletic body was outshone only by the delicate symmetry of her face in profile.

He quickened his step and came to a stop beside her.

“Hey, Fabe,” she said. “What’s up?” Her manner was warm and relaxed. It was a side of her that most da Vinci personnel didn’t get to see often, if ever.

Stevens had tried not to develop expectations when it came to Corsi. It had been roughly a year since

they'd shared a one-night stand that she had made him promise to never mention again—in part because Starfleet frowned upon fraternization between officers and enlisted personnel, and because Corsi simply didn't like having her personal life on display.

But a few months ago, when Stevens's best friend Kieran Duffy was killed in the line of duty, it had been her shoulder that he'd cried on. At the time, he and Corsi had been on the verge of... what? Romance? It had been hard to tell. But after their visit to her family and their return to duty on the *Vinci*, nothing had been the same between them. For one thing, they no longer needed to pretend that they weren't friends. For another, much of the awkwardness that had marked the beginning of their relationship had long since passed.

Which made the awkwardness of this moment stand out.

"I'm not sure how to ask this," he said.

"Just spit it out," she said reassuringly.

Stevens nodded. The moment stretched out a bit longer than he'd intended. She kept her attention fixed on him while he studied the scuffs on his shoes. He looked up. "Why aren't you going on the away mission?"

She shrugged. "It's Vance's turn."

"But it's such a high-risk mission that I just assumed you'd want to—"

"He can handle it," she said, the corners of her mouth turning upward in a half-smile. "He's actually better qualified than I am for this kind of thing."

She reached out and pressed the turbolift call button.

"If you say so," Stevens said.

"Besides, he'll need high-profile field experience if he ever wants to become a chief of security. People in our line of work don't get promoted for sitting around pushing buttons."

Stevens heard the hum of the turbolift stopping a moment before the outer doors opened. Corsi stepped inside the turbolift, then turned to face him again.

"Anyway," she said. "Good luck down there. Be careful."

"Thanks," he said. "I will." The turbolift doors closed.

He stood alone in the corridor, staring at the closed door.

For months after their one-night stand, he hadn't noticed that she had always seemed to be at his side during away missions, even when protocol would have placed her closer to someone of higher rank. Now, however, she seemed content to leave his defense to someone else.

As he walked back toward his quarters, he realized that, though he would never admit it, he was bitterly disappointed and more than a little concerned that this time out she wouldn't be there to watch over him.

Chapter

3

“Testing,” Haznedl said. The ops officer’s feminine voice was soft, barely audible through the subaural transceiver implanted in Gomez’s middle ear. The sensation of having a voice inside her head made Gomez feel like she was hallucinating.

“Susan, can you boost the gain on my transceiver?” Gomez said. A moment later, Haznedl’s voice sounded again inside Gomez’s head, this time as clear as if she was standing right next to her. “Testing,” Haznedl said again. “Better?”

“Much. Thanks.” Gomez sat on the edge of a bed in sickbay, staring down at her indigo hands. She was already attired in the rough, earth-toned cloth garb of a X’Mari civilian. Her tricorder was safely tucked away in a deep pocket along the leg of her pants. Her new, coppery hair spilled across the front of the heavy, dark-brown serape that covered her torso. Her feet were shod in heavy leather shoes, and each leg was wrapped from ankle to mid thigh with a long, wide, supple strip of dark leather tied tight at the top with thin strips of hemp cord. Despite having been replicated less than an hour ago, it all smelled like vintage clothing, musty and rich with history.

Across from her, sitting on two other beds, were Hawkins and Stevens. Both men had already been cosmetically altered with nearly identical shades of dark-blue skin and dark-bronze hair. Only the slight difference in their eye color—Stevens had been given metallic-gold irises, while Hawkins’s were now metallic violet—enabled her to distinguish them from one another. Both were dressed similarly to Gomez, except that the leather wrappings on their legs stopped below the knee. That was a gender-specific detail that Abramowitz had insisted on when she submitted the replicator patterns for the away team’s disguises.

Stevens checked the settings on his tricorder. Hawkins tucked his tricorder under his serape and began stretching and testing the range of motion afforded him by the X’Mari clothing.

The door to the surgical suite opened and Abramowitz stepped out. The petite cultural specialist had been the last to undergo the procedure because she had been busy overseeing the others’ transformations into authentic-looking X’Maris. Her skin was now midnight blue, and her new head of rust-hued, copper-flecked hair was tied in a long, large-knotted braid that hung straight down her back almost to her waist.

Abramowitz walked over to Gomez. “I have to fix your hair, Commander,” Abramowitz said. “Turn around for me?” Gomez turned and sat quietly as Abramowitz rapidly braided her hair. Within a few minutes she was finished. Abramowitz stepped in front of Gomez and looked over the first officer’s disguise. “Perfect,” she said. “And if I may say so, blue is definitely your color.”

Gomez rolled her eyes and stood up. “Let’s go.”

* * *

The away team stood in the transporter room and stared at Conlon and transporter chief Laura Poynter. None of the away team personnel showed any sign of being willing to step onto the transporter pad. Conlon was quickly growing annoyed.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Gomez said.

“I’m not saying it’s perfect,” Conlon said. “But if the ship can’t go into orbit to beam you down, then this—”

“Is suicide,” Hawkins said.

“I won’t lie to you, it could be a rough ride,” Poynter said. “But we’ve got plenty of documentation on previous, safe uses of this technology, and we’ve tested the living daylights out of it.”

“If I’d known you were planning on using a jury-rigged subspace transporter, I’d have aborted the mission,” Gomez said.

Conlon rolled her eyes. “Do you think we’d let you step on the pad if we thought it wasn’t safe? The transporter will work fine. My only concern is getting accurate beam-down coordinates from this distance.” Conlon was actually more concerned about interference from Teneb’s primary star, because Captain Gold had parked the *Vinci* above the star’s north pole to conceal the ship from Teneb’s legions of satellites and radio telescopes. But given the level of agitation the away team was already exhibiting, Conlon thought it best not to tell them about that particular variable in the equation.

“Let’s say you can get us down more or less in one piece,” Stevens said. “How are you supposed to lock on to our signals to beam us up from this far away?”

“We can’t,” Conlon said. She continued before the team’s groans of dismay got out of hand. “You can use a tricorder or the probe’s transceiver to send a signal that’ll let us know you’re ready to come out. When we get it, we’ll warp in, do a high-impulse flyby of the planet, and grab you with a near-warp transport before the Tenebians get too good a look at us. We can go from signal to beam-out in thirty seconds. In theory.”

“If you can get us out with a near-warp flyby,” Hawkins said, “why can’t you beam us in the same way?”

“Captain’s orders,” Conlon said. “He doesn’t want the Tenebians getting more than one look at us. That means you only get one shot at this. You all go in together, you all come out together. If you choose to abort, that’s it—mission over.”

Stevens rolled his eyes. Abramowitz brusquely lifted her hands in a gesture of capitulation. Hawkins shrugged.

Gomez stared at Conlon. “Captain’s orders?”

“Uh, yeah,” Conlon said. “Is there a problem, Commander?”

Sighing, Gomez said, “No, no problem. He’s the captain, after all.”

Conlon had felt odd being the bearer of Gold’s orders to Gomez. She guessed that this was the captain’s way of tweaking Gomez for what happened at Rhaax.

Gomez stepped onto the transporter pad. The rest of the team followed her and took their positions beneath the phase-transition coils. Conlon nodded to Poynter, who took her post at the transporter controls. Gomez frowned at Conlon.

“And away we go,” Gomez said with flat sarcasm.

Conlon moved behind the control panel next to Poynter. “Conlon to bridge. We’re ready, Captain.”

“Stand by,” Gold said over the com. A few seconds later, he continued. “Commander Corsi says the beam-in point is clear. You’re good to go.”

“Acknowledged.” Conlon nodded to Poynter. “Energize.”

Poynter keyed in the transport sequence. The room filled with the deep hum of the energizer coils charging to maximum power, followed by the almost musical rush of white noise that accompanied the dematerialization sequence. As the away team’s glowing silhouettes vanished from the transporter pad, Conlon prayed for their soft landing and safe return.

* * *

Abramowitz felt the irresistible tug of gravity as she began to materialize. She had warned the others that Teneb’s gravity was just slightly higher than what they were accustomed to aboard the *Vinci*, and to pace themselves accordingly.

The transporter’s annular confinement beam released its hold on her. She had just enough time to blink at her majestic view of the moonlit Scorla Hills before she realized that she was falling.

The rest of the away team plummeted beside her. They had materialized in mid-air, more than five meters above a river. For a moment, she almost dared to hope the river would break their fall. The coursing water rushed up to meet her.

The away team splashed into the river. Abramowitz had barely registered the stinging cold of the water before her feet struck a slippery mass of rock that had been concealed just beneath the river’s frothing surface.

Her left ankle shattered on impact. She shrieked in agony as her legs buckled. Her left femur broke as it slammed against the submerged boulder, and she fell on her side. Her left arm struck the jagged crest of the rock. She felt the bone break beneath her bicep, as she slipped swiftly beneath the frigid water.

She cried out in pain, tried to shout for help. She gasped for air and instead pulled water into her lungs.

Back to the surface, she commanded herself as she looked upward at the water-distorted crescent of Teneb’s moon. Use your good arm. Air! Swim! Her body refused to obey. She felt leaden. She reached out toward the light as she sank. Her outstretched right hand seemed to be several meters away.

Then it was in the grasp of another hand.

She was back above the surface, gasping for air, with no recollection how she’d gotten there, being pulled to shore. She was so cold, almost numb, that she started shivering uncontrollably. She couldn’t feel her feet. Her teeth chattered violently despite her attempts to stay still.

Hawkins carried her out of the water and gently laid her down on her back a few meters from shore. Gomez and Stevens were right behind him. Gomez already had her tricorder out and was scanning Abramowitz.

“It’s bad,” she said, as much to the two men as to the injured cultural specialist. “Left ankle shattered,

multiple breaks in the left femur, fibula, and tibia. Left knee joint dislocated. Multiple serious fractures in her pelvis. Broken humerus.” Gomez put away the tricorder and took out a disguised emergency medical kit that Dr. Lense had put together.

“You two go find some kindling and firewood,” she said to Stevens and Hawkins. “We have to warm her up before she goes into shock. Once she’s stable, we’ll move out.”

Hawkins stopped Stevens with a gesture and pointed at Abramowitz as he spoke to Gomez. “ ‘Move out’? She needs to get to sickbay.” Gomez opened her medkit and took out two transparent adhesive patches. She gently affixed them to the underside of Abramowitz’s upper right arm, and they seemed to vanish as they absorbed into the faux-blue skin.

“We can’t get her back to the da Vinci without aborting the mission,” Gomez said. “Her injuries are serious, but they’re not life-threatening. Once we stabilize her, we’ll set her up with some camouflage and supplies. If we need any cultural advice, we can reach her on the subaural transceivers.”

Hawkins looked like he was considering further protest, but a silent, withering glare from Gomez convinced him otherwise. “Yes, sir,” he said. He turned and followed Stevens away from the river, up a slope toward some trees.

The dermal patches released their painkillers into Abramowitz’s bloodstream. The pain in her leg abated. Gomez opened a watertight compartment in her backpack and took out a rolled-up blanket. She gently placed it under Abramowitz’s head. “You’ll be okay, Carol,” Gomez said. “I promise.”

“I’m going into shock,” she said through a shaking jaw.

Gomez spread another heavy blanket over her and tucked it under her. “No, I’m gonna fix that right now,” Gomez said. “As soon as the guys come back, we’ll build you a fire. You’ll be okay here while we finish the mission.”

Abramowitz felt almost disembodied by the sedative side effects of the painkillers. She blinked slowly. A weak smile trembled across her lips. “Well, hurry up, then,” she said. “No offense, Commander, but I want to go home.”

* * *

Commander Zila hunched over the regional road-and-municipality map, his pale-blue hands planted flat and wide apart on the table on either side of the large, laminated document. It had been more than three days since the UAO had fallen from the sky, and he was still no closer to finding it.

On the opposite side of the table stood Legioner Goff, Zila’s divisional second-in-command. Neither officer had enjoyed a decent night’s sleep in three days. As they cross-referenced field reports here in Zila’s meticulously organized command office, it looked like tonight wouldn’t be any different.

“Where the hell can it be?” Zila said, slapping the table with his palm. “It’s got to be somewhere in the hills.”

Goff shook his head. “Can’t be. We’ve cordoned every road and stopped every vehicle within five hundredtiliks of the impact site. We emptied every X’Mari camp we could find. It isn’t there.”

Zila pushed himself away from the table and paced in front of it. He scratched his head and thought

aloud. "Maybe the X'Maris buried it," he said.

"Yes, maybe," Goff said. Zila could tell the legioner was less than convinced. He forced himself to consider other scenarios, no matter how implausible they might seem.

"If the X'Maris don't have it, and we don't have it, is it possible that there are foreign agents in play?"

"Definitely," Goff said. "But they'd still have to move the object. Sync-Com radar indicated it was about the size of a class-six warhead. Not exactly the kind of thing you can hide in a backpack."

"So we've intercepted everything on the ground, and found nothing," Zila said. "And we know the nofly zone hasn't been breached." He stopped in front of the table and loomed over the regional map once again. He pressed his pale-blue index finger onto an X, drawn in grease pencil onto the map's clear plastic cover to mark the object's impact point. He traced the route of the Scorla Pass away from the impact point and into the hills.

Then he retraced his finger's path across the map, back to a notation on the map that was so tiny it almost escaped notice. "Hand me a magnifying glass," he said. Goff grabbed one off the shelf behind him and handed it to Zila, who put it to his eye and leaned down to scrutinize the map close up. "That's a bridge," Zila muttered. "It's afezzing bridge. What does it cross?" Goff opened the cabinet beneath the shelves and grabbed a topographical map of the region. He unfurled the map, which was printed on clear plastic, and laid it over the road map.

A hairline-thin blue line snaked through the Scorla Hills and passed beneath the road map's infinitesimal bridge icon.

"It's on the water," Zila said. He followed the blue line of the Scorla Ria across the topographical map toward progressively lower elevations until it intersected a much thicker blue line. "By now it'd be on the Ulom River."

"But we're watching the river," Goff said.

"For smugglers and terrorists," Zila said. "Not for one small watercraft just floating by. Whatever carried the object out of the hills had to be small enough to navigate a narrow, shallow stream for more than a hundred and twentytiliks."

"How many safe havens are there along that stretch of the river?" Goff said.

Zila scanned the names of the towns that lined the Ulom River downstream from its intersection with the Scorla Ria. "Tengma. Raozan. Kinzhol. Lersset. They've all been short-listed as X'Mari guerrilla bases."

"Assuming that the X'Maris are the ones who have the object," Goff said.

"They have it," Zila said. "Pull all the regiments out of the hills and secure those four towns, now."

"Yes, sir," Goff said. He snapped a crisp salute and held it until Zila returned the gesture. Then he turned on his heel and strode quickly out of the commander's office.

Zila picked up a red grease pencil and carefully drew an X through each of the four towns he'd just marked for death.

* * *

Gomez tied her pack shut and slung it over her shoulder. A few meters away, Stevens and Hawkins were already packed and waiting for her to lead them onward to the crash site. The sky overhead was peppered with stars; morning was still more than seven hours away, and the crisp, cold bite of winter was in the air.

Abramowitz was swaddled in thick blankets and propped up in a sitting position against a large rock formation next to the river. Within her reach on her left side was a neatly arranged assortment of water canisters and provisions, enough to last for up to two days. On her other side was a large pile of dry kindling and an ignition device, all arranged next to a stone-ringed concavity in which a small fire crackled.

Hidden beneath her serape was her tricorder and Gomez's medical kit, complete with another day's supply of painkiller patches. The whole comfy setup was concealed behind a makeshift screen of camouflage netting that Hawkins had tied together from spare hemp cord and local foliage.

Gomez crouched next to Abramowitz. "You feeling any better?"

"I'm okay," she said with a nod. "Pain's under control, and I should be fine here—assuming you guys don't drag your heels."

"I like you all drugged up," Gomez said with a smile. "Makes you talk like an officer."

Abramowitz chuckled and groggily shook her head. "Nah, just a mean cripple. Now go, you're wasting time."

Gomez gently squeezed Abramowitz's shoulder. "Okay. Hang tight, we'll be outta here in no time."

Gomez stood up and stepped around the camouflage screen. She walked over to Hawkins and Stevens, took out her tricorder, and checked the readout. They did likewise.

"I'm tracking the probe's energy signature," she said. "Bearing one-eight-six. Range, four hundred fifty-four-point-three kilometers and opening at a rate of roughly three kilometers per hour." Both men adjusted their own tricorders.

"Range and bearing confirmed," Hawkins said.

"Roger that," Stevens said. "That heading takes us right past the crash site, thirty-two-point-four kilometers from here. That's about... what? Six hours' walk?"

"More like seven," Gomez said. "We'll check it out on our way south. Let's move out." She adjusted the shoulder straps of her pack for a bit more comfort, then started walking forward into the night as a flurry of snowflakes fell like a white blanket across the uneven path ahead of her.

Chapter 4

Trooper Maleska led his squad down a dark, smoky stretch of Kinzhol's main street. Broad scorches marred most of the buildings along this avenue. Not one had even a single window intact, and their

façades were pitted with shrapnel scars and long trails of large-caliber bullet holes. Several had been reduced to broken-concrete foundations studded with shorn-off steel beams twisted in every direction.

He tuned out the slow-rushing roar of Venekan jumpjets cruising high overhead. Moments later, a loud explosion a few blocks away sent a glowing fireball mushrooming into the sky, followed by a plume of inky black smoke that melted into the night. The blast shook a cloud of dust off the ramshackle skeleton of a building on his left. He paid it no mind.

Debris was strewn in a chaotic jumble across the street. Maleska and his soldiers moved slowly, crouched low to the ground, their short-barreled rifles held level against their shoulders. The men on the sides of the formation crab-walked sideways while watching the flanks for any sign of enemy movement. All Maleska saw were civilians: some staggering aimlessly in shock; some cowering from him and his troops; some trying to preserve any semblance of their ordinary lives in the aftermath of a barrage of high-tech, pyrotechnic horrors.

A knot of twenty-odd X'Mari civilians drifted across the intersection ahead of the platoon. They were ragged and filthy, and they moved with a random, desperate curiosity as they sorted through the rubble and dirt, looking for who knew what. In the middle of the four-way intersection there was a crater where a bomb had exploded. As far as Maleska could see, the roads had been shredded, as if a fiery blade had shorn off the top layers of pavement. Twisted strips of the roads' aluminum undergirders were scattered everywhere, wedged into vehicles and corpses, or jutting out of buildings they'd impaled.

A door banged open to his right. He turned and aimed his rifle. A X'Mari man backed carefully out of the doorway, helping another man carry a sofa. Behind them emerged a woman carrying an enormous duffel bag on her back and two large cases, one in either hand. Following her was a trio of children, the youngest barely old enough to walk, all clutching one or two favorite toys as they abandoned their home.

As Maleska and his squad neared the end of their patrol route, he thought he saw a discarded bouquet of white flowers on top of the overturned, blasted-out, carbonized frame of a car. As he passed the smashed vehicle, he realized that the bouquet was actually a dead, white bird.

The soldiers moved cautiously through a hazy wall of gray, fuel-smelling smoke and turned the corner to the checkpoint at the end of their assigned sector. As they broke through the veil of smoke, Maleska saw the street was littered with broken musical instruments. Standing in the midst of the shattered items was a lone X'Mari man who stared, silent and forlorn, into the hollow, charred shell of what had once been a music shop.

Maleska looked back at his squad. Yellik, who had been bringing up the rear, signaled all-clear. Maleska beckoned his radioman forward and accepted the radio handset from him. He punched in his security code. "Sync-Com, Five-NineJazim. We've finished our patrol. Sectorsmasara all-clear. Over."

"Five-NineJazim, Sync-Com," came the staticky reply. "All-clear confirmed. Proceed due south on Genmeck Road and secure the river port with extreme prejudice. Over."

"Sync-Com, Five-NineJazim. Secure the river port, acknowledged. Five-NineJazim out." Maleska looked down Genmeck Road toward the river port a half-dozenkiliks away. There seemed to be nothing left intact between here and there.

He motioned his squad forward and began marching south toward the river. A light flurry of snow began to fall. He watched the flakes melt before they reached the smoldering, scorched ground, and wondered if any part of this country would survive the Venekan Army's dubious mission of liberation.

* * *

Ganag let his oar drag broadside in the water to the left of the skiff, turning the sliver-shaped watercraft neatly into the broad mouth of a corroded, half-submerged sewer drain. The stench of excrement and industrial waste assaulted his nostrils. He paddled the skiff slowly into the pipe. His paddlethunked against the sides of the pipe with a low, hollow metallic echo. The sound reverberated down the length of the pipe and back again, waking Lerec and Shikorn.

Shikorn swept his long, tangled bronze hair out of his eyes. "I dreamed I'd been buried inkarg," he said. He sniffed, looked around, and frowned. "I was right."

"We needed to take cover," Ganag said. "The sun'll be up any minute." He reached up and secured the anchor line to a protruding valve handle. Lerec failed to suppress a sick cough that sounded dangerously close to a retch. "Shut him up," Ganag said, realizing only after he'd spoken that Shikorn was already placing a clean, folded cloth over Lerec's nose and mouth, as a filter. Moments later, the young boy's coughing ceased as he breathed through his covered mouth.

"Where are we?" Shikorn said, his near-whisper amplified by the close quarters of the pipe. Ganag pulled his own, threadbare blanket from his seat and unfolded it.

"On the outskirts of Lersset," he said. "Maybe fivetiliks from the edge of town."

Lerec seemed calmer, but he was shivering now. "Why can't we go and get some food?" he said.

Ganag wrapped his blanket around himself and huddled down into the stern of the boat. "Because you'll be seen, we'll get caught, and we'll be killed," Ganag said. He curled up for warmth and closed his eyes. "Now be quiet and go back to sleep. Save your strength."

"I can't sleep," Lerec said. "I'm too hungry."

"How hungry can you be?" Shikorn said as he crawled back under his own blanket. "You ate just yesterday."

"No, the day before," Lerec said. "And it smells here."

Ganag sighed. He tried not to let his frustration with the boy prevent him from getting to sleep. He'd done most of the paddling since the bridge in the Scorla Pass, and his arms felt like knotty wood. He was hungry, too, but sleep was more precious to him than food right now.

"You'll eat tonight, after we reach the Resistance," Ganag said. "Now go back to sleep before we drown you." Ganag didn't enjoy making Lerec suffer, but right now it was necessary. Hungry, he reminded himself, is better than dead.

* * *

The pre-dawn sky was dark with clouds as Stevens, Gomez, and Hawkins crawled, side by side, up a snow-covered slope toward the crest of a hill. The gravity on Teneb was a bit more than Stevens was used to, and he felt as though he were dragging a large, dead weight behind him. He also could have sworn that the snow on this planet was colder than the brutal winters back home in the Rigel colonies, though that was probably only his imagination. As they inched over the top, they saw the brightly lit cluster of activity half a kilometer below.

A kilometer-long gouge in the soil, caused by the probe's impact, had been cordoned off with what looked to Stevens like a lot of hastily erected, prefabricated metal fencing topped with razor wire. Dozens of technicians in bright orange, full-body protective gear paced back and forth inside the trench, stopping occasionally to take samples or examine small bits of debris.

Parked on either side of the impact scar was a fleet of vehicles ranging from several kinds of large trucks to assorted types of four-person utility vehicles to armored assault craft. Scores of uniformed Venekan soldiers milled about. Several of them patrolled the site's perimeter.

Along the outer edges of the base camp, a large, fixed-wing aircraft with rotatable turbine engines split the air with a high-pitched roar as it made a slow, vertical landing. As its landing gear touched down onto the cross-marked landing area, its side hatches slid open, and another twenty-four Venekan soldiers bounded out and jogged in formation toward the camp's central, tentlike command pavilion.

Stevens looked up as another pair of the same type of aircraft shrieked overhead. Gomez leaned toward Hawkins. "How many, do you figure?"

Hawkins narrowed his eyes as he studied the Venekan troops. "About two hundred on the ground," he said. "Based on the number of landing platforms, I'd say there are three more of those aircraft in the area, counting the two that just flew over."

Stevens checked his tricorder readout. "The probe's stopped moving, four hundred eighty-two-point-seven kilometers from here, on bearing one-eight-four-point-two." He looked down at the Venekan troops. "Think their buddies have it?" he said.

Gomez shook her head. "No, look at these guys," she said. "If they had it, it'd be halfway around the world by now."

Hawkins nodded in agreement. "Definitely," he said. "They'd want it as far from here as possible. Same would go for any foreign powers trying to scoop it up. The fact that it's as close as it is tells me the X'Maris have it."

"Only one way to be sure," Gomez said. "Let's keep moving."

Stevens followed Gomez as she turned to shimmy back down the hill. He stopped as he saw the barrel of a rifle pointed at his face from less than three meters away. "Halt!" an angry male voice said. "Hands in the air!"

Stevens waited until Gomez raised her hands over her head, then he did the same, followed by Hawkins.

Three Venekan soldiers, dressed in gray-and-white camouflage, kept their rifles aimed at Gomez, Stevens, and Hawkins while three more Venekan sentries, in the same winter gear, circled behind the trio.

Stevens's pack was torn from his back and flung onto the ground, its contents strewn across the snow. Beside him, Gomez's and Hawkins's packs were given the same treatment. He looked down the snowy hill and followed the soldiers' footprints.

All six soldiers had been concealed beneath the snow and soil, buried into the hillside itself. They must have been in position even before it snowed, Stevens realized. We crawled right past them on the way up.

He heard Hawkins fall to the ground, followed by Gomez. He tried to brace himself, but the soldier's boot slammed into the back of his knee and his leg buckled beneath him. He was pushed face-first into the snow-covered dirt and winced as the Venekan's boot pressed sharply on his neck. Another soldier searched through his pockets. They found his tricorder and pulled it out to examine it.

"Let me see those," the soldier in charge said.

A moment later, Stevens heard the whisper-softpooof of his tricorder self-destructing at the molecular level, right in the Venekan's hand. Two morepooofs were all that announced the loss of Hawkins's and Gomez's tricorders.

The soldier in charge sounded very unhappy about having just inexplicably lost three very important pieces of evidence. "First squad, take 'em down to camp," he ordered. "Second squad, police up the rest of their gear and log it in with the quartermaster. I'll notify Sync-Com."

Stevens felt the boot lift from his neck. He was yanked back to his feet. The flurries of snow that had followed them south from the beam-in point grew heavier as he, Gomez, and Hawkins were pushed forward and down the far slope of the hill toward the floodlit base camp below.

Chapter 5

"Are you part of the X'Mari Resistance?" the Venekan military interrogator said. Stevens sat still and said nothing. After he, Gomez, and Hawkins had been escorted down to the camp next to the impact scar, he had immediately been separated from the others and brought to this tent for questioning.

The space inside the gray canvas tent was nothing if not Spartan. It stank of stale sweat. A naked tungsten-filament lightbulb dangled over his head, hanging from a frayed black electrical cord. It cast a weak orange glow in a tight circle around the dull-gray metal chair to which he was handcuffed in a sitting position. Other than that, the tent was empty.

The interrogator paced around Stevens, staring suspiciously at him. His steps crunched on the frozen-dirt floor. "Let's start with something easier," he said. "What's your name?"

"Hang on, Fabian," Abramowitz said over the transceiver, which made her voice sound intimately close. "Don't say anything yet. I'm still cooking up a cover story for you." Now that the Venekans had, albeit unwittingly, destroyed his, Gomez's, and Hawkins's tricorders, Abramowitz now held the away team's only true high-tech resource. Gomez had opened a four-way channel a few minutes ago, and now the entire away team was listening in on his interrogation.

"Just relax and play it cool," Hawkins said, joining the conversation. He sounded like he was whispering. "Abramowitz, did you download any Venekan legal data? Does Stevens have any rights in there?"

"I'm not sure," Abramowitz said. "Hold on."

The Venekan interrogator stopped in front of Stevens and leaned down until he was almost nose-to-nose with him. He stared into Stevens's eyes. "Why were you observing our camp?" he said, an edge of menace implicit in his tone.

“Don’t answer him until we know what they know,” Gomez said. Stevens wondered if having a party-line transceiver in one’s head was anything like having multiple-personality disorder. Probably not, he concluded.

The interrogator’s breath was hot and foul. It reminded Stevens of curry and cilantro, with a hint of sickly sweet cinnamon. Then he reconsidered—the odor might not be from the man’s breath at all. Could be his cologne, Stevens realized. No way to tell. Can’t really ask. Oh, well.

“Which of you is in command?” the interrogator said. “Where’s your base?” Stevens realized that the only thing that was keeping him from falling asleep with utter boredom right now was the remote possibility that, at any moment, the interrogator might summon someone else to continue the questioning.

Someone equipped with painful implements of persuasion. Someone unburdened by the weight of a conscience.

Abramowitz piped up over the transceiver. “Good news and bad news,” she said. “Good news is, the Venekan Army has strict laws against the use of physical or psychological coercion in the questioning of military prisoners. Bad news is, they have no problem detaining suspects indefinitely without charge, as long as it’s in a war zone.”

“Where are your weapons?” the interrogator said. Stevens raised his eyebrows and shrugged. Only after he’d done it did he consider the possibility that the gesture might not mean the same thing to Tenebians as it did to humans. Fortunately for him, the interrogator seemed to grasp his meaning just fine.

“Okay,” Abramowitz said, “I’ve compiled the thirty most popular male given names and the hundred most common surnames for X’Mari men in your age group, and cross-referenced them with demographic data for this region. Here’s your cover: Your name is Menno Yorlik, and you’re a textile trader from Navoc. We’re neighbors of yours, traveling toward—”

“All right, we’re done,” the interrogator said. He walked away from Stevens and stepped outside through a flap in the front of the tent. “Come get this guy,” he shouted to someone.

Figures, Stevens thought. Just as I get an alibi...

A pair of soldiers stepped past the interrogator and entered the tent, followed by another officer, an older man whose hair was turning platinum white at the temples.

“Did he tell you anything?” the older officer said. The soldiers unlocked Stevens’s handcuffs.

The interrogator shook his head with disgust. “I’m not even sure he can talk,” he said.

The soldiers lifted Stevens from the chair and dragged him out of the tent and across the compound, to another empty tent on the far side. They led him inside and ordered him to wrap his arms around the tent’s center-support pole. He did as he was told, and they slapped the handcuffs back on him before marching back out. It could always be worse, Stevens consoled himself as he eyed his predicament. At least I’m not stuck here with Tev.

* * *

“The patrol leader tells me you were the one giving orders to the other two,” the interrogator said, his

putrid breath warming the back of Gomez's ear. Gomez tested the strength of the handcuffs, which bit painfully into her wrists. The chair she sat on was lightweight, but its metal frame was strong—and not the least bit flexible.

"I know you're the one in charge of this scout team," the interrogator said. He shifted his weight and whispered in her other ear. "The penalties for you are going to be a lot worse than for your friends. Unless you want to cooperate?"

"Good-news-bad-news time again," Abramowitz said over the transceiver. "Bad news first: He's not lying. If they convict you three as spies and decide that you're the one in charge, they can execute you on the spot."

"What's the good news?" Stevens said, echoing Gomez's thoughts.

"I lied," Abramowitz said. "There isn't any."

"You X'Mari girls love to play soldier, don't you?" the interrogator said, leaning uncomfortably close to Gomez's face. "Love to pretend you're one of the men?"

"No more than you do," Gomez said, breaking her defiant wall of silence.

The interrogator wrinkled his brow and glowered. "Droll," he said. "Does this mean you're prepared to start answering questions?"

"Only if you're ready to meet my conditions," Gomez said. The interrogator folded his arms and eyed her warily.

"Such as?"

"You need to go shave and wash your face," she said.

He chuckled. "Why?" he said, his condescension naked in its intent. "Do my rough looks scare you?"

"No," she said with a lethal smile. "I just don't want you to scratch me when you kneel down and kiss my cold, blue ass."

The interrogator sighed in disgust, turned, and stepped outside through the flap in the front of the tent. "You can take her back now," he shouted to the soldiers waiting outside.

* * *

Hawkins looked his interrogator in the eye, sizing him up from the moment he sat down and felt the handcuffs click shut around his wrists. The interrogator's face looked gaunt and his eyes drooped with exhaustion, as if he hadn't had a meal or a decent night's sleep in weeks. He wore the manner of a man trying to be intimidating, but his body language was that of a man who would much rather leave this job to someone—anyone—else.

The interrogator rubbed his eyes and sighed. "I don't suppose you'll cooperate, either?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Hawkins said casually. "We're on the same side." The interrogator blinked and actually did a double take.

“We’re what?”

Hawkins looked around, as if he were genuinely shocked by the man’s response. “What? You mean they didn’t tell you?”

“Huh? Who didn’t—? Tell me what?”

“I’m a Venekan agent,” Hawkins said. “I’m undercover.”

“Come again?” The interrogator was starting to sound upset.

“I’m infiltrating the X’Mari Resistance.”

“What?” The interrogator sounded incredulous. “All three of you?” Hawkins rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“No, just me,” he said. “I’m only using them to enhance my credibility. They’re part of my cover.”

The interrogator’s eyes narrowed with suspicion.

“What agency are you with?”

Hawkins snorted derisively, as if the officer had just made the stupidest request in the world. “I can’t tell you that.”

“Why not?” the interrogator said.

Hawkins shrugged. “You obviously don’t have the clearance for that information.”

“The hell I don’t!” The interrogator pointed furiously at the rank insignia on his collar. “See these stars?”

Hawkins tuned out the rest of the away team’s laughter, which came in bursts over his subaural transceiver.

“If you had clearance,” he said, “you’d have been briefed already. But you obviously don’t know who I am, so you can’t have been cleared. Sorry, nothing personal.”

The interrogator inhaled sharply, then held his breath, apparently concentrating on calming himself. He exhaled.

“I suppose you think you can trick me into letting you go.”

“And blow my cover? Are you crazy? It took forever to win the X’Maris’ trust. Pull me out now and the whole op’s a wash. No, no way. Not unless you have specific orders for me to abort—which you don’t, because you didn’t even know I was here.”

The interrogator covered his face with his hands and breathed in and out in a slow, measured rhythm. He massaged his temples with his thumbs. He stopped and looked wearily at Hawkins, who stared back at the man like he owned him.

“Do you have any evidence,” the interrogator said, “anything at all, that proves you’re telling me the truth?”

Hawkins arched one eyebrow and smirked at him.

“Do you have any that proves I’m not?”

The interrogator stared at Hawkins for a very long moment before letting out a sigh of defeat. He plodded to the tent’s flap, pushed it aside, and walked outside as he issued one final order to the soldiers standing guard outside the tent.

“I’m done,” he said. “Put ’em on a jumper and get ’em outta here.”

* * *

A steady fall of snow had shrouded the ground surrounding the Venekan camp during the two short hours that Gomez, Hawkins, and Stevens had been held for questioning. The snowfall was heavier now, but, Gomez noted, not heavy enough to keep Venekan aircraft from flying. She, Hawkins, and Stevens—with their hands cuffed behind their backs—were escorted at gunpoint toward a waiting aircraft, or “jumper,” as the Venekan soldiers called them.

The gray-and-white camouflaged vehicle’s jet-turbine engines gave off a loud and steady whine, and wavering ripples of heat distortion rose from the thrusters’ exhaust ports. Its two-person flight crew sat side by side in the cockpit, which was separated from the troop compartment by what Gomez concluded was a very durable-looking metal door.

Gomez was the first to climb the wide metal ladder and step through the jet’s right-side hatch, just behind the wing, into its main compartment. Hawkins followed close behind her, with Stevens and their three-person armed escort boarding last.

“You three sit there,” one of the soldiers said, pointing at a long, flat bench that ran the length of the compartment’s right side. The trio sat down. Two of the soldiers kept their rifles aimed at them while the third shackled the trio together at the ankles. As soon as he backed away and sat down, the other two soldiers did likewise.

“Commander, I’m monitoring the signal traffic from the aircraft you just boarded,” Abramowitz said over the subaural transceiver. Though she’d addressed Gomez, Gomez could tell from Hawkins’s and Stevens’s subtle reactions that Abramowitz was using an open channel to keep everyone on the team equally informed.

She could barely hear her over the engine noise inside the jumpjet. “Your pilot just received orders to take the three of you to a place called ‘Samara.’ I checked the—”

The engines shrieked then roared, and the jumpjet wobbled slightly into a vertical liftoff. The hellish din drowned out Abramowitz’s voice for several seconds. Outside the still-open side hatches, Gomez saw the horizon recede as the craft gained altitude. A pair of amber-hued lights next to the side doors activated. The doors slid shut and locked closed, then the amber lights turned pale blue. Once the doors closed, Gomez was once again able to hear Abramowitz.

“—appears that Samara refers to the Mount Samara prisoner-of-war camp, located roughly one hundred twenty-point-seven kilometers northeast of your current position,” Abramowitz said.

Gomez felt her weight shift in response to the sudden acceleration as the jet's afterburners kicked in. "I'll try to access schematics for the camp and maps of its surrounding terrain before you—" Abramowitz stopped abruptly. Gomez glanced sidelong at Stevens and Hawkins, who wore similar expressions of concern. Seconds passed before Abramowitz transmitted again. "Um, Commander," she said, sounding worried, "I have company."

* * *

Abramowitz quickly deactivated her tricorder and concealed it in a pocket beneath her serape. The sound of approaching footsteps drew closer, muffled only slightly by the freshly fallen snow. Whoever it is probably saw the smoke from my fire, she realized, and she chastised herself for not staying more aware of her situation. She'd been staring at her tricorder display for the past two hours and had lost all sense of time and place.

As the footsteps grew louder, Abramowitz steeled herself for a much-dreaded confrontation with a Venekan soldier. But the face that peeked around the camouflage drop was young, female, and dark blue. The girl's clothes were of distinctively northern X'Mari origin. Abramowitz surmised that the girl couldn't have been much older than twelve or thirteen. The teenager stared at her with wide, doleful violet eyes.

"I'm Lica," the girl said. Abramowitz hesitated, unsure what to say. The girl continued to stare unthreateningly at her.

"I'm Kinara," Abramowitz said, slipping into the cover identity she'd prepared for herself while convalescing here.

"We saw the smoke from your fire," Lica said. "Are you all right?" Abramowitz concealed her immediate wave of concern: We?

"No," Abramowitz said. "My leg is broken. I—" Before she could continue, Lica waved someone else over to join her. Abramowitz heard more footsteps, slower and heavier than Lica's. Sounds like more than one person, she thought. Two adult women joined Lica. Both were gaunt and bore haunted expressions; one looked to be in her forties, the other in her sixties or older. Lica pointed at Abramowitz.

"She's hurt," Lica said. "Her leg is broken."

The younger adult woman knelt next to Abramowitz and rested a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I'm Nedia," she said, then gestured toward the older X'Mari woman, who was garbed in robes that Abramowitz could tell had religious significance. "This is Mother Aleké. What's your name?"

"Kinara," she said.

"I'm going to check your wounds, Kinara. Is that all right?" Abramowitz nodded, afraid to refuse lest it raise suspicion. Nedia looked over the makeshift splints that Gomez and Hawkins had made for Abramowitz's left arm and leg. The woman's hands smelled strongly of antiseptic iodine.

"Who set these?" Nedia said.

"My friends," Abramowitz said.

“They left you behind?” Nedia said, alarmed.

“They were captured,” Abramowitz said.

“By the Venekans,” Nedia said. Abramowitz nodded.

Nedia turned her head toward Mother Aleké. “Her injuries are severe, and her friends have been taken by the enemy. We can’t leave her here.” Mother Aleké nodded gravely.

“Get a stretcher and some more help,” Nedia said to Lica. The girl sprinted away, back the way she’d come. Nedia began to gather Abramowitz’s supplies for her, while talking over her shoulder in a low, angry voice to Mother Aleké.

“How can the Venekans be such savages?” she said. “How can they treat women and children like this?”

“Because they seek to extinguish in us what they have lost of themselves,” the elderly woman said. “They are empty.”

“Yet they rule the world,” Nedia said, her bitterness threatening to spill over into rage.

“To rule is to govern and care for one’s people,” Mother Aleké said. “The Venekans rule nothing. They merely hold people hostage.”

Lica returned, accompanied by four more X’Mari women ranging in age from late teens to mid-fifties. One of them carried a crude stretcher. Nedia and another woman gently lifted Abramowitz and slid the stretcher beneath her. “Everyone,” she said, “this is Kinara.” The women surrounded Abramowitz and lifted her stretcher. “Don’t be afraid, Kinara,” Nedia said. “We’ll take care of you. It’s going to be all right.”

The cluster of women carried Abramowitz and followed Mother Aleké up a knoll and away from Abramowitz’s redoubt. Heavy, wet flakes of ash-gray snow fell from a dreary sky and smothered the surrounding hills. As the group crested the hill and began descending the other side, Abramowitz saw the narrow road that snaked through the Scorla Hills, reaching from the plains in the south toward the higher ground in the north.

Stretched out on that road, for more than a kilometer in each direction, was a column of tattered-looking X’Mari refugees, almost all of them women and young children. Many of them were wounded and wrapped in crude bandages freshly stained with their sapphire-tinted blood. Those women who weren’t holding wailing infants bore the burden of carrying what few possessions they’d salvaged from their former lives. Most were poorly clothed, considering the quickly dropping temperatures.

The women carried Abramowitz on her stretcher into the middle of the refugee column, which resumed its grim and wordless march away from civilization, into exile.

Chapter

6

The flight to the POW camp was brief. Hawkins estimated the trip had taken only about twenty minutes

from liftoff to landing. He, Stevens, and Gomez were ushered off the aircraft. They stood at the base of a small mountain, in the mouth of a gigantic off-round nook in its side.

The nook's sheer, rocky walls were almost completely vertical, rising several hundred feet toward the crescent-shaped lip of a snow-covered slope. Hawkins could barely see the top of the cliff wall through the falling snow.

The trio was met by a platoon of armed soldiers, who led them past several Venekan troop vehicles and through the camp's outer gate, into a wide-open parade-and-assembly area that was more than forty centimeters deep with fresh-fallen snow.

On his left, Hawkins counted three barracks, each large enough to house fifty personnel comfortably. Tucked into the far left corner, against the front fence, was a structure that he guessed was probably the latrine. On the opposite side of the assembly area was a long building whose roof was festooned with chimneys and steam vents. Probably the mess hall, he decided.

Directly ahead of the trio was an enormous, ten-meter-tall concrete bunker that stretched nearly two hundred meters across, spanning the entire width of the nook. Rising from the bunker's center was a fortified command tower fifteen meters tall. At either end of the bunker was a guard tower equipped with a searchlight and manned by a sniper.

Set into the bunker on either side of the central tower, halfway between it and the guard towers at the far ends, were a pair of three-meter-tall gates. Each opened into a ten-meter-long, three-meter-wide corridor. On either side of both corridors were gatehouses complete with "murder holes"—narrow openings in the walls just large enough to point gun barrels through, in order to mow down people inside the corridors without the risk of the victims fighting back.

Gomez was ushered toward the right-side gate, while Stevens and Hawkins were herded toward the one on the left. The two men passed a platoon of soldiers marching in formation. Based on the size of the camp and the number of buildings and vehicles, Hawkins estimated that there was, at most, a single company of soldiers garrisoned here—no more than a hundred and fifty personnel, including officers and support staff.

The left gate opened. He and Stevens stepped forward into the dark, narrow corridor. As soon as they were past the outer gate, it closed behind them, and the gate at the far end of the corridor opened in front of them. Hawkins felt the eyes of the Venekan soldiers watching them from behind the murder holes as he and Stevens walked forward.

They stepped out of the corridor, into the men's prison yard. The inner gate clanked closed behind them. In contrast to the orderliness of the soldiers' camp on the other side of the concrete bunker, the prisoners' side was a shantytown of torn and rotting canvas and rusted sheet-metal lean-tos. More than two hundred X'Mari men and adolescent boys drifted like aimless shades or sprawled idly inside their pathetic shelters.

Like the soldiers' camp, the men's prison yard was circled by a seven-meter-tall chain-link fence topped with razor wire. In several places there were narrow gaps between the fence and the cliffs beyond, but Hawkins looked back and saw that the gaps had been sealed on either side of the concrete bunker. Along the right side of the prison yard, parallel to the center fences, was a slope-roofed latrine building, thirty-plus meters long.

To his right, beyond the center fence, was the women's camp. It was a near-perfect mirror image of the

men's camp, down to the shoddy latrine building opposite their own. The two yards were separated not by a single fence but by two parallel fences, less than a meter apart, whose razor-wire toppings tangled together. There were nearly as many women imprisoned here as there were men. Standing in front of the women's inside gate was Commander Gomez, who looked back at Hawkins.

He heard her speak softly to him via the subaural transceiver. "Gotta give the Venekans credit," she said. "They sure do build a good concentration camp."

"Yeah," he said. "Get past the fence and there's nowhere to go. Go through the gate and you get shot."

Stevens craned his neck backward and gazed up through the falling flakes of snow at the towering cliffs of rock that surrounded the prison yards. Then he looked at the concrete bunker, the guard towers, and the central command tower.

"It does have one flaw," Stevens said. Hawkins fixed him with a look that urged him to explain. Stevens grinned.

"It shows a fundamental lack of respect for nature."

* * *

Abramowitz peeked through one eye to see if any of the refugees were watching her. She had pretended to fall asleep a few hours ago to discourage them from talking to her, which would only increase the likelihood that she would be caught in a lie. She knew the X'Mari were xenophobes; if they realized she wasn't one of them, they would very likely brand her a spy and kill her.

The column had stopped moving several minutes ago, and the women who had been carrying her had put down her stretcher and stepped away. Realizing she had been given a fleeting moment of privacy, Abramowitz activated her transceiver and covered her mouth with her hand as she spoke.

"Abramowitz to away team, do you read me?" she said in a near-whisper. She looked around nervously while she waited for a reply.

Gomez's voice filled her ears. "Gomez here. Are you okay, Carol? We've been trying to reach you for four hours."

"I know," Abramowitz said. "I couldn't say anything because I'm not alone. I got picked up by a X'Mari refugee column."

"Picked up? Where are you?"

"We're on a road heading into the high country. I don't know exactly where, but I'd say we're heading north."

"Carol, we need some tricorder magic," Stevens said, jumping into the conversation. "Can you help us out?"

"Not right now," she said. "Still too many eyes around. Maybe tonight, after they make camp and go to sleep."

"It's okay, we can wait," Hawkins said. "They're about to serve lunch here and I'm starved."

Abramowitz's eyes widened with alarm. She hoped she'd heard Hawkins wrong.

"Tell me you haven't eaten anything," she said.

"Why?" Stevens said. "What's—"

"Didn't any of you read my mission briefing? We can't eat the food on this planet. Everything organic on Teneb contains a cyanic compound called thanacil. One mouthful and you'll be dead before you hit the ground."

* * *

Gomez stared in horror at the shallow tin of gruel in her hands. Abramowitz's warning had come just as she had reached the front of the chow line and been given her thrice-daily ration.

Lucky for me they made me wait near the back of the line, she thought. Being low girl on the totem pole finally pays off.

On the other side of the fence, Stevens and Hawkins were just now having ladlefuls of the saffron-colored goop swatted into their own dented tin bowls. Gomez stared at them, then at the plate of poison in her hands.

From behind her came a grumbled litany of protests and complaints. "What's the problem?" one woman shouted. "Why isn't she moving?" said another. A filthy ladle was waved in her face. "What're you waiting for? Move it!" said the prisoner serving the food, shooing Gomez away.

Gomez turned and handed her tin to the woman behind her.

"I don't want it," Gomez said. "You take it. Enjoy."

A soldier standing guard in front of Gomez grabbed the edge of her serape as she started to walk away from the chow line. "What do you think you're doing?" he said.

"Not eating. Let me go."

He snatched back Gomez's tin from the woman behind her and thrust it back into Gomez's hands. "Move along."

Gomez held her ground and stared back at him. All activity and grousing on both chow lines ceased. Everyone watched the confrontation between Gomez and the soldier. "I don't want your food," she said, enunciating clearly and with growing defiance. "It tastes like death," she said. She turned her bowl upside-down and emptied its sticky, yellow contents on the soldier's well-polished black boots.

On the other side of the fence, Hawkins and Stevens followed Gomez's lead, and dumped their own bowls of gruel on the ground. The soldier facing Gomez lifted his arm to backhand her—and paused as the yard resounded with the splatter of hundreds of bowls of gruel being emptied onto the frozen ground. Every X'Mari man and woman in the camp had dumped their food and now glared at the soldiers. The air tingled with hatred.

Gomez tensed and waited for the Venekans to respond.

The soldier in front of her lowered his hand and stepped back toward the serving table in front of the chow line. “You want to starve?” he said. He grabbed the pot of gruel and dumped its contents on the ground. “Fine. Starve.” He motioned to the soldiers who had been monitoring the chow service. They followed him back through the gate to the soldiers’ side of the bunker.

On the other side of the fence, in the men’s prison yard, more soldiers did the same thing, spilling out the remaining food then retreating to safety on the other side of the gate.

Gomez wondered if she had led the X’Maris astray—most of them looked like they couldn’t afford to miss too many more meals. As she pondered the morality of triggering an almost certainly futile hunger strike, a X’Mari woman who looked to be about Gomez’s age stepped up to her and clasped her arm.

“Thank you,” she said as her eyes brimmed with tears. “We’d forgotten how to fight...how to resist. Thank you for reminding us.” She released Gomez’s arm and shuffled away, weak and tired, but no longer beaten.

Gomez felt a wave of sympathy for the woman, for all the prisoners in the camp—but then she reminded herself that she wasn’t here to take sides. She didn’t know the history of the X’Maris or the Venekans, or what the issues of their conflict were. She was here for only one reason: to destroy a Starfleet probe before any of this planet’s denizens—whether they be Venekans, X’Maris, or anyone else—turned it into a weapon.

“Thanks for the heads-up, Carol,” she said as she looked across at Hawkins and Stevens. “Let us know the moment you can use the tricorder. We need to break out of here as soon as possible.” Before we starve, she thought as her stomach growled.

* * *

The refugee column had covered several kilometers between midday and nightfall, and everyone was worn out. The task of carrying Abramowitz’s stretcher had been shared by many dozens of women. A few would carry her for a while until they became fatigued, then others took their place. No one had asked for help or complained; the shifts had seemed to happen all on their own.

The snowfall had petered out a few hours ago, and a break in the cloud cover along the horizon had allowed a few golden rays of sunset to slant through the jagged peaks surrounding the refugees before darkness fell.

Now the group was quiet; a few women and old men remained alert, tending small fires or watching the road ahead and behind for any sign of unwelcome attention. Abramowitz’s benefactors had set her up with a bedroll and made space for her inside their crowded tent. Now she was huddled among them, shivering despite the body heat that emanated from either side of her.

She pulled her heavy blanket up over her head to hide herself. Fishing her tricorder from its hiding place, she activated it and adjusted its display, reducing its brightness to avoid casting a telltale glow beneath her covers. She set it for silent operation, then interfaced it with her transceiver. Thank heavens for fully integrated technology, she thought as she accessed the tricorder’s voice-synthesis function. She would let the tricorder generate an audio signal to speak for her, and use her transceiver to transmit it to the rest of the away team. No one in the tent with her would hear anything, because Abramowitz herself wouldn’t have to speak.

Abramowitz to away team, she transmitted. She heard the tricorder-synthesized voice in her transceiver.

It sounded human, but strangely lacking in affect. Do you copy?

“Gomez here. Did you go and catch a cold?” Abramowitz could tell that Gomez was kidding—the commander knew what a computer voice sounded like just as well as she did.

I have to let the tricorder do the talking. What do you need?

“Can you tap into the camp’s P.A. system?” Stevens asked. “If we can use it to transmit a properly focused ultrasonic signal at the right frequency, we might be able to trigger a controlled snowfall from the ridge above the soldiers’ barracks and make ourselves a bridge out of here.”

I’ll see what I can do, but it’ll take time.

“Let us know when you’re ready,” Hawkins said. “We’ll be standing by to walk you through the details.”

Abramowitz began the slow, tedious process of scanning for weather-radar satellites that would help her gauge the snow density on the ridge, and looking for a “back door” in the POW camp’s communications software.

Why couldn’t they have been captured by a X’Mari chieftain? she groused to herself. A few platitudes, a few gestures of respect, and I could’ve had them out in time for lunch. But, no, they have to go and get themselves locked up in a Venekan POW camp. She sighed heavily as she tapped into Teneb’s satellite-information network and began seeking out weather-radar systems.

* * *

Stevens and Hawkins sat next to the fence that separated the men’s and women’s camps. The crisscrossing searchlight beams that swept like clockwork over the prison yards passed over their heads. Directly on the other side of the fence, Gomez leaned sideways against the chain-link and stared at the sky.

In the hour or so that they had been waiting to hear back from Abramowitz, the weather had cleared considerably. The night sky was an unpolluted black field salted with stars. The air had grown colder and drier. Stevens watched his exhaled breath become gray ghosts that vanished into the darkness.

He turned and looked at Gomez, then he glanced skyward, following the direction of her gaze. A brilliant, cross-shaped constellation dominated that patch of the sky.

Gomez whispered through the fence to him. “Which one are you looking at?”

He answered without looking away from the stars.

“The same one you are.”

“Second from the bottom of the cross, right?” Hawkins said.

“Yeah,” Stevens said, somber and reflective.

They sat together in silence for a few minutes. Stevens knew, just as he was sure Gomez and Hawkins did, that the star they were looking at was Galvan, and that none of them wanted to say its name. Hawkins finally broke the silence. “Y’know, sometimes... lately... I can almost go an entire day without

thinking about it.”

“I envy you,” Stevens said. He knew that Hawkins’s loss at Galvan VI had been just as painful as his or Gomez’s. Hawkins had lost most of his colleagues on the security staff, including his best friend, Stephen Drew, during that fateful mission.

Another silence enveloped them. Then the mechanically neutral synthetic voice from Abramowitz’s tricorder spoke to them through their transceivers. “Abramowitz to away team, priority one.”

Gomez put her hand to her ear, though it wasn’t really necessary. “Gomez here. Go ahead.”

“I have good news and bad news.”

Stevens, Hawkins, and Gomez swapped dismayed reactions.

“The camp’s public-address hardware is a closed system,” Abramowitz transmitted. “I wasn’t able to access it.”

“What’s the good news?” Gomez said.

“I’m using an alternative method to trigger your snowfall.”

Stevens suppressed a stab of panic. “Whatmethod?”

“I found a derelict Tenebian satellite that was scheduled for atmospheric reentry and changed its descent profile.”

The trio’s looks of dismay turned to terror.

“You’re crashing a satellite into the mountain?” Hawkins said. “Isn’t that a little...” His voice pitched with disbelief. “...imprecise?!”

“We’ll know in about thirty-five seconds. I suggest you take cover.”

Stevens was about to say something about the importance of leaving engineering to engineers when a fiery streak slashed low across the sky overhead. Oh, no, he thought, then he sprinted to catch up to Hawkins, who was already running between the tents, shouting to wake up the other male prisoners. Gomez ran through the women’s yard, shouting for the women to retreat to the far side of their camp.

A crimson flash on the mountainside above the camp lit up the night sky. One second later, a cataclysmic boom shattered the night. X’Maris and Venekans alike awoke in terror. A surreal, deathly silence washed over the camp.

Then the rumbling began. Low, almost inaudible at first, then it grew louder. Stronger. Closer. The ground trembled. A gentle rush of air gave birth to a blustering wind.

The camp’s alert klaxon wailed. X’Mari prisoners scrambled out of their fragile shelters. Half-naked Venekan soldiers fell over one another as they fled their barracks.

The mountain roared, drowning out the siren. The avalanche exploded over the top of the cliff and plummeted in a roiling white cloud toward the camp. It seemed to fall in slow-motion, but as soon as it hit

the ground it spread across the camp with terrifying speed, sweeping up tents, sheets of metal, and everything else in its path.

From beyond the concrete barrier, Stevens heard the soldiers' barracks snap like dry twigs crushed underfoot. "Get behind the latrine!" Hawkins shouted to the X'Mari men, who already were running in that direction, away from the oncoming wall of churning snow, dirt, and ice.

The crowd broke like a wave against the latrine building, flowed around its sides, and reassembled behind it. Stevens and Hawkins were trapped in the middle of the group.

"Push it over!" Hawkins yelled. With strength born of panic, the prisoners heaved against the back of the freestanding structure and tipped it forward, pointing its angled roof toward the raging gray-white crush that was about to hit it. "Get inside!" he hollered. The men leaped inside the overturned but otherwise intact building, piling on top of one another.

The avalanche struck the sideways-facing latrine roof and shoved the building forward ahead of the snowfront. It crashed like a battering ram through the first chain-link fence, then the other. Snow and ice from the avalanche surged through gaps in the walls and shattered ventilation grates.

Stevens's lower body became cocooned in snow and earth from the building's open side, which was scooping up snow and dirt from the ground like a plow blade. He scrambled away from the incoming snow, climbed beside the other men, and pressed himself against the splintering roof.

Then the avalanche slowed. The building's slide halted halfway across the women's prison yard. The wood-frame building creaked and moaned ominously. "Out!" Hawkins bellowed. "Now!" The X'Mari men fell over one another as they rushed to exit the buckling shell of the latrine building.

Hawkins and Stevens helped up a few older men and young boys who had fallen and pushed them out ahead of them, then leaped to safety themselves as the weight of settling snow and ice crushed the latrine building into pulp and toothpicks.

Stevens lifted his head and looked around. The camp was pitch-dark. "Avalanche must've knocked out the power," he said to Hawkins, who brushed himself off then offered Stevens a hand and helped him to his feet. Stevens looked back at the massive, steep slope of snow that had buried more than half of the camp and one of the two guard towers.

He ducked reflexively as a crack like a gunshot echoed off the cliffs. Then he heard the sound of snapping wooden planks and turned to see the central command tower topple, break apart on the concrete wall, and collapse into the women's prison yard. When he turned back toward Hawkins, Gomez was there.

"Are you two all right?" she said.

"Couldn't be righter," Hawkins said.

"Define 'all right,'" Stevens said.

"Let's go," Gomez said.

Stevens and Hawkins followed her up the icy slope. As they hurried over the buried concrete wall, the X'Mari prisoners swarmed past them and rushed ahead and down the other side to confront the

Venekan soldiers, most of whom had narrowly escaped the avalanche by leaving their weapons—and most of their uniforms—in their barracks. Only a pair of soldiers, who had been on duty in the far guard tower, were still armed and in uniform. A handful of others, from the buried guard tower and collapsed central tower, were likely alive but trapped inside the concrete bunker and unable to join the fray.

Gomez led Stevens and Hawkins around the melee that was brewing just a few dozen meters away. The sharp reports of gunfire split the night and continued for nearly a minute as the trio sprinted away, dodging through the shadows and walking out over the camp's buried outer fence. Then the gunfire stopped, and from inside the camp Stevens heard the fearsome sound of the angry X'Mari mob attacking the unarmed and massively outnumbered Venekan soldiers. He, Hawkins, and Gomez clambered inside a Venekan Army truck, which was the only one of the camp's five vehicles that hadn't been buried by the avalanche.

Hawkins slid into the driver's seat and pressed the ignition switch. The engine stuttered then turned over with a robust growl. He shifted the vehicle into gear. "Next stop, the probe," he said as he pressed on the accelerator and steered the truck down the road and away from the camp.

"Carol, we're out of the camp and we have a vehicle," Gomez said. "Which way do we go?"

"Follow the main road for about seventy-seven kilometers until you cross a bridge over a river," the tricorder's synthetic voice instructed. "After the bridge, the road forks. Go to the right. Stay on that road for four hundred forty-six kilometers, then follow another major road that branches off on the right. From there it's about one hundred sixty-four kilometers to the probe."

Stevens calculated the total distance in his head and divided it by what he gauged to be this vehicle's maximum safe speed on icy winter roads. By his best estimate, it would take more than nine hours for them to reach the probe.

Hawkins upshifted and accelerated. "We'll be there in about five and a half hours, Commander," the security officer said. Stevens checked to make certain his safety harness was secured.

"Carol," Gomez said, in an overly tactful tone that Stevens had heard her use only when she was utterly livid, "in the future, please confer with me or another senior officer before you devise a plan and put it into action. That bit with the satellite was one of the most irresponsible, most dangerous stunts I've ever seen a Starfleet crewmember pull on an away mission. You could've killed us, not to mention hundreds of Tenebians."

An awkward, uncomfortable silence lingered inside the cramped cab of the truck, which hurtled through the night, all alone on a lonely stretch of winding road.

Then Gomez's mouth twisted into a crooked smile and she shrugged. "On the other hand," she said, "it worked, it had style, and we're all still here. So what the hell—nice work. Gomez out."

Chapter

7

Commander Zila stormed into his office. It was the middle of the night, and he'd just been woken by a damned footman who'd told him there was urgent news. Standing in the middle of the office was Legioner Goff, around whom five lancer-grade officers scurried, collecting incoming reports from the

secure digital comfeeds. “This had better be important,” Zila said, his voice rough and loud.

“The Samara POW camp was destroyed three hours ago,” Goff said. He held out a printed report. Zila snatched it from his hand and scanned the damage reports and casualty lists.

“An avalanche?” Zila said. “You woke me for afezzing avalanche?”

Goff took the rebuke in stride. “Turn to page two,” he said.

Zila turned the page. The trajectory change of a satellite was the first thing he noticed. Then he saw its impact point. “Its navigational systems were hacked moments before it made premature reentry,” Goff said.

“How many intelligence agencies in the world have that kind of capability?” Zila said.

“Three, maybe four.” Goff handed another printed sheet to Zila, who accepted it politely this time. “I checked the camp’s nightly report for new arrivals. Two X’Mari men and one woman, arrested at the impact site, northeast of Raozan.”

“Arrested at the impact site,” Zila said. “And eighteen hours later a satellite gets knocked out of the sky and lands above the camp they’re being held in. Whoever they are, they’re professionals, and well-connected.”

“Very well-connected,” Goff said. “An interrogator’s report says that one of the prisoners claimed to be a Venekan agent working undercover, but he wouldn’t say for which agency.”

“I’ll bet he’s working for Councilor Urwon,” Zila said, shaking with fury at the mere mention of his archnemesis in the Venekan civilian government. That bastard’s been undermining me ever since I was commissioned, Zila raged. He probably thinks he can beat me to the biggest discovery in history, cheat me out of another promotion. “Where are the spies now?”

“On the move,” Goff said. “The rescue team activated the signal beacons on the camp’s vehicles to help with the recovery effort. One of them is on the Eruc Highway, heading south at nearly a hundred and twentytiliks per hour.”

“Exact position?” Zila said. Goff pointed to a red circle with a dot in its center, drawn in grease pencil on the transparent map overlay. “It’s already past the Tengma turnoff,” Goff said. “They’re heading for Lersset.”

“Get every jumper you can find,” Zila said. “I want them loaded and in the air to Lersset now.”

“Already done, sir,” Goff said. “We’ll be moving into the city from three directions by daybreak.”

“Get my jumper ready,” Zila said. “We’re going down there.”

“Fueled, armed, flight plan filed,” Goff said. He snapped his fingers, and one of the lancers stepped up, holding Zila’s foul-weather jacket open for him. Zila put the jacket on.

“Well done,” Zila said with a nod. “Let’s move out.”

* * *

Hawkins parked the truck in a narrow, trash-strewn alley and turned off the engine. The town of Lersset was smaller than he'd expected, perhaps no more than a hundred thousand people. Its tallest buildings were four stories tall; most were shorter. It looked old, neglected, weather-beaten. He saw signs of skirmishes past—scorches, blast-pitting, broken foundations—but the town was not particularly war torn. Its dominant colors were shades of gray and brown.

The trio had made good time, finishing the trip from Samara in just under six hours, due in no small measure to the fact that Hawkins had kept the accelerator pinned to the floor for almost the entire journey. The real-life vehicle had handled less reliably than had its holographic simulation, but Hawkins chalked that up to poor vehicle maintenance.

Of course, the truck's tendency to fishtail wildly on fast turns was no doubt a key factor in why both Gomez and Stevens now looked nauseous as they staggered out of the truck, boots sloshing and crunching in the ice-crusting mud. Gomez leaned against the truck, and Stevens bent over and rested his hands on his knees while he steadied his nerves with long, deep breaths.

The sky overhead slowly changed hue, from black to royal purple. Sunrise was drawing near, and Hawkins was eager not to lose momentum when they were so close. "Commander, we should move while we still have cover of darkness," he said.

Gomez nodded and straightened her posture. "Right. Ready, Fabian?"

The engineer stood up, drew a deep breath, exhaled, and nodded once. "Yeah, I'm set," he said.

"Carol, you read me?" Gomez said. "Which way from here?"

"Out of the alley, right thirty meters. Then left, up the main avenue, forty meters."

Gomez led the way, and Hawkins and Stevens fell into step right behind her. Hawkins scanned every window and rooftop for sentries, snipers, or simply unwelcome observers. The city was quiet, not yet roused by the coming dawn. Gomez darted across the street, her mud-splashing footsteps answered by sharp echoes. She paused at the corner before the left turn.

"Vance, take point," she said. Hawkins slipped past her and moved down the street on its sidewalk, which was lined with dilapidated parked cars. He crouched low, keeping himself mostly concealed behind the row of vehicles until he'd covered roughly the forty meters Abramowitz had directed.

"Checkpoint," Hawkins said. "Where now?"

"Narrow gap between the buildings on your right. Slip through there to an alley behind the building on the left."

Hawkins scouted the street in both directions, then ducked across it to the gap. It was barely wide enough for them to move through sideways, single-file, backs to the wall.

Hawkins went in first, followed by Gomez, then Stevens. He inched ahead, scraping against the wet, rough-stone wall. They emerged in a wide alley that ran behind two rows of buildings situated on parallel streets.

"We're in the alley," Hawkins said.

“Go to the alley on your right, five buildings ahead.”

Hawkins led Gomez and Stevens into the intersecting alley, which was cluttered with debris and overflowing garbage bins. It reeked of rotting food and stale urine.

Overhead, the sky was now a deep sapphire blue and getting brighter by the minute. “Checkpoint,” Hawkins said.

“In the building across the street, second from the corner. Elevation ten-point-two meters above ground level.”

Hawkins eyed the target building. It was narrow, three stories tall, and nondescript except for the garage door at street level, which was uncommon among the buildings he’d seen on the surrounding streets. The elevation Abramowitz had cited would place the probe on the building’s top floor, where the window shades were pulled closed.

Silhouettes played across the drawn shades, overlapping one another and preventing Hawkins from making an accurate guess as to how many people were inside. The one thing he could tell from the occupants’ silhouettes was that they were armed, whereas he—and the rest of the away team—were not.

The building’s front door opened. Three teenage X’Mari boys stepped out the door and walked down the front steps to the street. They carried heavy backpacks and wore loose, flowing dark serapes that Hawkins could tell were being used to conceal long-barreled weapons. They moved quickly, without talking, and continued around the corner and out of sight.

The Starfleet trio huddled together in the alley.

“What’s the plan, Commander?” Hawkins said.

“We sneak inside,” Gomez said. “Cause a distraction. Keep the guards busy while Fabian fixes the probe. Start the timer, signal the da Vinci for beam-out, go home, and get some sleep.”

Stevens and Hawkins stared at Gomez through narrowed eyes. “No disrespect, sir,” Hawkins said, “but that’s a bit vague.”

“I’m open to suggestions,” she said.

“Maybe Carol can drop another satellite on them,” Stevens said. Hawkins struggled to suppress a chortle.

“It’s still an open channel, Stevens. Watch it.”

“Seriously,” Gomez said. “Does anyone have any ideas on—”

“Cover!” Stevens said, pulling Hawkins and Gomez behind one of the putrid-smelling trash bins. From the street, ear-splitting explosions chewed up the pavement and turned parked cars into hurricanes of shrapnel. The rumbling blasts melded with the engine-roar of a pair of Venekan jumpjets screaming past, low over the rooftops.

The town quaked under the simultaneous impacts of hundreds of air-to-surface missiles, which shredded vehicles, collapsed buildings, and turned streets into jumbles of broken stone. Hawkins shielded his head with his arms and strained to think of a way to reach the probe before a Venekan missile destabilized its antimatter containment and vaporized most of this continent.

* * *

Trooper Maleska gripped the piping that ran from the front of the armored attack vehicle to its rear. He and eleven soldiers from his squad—all outfitted with body armor and anti-gas masks—squatted on top of the AAV. Each man hung on with one hand and balanced his rifle across his knees with the other as the AAV rolled down Lersset's eastern boulevard toward the center of town. Coils of smoke twisted through golden, horizontal shafts of dawn light as jumpers streaked overhead and unleashed their ordnance on suspected key enemy strongholds.

Perched on top of another AAV directly behind them was the rest of his squad, led by Senior Footman Yellik. Following them was a column of eighteen more AAVs ferrying nine more squads into town. Ahead of the column, panicked X'Mari civilians ran across the streets and in and out of decaying buildings.

The streets were lined with burning vehicles, incinerated only minutes earlier during the initial aerial assault. The squad's orders were simple: Neutralize all non-allied vehicles.

The column reached a major four-way intersection. The AAVs carrying Maleska and his squad turned left. Behind them, two more AAVs turned right at the intersection, while the remaining sixteen AAVs rumbled straight, toward the center of town.

Without warning, a spatter of gunfire ricocheted next to Maleska, off the top of his AAV's gun turret. "Down and cover!" he said. He jumped from the moving vehicle to the muddy, slush-filled street. The rest of his squad followed him. The splashing of their boots into the mud was swallowed by the growl of the AAVs' wide, armored treads pushing forward. He scanned the rooftops and windows, looking for the shooters.

He saw too many to count. Rows of windows on either side of his squad bristled with the barrels of various small firearms. The street echoed with the cracks of semiautomatic gunfire. Two of his soldiers were hit and fell dead next to him. He sprayed a long burst across a row of windows.

"Rockets!" he shouted. To his left, Norlin hefted a compact, shoulder-mounted launcher and fired a small rocket through a top-floor window in the building on the squad's left. The explosion sent jets of fire out six adjacent windows and caused the top floor to collapse in a fiery jumble onto the one below. On the opposite side of the street, Pillo and Yellik fired two more rockets and gutted another building. Clouds of smoke and dust rolled into the street, choking out the daylight.

Maleska keyed his helmet mic. "Velkor One, Five-NineJazim! Suppressing fire, forward left and right! Over!"

"Five-NineJazim, VelkorOne. Acknowledged."

"Fall back!" Maleska said, stepping backward as he peppered the buildings ahead with short bursts of gunfire, even though he couldn't see through the smoke what he was shooting at. The lead AAV rotated its gun turret slightly to the left, while the second swiveled its massive gun barrel a few degrees to the right. They fired in unison, the booms low and deafening. Ahead of the AAVs, five buildings on each side

of the street filled with flames, then imploded. For a moment the harassing fire from above stopped, then resumed from behind the squad.

Norlin and Pillo leveled their rocket-launchers toward the rear-flank buildings. Before Maleska could order them to hold fire, a pair of rockets were in the air, one racing toward each building's center point. The bright orange flashes turned the buildings into huge brick boxes filled with fiery clouds.

He watched greasy black smoke belch from the buildings into the street and was ashamed that he felt glad he wouldn't have to risk clearing the buildings room-by-room, as the law required. "Velkor One, Five-NineJazim. All secure." He looked around and counted his casualties. "Notify Sync-Com, we have three dead, four wounded for immediate medivac. The rest of us are up and solid. Over."

"Five-NineJazim, VelkorOne. Acknowledged, signaling Sync-Com for medivac. Holding for your go. Over."

"Mount up!" he said, directing his men back onto the AAVs. There were actually nine wounded among his squad, but five of them were still walking and able to hold their rifles; he'd only counted the four who were still down and bleeding. His men piled on top of the AAVs, found their handholds, and hefted their rifles a bit less cavalierly than before. He climbed aboard, spared one last look back at the soldiers he was leaving behind in the muddy, dust-choked street, and keyed his mic.

"VelkorOne, Five-NineJazim. All boots are up. Good to go. Five-NineJazim out." With a low growl of their engines, the AAVs rolled forward through the walls of smoke, forging ahead into the town to look for more enemy vehicles to destroy.

He loaded a fresh magazine into his rifle and tried to convince himself that there most likely hadn't been any innocent noncombatants in the fourteen buildings that he and his squad had just incinerated.

As he scanned the road ahead, he couldn't decide what stank worse: the burnt bodies along the roadside, or the lies he was now telling himself so that his government wouldn't have to.

* * *

Ganag peeked out of the alley, then ducked back into the shadows and motioned Lerec and Shikorn to stay down.

"What's happening?" Lerec whined.

"Shh!" Ganag hissed, waving a threatening backhand at the boy. Shikorn placed his hand over Lerec's mouth before the boy complained again. In the street beyond the alley, a Venekan armored attack vehicle rolled slowly past, its heavy treads grinding up the brittle and heavily weathered pavement. Marching on either side of the AAV were several Venekan infantrymen, all wearing torso armor and anti-gas masks.

Ganag knew that the X'Mari Resistance had never used poison gas; he could only assume that the Venekans had equipped their soldiers to protect them from their own weapons.

I should've known better than to hang around, Ganag chastised himself. Should've left as soon as we'd delivered the object. After the sun had set last night, Ganag had left Lerec and Shikorn in the skiff to guard the object, and he had snuck into Lersset and made contact with Jonen, the Resistance leader whom Hakona had told him to seek out. It had been nearly midnight by the time he'd led Jonen and his

commanders to the object, and a few hours more before they'd smuggled it back to the group's base of operations on the other side of town.

The commanders had rewarded the boys with fistfuls of cash and backpacks full of food, medicine, and ammunition, as well as new reconnaissance orders. Should've left then, while it was still dark, he thought. But they hadn't left; they had stayed to bask in the praise that the commanders had heaped upon them. It had felt good to be recognized for a change. To be needed.

Now we're just trapped, he fumed, as he watched three more AAVs roll past flanked by dozens more soldiers. They must have the whole town surrounded. And it's probably because of us.

The street buzzed with the angry roar of assault rifles. A massive explosion rocked the ground under his feet and knocked him down. In the street, a fireball laced with huge slabs of metal debris hurled a dozen Venekan soldiers backward through the air and dropped them like so many limp rag dolls on the muddy ground. A torrent of burning fuel rained down and turned the street into a lake of fire. The blazing liquid pushed into the alley, toward Ganag and his friends.

"Run!" he said as he sprinted past Lerec and Shikorn. He retreated from the fuel fire that was spreading rapidly into the alley. "Go right! We're heading for the river!" Neither of the younger boys questioned his order. They simply turned right and kept running, following a half-stride behind him.

The river would be dangerously cold. Trying to float submerged back to their skiff would be a risky proposition; there was a good chance they'd all end up with hypothermia, or catch who-knew-what kind of illness. Sick is better than dead, he told himself, and it's our only way out of here.

Fighting to remember every pathway and abandoned building between the alley and the river, he sprinted ahead to the next shortcut and prayed they reached the water before Lersset went up in flames.

* * *

The entire town was alive with the chatter of weapons fire and the irregular percussion of large explosions. Gomez could barely hear Abramowitz's whispering voice over the transceiver.

"Abramowitz to away team!"

"Gomez here."

"The refugees are getting ready to move out, I have to hide the tricorder. Have you reached the probe?"

"Not yet," said Gomez, who was growing both impatient and frustrated. She leaned out from behind the trash bin to see if the fire at the end of the alley had dwindled enough to allow passage to the street. A wash of searing heat stung her face. She ducked back behind cover. "We're kind of stuck."

Going back was no longer an option: A pair of missiles had collapsed a building in the intersecting alley behind them, blocking their only avenue of retreat.

"Well, you need to get unstuck," Abramowitz said. "The probe's moving. Street level, coming right at you."

Gomez, Stevens, and Hawkins scrambled out from behind the trash bin and squinted to see through the flames and the wavy wall of heat radiation. From an alley beside the target building a truck emerged and

pulled into the street, where it awkwardly navigated an obstacle course of burning debris. Inside the front cab of the truck were two Tenebian men with sky blue skin and metallic-gold hair. “Those aren’t X’Maris,” Stevens said.

“And they aren’t wearing Venekan uniforms,” Gomez said.

“Game on,” Hawkins said. He ducked his head under his serape and ran toward the wall of fire. Diving through it, he rolled out the other side, singed and smoldering, but all in one piece.

Gomez and Stevens glanced at one another, then turtled into their own serapes. They sprinted forward, leaped through the flames, and hit the ground running.

Chapter 8

Gomez’s running footsteps slammed against the cracked pavement and sent painful tremors through her shins. She had almost become accustomed to Teneb’s gravity, but now, as she tried to sprint, she really felt it pulling her into the ground.

Hawkins was in front of her and Stevens was right beside her. The truck carrying the crashed Starfleet probe rounded the corner and began climbing a gradual incline. Hawkins veered away from the chase, toward the building the away team had been staking out. “Hawkins!” Gomez said. “Where are you—”

“Playing a hunch!” Hawkins shouted over his shoulder. “Stay on the truck, I’ll catch up!”

Gomez pushed ahead after the truck. In regular gravity, an unburdened run up such an incline would be no problem for her. But she watched the truck gain speed up the slope even as she felt the muscles in her legs begin to burn and ache. Several dozen meters ahead, the truck neared an intersection.

Stevens kept pace beside her. She sensed that he was holding back. “Don’t worry about me,” she said, gasping for breath. “Go.” He hesitated for a moment, then steadily gained speed—not enough to overtake the truck, but enough to leave Gomez behind.

* * *

Stevens was running on fumes. He hadn’t eaten in a day and a half, and he’d been pushing himself much harder than normal.

His throat burned with every ragged gulp of biting-cold morning air. Gusts of breath exploded from his mouth in clouds of mist that quickly evaporated.

Push through the pain, he told himself. Pain is my friend. He tried to force himself into a “runner’s high,” but he knew it was still far away, on the other side of a mountain of agony he wasn’t prepared to scale.

The truck turned right at the intersection and disappeared around the corner.

He forced his legs to pump faster, fight harder against Teneb’s merciless gravity. His grunts of pain became growls, then gasping cries. His body desperately wanted to stop. His leg muscles felt like knotted cable. Sharp knifing pains stabbed between his ribs with every frantic pull of frigid air.

He refused to slow down. He flailed through the right turn in a stumbling run. The truck was far ahead, fortuitously slowed by another maze of exploded car husks in the road.

A few more steps, he begged himself. Just a few more steps.

“Fabian!” Gomez shouted from behind him. “Take my hand!”

He looked back and saw a large cargo van hurtling up the road toward him. Hawkins was in the driver’s seat, securely strapped in. Gomez stood in the open passenger-side door, her hand extended toward the exhausted Stevens.

He forced himself to keep running, alongside the van. He held up his hand and left it there until Gomez seized it and pulled him up, through the open door into the vehicle. He crouched between the two seats. Gomez got in behind him and slammed the door. “Thanks for the lift,” he said between gasps.

“Jump in back and tell me what’s there,” Hawkins said.

Stevens turned and opened a narrow door that led into the van’s cargo area. He squeezed through into the windowless space, which was dark except for the narrow shaft of daylight slashing in through the open door behind him.

He reached toward an overhead light fixture in the middle of the cargo area. The van swerved suddenly, and he tripped over a heavy object on the floor. He righted himself as Gomez joined him. He reached up and turned on the light.

The back of the van held an arsenal. Its sides were lined with assault rifles and submachine guns. Boxes of grenades and ammunition covered the floor. “Vance?” he said. “If you want weapons, today is Christmas.”

“I figured that much,” Hawkins said. “What’ve we got?”

Stevens looked around, more than a little spooked by the primitive, savage weaponry. “Projectile weapons galore, a ton of ammo, and a lot of grenades.”

“Are the grenades smooth on the outside, or bumpy?”

“Like Cardassian neck ridges,” Gomez said.

“Okay, those are high-explosives. Careful with those. Anything else?”

Stevens opened a long, narrow box. An odd weapon was nestled inside, packed securely in custom-cut blocks of foam. “I have an empty metal tube with a targeting sight,” he said. He opened the large square box next to it. “And a box of... I have a rocket launcher.”

“Good to know,” Hawkins said. A staccato rattle of gunfire was followed by the sound of cracking glass. The van swerved wildly, tossing Stevens and Gomez back and forth against the walls of guns. “Load me up a small semi-auto,” Hawkins said, “and grab two for yourselves. Bring extra rounds.”

“I don’t know how to load one of these things,” Stevens protested.

“Neither do I,” Gomez added.

“Didn’t you guys read my mission briefing?” Hawkins said.

“Did you read mine?” Stevens retorted.

Another buzz of gunfire was followed by ricochets off the van’s front hood. “No,” Hawkins said grudgingly.

“Tell me what to do,” Stevens said.

“See the open slot in front of the grip?”

Stevens picked up a submachine gun. It was much heavier than the phasers he was used to. “Yeah,” he said, looking at the bottom of the weapon. The van lurched side to side again, but he was starting to get used to the chaotic rocking motion, and he swayed with it.

“Look for a clip full of bullets that fits into it and slap it in.” Stevens and Gomez rooted through the boxes at their feet. Gomez found the matching magazines, jammed one into her weapon, and handed one to Stevens. He loaded his weapon while Gomez armed another for Hawkins. Stevens picked up the box of loaded magazines and moved back toward the van’s cab.

“Stay down,” Hawkins said. “We’re taking fire.”

Stevens crouched and shuffled back into the cab, pushing the box of ammo ahead of him. Gomez inched in behind him and handed a weapon to Hawkins, who ducked low behind the steering wheel and peeked occasionally to see where he was going.

The windshield was spiderwebbed with cracks radiating from a constellation of bullet holes. The engine roared as Hawkins stomped on the accelerator.

The passenger-side windshield exploded over Stevens’s head. A storm of glass shards rained down on him and Gomez as bullets dented into the rear wall of the cab.

“Shoot back!” Hawkins said.

Gomez and Stevens lifted their weapons over the dashboard and aimed them out the shattered windshield in a vaguely forward direction. They opened fire. The weapons were incredibly loud. Stevens found his gun impossible to control—it jerked and jumped in his hand like it had a mind of its own.

By the time he and Gomez released the triggers, they were sprawled atop each other on the floor. Smoking bullet holes cut a path across the van’s roof. The van’s cab smelled of sulfur.

Hawkins was pressed down against his door and glowering at them. “Whose side are you on?” he shouted. “Use both hands. Short, controlled bursts. And watch your ammo.”

Another sweep of enemy gunfire turned the rest of the van’s windshield opaque with damage. Hawkins punched the windshield with the flat of his palm and knocked it out of its frame. It slid across the bullet-scarred hood and fell into the street. Icy winds whipped dust into the cab and stung their faces.

Stevens and Gomez sat up and steadied their weapons on the van’s dashboard as Hawkins swerved around more burning wreckage in the street. Stevens felt the flames licking at his face as they sped

through a curtain of fire with awhoosh.

He opened his eyes and saw the escaping truck thirty meters ahead. The back of the truck was open. Two Tenebian men crouched inside, both brandishing large assault rifles.

The muzzles of the Tenebians' weapons flashed. Bullets zinged past Stevens's head. He held his breath and steadied his aim as he stared into the cold wind, then pulled the trigger.

Beside him, Gomez opened fire, her face a mask of grim determination, the frigid gusts watering her eyes with tears.

The weapons chattered in their hands.

They filled the back of the truck with a spray of bullets. The two Tenebians hit the deck as ricochets rebounded and tore out through the canvas-covered, wooden-plank sides of the truck, which Stevens guessed probably had been "borrowed" from a livestock or poultry purveyor.

His and Gomez's weapons clicked empty. He tried to pull the empty magazine out of the weapon, but it refused to come free.

"Press the release on the right side of the rear grip," Hawkins said as he aimed his own weapon one-handed out the front windshield. He spun the steering wheel through a tight right turn and peppered the truck ahead with more harassing fire.

Stevens fumbled with his weapon's release catch, then felt the magazine slide easily and fall from the weapon to the floor. He picked up a fresh magazine and slapped it in.

Beside him, Gomez locked and loaded. She nodded to him.

They sprung back into position, facing into the wind, weapons planted on the dash.

Looking back at them from the truck, now only twenty meters ahead and racing toward a Y-shaped merge with another road, were the two Tenebians—both of them aiming rocket launchers.

Stevens saw the look on Hawkins's face, and he knew:

We're so screwed.

A moment before the Tenebians fired their rockets, their truck barreled into the Y-merge—at the same moment that a speeding passenger car raced into the merge from the other fork of the Y and accidentally broadsided them. The car caromed off the truck and spun into a dusty collision with a brick wall.

The Tenebians' shoulder-fired rockets careened off-target. One screamed into a deserted building to the left of the van. The other plowed into the street directly ahead of it.

Hawkins slammed on the brakes. The van skidded to a halt just shy of the explosion in the road, which kicked up a smoky storm of glowing-hot broken asphalt that pattered down onto the van. Past the smoldering crater, the rocketed building collapsed into a broken-stone mountain that blocked the street.

"Can we go over it?" Gomez said.

“Not in this thing,” Hawkins said.

The security guard poked his head out his window, looked around quickly, then spun the van through a reverse whip-turn. He shifted gears and stepped on the accelerator. The van sped forward. He hooked a quick left turn, then made another left down an alley so narrow that a shower of sparks fountained from either side of the van as he accelerated.

“Chief,” Gomez said, “where are you going?”

“I don’t know,” Hawkins said. “I’m making this up as I go.”

* * *

Commander Zila monitored his army’s drive into Lersset from a bank of monitors installed in his personal jumpjet. Sitting opposite him, facing his own bank of monitors, was Legioner Goff, whose attention had become much more narrowly focused during the past few seconds.

“What is it?” Zila said.

Goff held up a hand to signal that he needed a few more moments to concentrate. He looked up at Zila. “Reports of a van chasing a truck in southern Lersset, near the riverside. A recon unit says the two vehicles have exchanged gunfire.”

“On my monitor,” Zila said. Goff transferred the command-and-control screen to Zila’s computer. The time-stamped reports scrolled quickly up the side of the screen while blurred, grainy images snapped by an aerial reconnaissance drone showed moment-by-moment details of the chase.

“That’s it, that’s our target,” Zila said. “Order all forces to intercept and capture. No heavy munitions—I want those vehicles and their cargo intact.”

“And the passengers?”

“Expendable.”

* * *

Hawkins kept the accelerator pinned to the floor and barreled up streets, down alleys, and through the occasional vulnerable-looking fence. Stevens rode shotgun, his safety harness now securely fastened.

Hawkins glimpsed the morning sun as intermittent, yellow-orange flashes in the narrow seams between the decaying buildings he raced past.

Leaning forward, he glanced upward, then swung the van wide through a right-hand turn, followed by a quick left turn. Stevens held on to the dash with white-knuckle intensity.

“What’re you following?” Stevens said. “Their scent?”

“No,” Hawkins said, pointing skyward. “The planes.” Several blocks away on either side of the van, flying low over the rooftops, were two Venekan jumpjets. They were approaching from different directions, but seemed to be converging on a point several blocks ahead of the van.

“Nice work,” Stevens said.

“Well, Starfleet didn’t hire me for my looks.”

“Obviously,” Stevens quipped.

“Don’t make me come up there,” Gomez said.

The buildings melted past in a blur as Hawkins pushed the van to its top speed. As the van rounded a long gradual bend in the road that ran along the river, behind the docks on the west side of town, the truck came into view.

Two jumpjets converged several dozen meters behind the truck. One aircraft assumed an attack position; the other dropped back over the river, to cover the leader’s wing.

A ground-to-air rocket soared up from the back of the truck and sliced like a blazing scalpel through the leader’s right wing. As the aircraft pitched nose-first in a death-spiral toward the ground, a fiery chunk of debris expelled from its wing was sucked into the follower’s left turbine intake. The second jet’s left-wing engine exploded, taking half the aircraft with it in a massive, aviation-fuel conflagration.

Wreckage from the lead jumpjet struck the road and rolled like a Catherine wheel juggernaut over a row of decrepit dock warehouses. The second jet disintegrated in midair, scattering its debris in ephemeral, coal-black coils of drifting smoke as it splashed down in the river on the other side of the road.

Hawkins kept his eyes on the truck and his foot on the gas.

He pondered the tactical dilemma that was only seconds away from requiring an answer: How the hell are we supposed to stop them when they have rockets?

The question became moot as a sustained spray of large-caliber machine-gun fire, from an unseen source on the truck’s left, shredded the wood-beam-and-canvas covering of its cargo area—and mowed down the two gunmen in the back of the truck.

From a gap in the several-kilometers-long row of dock warehouses, a flatbed truck swerved toward the smaller truck. Mounted on a pivot secured to the flatbed was the heavy machine gun whose handiwork Hawkins had just witnessed.

The flatbed’s machine-gunner and another Tenebian man leapt into the now-open back of the truck that carried the probe. Both men drew small pistols from under their coats and fired several shots through the truck’s rear window.

The attackers swiftly opened the truck’s doors, pulled out the two men inside, climbed inside, and commandeered the moving vehicle with hardly any loss of forward momentum.

Hawkins veered slightly to avoid running over the two dead Tenebians who’d just been thrown into the street.

“That flatbed doesn’t have Venekan markings, either,” he said, stating the baldly obvious.

Stevens shook his head in shock and disbelief. “How many countries on this planet are trying to steal this thing?”

“All of them,” Gomez said without irony.

* * *

Maleska sat next to Yellik on top of the AAV as it rolled toward the turn for West River Road. From adjacent streets he heard the low rumble of two more columns of AAVs converging toward the south end of Lersset.

“What’s going on?” Yellik said, shouting to be heard over the noise.

Maleska shook his head. “No idea,” he said, his voice hoarse from yelling over the thick screech of low-flying jumpjets, which seemed to be leading the way. He had never seen this level of frenzy in either of his previous tours of duty in X’Mar.

Yellik leaned closer to him. He thought the man looked worried. “You don’t think it’s nuclear, do you?” Yellik said.

“I don’t know,” Maleska lied. “You know how it is. We’re just the boots on the ground. Nobody tells us anything.”

He looked back down the road and saw the column of AAVs growing longer with each block it traveled. He counted his men and was satisfied to see them all still accounted for. He sighed. At least we don’t have to hump into the zone on foot.

* * *

Gomez leaned forward from the van’s cargo area and assessed the situation. Hawkins was keeping the van a safe distance behind the truck and the flatbed, whose passenger now staffed its gun, leaving just the driver in the flatbed’s cab.

The two large vehicles veered away from the river and sped into a vast industrial plaza that contained several mountains of construction-grade gravel. The flatbed was still on the truck’s left, and the two were nearly parallel.

“I don’t think they see us,” Hawkins said. “I’d say it’s now or never.”

“Okay, what’s your plan?” Gomez said.

“I was hoping you had one.”

Gomez eyed the twisting, obstacle-littered terrain ahead. Then she saw six Venekan jumpjets, still several kilometers away but closing steadily. And she knew that the enormous, advancing cloud of dust rising from the city beneath the jets had to be the product of an army on the move.

“Can you get in front of them without getting us shot?” she said, nodding at the trucks.

Hawkins cocked his head to the side. “Maybe.”

Hawkins swerved left onto a path that ran parallel to the road that the truck and flatbed were traveling on. The path and the road were separated by mound after mound of gravel.

Pushing the van to its limits, Hawkins quickly caught up to the two trucks. The wind cut like a meat ax at

Gomez's face.

As the van raced past a wide gap between two conical gravel mountains, the driver of the flatbed turned his head and saw them. Behind him, his machine-gunner opened fire.

Large-caliber bullets chopped a wide swath across a slope of gravel in front of the van. Bits of rock bounced in through the vehicle's empty windshield frame.

The flatbed accelerated ahead of the truck as another dark gray gravel mountain filled Gomez's field of vision.

She pointed to the next gap linking the path and the road. "Cut across up there, and don't slow down!"

She moved back into the cargo area. Grabbing the bolted-down weapons rack along the wall to her left for leverage, she kicked open the van's rear double doors.

Reaching down, she opened a box of grenades. She took one grenade out of the box and armed it. The van lurched into a sharp right turn. As Stevens fired out his window at the flatbed, Gomez jammed the live grenade back in the box.

The van cut a hard turn across the industrial yard's main road. Gomez heaved the box out the van's rear door. Then she hit the deck and grabbed the first thing that didn't budge.

Behind the van, the flatbed raced into the intersection. A chattering burst of machine-gun fire tore through the van, unleashing a storm of metal fragments. Hawkins and Stevens yowled in pain. Gomez felt a sharp impact in the back of her left thigh, followed by an agonizing burning sensation.

A shrapnel-filled fireball erupted beneath the flatbed's second axle, directly below the machine gun. The blast lifted the truck off the ground and dropped it in a burning, broken-backed heap. Gomez enjoyed a very brief moment of gloating until she heard the screech of brakes from behind the flatbed.

The truck carrying the probe was unable to slow down in time to avoid the crippled flatbed in front of it. Making a desperate left swerve up a gravel slope, the truck lost its traction and slid out of control. It clipped the back edge of the flatbed and rolled several times until it came to rest on its side, several meters from the flaming husk of the larger vehicle.

Hawkins stopped the van and shifted it into reverse. He backed up the van to the truck, which lay on its left side, helpless as an overturned turtle.

Gomez got up and stepped out the van's rear doors, her submachine gun still clutched in her hand. Every step with her left leg caused sharp jabs of pain to radiate from her wound.

She looked back as Stevens and Hawkins got out of the van. Stevens's door looked like it had been chewed up and spat out. Hawkins pressed down on a bloody wound along his lower right abdomen. Stevens limped beside him and clutched fiercely at the left side of his neck. "How bad are you guys hit?" she said.

"Flesh wound," Hawkins said.

"Grazed, but it stings like a sonofabitch," Stevens said. As Gomez got closer, she realized both men's faces and hands were covered in tiny nicks, scratches, and cuts that were only now beginning to bleed.

She also saw that the right leg of Stevens's pants was shredded below the knee. He noticed her watching him limp. "Shrapnel," he said simply. "From the door."

They gathered in back of the overturned truck. The probe was still securely fastened to the floor of the truck's rear section. Hawkins and Stevens loosened its restraints and lowered it quickly but carefully to the ground.

The low mechanical roar of approaching tanks, troops, and aircraft grew steadily louder, from both in front of and behind the trio. Except for the van, the two wrecked vehicles, and the gravel mounds, there was no significant cover in the industrial yard and no means of escape.

Hawkins stared into the distance, also tracking the Venekans' approach. "Make this quick, Fabian," Gomez said. "The Venekans'll be here any second."

Stevens ran his hand along the probe's casing until he found the probe's hidden access panel. "Stevens to Abramowitz," he said. "Carol, we need the tricorder to transmit the security code that opens the probe's maintenance panel." There was no reply. "Carol, do you read me?"

"I can't," Abramowitz whispered over the open channel. Even over the transceiver, Gomez could tell Abramowitz was speaking through a clenched jaw. "They'll kill me."

"Carol, if we don't get the panel open now, we're dead," Hawkins said. "Just get clear long enough to send the signal, and we'll beam outta here in two minutes."

"You don't understand," Abramowitz said, her voice rising with desperation. "There's nowhere I can—"

"Abramowitz," Gomez said. "Activate the tricorder and send the signal. That's an order."

For several seconds there was no response. Then Gomez heard Abramowitz's muffled and dismayed answer: "Yes, sir."

The dust cloud followed the Venekan troops as they entered the industrial yard and fanned out around its perimeter.

Gomez heard the engines of large, heavy ground vehicles and the frantic clatter of boots growing closer.

A pair of Venekan aircraft cruised low overhead, stopped in midair over the river, hovered, then began doubling back.

Soft chirping noises accompanied the opening of the probe's maintenance panel. Stevens reached inside and deftly handled several delicate-looking gadgets. He reached deeper inside the probe and pulled out a tiny kit of Starfleet repair tools—which decades ago some genius engineer had, in a moment of rare foresight, thought to design into the probe itself for exactly this kind of emergency field repair.

"Good work, Carol," Gomez said. "Hang tight, we'll be outta here in a few minutes." Gomez watched Stevens work for a few seconds, then realized Abramowitz had not acknowledged the good news. "Carol, do you read me? Gomez to Abramowitz, do you copy?"

Silence reigned over the transceiver channel.

* * *

Abramowitz stared up into the crazed, maniacally gleaming eyes of teenaged Lica, elderly Mother Aleké, and the formerly gentle and caring Nedia. They and a dozen other women surrounded her.

Nedia had been the first to see the tricorder and alert the others. Now they all stared angrily at the high-tech device in Abramowitz's hand, as if it were the very embodiment of evil.

"What is this thing?" Mother Aleké said, her voice grave.

"It's hard to explain," Abramowitz said.

"It's a Venekan tracking beacon," one of the women said. "She's helping them follow us to the sanctuary."

"No," Abramowitz said, "I'm not, I swear. Please, I—"

"I can't believe I let you deceive me," Nedia said. "You said your friends were 'captured' by the Venekans?" Abramowitz nodded. "Was that before or after your friends built you that shelter? And collected the wood for your fire? Certainly, with your injuries, there's no way you did that work yourself."

"Yes," Abramowitz said, "my friends built my shelter. They were captured later."

"How could you know that?" Nedia said. "Unless they were captured close enough for you to have seen or heard it. But if the Venekans were that close to you, how could they have not seen the smoke from your fire? Smoke that we saw from more than twotiliks away?"

An even larger crowd was now gathered behind the circle of women surrounding Abramowitz. Nedia snatched the tricorder from Abramowitz's hand. "Or did they contact you with this?" In the moment between Nedia's grabbing the tricorder and her holding it up to the crowd, the device vanished—poof.

Nedia stared at the dissipating tendrils of vapor in her hand, then looked down at Abramowitz, her rancor now tinged with fear. The entire crowd had seen the tricorder vanish in Nedia's hand, spawning a wave of horror that rippled out into the troubled sea of refugees massed on the cold mountain road.

Mother Aleké pointed a gnarled, bony finger at Abramowitz.

"She is a spy," Mother Aleké proclaimed.

Mother Aleké drifted back into the crowd as dozens of X'Mari women kneeled down, picked up fist-sized rocks from the road, and carried them toward Abramowitz—who had done enough research on the xenophobic X'Mari culture to know there was nothing left she could say that would stop them from executing her.

Chapter 9

A voice distorted by electronic amplification resounded from across the industrial plaza. "This is the Venekan Army," it squawked with ear-splitting volume. "Lay down your weapons and surrender. This is

your only warning.”

Gomez felt her stomach churning as humanoid figures—decked out in military body armor and carrying a variety of small arms—began to coalesce into distinct shapes, even though they were still obscured by the amber haze of the growing dust cloud.

“Talk to me, Fabian,” she said.

“It’s not good,” he said. “I need a few minutes.”

Hawkins shook his head. “Stevens, we don’t have—”

“Look,” Stevens snapped. “I’m not making this up. I’m telling you, I need a few minutes.”

Gomez looked at Hawkins. “Help me unload the van.”

He followed her back to the van. She hurried inside and handed two assault rifles out to him. “You can’t be serious,” he said.

“We don’t have to win the battle,” she said as she handed him a heavy box filled with loaded rifle magazines. “We just have to hold our position until Fabian arms the self-destruct trigger. But there’s an entire army coming at us, so we need all the firepower we can get.” She handed him another weighty box, loaded with short, round-nosed cylinders. “What are these?”

Hawkins glanced in the box. “Rifle-fired mini-grenades,” he said. “Pump-action launcher. You can preload up to four.” He turned and set down the box. Gomez took the rocket launcher from its box, handed it to him, and picked up the box of rockets next to it. She stepped out of the van and looked around.

“The wrecked flatbed’ll give us some cover,” she said, setting down the box of rockets. “I’ll take the left. You take the front and the right.”

She took off her serape, laid it on the ground, and piled rifle magazines and mini-grenades onto it. Hawkins slapped a magazine into his rifle and began loading mini-grenades into its secondary chamber beneath the main barrel. “Sir, you do realize these weapons have no stun settings,” he said.

“Wound if you can,” she said, jamming a magazine into her own rifle. “Kill if you have to.”

She slung her rifle across her back. Grabbed the corners of her serape; pulled them together to make it a bundle. Jogged in a low crouch to the front edge of the van. Kneeled down. Opened the serape on the ground. Counted ten thirty-round magazines of rifle ammunition and ten mini-grenades. Loaded four mini-grenades into her weapon.

Gomez looked over her shoulder. Hawkins loaded a rocket into the launcher. Between them, kneeling behind the truck, Stevens worked furiously, his hands deep inside the probe.

She peeked around the corner of the van at the advancing clusters of soldiers. There were hundreds of them, advancing in groups of ten and twenty. Leading them in and providing them with cover were large armored vehicles equipped with sizable gun turrets.

Four of the six Venekan aircraft that had led the soldiers here hovered nearby, low over the gravel

mountains, at angles ideal for avoiding the risk of cross fire. The remaining two aircraft stayed together and circled the industrial yard.

I can't believe I'm doing this, Gomez thought. I came here to save these people, not kill them. She closed her eyes and reminded herself of the destructive potential of the probe's antimatter fuel payload. No choice, she decided. If we let these fools capture the probe, they'll blow up their planet trying to take it apart. Better for a few of them to die by our hands than for the whole species to die by its own.

"This is your final warning," the distorted loudspeaker voice said with ear-splitting clarity. "Put down your weapons and surrender, or we will open fire."

Gomez looked again at Hawkins, who looked back at her, awaiting her order. She nodded to him, then aimed her rifle around the corner of the van at the Venekan soldiers, who had closed to within sixty meters of the vehicles.

She pulled the trigger. Her weapon roared like rattling thunder and kicked painfully into her shoulder. Two soldiers fell to the ground as their comrades ran for cover, firing back in Gomez's general direction.

The overturned truck stuttered with metallic echoes from scores of bullet impacts. From behind her came the foomp of Hawkins pump-firing a mini-grenade. As she heard it explode, the buzzing clatter of Hawkins's rifle joined her own.

Her weapon clicked empty. She gripped the pump-action slide underneath her rifle's barrel and fired a mini-grenade into the path between two large gravel slopes. The explosion kicked up an enormous cloud of smoke and dust. She ejected the empty magazine from her rifle and slapped in a fresh one.

Bullet holes poked randomly through the overturned truck, a few at first, then several more. A round zinged past Gomez, close enough for her to feel the wake it cut through the freezing morning air.

A phaser, she pined, my kingdom for a phaser.

* * *

Abramowitz lifted her right arm to shield her face as Nedra cast the first stone. Abramowitz cried out in pain as the rock slammed into her torso.

She turned away and felt the second and third stones strike almost simultaneously in her middle back. Another rock hit her in the back of the head, purpling her vision. Then she lost count of the blows as a flurry of rocks rained down on her.

One agonizing blunt impact overlapped another and another and another. Her shouts of pain became an unbroken string of sobs and whimpers. She struggled to crawl away from the mob, with her one good arm and leg. A jagged stone hit her left arm dead on the break. Flashes of pain coursed up her spine.

Her fingers clawed at the cold, rocky ground as she pulled herself forward beneath the brutal onslaught. Her fingertips scraped across the thin layer of sand scattered across the high mountain road. She heard the clamor of hate-filled voices and the shuffle of leather-shod feet following close behind her.

Another wave of stones crashed down on her back, her legs, her head. One banged off her temple. A warm, wet wash of blood sheeted across the right side of her face. Trickle of blood snaked out from beneath her copper-flecked, rust-hued faux hair to trace paths across her forehead.

She came to the edge of the road and looked over it, into the yawning gorge below. There was nowhere left to run to.

The mob surrounded her on three sides. The women cast their stones then left to find more—as another group of women, rocks in hand, stepped forward to take their places.

She put her arm back over her face and curled into as tight a ball as she could. Retreating into the uncomfortable cocoon of her own shadow, she whimpered in terror and pain as the rocks continued to fall, without end and without mercy.

* * *

Ganag, Lerec, and Shikorn huddled together behind a stack of rusted metal barrels lying on their sides in a narrow gap between two abandoned riverfront warehouses. Just past the end of the gap was West River Road.

On the other side of the road was the Ulom River.

Rolling down the road was a Venekan Army unit comprising several armored vehicles and more than a hundred heavily armed troops. “Just a few more minutes,” Ganag whispered to his friends. “As soon as they pass us, we’ll get in the river and swim the rest of the way back to the skiff.”

Shikorn nodded. Lerec stared in mute terror at the Venekan troops marching past. Ganag reached back and playfully mussed the young boy’s dark-bronze hair. “Breathe,” Ganag teased him. “Hold your breath after we’re in the water.”

Lerec smiled weakly but said nothing. The boys remained quiet and hidden, waiting patiently for the soldiers to pass.

Then the army column ground to a halt.

Shikorn leaned over to Ganag. “What’s happ—” The first cracks of gunfire silenced Shikorn and sent the Venekan soldiers in the road scrambling off the tops of their armored vehicles and behind them for cover. Explosions filled the road with fire, smoke, and shrapnel. Furious, buzzing automatic gunfire came as much from the X’Mari Resistance fighters on the warehouse rooftops as from the soldiers in the street.

Ganag turned to his friends and pointed away from the road, back the way they’d come. “Back and right, to the gravel yard,” he said. “It should be empty. We can cut through it to the river.” He herded Lerec and Shikorn away from the fighting.

“You’re sure?” Shikorn said. With a look, Ganag silently admitted that he wasn’t. Shikorn frowned, but nodded and moved on ahead, keeping one hand on the shoulder of Lerec’s coat to prevent the boy from lagging behind.

The three boys ran south toward the gravel yard as the pandemonium of battle echoed behind them.

* * *

Hawkins fired off two quick bursts toward the attackers to the front, then pivoted to pick off a soldier who was charging forward on the right flank to lob a grenade, which fell from the man’s hand and detonated, taking down four more Tenebians.

He spun back toward the front and pumped out the last of his four pre-loaded grenades. It bounced off the turret of an armored vehicle that had stopped and turned perpendicular to the road to provide maximum cover for the troops advancing behind it. The grenade's explosive detonation almost drowned out Stevens's anguished scream.

Glancing sideways, Hawkins saw that Stevens had been hit in his upper chest, just to the side of his right shoulder. The impact had knocked him backward nearly two meters. His earth-toned serape showed the beginning of a spreading bloodstain. From the other side of the truck, Gomez glanced nervously at Stevens and Hawkins as she continued shooting.

"Stevens!" Hawkins yelled over the metallic peals of ricochets. He tensed to spring to the wounded man's side.

Stevens grimaced and held up his hand, signaling Hawkins to stop. "I'm all right," he said, his voice a roar of agony, his eyes tearing. He crawled back toward the probe, his right arm limp at his side. Reaching in with his left hand, he resumed working. The bloodstain spread swiftly across his serape.

Hawkins snapped off another burst toward the right flank, then another forward. His weapon clicked empty. He ejected the magazine and reached down to grab a fresh one, then realized he had just picked up his last clip.

He tuned out the terrible battering clamor of weapons blazing; the fear-colored din of soldiers barking orders over the cries of the wounded and dying; the acrid smell of gunpowder and the choking weight of oily smoke.

He switched his weapon to semi-automatic and picked his targets, popping off three shots forward, two more to the right, then turning forward again. The soldiers on the front and right flanks seemed to be holding back, unwilling to charge blindly as their fallen comrades had done. Instead, they stayed behind cover, each of them looking to make a lucky shot.

We're lucky they want the probe, Hawkins realized. If not for that, those tanks would've just run us over.

An armor-piercing round blasted through the overturned truck and shot through Hawkins's right leg, knocking him on his back. Three soldiers on the front flank saw him fall, and charged forward. Hawkins lifted his head just enough to aim his rifle over his knee and fired three more rounds, dropping all three men in quick succession.

He heard the turbine shriek of a jumpjet, which appeared from behind an enormous gravel mountain like a dark mechanical raptor. It had a perfect angle from which to sweep him, Gomez, and Stevens with cannon fire without hitting the probe.

He dropped his rifle and grabbed the rocket launcher. In a single motion he raised it to his shoulder and fired.

The projectile soared away with a sibilant whoosh, trailing a streak of white exhaust as it raced in less than a second to its target. It struck the jumpjet almost dead-center in its fuselage. The aircraft spat fire from beneath every hull plate. It wobbled and spun for a moment, then pitched toward the ground and tumbled chaotically, finally making impact on the slope of another mound of gravel on Hawkins's rear flank.

The blast felt like an earthquake. The gravel mound was transformed into a storm of speeding rock, suspended in a pyroclastic cloud that billowed over the rear third of the industrial yard. Dust and dirt blanketed the away team.

Hawkins's ears were still ringing from the explosion as he loaded another rocket into the launcher.

Stevens slumped against the probe and declared as loudly as he could, "It's armed." Gomez looked back at him.

"Good work, Fabian," she said. "Set it for thirty-five seconds, then signal the—" The bullet exploded through her chest half a heartbeat before Hawkins heard the crack of the sniper rifle that had fired it. Two more shots ripped through Gomez's torso as she fell toward Stevens. With his good hand, he plucked her rifle from her hand and tossed it to Hawkins, who caught it, braced it against his shoulder, and aimed it at the sniper on top of the gravel mound behind them on Gomez's side.

He fired as he saw the muzzle flash of the sniper's weapon.

The sniper jerked back and tumbled down the far side of the gravel mountain—just as his bullet slammed into Hawkins's lower left arm, just in front of the elbow. Flesh and muscle were shredded, the bone shattered. The shell exited Hawkins's forearm and lodged deep in his bicep. He collapsed onto his back, with one arm and one leg paralyzed.

"Stevens," he said through a mouth sticky with dust. "Set the timer. Send the signal." Stevens reached into the probe and keyed in a short string of commands.

Hawkins craned his neck back and gauged his upside-down perspective of the armored vehicle parked broadside not forty meters away. He fought to steady his one-handed aim with the rocket launcher.

A pleasant-sounding chirp from the probe confirmed Stevens's orders. Just need thirty more seconds of delay, Hawkins told himself. He fired the rocket.

The AAV flew apart in a devastating eruption of metal and fire. Its explosion effectively pushed the Venekans' front line back at least fifty meters, equaling the damage done to their right flank by the crash of the jet. "Stevens..." The engineer limped over to him, his face stippled with Gomez's blood and shrapnel wounds from bullets that had penetrated the truck.

"Get Gomez's submachine gun," Hawkins said. "Hold the left flank."

Stevens gripped Hawkins's shoulder, then half-limped, half-hopped to Gomez and took the submachine gun that was still slung over her shoulder. He staggered over to Gomez's position and squeezed off a short burst toward distant voices in the dense gray-brown cloud. Hawkins reached down and loaded one more rocket into the launcher, just in case.

* * *

The weight of the barrage had driven Abramowitz toward the edge of the precipice until she was perched on its lip, one foot dangling over the abyss. She shivered uncontrollably; she wasn't sure whether it was because of the cold or her injuries.

Then the rocks stopped falling. Abramowitz hoped that she had passed out and been beamed up to the da Vinci. She opened her tear-filled eyes. She was still on the mountain road.

A girlish scream of rage echoed off the cliff walls. Abramowitz heard a few running footsteps coming toward her, then she felt a brutal kick between her shoulder blades that knocked her over the edge.

Her right hand flailed out, every instinct telling her to survive, to hang on until the last possible second.

She looked up and saw Lica standing over her, like a dark and terrible child-deity. Her young violet eyes, scarred by war and its endless horrors, were filled with rage.

“I asked them to rescue you,” Lica said, her voice quaking with fury. “They let you in because of me! It’s my fault we have a spy!” Abramowitz said nothing. She clung by four fingertips to the sandy lip of stone.

“I have to cleanse myself,” Lica said. She lifted her foot.

“No!” Abramowitz screamed. Lica stomped on Abramowitz’s fingers. A pain like searing fire spiked through her hand. Sobbing with agony and desperation, she held on. The girl lifted her foot again. “Lica, don’t!” The girl’s foot smashed down on Abramowitz’s slender fingertips and pulverized them.

The world washed past Abramowitz, like a child’s watercolor painting left in the rain, as she fell through the mist toward the barren canyon floor several hundred feet below.

* * *

Commander Zila swallowed mouthful after mouthful of curses as he observed the battle from the air and snapped orders to Lancer Vecha, the weak-kneed and mind-bogglingly incompetent field officer leading the attack on the ground.

“I know you just lost an AAV!” Zila shouted. “Send Eight-Two Olik around the right flank and have One-Three Masara lay down smokers to cover Eight-Two’s charge.”

“Commander,” Vecha said, his voice swallowed by static, “with all due respect, their position is too strong for a direct—”

“There’s only three of them, you idiot! And one’s dead! Charge! Do it now, before I come down there and rip off your renods!” Zila punched the channel closed and looked across the compartment at Goff. “Now we’re gonna see some results!”

A flash of light brighter than the morning sun enveloped the gravel yard. The blast tossed the jumpjet into a flat spin. As the aircraft’s electrics went dead, Zila felt its sickening spiral toward the ground begin.

* * *

“Move out! Double quick time!” Maleska barked marching cadences at his squad as they sprinted away from the X’Mari ambush toward the firefight in the gravel yards three tiliks up the road. He’d heard two resounding explosions even from this distance.

The X’Maris must have an entire regiment holding the gravel yard, he speculated. The combat zone loomed into view beyond the row of dock warehouses along the road. What if it’s another ambush? Should we wait for more orders?

A synthetic bleating from the radioman’s pack signaled a transmission from Sync-Com. “Hold up!”

Maleska ordered. His squad halted and immediately crouched low and assumed perimeter-watch formation. The radioman kneeled in front of Maleska, who grabbed the digital receiver, turned toward the river to reduce the noise from the combat zone, and pressed the transmit key.

“Sync-Com, Five-NineJazim. Go ahead.”

“Five-NineJazim, reinforcements are needed at map grid XondiSix-One,” the Sync-Com coordinator squawked. “What’s your column’s status? Over.”

“Sync-Com, Five-NineJazim. We lost our AAVs and more than half our company in an ambush on West River Road. Remainder of company is humping into the zone on foot. Over.”

“What’s your grid reference?”

“We’re near the end of West River Road, roughly thretiliks fromXondi Six-One, and moving into—”

A nova-bright flash of light from the gravel yard coincided with a sizzle-hiss of static over the line. Half a second later came the cataclysmic thunder-crack of a massive explosion.

“Down!” Maleska vaulted over the railing that ran along the road and dived over the river’s edge into the water.

He hoped that his men would be quick enough to follow him.

The water was so cold that it prickled his skin, like needles jabbing him with electric shocks. He gasped in pain, losing half the breath he’d gulped before hitting the water.

Looking up, he saw the blurry, morning-sky silhouettes of bodies diving into the river above him. Then he realized debris was falling in with them—and that none of them were swimming down to escape the blast or up to get air. They simply bobbed on the surface like flotsam and jetsam.

Within seconds, the rumbling stopped. A film of dust and filth settled like a skin over the surface of the river.

Maleska surfaced to a scene as dark as night. Gasping hungrily for air, he coughed as he swallowed a mouthful of filthy water and smoke. He spat it out and wheezed as he stroked awkwardly to the river’s edge and pulled himself out.

He looked around at the flattened building, the landscape of scorched ruins and smoldering ground, the mushroom cloud. The gravel yard, the warehouses along its perimeter, and the ship-loading cranes that had dominated its waterfront were all destroyed, crushed as if by divine retribution.

Lying among the ruins, shrouded in the gray dust of this backward country Maleska had learned both to loathe and to pity, was his squad, reduced to an assortment of gruesome sculptures: an outstretched hand over here; a half-buried corpse lying facedown over there.

He plucked a rifle from the ankle-deep ash that covered the road. Slapped the dust off it and puffed a breath into the barrel. Took out the magazine and inspected it; it was clean. He put it back in. Fired one shot into the river, just to test it, then slung it over his shoulder.

Turning his back to the river, he walked east across the field of destruction. The ground was hot beneath

his boots. He wandered without thought past slag heaps that once had been AAVs, past the mangled wing of a jumpjet.

After a time, he reached the far edge of the blast's major area of effect. Here the buildings still stood, though there wasn't a window intact anywhere. The city was quiet with death, its secrets whispered on a hot wind that concealed its phantoms in wandering dust clouds.

He paused as he heard muffled sobs. He looked up from his boots, which now were caked in dried mud. Kneeling on the sidewalk, dusty and bloody and broken like himself, was a teenaged X'Mari boy, slumped in the street along the industrial yard's perimeter. He held in his arms two other boys, both of whom were dead, riddled with bullet wounds.

Maleska looked at their faces, which were masked in dust. One was practically still a child, no more than thirteen, the same age as Maleska's youngest brother. The other was a teenager, gangly and rugged-looking, cut down just shy of growing into manhood.

The kneeling boy wept bitterly, choking on his tears, seemingly oblivious of Maleska's presence.

A silhouette staggered out of a wall of sunlit dust farther down the street behind the kneeling boy. As the backlit man drew closer, Maleska saw that it was Commander Zila. The officer was scorched, wounded, maniacal. He carried an assault rifle at his side as he pitched from one side to another, lurching like a drunkard down the street toward Maleska.

Zila stopped and stared with wide-eyed contempt at the kneeling, weeping X'Mari boy in the street. He stared at the boy for close to a minute. Maleska stood like a statue, watching Zila. Without a word, Zila lifted his rifle and pointed it at the boy in front of the alley.

Maleska didn't think about swinging his own rifle into his hands; he simply did it. He didn't think about aiming at Commander Zila and pulling the trigger once, twice, three times. He simply did it, without thought, without emotion, without regret. The boy went on weeping as the echoes of gunfire faded.

Maleska walked slowly up the street, dropping his rifle next to Zila's body as he passed by. The sound of the boy's crying receded behind him as he wandered out of the city, away from the devastation, toward the faint and distant hope that he had seen his last day of war.

* * *

Stevens materialized in the *Vinci* sickbay. He felt lighter the moment the annular confinement beam released him into the familiar, lighter-than-Teneb gravity of the ship he called home, but he collapsed to the deck all the same.

The transporter beam had grabbed him, Hawkins, and Gomez less than two seconds before the probe self-destructed, and the near-warp aspect of their beam-up had left him more than a little disoriented. Of course, that could also be because I've lost a lot of blood, he realized.

Hawkins and Gomez materialized on the deck beside him in roughly the same poses they had been in on the ground. On the other side of Gomez was Abramowitz, who was battered, bloody, and unconscious.

Even before the away team had fully materialized, Dr. Lense, Nurse Wetzel, and Medical Technician Falcão snapped into action, visually assessing each team member's status.

They surrounded Gomez. Lense called out a string of medical orders that was so fast and thick with jargon that Stevens couldn't follow it. The only orders he caught for certain were Lense activating the EMH and instructing it to perform emergency surgery on Abramowitz, and Wetzel activating a backup copy of the EMH to perform triage on himself and Hawkins.

Lense, Wetzel, and Falcão lifted Gomez's limp, bloody body onto a surgical bed and activated the sterile force field. The first EMH, meanwhile, moved Abramowitz to the da Vinci's other surgical bed, activated its sterile field, and began his own surgical procedure.

The second EMH consulted a medical tricorder as he knelt between Stevens and Hawkins.

"Both of you have multiple shrapnel wounds, ranging from minuscule to serious," he said, reading from the display. "Multiple grazing wounds, cuts, and bruises."

"Yeah," Stevens said. "We know that."

The EMH scanned Hawkins. "You have severe damage in your—"

"Doc," Hawkins said, his temper rising. "I know where it hurts. Spare me the list and help me." The EMH drew back a bit, as if he were offended, then he turned and picked up a hypospray from a nearby equipment cart. He put the nozzle of the hypospray to Hawkins's throat and injected a sizable dose of medicine. Stevens saw the tension melt from Hawkins's body.

The EMH placed the hypospray against Stevens's jugular and administered another healthy dose of painkiller meds. It worked beautifully; Stevens felt no pain, no weight, not even the coldness of the deck beneath him. The duplicate EMH remained between the two men, working quickly to stanch the bleeding from their worst wounds, but Stevens couldn't feel a thing.

He lolled his head toward Hawkins, who, like him, was barely conscious. "Hey, Hawk," he mumbled, his own voice sounding oddly deep and dreamlike.

"Yeah...?" Hawkins sounded like he was a light-year away.

"All we wanted to do was help those people...and all they wanted to do was kill us."

Hawkins chuckled cynically. "That's the job, Fabe," he said with a grin. "You don't like it, quit."

Stevens grinned as his vision clouded over. "Can't," he said, letting go of an exhausted sigh. "I'm enlisted."

Hawkins wore an ironic looking grin. "Yeah... Me, too," he said as Stevens followed him into medicated unconsciousness.

Chapter 10

Gomez's world turned red in an instant. An impact like a sledgehammer against her chest knocked her against the bottom of the overturned truck with such force that she bounced off it. Her legs wobbled beneath her.

A battering-ram of force slammed into her back. She watched a spray of her own blood jet out of her torso and stipple Stevens's horrified face with wet freckles. The mechanical din of battle washed away in a low roar, like the sound she'd heard as a girl while floating underwater off the coast of Vieques. The ground tilted up toward her.

Color washed away, leaving the world painted in shades of watery gray as she stood over herself, counting the bullet holes in her own back. Her body was facedown in the dirt, next to a pool of blood from Stevens's wounded shoulder. A shell casing tumbled into the blood, touching off a tiny ripple. This isn't real, she told herself. A hallucination. A delusion.

"Not bad as delusions go," her love said.

Gomez spun around and looked at Kieran Duffy, who stood, arms folded, wearing that damned knowing grin, his sandy hair tousled rakishly. Unlike the rest of the bleach-rinsed world, he was painted in colors brighter than life itself.

"But you're dead," she said.

"Then I guess we're even." He nodded toward her body. "So. You call this a plan?"

"It was so crazy, I thought it just might work."

He shrugged. "I've seen worse."

"So," she said, taking a cautious step toward him. "What happens to me now?"

He lifted his arms in an exaggerated gesture of ignorance. "I'm an engineer, not a fortune-teller."

Gomez turned back toward her inanimate body. The world around her was growing fainter by the moment, dissolving into smoky white phantoms.

"Regrets?" Duffy said.

"No," she said.

"But sorry it's over?"

"Yeah.... I guess I am."

"Shame you didn't see this coming," he said.

"I did," she said. "I expected it."

"Then why'd you lead the mission? Didn't have to be you."

"Yes, it did," she said. "This entire planet was at risk, and I was in command. It was—" She stopped, the words like a hang-fire in her throat. She turned back toward Duffy, who once again stood with his arms folded in front of him, his face masked by that enigmatic smile.

She tried not to say it, but couldn't hold the words inside. "It was my duty," she said. He nodded

sympathetically.

“Yeah,” he said, “I know what you mean.”

The world around Gomez passed away into white oblivion. All that remained for her now was Kieran Duffy. She hadn't been aware of movement, but he was so much closer now, close enough that she could almost reach out and touch him...almost.

The ocean of pain she'd swallowed to fill the empty spaces inside her threatened to surge up and drown her. “I've missed you so much,” she said, her voice trembling with sorrow.

“That's good,” he said gently. “I should be missed.”

“It's been so hard,” she said. “So lonely. Nothing's the same, it's like I don't remember anymore.”

“Remember what?” he said with a voice colored in love.

“How to live,” she said. She didn't remember being touched, but his hands gently cupped her face. She became aware of a chilling cold all around her, and the only warmth she felt was from his hands. He smiled, but she didn't know what that meant.

“Don't be silly, Sonnie,” he whispered. “Of course you remember. You just haven't wanted to. Not enough, anyway.”

She closed her eyes and placed her hands over his and felt their warmth against her palms.

“Open your eyes, Sonnie,” he said, his voice quiet, his breath warm as sunlight and soft as silk on her cheek.

She opened her eyes and looked into his. She saw her reflection in the dark pupils of his eyes, which looked blacker and deeper than space, like the abyss of time itself.

“Know what today is?” he said.

She trembled in his hands. “Today is nothing,” she said.

“No,” he scolded. “I taught you better than that.... Today is everything. ...Open your eyes.”

A flash blinded her as a flood of torment raged through her body, like liquid fire filled with needles. She felt suffocated, as if she were drowning. She reached out to Kieran, but he was far away and fading, painted in the unnatural shades of an X-ray image, coming apart like smoke in a gale.

“Open your eyes!” the voice boomed, filling her with soul-shaking irrational terror.

She was back in the gravel yard, pitching forward toward the ground. A third bullet ripped through her torso. Her body felt like lead. She sank like an anchor into Teneb's gravity.

Another blinding flash, another surge of excruciating pain.

Today is nothing.

She was back in the shuttlebay of the *Vinci*, watching Stevens pilot Work Bug Two back into the ship with Duffy's lifeless body clutched in its cargo claw.

Searing light burned her eyes like she was staring into the sun. A crushing weight pressed in on her from every direction.

She was floating in the water, warm and safe at home.

“Open your eyes!”

The light flared then subsided as she pulled a ragged, painful breath into her fluid-choked lungs. She exhaled with a string of hacking coughs that filled her torso with hideous jolts of pain.

She was lying on a surgical bed in the *Vinci* sickbay. She looked up into the faces of Lense, Wetzel, and Falcão.

Lense clasped Gomez's bloody right hand in both of her own and smiled. “Welcome back, Commander.” She turned to Wetzel. “Keep her stable while I scrub in for surgery.” Wetzel nodded and Lense stepped away.

As Wetzel adjusted the surgical bed's numerous devices and functions, she looked at Gomez. “Relax, Commander,” she said. “You're home. We've got you.”

Gomez watched Wetzel and Falcão work. Lense returned, clad in a surgical gown. “I'm gonna make it, Gomez promised herself. Lense stepped up to the surgical bed. “You were clinically dead for almost two minutes,” she said. “Scans don't show any sign of neural damage, but I don't always trust scans. So, before I put you under for surgery, answer one question: What's today?”

Gomez smiled weakly at Lense. “Today is everything.”

Lense considered that, then smiled. “Good answer.” She nodded to Wetzel. Gomez felt the delta-wave generator fill her mind with soothing impulses to embrace a dreamless sleep. She put up no resistance and let herself drift away, confident she would awake whole.

* * *

Abramowitz stepped out of the turbolift and reveled in the simple act of walking. The EMH had done a textbook-perfect job of mending her shattered bones. But as glad as she was to be back on her feet, she was even more relieved to be looking like her old self again.

Putting her back together hadn't been easy, however. The EMH had described her internal injuries as “shocking,” and Lense had wholeheartedly agreed with his diagnosis. Consequently, Abramowitz had been forced to stay in postsurgical recovery for almost a day after Stevens and Hawkins had been discharged to bed rest in their quarters.

It could be worse, she reminded herself. Gomez is still there. Abramowitz had learned from the EMH that the first officer had been beamed up dead and with such grievous wounds that only Lense's stubborn refusal to quit could be credited with her revival. After surviving a seven-hour surgery, Gomez was expected to remain in sickbay for at least a few more days.

Abramowitz strolled down the corridor toward the mess hall, looking forward to a nice bowl of raisin

oatmeal. And a Denver omelette. And some pancakes. A day and a half of fasting on Teneb, and I come home to a day of injected liquid nutrients à la sickbay, she groused silently. Bring on the apple pie.

She turned the corner and paused at the peals of laughter ringing out from the mess hall. Stevens's hearty guffaws came through loud and clear, rising joyfully above the chorus of chortles. He reined in his laughter as he continued.

"So this lunatic, he tells him that they're 'on the same side,' that he's a secret agent!" More chuckling and snorting filled the room. Abramowitz peeked around the corner. Stevens and Hawkins sat across from each other at the far end of the middle table, holding court before an amused audience that included Corsi, Haznedl, Poynter, Conlon, Konya, Vinx, and half of engineering. The table in front of Hawkins and Stevens was covered with plates of food and a variety of odd beverages.

"He's leaving out the best part," Hawkins interjected. "Here I am, trying to keep my game face on, and this knucklehead's slaughtering—over an open transceiver channel!"

"It wasn't just me!" Stevens protested with a laugh.

"I know, it was all of you!" Hawkins said, his face bright with amusement. "I'm fighting not to crack a smile in front of this guy, but I've got the twit triplets giggling in my brain!"

A small, frightened voice inside Abramowitz's head suggested she clandestinely slip away to her quarters and come back to eat later. She told the voice to shut up, and stepped around the corner into the mess hall. "Room for one more?"

Stevens, who was about to launch into the next part of the story, switched gears. "Hey! Look who's up and around!" The group broke into applause and whistles and overlapping exclamations of "Good to see you!" and "Welcome back!"

She moved to take a seat at the close end of the table, near the door. "No you don't," Hawkins said cheerfully, crooking a come-hither finger. "Up here, with us, in the seats of honor."

Haznedl and Poynter stepped apart to let Abramowitz pass by. She stepped around Hawkins, who ushered her to sit at the head of the table, between himself and Stevens. "What're we eating?" she said as she sat down.

"It's habañero happy hour!" Stevens exclaimed.

"Burritos, fajitas, hasperat—if it'll light your tongue on fire, it's on the menu," Hawkins said.

"And for those of us still not cleared for active duty," Stevens said as he placed a large frosty beverage in front of her, "real-tequila margaritas, courtesy of a transporter chief who shall not be named." Poynter feigned innocence as she looked at the ceiling and whistled.

Abramowitz picked up her drink and took a sip. It was sweet and tart and cold and fiery all at the same time. She wasn't sure whether she liked the ring of large-grain salt around the edge of the glass, though it took the edge off the drink's more sour notes. Stevens lifted his glass in a toast, and the rest of the room followed his lead and lifted their glasses.

"To Carol," he said, "who stopped the rest of us from eating bowls full of poison—"

“Technically,” Abramowitz said, “alcohol is also a poison.”

“Quiet, I’m toasting you. Stopped us from eating bowls of poison so she could drop a satellite on our heads instead.”

Amid the laughter, Corsi grabbed Stevens’s sleeve and tugged on his earlobe. He made an exaggerated yowl as she pulled him toward her. “You were going to eat a bowl of poison?”

“It was an accident,” he said, grinning as he squirmed loose and played to the crowd. “We were in this POW camp....”

Abramowitz tuned out the rest of Stevens’s rehash of the mission. She pretended to pay attention, in between washing down the insanely searing-hot asperato and burritos with mouthfuls of her lip-puckering margarita. A few times every minute, she caught herself stealing sidelong glances at Hawkins.

His close-cropped hair flattered the crown of his perfectly rounded dark head, and the corners of his mouth curled winsomely behind his neatly groomed goatee.

A woman would have to be blind not to see what a handsome man he is, she thought. The echo of that notion lingered until another, more cautious voice intervened. What am I doing?

She couldn’t stop looking at him. A few times he happened to glance back, laughing at some detail of Stevens’s story, and she pretended to laugh along. She desperately wanted to reach out and put her hand over his. To touch his arm. To...

Stop it, you’re irrational, she chastised herself. You’re feeling drawn to him because he pulled you out of the water. You were injured, you were delusional, in shock. Just some silly imprinting psychology, just a Florence Nightingale effect, just...it’s just...

She swallowed another generous gulp of her margarita. The alcohol infused her body with a warm glow that, unlike the effect of synthehol, was entirely impossible to ignore.

Just stop rationalizing, she commanded herself. No more thinking. Feel. What do I feel?

Turning her head, she looked unabashedly straight at him. She let go of her thoughts and forced her eternally chattering mind into a moment of silence.

She felt intrigued. She remembered talking with him during one of the premission briefings, and feeling respected. She saw the keen mind behind his eyes, the candor of his smile, the relaxed confidence that radiated from him...and she felt deeply, powerfully, undeniably attracted.

He noticed her unbroken stare. For a moment he looked taken aback, then he smiled at her. “What?” he said in a sub rosa tone. “Something in my teeth?”

She shook her head and answered in a voice for his ears only. “That vehicle-training holo-program you made?”

“What about it?”

“Would you show it to me?”

“Sure,” he said. “When would—”

“How ’bout now?” she said, cutting him off. He peered inquisitively into her unblinking gaze.

The first tremor of a sly grin tugged at the corners of her lips. She knew that Hawkins was good at “reading” people, and she wasn’t exactly concealing her intentions in this rare unguarded moment.

He didn’t answer right away, and Abramowitz’s mind became a panicked whirlwind of all the awkward, innocently devastating things that she feared were about to issue from his mouth.

Then he spoke. “Love to.”

He stood up and waited for her to join him. She blinked, realized it was really happening, and stood up.

“Where are you guys going?” Stevens said. “I’m just getting to the—”

“I’m gonna teach Carol how to drive,” Hawkins said. “Don’t forget to tell them about the...uh...”

“Flying monkeys?” Stevens said, clearly baiting him.

“Right,” Hawkins said with a snap of his fingers. “The flying monkeys.”

Abramowitz followed Hawkins out of the mess hall to the turbolift. “It’s a great program,” he said, his mind clearly not on the small talk he was spinning. “Very versatile. Plenty of environments to choose from. I think you’ll really enjoy it.”

“I’m sure I will,” she said as the turbolift door opened. They stepped inside and stood unusually close together in the middle of the car.

Abramowitz felt like someone else—or maybe she finally felt like herself—as she lowered her head and flashed him a grin from beneath her slightly drooping black bangs.

The doors had barely begun to swish closed as she reached up, with three decades of suppressed passion suddenly unleashed, and pulled him into a hungry kiss.

He didn’t pull away.

She didn’t think about letting go.

About the Author

DAVID MACK is a writer whose work spans multiple media. With writing partner John J. Ordovery, he cowrote the *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* episode “Starship Down” and the story treatment for the *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* episode “It’s Only a Paper Moon.” Mack and Ordovery also penned the four-issue *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine/Star Trek: The Next Generation* crossover comic book miniseries *Divided We Fall* for WildStorm Comics. With Keith R.A. DeCandido, Mack cowrote the *Star Trek: S.C.E.* eBook novella *Invincible*, currently available in paperback as part of the collection *Star Trek: S.C.E. Book 2: Miracle Workers*. Mack also has made behind-the-scenes contributions to several *Star Trek* CD-ROM products.

Mack's solo writing for Star Trek includes the Star Trek: New Frontier Minipedia, the trade paperback The Starfleet Survival Guide, and the best-selling, critically acclaimed two-part Star Trek: S.C.E. eBook Wildfire. His other credits include the short story "Twilight's Wrath," for the Star Trek anthology Tales of the Dominion War, edited by Keith R.A. DeCandido; and "Waiting for G'Doh, or, How I Learned to Stop Moving and Hate People," a short story for the Star Trek: New Frontier anthology No Limits, edited by Peter David. His upcoming work includes a Star Trek: The Next Generation duology, A Time to Kill and A Time to Heal, slated for publication in August and September 2004. He currently is working on an original novel and writing a new S.C.E. eBook titled Small World, coming in March 2005.

A graduate of NYU's renowned film school, Mack currently resides in New York City with his wife, Kara.

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