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PARADISE INTERRUPTED

John S. Drew



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For Raymond Hoblock Sr.

For a man who worried about everything,
you never once questioned my dreams
and schemes, no matter how crazy they
may have seemed. Thank you for being
my friend as well as my father-in-law. We
all miss you.

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Next comes Susan Drew, my better half and my editor. Like Jean-Luc Picard, I spell knife with an "n," and this piece looks as good as it does thanks to this woman.

To my son, Edward Declan, I say thanks for letting Daddy use the computer for a while. You can get back to playing with Elmo and Clay.

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Chapter 1

"Please hang on, sir. We'll have someone out there as soon as we've reestablished power in that region." Shira, a senior technician for the Risan Operations Unit, pulled her earpiece away as the sharp squawk emanating from it became too much for her sensitive ears. She quickly lowered the volume and made another attempt. "I am sorry for the inconvenience, sir, but—"

She was cut off by an even louder tirade of expletives that would have made even a Nausicaan blush. "Please try to be patient, we—" The signal suddenly stopped. Shira wasn't sure if it was the guest's doing or another fault in the system. She hoped for the latter as the guest and two of his companions were hanging from the side of Catona Bluff, a popular rock-climbing formation on Risa. Their antigravity belts had been rendered useless as their power, along with all energy circulating in the region, had mysteriously vanished. The drain was so intense that Shira couldn't even get one of Operations' flyers in the air to rescue the three.

Shira tapped in a request from her keypad for a ground team to make their way on foot to the bluff. Unfortunately, it would take at least an hour to get there. She sighed and looked around the circular control room at her fellow technicians, their faces looking as tired and frustrated as her own. Their consoles were all lit up a bright red, indicating technical problems throughout the Monagas Peninsula, one of the most popular regions on the planet.

"I realize it's not supposed to rain, ma'am, but I'm afraid it's out of our control at the moment," she heard Milan, who was sitting next to her, say a little too wearily for her liking. Despite the troubles they were facing, it was important they maintain a positive attitude. Risa was the number-one destination resort planet in the Alpha Quadrant. It got that reputation because of its constant, stable climate, its attractive landscapes, and most of all, its very friendly staff.

But at the moment, the first two attributes were being threatened. The weather control system appeared to be breaking down. As a result, several popular areas in the region were literally being washed away by developing, heavy storms.

Shira turned back to her own console and groaned as she watched another five complaint calls line up in the queue of already forty on her viewscreen. She closed her eyes and thought about how nice it would be to sit out on the white sands of Monagas Lagoon. The only problem was that most of the beach had been wrecked by a freak rainsquall that ripped through the area earlier that day. This had been the third power loss in as many days.

The swishing of the doors to the control area and the shrill voice of Tonais, director of the Monagas Lagoon resort, drew her from her thoughts. Shira said a quiet prayer, asking for strength to get through the moments to come.

"And I'm still waiting for an explanation for all this." Tonais was speaking to his assistant, a mousy little individual with his nose buried in a large data pad. He stopped short, his assistant nearly colliding with him. "Technician Shira, correct?"

Shira turned around in her seat to face the two, not attempting to rise. “Senior Technician, yes,” she responded, making every effort to keep her tone even. The director had been a general pain in the neck since the crisis had begun. Granted, a great many of the complaints from the guests had fallen on his plate, but his hourly visits to the Operations Unit just seemed to add to their problems.

“Have you come to any conclusions, Senior Technician?” His tone dripped with sarcasm as he uttered Shira’s title. He was decked out in a long flowing robe that didn’t cover enough of his girth for Shira’s satisfaction. He wore no shoes, and he tracked sand into the room. It was clear that the director had no respect or concern for anyone but himself.

“None, sir.” Shira hated admitting it. She rose from her chair and gestured toward a map of the southern hemisphere projected on a large viewscreen overhead. Pulsing maroon indicators winked on and off in one particular area. “All we have so far is that this wave of freak—” She held up a hand to halt the oncoming protest she saw brewing in the director’s eyes. “I’m categorizing them as ‘freak,’ since I can offer no cause for these problems—freak power outages that began in the Monagas Peninsula and are now spreading to other resorts in the region.”

“There is no such thing as a freak occurrence, Senior Technician,” Tonais responded. “At least, not when it comes to a magnificent system such as ours. There are fail-safes, backup systems. Why are they not engaged?”

“They have been, Director, and in some cases they are working normally.”

“In some cases?” he repeated slowly.

“Whatever is affecting our systems is affecting them too.”

“But those are independent arrangements, Senior Technician. You cannot tell me this is a freak occurrence too?”

“I really don’t know what to tell you, sir,” Shira replied, wincing as she brought her shoulders up in a shrug. She didn’t like appearing so incompetent, especially in front of someone like Tonais, but the answers were eluding her.

“Excuse me, Director,” the assistant squeaked, not looking up from his notepad. He had a deep nasal tonality to his voice. “But we’re getting a report from the resort. There are three rock climbers trapped on the side of the bluff.”

Shira winced again. She was hoping to deal with this situation on her own.

“Well,” Tonais snapped, “take care of it.”

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple, sir.” The assistant looked up for a brief moment. Although his head was completely bald, he sported a thick mustache that curled on the ends. Shira thought the two were an odd pair. If the situation wasn’t so desperate at the moment, she might have almost allowed herself to laugh aloud.

“You see, the transporters have no power to their systems and we can’t seem to get our flyers off the ground. The climbers were equipped with antigravity belts, but they won’t function.”

Tonais's eyes flashed with anger. "You call this a freak occurrence too? I want more than a pat answer to all this!" He tapped his assistant on the shoulder. "Have a rescue team organized to ascend the bluff and get those people down!"

"I already—" Shira started to explain, but was cut off.

Tonais whirled toward Milan. "You! Contact Starfleet Command!"

Shira followed the director. "Starfleet Command? Don't you mean the nearest Federation representative, sir? Ambassador Li—"

"No, I want Starfleet Command. They're the only ones who can handle this situation now."

"The only ones?" Shira's voice began to rise in anger. "With all due respect, Director—"

"No," he cut her off, "don't say another word." He leaned over to Milan. "When you have Starfleet, get me Captain Montgomery Scott of the S.C.E. division."

"S.C.E.?" Shira was confused.

"Starfleet Corps of Engineers," Tonais explained, nodding his head and adding with a note of hopeful confidence. "They'll get to the bottom of this."

"But sir—" Shira tried desperately to regain control of the situation.

Tonais turned to face her. His facial expression had changed, softened somewhat. "Please understand. We cannot afford to have this kind of interruption in services for any lengthy period of time. At the moment, we are preparing to receive a group of scientists from throughout the Federation for a symposium. Some of the guests are already here. If word gets out that we are not capable of accommodating their desires..."

He didn't need to finish the sentence. Every person in the room, indeed, every Risan knew of the importance of total guest satisfaction.

"I have Starfleet, Director," Milan called out. "Captain Scott is waiting for you."

Suddenly, the lights in the room dimmed. Monitors began to wink out one by one around them. The large overhead viewscreen faded to black.

"This is intolerable," Tonais muttered. Aloud, he said, "Captain Scott, this is Director Tonais of the Monagas Peninsula on Risa."

The only response was static that faded away as the lights in the room continued to ebb.

"Get them back!" Tonais barked.

"I can't, sir." Milan moaned as he tried to comply with the order. "We're losing power to our systems."

Tonais turned his questioning gaze to Shira, who could only answer him with a confused stare.

"Now what are we going to do?" the assistant blurted out as the darkness engulfed them.

Chapter

2

“We’ll take the north and you take the south end,” Commander Eddie Johnson gestured toward the map that lay in front of him. “Any questions?”

Silence was the only reply. He couldn’t help but smile. This was good. His people knew their jobs.

“All right, then,” he said, giving his traditional thumbs-up. “Let’s move out.”

Eddie crouched into a squat position and moved with precision toward his goal. With each step he glanced around and brandished his phaser rifle. He was pretty sure they weren’t prepared to deal with any heavy resistance and hoped that they would make it to their target without being seen.

As they neared their goal, Eddie felt both excited and nervous. He could make out the imposing target. The large monolith hung over the entrance to the temple. It seemed to look down on Johnson’s team with a mixture of amusement and boredom. The team slowed their pace and waited as Eddie looked over their objective with a careful eye.

They say it’s an exact representation of their god, Eddie thought, giving the one-eyed statue a defiant glare. He’s about to meet his match in Commander Eddie Johnson of Starfleet Command.

Eddie gestured to the others to prepare to move out. With silent precision, Eddie and his team advanced on the temple, rotating the point as they moved forward. It didn’t take long before they reached the entrance. Eddie stepped up to the dull gray metallic door and examined the keypad on its left-hand side. It seemed a simple enough device—almost too simple—which was why Eddie was going to handle cracking its code rather than having his science officer attempt it. Commander Eddie Johnson was not about to risk any of his crew on such a dangerous task.

Eddie noted the ten-digit entry system and closed his eyes as he tried to figure out the exact sequence to open the door. His team waited in silence; an air of tenseness around them caused Eddie to break into a sweat. If he failed to open the door on the first try, heaven only knew what fate would befall them.

He reached out with a shaky finger and began to tap in the code. The keypad buttons lit a bright green with each successful entry. Eddie worked his way through the first three numbers of the code without any interruption. He stopped for a moment and exhaled nervously.

The final number.

It had long eluded a number of people who had made the attempt to break into the temple. There were tales of the consequences of failure, but Eddie refused to be swayed by such rhetoric.

He could make out the reflection of his crew behind him in the door. They had seen him through a number of tough situations and he in turn had not failed them yet. He hoped he wouldn’t now. Saying a silent prayer, Eddie ran his hand through his strawberry blond hair as he tapped the final number in the sequence.

The lights on the keypad blinked out.

A low whine filled the area.

“Get out!” Eddie barked to his crew as he started to back away from the door.

“Eddie!” an angry voice stopped him dead in his tracks. He turned around slowly to see his father standing in the doorway opposite him. With his hands folded across his chest, his father had a look in his eyes that Eddie was all too familiar with—exasperation.

“What do you think you’re doing?” His father said each word slowly and with great effort as if to keep from shouting.

Eddie looked futilely around the room, hoping that a member of his crew would appear to help bail him out. He wasn’t getting such aid now.

“Well, it’s like this, Dad. Starfleet contacted me and—”

“Stop right there, young man,” his father, Ray Johnson, cut him off in midfantasy. “I’ve told you to stay away from that room, haven’t I?”

“Yes, sir.” Eddie looked down at his feet. “It’s just that—”

“You’re bored. I know. But I don’t understand it, Eddie.” The senior Johnson gestured out a window at the tropical paradise before them. “This is one of the most popular planets in the entire galaxy. You have access to almost any area to enjoy yourself, within reason of course, yet you choose to waste your time playing Starfleet Command and trying to break into my study.”

The eleven-year-old felt the heat build up in his cheeks. He never considered his activities as “play.” He tried to gain control of his emotions as he saw his father’s demeanor change.

“Eddie.” Ray’s tone softened as he let out a sigh. “I know this hasn’t been easy for you.”

Here it came, the apologetic speech. Eddie heard it at least once a week. Ray Johnson ran a gentle hand through Eddie’s hair.

“I miss your mother too. But it’s just the two of us now and we have to rely on each other. We also have to respect each other’s needs. I know I haven’t been doing that lately, what with the extra work I’ve been putting into the modified warp coils for my presentation at the symposium, but this is important to me.” He paused before continuing. “And you’re important to me.” Ray looked up at the ceiling as though he were making some mental notes about something completely unrelated to the conversation. “Look, how about we do a little exploring of those caves by the lagoon that you were talking about?”

Eddie’s face lit up. “Really?”

“Sure. I’ll tell you what, I’ve got some work to finish up here. Why don’t you start down to the lagoon and do a reconnoiter of the area.”

“What?” Eddie’s face fell.

“Yeah.” His father placed his hands on Eddie’s shoulders and guided him toward the front door. “There are several caves there. Pick a system that interests you the most and we’ll explore it together. The

symposium doesn't start for another two days. We can spend some of the time together."

"Some?" Eddie repeated softly.

"Well, I've also got to finish copying my notes and putting them in some coherent order for my presentation, don't I?" They passed through their bungalow entrance and Ray gave Eddie a gentle push forward. "But I promise you we'll spend time together. Now, why don't you run along and I'll catch up with you." He backed up into the doorway. "Oh, be careful down there. Don't go too far into the caves. With the odd power fluctuations that have been happening, you might not be able to contact me if you need me. Have a good time."

He slammed the door shut as Eddie stood in the courtyard, stunned.

He just blew me off. He didn't even finish his speech. Where was the part about how it's been rough on him as I remind him so much of Mom? Where was the part about how proud she would be that I have remained so strong during such a difficult time? I feel cheated.

Eddie drew himself from his thoughts, determined not to let it get him down. He turned toward the lagoon and watched as his imaginary crew emerged from the shadows.

"Where were you guys when I needed you?" he asked aloud. He knew he wasn't going to get any answers. He shrugged. "Right then, we have a new mission. We're going to explore the caves in the lagoon. We've been getting some unusual reports from Starfleet Command. I'll explain on the way there."

Eddie trudged off toward the lagoon, developing his next adventure in his mind.

Chapter 3

Commander Sonya Gomez gestured to Soloman to enter the conference room first as the two converged on the door at the same time.

"Thank you, Commander," the Bynar replied as he stepped through. Sonya couldn't help but smile at the small alien. The two had been through quite a lot since she first boarded the ship a year ago. They had both watched as someone they cared greatly for had been lost in the line of duty. For Soloman, the loss had been his Bynar partner. In Bynar culture, partnership was essential for proper functioning. And yet, rather than return to his home world to recouple, Soloman elected to stay and serve on board the *Delta Vinci*. It took some time, but Soloman was adapting to life without his other half.

Sonya's bond with the late Kieran Duffy wasn't anywhere near as total as the one Soloman had shared, but her own recovery seemed just as slow. Her near-death experience on Teneb had been a wake-up call for her to move on with her life, but there were days when she still felt like she was walking through mud.

Captain David Gold's voice drew her from her thoughts. "Any time you'd like to join us, Gomez."

"Sorry, sir." She felt the blood gathering in her cheeks as she took her place at the conference room table. The usual crew was gathered in their traditional places. Sonya quickly acknowledged each and

every one with a nod and a smile as she settled into her chair. She felt the odd stare from Mor glasch Tev, second officer aboard the da Vinci. She tried to meet his stare in the hope of unnerving him, but his face remained impassive.

“Commander,” he said curtly with a slight snort. Sonya wasn’t sure if his tone was sarcastic.

The communicator chimed as Anthony Shabalala’s voice filled the room. “Bridge to Captain Gold.”

“Go ahead,” Gold replied.

“We’re on course for Risa, Captain,” Shabalala announced. “I have Captain Scott standing by.”

That surprised Sonya. Risa was usually one’s destination for shore leave, not a mission assignment.

“Patch him through.”

The S.C.E. team turned their attention to the viewscreen over Gold’s shoulder. The Starfleet emblem winked on momentarily and was replaced by the warm, smiling image of Captain Montgomery Scott.

“Captain.” Gold nodded in greeting.

“Good morning, people. As I’m sure you’re all aware, you’re currently on course for Risa.”

“What happened?” Fabian Stevens had a hint of mischievousness in his voice. “Is there a broken blender that needs repair?”

Bart Faulwell chuckled. “The entire Risan economy is on the brink of collapse because they can’t make the piña colodas fast enough.”

This brought a laugh from Scotty. “ ’Tis a wee bit more serious than that. The entire future of Risa is in jeopardy. As I’m sure you know, Risa relies on mostly automated systems to make the stay of their guests as simple and as pleasurable as possible. Unfortunately, those systems are breakin’ down. We’re getting reports of random power drains from certain locales in the Monagas area. It’s affecting everything from the sonic toothbrushes to the sky vehicles to the weather control network. And the power disruptions are spreading.”

“Is it a mechanical or natural phenomenon?” Gomez asked.

“That’s for you lot to determine,” Scott replied. “We haven’t been able to contact Risa for nearly twelve hours now. The energy problems are affecting communications. Our most recent report came from an Andorian freighter. The crew was on leave and left after one day. The heavy rains caused by the lack of control of the weather system made it unbearable for them to stay.”

Fabian grinned. “Well, they could make themselves the number-one destination spot for the Ferengi. A home away from home.”

“I think they’d like to continue serving a broader client base.” Gold turned to his first officer. “Your thoughts, Gomez?”

Gomez felt the eyes of everyone on her. “I would assume the Risan authorities would like this handled as quickly and as quietly as possible. So we don’t want to attract much attention. We’ll keep the initial team

small as we assess the situation, then bring in team members as is necessary.”

“Sounds good.” Gold smiled thinly.

Scott nodded his consent as well. “I’ll leave you to your work then. Contact me when you arrive at Risa. Good luck.”

The image of Scott faded from the viewscreen. Gold folded his hands in front of him. “And who will make up this team?”

“Myself, Soloman, and Pattie,” she replied.

Tev let out a snort of surprise. “Commander?”

“Yes?” She turned toward the Tellarite, steeling herself for the challenge.

“I understand your desire to keep the group small. In fact, I wholeheartedly endorse it, but I feel you will need my expertise on this matter.”

“As I stated, Commander,” Sonya began to explain, keeping her tone as even and pleasant as possible, “I will be bringing in personnel as the situation warrants. Soloman will determine if the fault relates to the computer systems. Pattie will determine if the problem is mechanical.”

“It would make more sense to bring a generalist down to determine the cause, then summon specialists as needed.”

“Maybe, but I think this away team configuration is what’s best for the mission,” Gomez said, giving Tev a sharp look.

Tev looked as though he was about to pursue the argument further, but instead settled back in his seat and folded his arms in defeat.

Domenica Corsi spoke up. “I think you should have someone from security with you.”

“Why?” Gomez asked, looking forward to hearing the expected answer.

“What if the nature of these energy drainings is hostile?”

“Then I’ll call a security detachment down. Domenica, this is Risa. This is where you go to get away from your troubles. Even the bad guys lower their weapons there. If we run into trouble, I’ll call you.”

“And what if communications are out?” Gomez noted Gold’s “leave her alone” look being directed at Corsi, but the security chief was ignoring it.

“Then I’ll simply scream at the top of my lungs until you hear me,” Gomez replied with an impish smile that drew a frustrated sigh from both Corsi and Tev simultaneously.

“It’s settled then,” Gold said. “We’ll arrive at Risa in thirteen hours. Unless there are any other questions or comments, you’re dismissed.”

The staff rose from their chairs and slowly filed out of the room. Gomez and Gold watched as they

departed.

As the door closed with a whispering hiss, Gold gave his first officer a look. “Gomez, you know that you’ve got final say over any away team you lead.”

Gomez heard the implied word at the end of that, and provided it. “But?”

“Tev had a point.”

“Yes, sir, he did. And honestly, with a different second officer—” Her voice caught, but she recovered.

“—I would probably have him or her along. But as good as Tev is—and I admit, he’s very good—he’s still adjusting to working with the team. Until he does, I want to remind him that there are other people on the ship.” She smiled. “Besides, this is Risa. These are friendly people, and I trust Soloman and Pattie to interact more pleasantly with the staff.”

Gold grinned. “Good point.”

Chapter 4

Commander Eddie Johnson stopped short in his hurried tracks as he approached the cave system looking out over the lagoon. He felt a heavy heart as he knew he would be exploring the area alone, even though he had the rest of his crew along in spirit. He turned to face them, holding out a hand to halt their advance.

“I haven’t been completely honest with you,” he said to his crew with regret. “There isn’t any trouble in these caves. For a long time, you have been faithfully following my orders without question. I appreciate that. It’s nice to have such a loyal crew. But I think you should know that there has been an ulterior motive to all this.”

Eddie sighed. This wasn’t going to be easy. “A few years ago, I lost my father. He disappeared from my life at a time when I needed him most. Every mission we have been on, while they have served the best interests of Starfleet and the Federation, has also been about finding my father.

“My father is Ray Johnson, the noted warp field specialist. He’s been working on a top-secret project to produce a more efficient warp coil generator. I believe he may have been on the verge of something critical when he disappeared. I don’t know if he met with foul play or if he has simply gone into hiding, but every mission we have been on in the last six months has allowed me to follow up on clues and rumors I’ve heard regarding his whereabouts.”

Eddie pointed toward the entrance. “I have every reason to believe he is in there. So, while officially we will be exploring the caves and creating a detailed map of the region for Starfleet records, unofficially, we will be looking for my father.” Eddie paused to allow everyone to ponder what he had just said. “I will understand if anyone wishes to return to the ship.”

Silence was once again the reply. Eddie broke out into a big smile. He had a good crew.

“Then why are we waiting? Let’s move out!”

* * *

The crew moved quietly through the caves for the better part of an hour. The only sound that could be heard was the echoing of Eddie's heavy footsteps. The journey inward had been uneventful for the most part, save for Lieutenant McGuinness nearly falling into a chasm. Some quick thinking on Eddie's part saved her from a sad ending.

Eddie stopped for a moment and took in a deep breath. The much cooler, damper air of the caves filled his lungs and caused him to cough. He settled down on a large boulder and looked around at the craggy features of the ceiling and walls surrounding him.

A glance at his watch confirmed his worst fear. He had been in the caves for nearly two hours now.

His father wasn't joining him.

He stood up, determined not to let his crew see the mixture of disappointment and anger in his face. He cleared his throat and prepared to make the announcement when something shining out of the corner of his eye caught his attention.

Eddie stepped slowly toward the glow, which seemed to pulse and emanate a low hum. It was coming from just around the corner, where Ensign Tomkins had reported as "uninteresting" just moments before. Eddie made a note to have a word later with Tomkins about the accuracy of his investigations.

Eddie stepped cautiously forward, wishing he had thought to bring his tricorder with him. As he moved into the next chamber, he caught the first sight of its occupant—a glowing orange-yellow ball of pulsing light that illuminated the chamber.

To Eddie's surprise, it appeared to retreat slightly as he entered. Eddie stopped and watched for a moment, waiting to see if it would make a move.

Make a move? You should be the one making a move, Eddie Johnson, right out of the cave.

And yet he remained perfectly still, watching as the glowing light maintained an equal distance away from the boy. As Eddie took a step forward, it would move the same distance back and move forward as the boy retreated. Eddie wiped away a trickle of sweat that ran down the side of his cheek. The heat emanating from the creature, for lack of a better term, was sweltering.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said, surprising himself as he said it. This thing looked powerful enough to take out most of the continent. Realization dawned on the boy. "Say, you're not what's causing all these energy problems on Risa, are you?"

As if in response to his question, the creature shuddered and Eddie's torch suddenly winked out.

"Wow," he whispered as he slowly put the torch down on the ground. "My name's Eddie."

The creature offered no acknowledgment.

"I come from a planet called Earth. We have a lot of energy there." Nice move, Eddie. Come visit Earth, we're ripe for the taking.

“Do you have a name?”

Again, the creature just pulsed in silence.

Eddie took another step forward. This time, the creature did not move.

“Starting to trust me?”

Eddie ran his arm across his forehead, which was producing rivulets of sweat that ran into his eyes, stinging them. He took another step.

“All right. You won’t tell me your name, how about where you come from?”

Another step. The creature’s glow began to increase. Eddie placed a hand in front of his eyes to shield the glare. It didn’t help much.

“Can you talk at all? How are we going to communicate?”

Every instinct in Eddie told him to leave quickly, but his curiosity and the serenity of the creature kept his guard in check. He stepped forward again.

The creature suddenly shifted forward, growing somewhat larger as it did. Eddie took a fearful step back and stumbled to the ground.

He fumbled with the combadge his father had given him. “D-d-dad! This is-is E-e-eddie! Come in!”

There was no response. He looked up at the creature. It was hovering close to him. “Drained the energy from that too, huh?”

The creature continued to advance on Eddie.

“Now look, just remember. I came here in peace. I want to go that way!”

It was less than half a meter away from Eddie now. The heat was becoming unbearable. Eddie thought he might pass out.

“I won’t even tell anyone that you’re here. I promise!”

The creature made one sweeping move forward, engulfing Eddie. He felt a momentary searing flash of heat touch every part of his body as the creature washed over him, but the heat quickly subsided as consciousness began to slip away from him.

Despite all that was happening and how dangerous the situation seemed, Eddie final thought before succumbing to the darkness was Wow!

Chapter 5

“Now entering standard orbit of Risa,” Songmin Wong announced to the bridge crew of the *Vinci*. He

tapped a further command into his console and smiled with satisfaction. They had arrived at Risa without incident, which made a nice change for the conn officer. After the navigational nightmare of the so-called “Sargasso sector,” a simple flight to Risa was a welcome change.

Wong, like most in Starfleet, looked forward to the challenges of exploring strange new life-forms and new civilizations, but he never expected ferrying a bunch of techs across the galaxy to be so dangerous. He glanced down at his left hand and said another silent prayer of thanks that he managed to retain it after an explosion of his console hurled debris at him at Galvan VI.

“Very good, Wong.”

Wong turned to look up at Captain Gold as he rose from his chair. The captain hadn’t been so lucky. His hand was lost as nearly the entire ceiling had come crashing down upon him. But the captain was luckier than tactical officer David McAllan. Gold lost his left hand due to the pinning debris. McAllan lost his life as he leapt forward and pushed the captain to safety, taking the brunt of the wreckage himself.

Wong wondered for some time after if he should have requested reassignment, the way the alpha-shift ops officer, Ina Mar, did. He still sometimes wrestled with the thought, especially after a reoccurring vivid nightmare in which he was the one trapped beneath the wreckage of the bridge as the crew lay dead around him. In the dream, the only sounds he heard were his own heavy breathing and the groaning of the hull as the badly damaged ship gave in to the pressures of Galvan VI’s turbulent atmosphere.

Wong repressed a shudder and turned his thoughts to more pleasant pursuits. Despite the fact that Gold warned everyone that the trip to Risa was purely business, Wong hoped to convince the captain to allow him some time to take his pleasure yacht out for a spin.

Wong recently obtained the craft after investing inherited strips of latinum in the Ferengi market. He was fairly successful and that gave Wong further reason to think about where his life was going. He could still see much of the universe as an investor. And he wouldn’t have to be placed in such hazardous situations.

The viewscreen showed the green-blue hue of Risa below them. Wong caught sight of his yacht in the lower corner of the screen.

“Permission to magnify the lower quadrant, Captain?” he asked.

Gold squinted at the viewer and smiled in recognition. “Granted.”

The young lieutenant tapped in the command and the screen adjusted to the required setting. A long, sleek, light gray pleasure yacht hung just over the Olobon continent. Mooring lights faded in and out.

Gold whistled appreciatively. “She’s a beauty.”

“You should see her when she’s all lit up and in flight,” Wong replied, suddenly imagining himself in the observation lounge of his ship, entertaining potential investors. It seemed a pleasant way to live.

Tev grunted as he leaned over the railing to get a better look. “It is a practical design. What have you named it?”

Wong’s face flushed slightly. “I haven’t been able to come up with one yet, sir.”

“You’ve taken her out and she doesn’t have a name?” Gold asked with a grin. “What kind of a

ship-master are you?"

"I haven't really thought about it, I guess," Wong admitted.

"Well, we're going to be in orbit for a while, Wong," Gold said. "I suggest you use that time to think about it. Maybe we can take a moment to put the lettering on her. A fine craft like that needs to have an identity."

"Yes, sir," Wong replied, turning back toward his console. "Thank you, sir."

The intercom beeped overhead.

"Bridge, this is Gomez. We're assembled and ready to beam down."

"Good luck, Gomez. Try to avoid the tourist traps," Gold answered.

"Yes, sir." She chuckled.

"Captain," Shabalala called out. "I think you should take a look at this."

Gold and Tev stepped up to the tactical station where Shabalala was staring intently at his monitor.

"What is it?" Tev asked.

"I've completed a thorough scan of the entire Risan system. Risa has a lot of traffic. Each vessel's engine gives off a particular energy signature."

"And your point is?" Tev asked with a tone of annoyance.

"I'm reading no recent energy signatures, sir," Shabalala replied. "Take a look at this." He tapped a command into his console and a small freighter came into view on the monitor. "That's an Antedean freighter."

"I'm familiar with the design," Gold said.

"Yes, sir," Shabalala continued. "It features a modified version of the millicochrane warp engines in our shuttlecraft. It gives off a distinct energy signature that remains for some seventy-two hours. But as you can see with this sensor overlay..."

Shabalala touched a corner of his console and a grid appeared on the screen. "This freighter arrived two days ago. We're not getting anything from it. In fact, all recently arrived craft have no proper energy signature. It's as though they were all cloaked."

"Which is pretty unlikely," Gold said.

"Exactly," Shabalala said. "So what happened?"

Tev furrowed his thick eyebrows. "Whatever it is that is causing the power failures on Risa has extended its influence beyond the surface."

Gold put a hand on the tactical officer's shoulder. "Good work, Shabalala. Contact the away team with

this information as soon as they arrive on planet.”

“Aye, sir.”

* * *

Gomez’s first sight as Risa materialized around her was of a large man, dressed in what looked like a toga, moving toward her. There may have been another individual behind him; it was hard to tell with the size of the man.

“Commander Gomez, is it?” The man offered a meaty hand to her. She took it cautiously, noting the moisture in his palm. She tried not to show her revulsion, but failed. He quickly pulled his hand away. “I’m sorry, Commander. With the weather system out of control, we’re being assaulted by a heat wave that doesn’t agree with a man of my stature. I’m Tonais, director of the Monagas resort.”

Gomez ran a finger through her collar, noting the heat was oppressive. “Quite all right, Director. That’s why we’re here.”

“And I’m glad you are,” Tonais said as he backed up into a much smaller man. He whirled on him in frustration. “Bander! Must you always be so close to me?”

The bald-headed man looked pained at the rebuke. “How else am I to serve you, Director?”

“I don’t know.” He turned to Gomez and smiled with a smarminess that made her flesh dimple. “He’s very good at what he does, but he can be a little troublesome sometimes.”

Gomez’s combadge chirped, saving her from having to reply. “Da Vincito Gomez.”

“Excuse me a moment, Director,” Gomez nodded, turning slightly away. “Go ahead.”

As Shabalala relayed the information from his scans to her, Gomez took a moment to glance over her surroundings. The concourse they had materialized in featured a number of high supporting pillars similar to the architectural styles of ancient Rome on Earth. The white, marble columns supported a domed ceiling featuring a collage of tropical plants. Several small water fountains dotted the large area, not activated at the moment. She also noted the lack of tourists.

After acknowledging Shabalala’s report, she turned back to the director. “There aren’t many of your guests here.”

“No. With the weather control network not working properly, we’ve experienced high temperatures and wild rainstorms. It washed out our lagoon, one of the most popular attractions of this resort.”

“That’s terrible,” Pattie said.

“Director, this is P8 Blue, who will handle the structural analysis of your affected systems.” Gomez gestured to Pattie and then to the Bynar. “And this is Soloman, who will determine if it’s a programming fault.”

“That’s the problem, Commander Gomez. I think you will find that it is neither a structural nor a programming problem. The systems being affected are widespread and, for the most part, independent of each other.”

“I’d like to see a log of your most recent power failures and have my people look over the systems just to be sure.”

“Of course.” Tonais nodded quickly, gesturing toward the concourse entrance. “If you’ll come this way.” They proceeded toward the archway. “I’m afraid I cannot offer you any comfortable accommodations as none of the air coolers in any of the rooms work. But then, neither do the lights or the waste disposal systems or—”

Before the director could go on with his litany of problems, he was stopped short by a large, muscular figure.

“Excuse me, sir!” Tonais started, but his voice dipped into a squeak as he looked upward at the individual.

The seven-foot reptilian alien stood imposingly over the director. He was decked out in heavy leather that covered his entire body. An energy weapon hung from a holster to his side, while a jeweled blade featured prominently in a scabbard on his chest. His jewel green eyes flashed angrily at the sight of the director.

“Out of the way!” the imposing Gorn hissed. The reptilian alien tilted his head and glanced at Gomez and her party. “Federation!” He gestured to the other two Gorn accompanying him and they circled around the group, keeping an eye on Gomez the entire time. She turned and watched them walk across and exit the concourse without ever looking back.

“Do you know them, Director?” she asked, turning to face Tonais.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Bander?”

Before Tonais could ask the question, the little man had the information on his data pad. “A Gorn ship entered orbit some thirty-three hours ago, sir. They have been beaming back and forth to their ship since then. They are not staying planetside, nor are they utilizing any of the facilities.” He paused and then lifted his head and wiped the sweat from his nose. “Not that they could anyway. Most of the facilities are nonfunctional at the moment.”

“Yes, thank you, Bander,” the director snapped.

“Beaming back and forth, eh?” Gomez tapped her combadge. “Gomez toda Vinci.”

“Go ahead,” Captain Gold’s voice echoed in the chamber.

“Captain, please beam down a security detachment. We may have trouble with some Gorn who appear to not be here for a holiday.”

“We detected their ship a short while ago. I’ll have that detachment down shortly. Keep us apprised of your situation. Da Vinciout.”

“Is that necessary, Commander?” Tonais asked worriedly.

“I’m hoping not, Director,” she replied. “Just look at it as a precaution.”

“Well,” Tonais said, the worry in his voice apparent, “just make sure they don’t get in the way of the guests.”

Gomez smiled. “Don’t worry, Director. You won’t even know they’re here.”

Chapter 6

Eddie was aware of every single nerve point in his body. He felt a continuous buzz of electricity similar to a slight static shock coursing through him and found it to be invigorating. His senses, something he had taken for granted for so long, were intensified by the experience. He could smell the dampness of the cave, make out every rock and crag that jutted from the cave walls, and at the same time admired the congruity they projected where once it had seemed chaotic. He could hear the music created by the echoing condensation falling off the cave ceiling.

“Fantastic,” Eddie said, but he wasn’t sure if he was saying it or thinking it. His “voice” had an almost electronic edge to it.

He looked down at his arm and marveled at the way he could see the thin hairs on the back of his limb standing up, moving back and forth like a field of grain on a windy day. He lifted his hand and intensified his stare. He squawked in surprise as he was able to see beyond his skin to the blood pulsing through his veins beneath.

FANTASTIC.

Eddie looked around the cave nervously. He could make no one out. “Who said that?”

THAT.

Eddie could hear his heart pounding, could feel it beating against his chest.

“Who are you?”

Eddie felt a ripple of electricity course through him. His body stiffened slightly as electrical blue sparks arched across the top of his head.

“Stop!” Eddie said excitedly. “Please.”

PLEASE. STOP. WHO ARE YOU?

The surge diminished and Eddie felt his limbs under his control again. He took in a deep breath.

WHO ARE YOU?

“I’m not imagining it.” He looked at the glow surrounding him. “You’re alive. You exist.”

WHO????

“Take it easy,” Eddie said, feeling the voice in his head getting louder and more insistent. A mild

headache began to form. "My name is Eddie Johnson. I'm from Earth."

EARTH?

"Yeah, Earth. It's a planet like this one."

PLANET?

"Is this all you can do?" Eddie asked. "Are you just going to keep parroting me?" His only answer was silence. "All right, how about we try this. What's your name?"

NO NAME. NO PLANET. NOBODY TO CARE.

"Care? Are you plucking words from my mind?"

MIND FULL OF IMAGES. FULL OF IDEAS. FULL OF THOUGHTS. LEARNING.
BECOMING...

"Becoming? What are you talking about? Who are you? Where are you from?"

NEED TO EXAMINE DATA. ESSENTIAL. It paused for a moment. THERE IS SOMETHING
ELSE.

Eddie felt a rumble in his stomach. He was getting hungry. He wasn't sure how long he had been in the cave, but he knew he had to get something to eat.

HUNGER.

"You're hungry too?" Eddie asked.

The being pulsed and Eddie felt his senses expand again. This time he was seeing beyond the walls of the cave. The skies were beginning to grow dark as evening was approaching.

"Uh-oh," Eddie said. "My dad's going to kill me."

DAD? KILL?

"My father. He's not really going to kill me. But he's going to be upset that I've been away so long. But this wouldn't have happened if he had come to the caves with me like he said he would."

The being appeared to rumble as it pondered what Eddie was saying.

FATHER. MOTHER. PROGENITORS. It said each word slowly. UNDERSTAND. MOTHER
ABANDONED. FATHER ABANDONED.

"Well, I wouldn't say my mother abandoned me. She died a few years ago."

MEMORY IS STRONG. THERE IS SOMETHING ELSE THERE. CANNOT UNDERSTAND IT.

Eddie felt a tear falling from his cheek. "You're reading me wrong! I'm not mad at my mother!" Eddie tried to change the subject. "Look, you said you were hungry. How about getting something to eat?"

Eddie's vision spotted several flyers flitting about in the skies above. With his enhanced senses, he could make out the energy that surged through the crafts.

YES. HUNGER.

"Uh-oh," Eddie said as the realization of what the creature was about to do dawned on him.

Chapter 7

Sonya ran a hand along the surface of the sky flyer sitting in the landing bay of the Monagas Peninsula. She smiled at the thought of taking it out and guiding it through the deep blue skies above. But her smile faded as she glanced out a nearby window and watched the clouds outside quickly darken as a late afternoon thunderstorm was developing.

Normally, the weather control system would be able to deter the storm, allowing visitors to the peninsula to enjoy their evening. But after a sweltering hot day trapped inside, the tourists would find themselves remaining indoors to avoid getting soaked.

Soloman poked his head out of the top of the flyer. "This is definitely not a systems problem. In fact, this flyer is ready to take off." And so saying, he activated the flyer, bringing a low hum to the surrounding area.

Pattie stepped out from behind the craft. "Structurally, it's a sound vessel. In fact, all the flyers in this bay are fine."

"Then why couldn't they launch them when they needed to rescue those climbers the other day?" Gomez asked.

Soloman shook his head. "This is clearly an external influence, Commander. While I would like to take a look at the launch bay control room to see if I can determine anything else, I feel we need to shift the focus of our investigation."

"I agree," Gomez nodded.

The doors to the launch bay entrance parted and a couple of Risans entered the area. The female of the duo approached Gomez, her gaze less than friendly.

"Commander Gomez, I'm Shira from Risa Operations. How are your investigations proceeding?" Her tone was not the usual congenial, friendliness that Gomez was used to from a Risan. In fact, it seemed downright hostile.

"I don't think there is anything wrong with any of your systems, Shira." Gomez tried to keep a smile on her face, hoping that the Risan would pick up on it. "We have been through your communications systems, aircraft, and the weather control station. We can find no systemic reason for this power loss. Our current hypothesis is that an outside force is responsible."

"Outside force?" Shira repeated. "You mean alien?"

“Possibly,” Gomez admitted a little reluctantly. “We don’t want to rule anything out. It could be some natural phenomenon we haven’t accounted for yet.”

A chime from a communicator interrupted them. The Risan male stepped forward. “Shira, it’s the weather control station.”

“Thank you, Milan,” she replied, taking the small device from him. She looked at Gomez. “Will you excuse me?” She turned away without waiting for a reply.

Pattie stepped up behind Gomez and leaned into her ear. “What happened to the famous Risan warmth? You could take the chill from that woman alone and reduce the temperature of the entire peninsula.”

“She’s got her feelings hurt by our involvement in this,” Gomez said simply. “How would you feel if we couldn’t handle a certain engineering situation and they brought in another S.C.E. team to assist?”

“Something I’ll never have to worry about,” Pattie replied, clicking one of her mandibles with a flourish, the equivalent of a human wink. “We never need anyone’s help.”

I only hope that’s always the case, Gomez thought.

The approach of the da Vinci’s security chief changed the commander’s mood. A smile broke out on her lips. She always got a kick out of watching Corsi in “full security mode,” as Gomez liked to think of it. She was like a cat, tensed, ready to spring into action on a nanosecond’s notice.

Corsi stopped just short of Gomez. “We found our Gorn friends. They appear to be searching the beach areas around the lagoon. I’ve got Hawkins and Angelopoulos following them.”

“We don’t want to draw attention, Domenica.”

“They’re dressed as tourists. I also issued them Ferengi disruptors, which won’t connect them with Starfleet. I did a check with Risan orbital control. The Gorn never stated a reason for coming to Risa. They don’t have to, when contacted by the Risans, but most vessels do answer the question.”

Shira turned back to face the S.C.E. team. “I am being informed that the weather control grid is back online.” As she said this, the lights in the landing bay winked on. A hum filled the chamber. “As is this landing area. The portable generators you provided are working nicely.” Shira looked from Gomez to Corsi and muttered, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Gomez replied. “They should do the trick until we determine the source of the energy drain.”

The lights, as quickly as they winked on, flashed off. Gomez looked at Soloman. The Bynar pulled a tricorder out and began a scan. The device gave off the usual whine for several seconds before it too began to die out.

“Not the tricorder too,” Corsi said.

“It is worse than we feared,” Soloman replied. He pointed toward a large window looking out into the sky. “I managed to detect an approaching aircraft.” Moving rapidly toward the landing area was a small flyer.

“We’ve got to warn them off,” Gomez said.

Milan shook his head. “From the looks of it, it’s out of control.”

Gomez tapped her communicator, but wasn’t greeted with its familiar chirp of activation. “Gomez toda Vinci.” There was no response.

“Quick!” Gomez ran toward the landing bay control room. “We’ve got to open those bay doors. Domenica, Pattie, I want you two to clear everyone in the surrounding area. Let’s minimize the potential for casualties.”

“Right,” Corsi replied as she moved off with the Nasat.

Shira and Milan followed after Gomez and Soloman.

“You should leave the area too,” Gomez said as they climbed the circular stairs to the control room, a glass-enclosed structure that rested just above the landing bay.

“This is my responsibility,” Shira said coolly, “as much as it has been made yours.”

“Fine.” Gomez didn’t have time to argue.

They entered the control room and Gomez settled herself into a chair facing the main operations panel. Soloman settled to her right, activating the scanners and getting a lock on the craft.

“Thank goodness this is still working,” Gomez said, wincing as the lights began to dim. “Why did I have to jinx us?”

“Open the bay doors!” Shira shouted. “Quickly!”

Milan leaned over Gomez and tapped in the command. The four looked out as the huge metallic barriers began to part with a loud groan. They parted about five meters before coming to an abrupt halt.

“We’ve lost all power,” Gomez said.

“We’ve got to stop them from landing!” Shira’s voice was becoming hysterical.

Gomez watched as the flyer drew near, not exactly sure how they could accomplish that in time.

Chapter 8

Vance Hawkins stopped and grumbled quietly as he removed his shoe and dumped out what seemed to be the entire contents of the beach he was treading on. He looked up at his partner, Andrew Angelopoulos. The young man chuckled and ran his hand through his thick, dark mane of hair. Angelopoulos was one of seven new transfers to security after Galvan VI, and since reporting, he had turned many a female and a few male heads with his striking good looks.

“Chief, why didn’t you wear sandals?” Angelopoulos asked.

Hawkins looked up at him, shaking his head. “These shoes are comfortable.”

“Practical, was the term I think you used.” Andrew smiled. “There’s no such thing as a practical shoe on a beach.”

Hawkins gestured toward a series of nearby caves. “Don’t lose sight of our friends.”

“As if I could.” The young man looked up at the sky and placed a hand to his forehead to block out the glare. “They stick out like a sore thumb and look just about as miserable on the beach as you do.”

“I’m not a beach person,” Hawkins said. “Simple as that.”

Angelopoulos looked down at Hawkins and smiled. The two were quite the contrast in study. Where Hawkins was dark-skinned, with a head as smooth as a marble table surface, Angelopoulos was pale with a big thatch of black hair.

“So what do you think of life on the *Vinci* so far?” Hawkins asked, standing up and giving each foot a final shake. “I’ll bet you’d never have thought you’d be following a group of Gorn on the beaches of Risa, dressed”—Hawkins flailed his arms about—“in this getup.” Both he and Angelopoulos were sporting a more colorful array of clothing than either was used to wearing. Their shirts were a combination of bright primary colors mixed together in what was to Hawkins, an appalling fashion.

“It helps us to blend in, sir.”

“Risan fashion leaves a lot to be desired,” Hawkins grumbled. “And don’t call me sir.”

“Yes, sir,” Angelopoulos said with a cheeky grin. Then he gestured toward their quarry. “They’re moving out. Whatever it was that interested them didn’t hold their attention long.”

“They’re looking for something. Make a quick scan of the area they were standing in as we pass.”

“Right.”

As they trudged through the sand, Angelopoulos kept the conversation going. Hawkins quietly approved; better not to draw suspicion from the Gorn, make them think they’re tourists. “I’m enjoying it, sir. I like working with you.”

“And Commander Corsi?” Hawkins asked, looking forward to hearing the awkward reply.

“She takes some getting used to, sir,” Andrew said without hesitation, which surprised Hawkins. “She certainly knows what she’s doing, but I don’t know anyone who has such a brusque style.”

Hawkins’s face darkened slightly. “That’s your commanding officer you’re talking about, mister.”

“Yes, sir. You asked me my opinion and I gave it.” He stopped and then smiled. “You thought I was going to come up with some nervous reply or maybe lie to you. I’m sorry, sir. I can’t do that. I respect the commander, it’s part of the reason why I requested the transfer, but I feel she needn’t be such a hard character.”

Hawkins grinned. “No, I was making sure you didn’t come up with some nervous reply or lie to me. A unit like this depends on trust and honesty, especially one with as many new recruits as we’ve got now.” Hawkins stopped as the Gorn reached the entrance to a cave. “Wait a minute. They’re scanning the area.”

Andrew pulled out his tricorder and tapped a series of commands. “Hang on. I’m trying to lock into their scanning unit.”

“Be careful not to let them detect you.”

“Not a problem, sir. This was how I always knew where my fellow classmates were during field exercises when I was in training. I would develop a map of the entire area and then lock on to each person’s tricorder as they scanned the immediate area.”

“Very smart,” Hawkins noted with some admiration. “They would only be scanning the immediate area as they didn’t want to be detected.”

“Yeah, but I would just link up to their tricorder and read their findings. This takes a little more finesse, but I think I can—” The tricorder chirped an alarm. “Uh-oh.”

“Uh-oh?” Hawkins repeated. “What the hell does that mean?” He watched as the Gorn looked in their direction. For such large creatures, they had quickly pulled out their weapons.

“It means we’ve been spotted.” Andrew gave Hawkins a rough shove that knocked him to the ground before diving himself. Twin streams of phased energy whizzed past them, striking a tree nearby. A shower of wood chips fell upon the two. Hawkins pulled out his own phaser and made a quick scan of the area, looking for weaknesses in the Gorn’s position to exploit.

“Humans!” The Gorn’s voice trailed off in a hiss. “Surrender now and we can save you the trouble of dying in defeat!”

“Listen to him,” Hawkins muttered. “You’d think they had this in the bag.”

“Don’t they?” Angelopoulos sounded nervous.

Hawkins snorted. “Kid, after what I went through on Teneb, a couple of pissed-off Gorn are a walk in the park.”

Angelopoulos did have a point, though: The Gorn’s position was pretty solid. They had the cover of a number of large boulders that lined the cave’s entrance and the cave itself to retreat into if necessary. A thin smile broke Hawkins’s stern look.

“What are you thinking?” Angelopoulos asked worriedly as he saw the smile turn devious.

“I want you to lay down some rapid weapons fire, scattered, but centered around them.” Another volley of shots whizzed past them. “We’ll draw them toward the cave. When they’re in position, fire at the roof of the entrance. Got it?”

Angelopoulos nodded.

“We will not fire another warning shot, humans,” the Gorn announced. “Enter the clearing.”

“Go!” Hawkins said.

With his best attempt at a primal scream, Angelopoulos launched himself from his crouched position and began a rapid-fire stream at the Gorn. Hawkins took the more secure route, moving from tree to tree, getting off a series of bursts each time.

Angelopoulos’s disruptor was set for wide dispersal, which caused more area damage, but with less physical results. But the strategy appeared to be working as the Gorn began to back up toward the cave.

Hawkins lined up his shot of the entrance, allowing Angelopoulos to finish the herding. Hawkins never saw the shot that struck him in the shoulder, which lifted him off the ground slightly and deposited him on his rear end with a loud thud.

“Chief!” Angelopoulos shouted, stopping his barrage. He turned and ran toward Hawkins.

“No!” Hawkins shouted a warning as one of the Gorn stepped out and drew a bead on Angelopoulos.

Hawkins fumbled to lift his disruptor, but wasn’t fast enough. He could see the trigger finger of the Gorn twitch on the weapon.

Nothing happened.

Angelopoulos dropped to the ground and took aim with his weapon.

Hawkins tried to return fire but met with the same result as the Gorn. He looked at his disruptor and saw that the power cell was drained.

“Angelopoulos?” Hawkins looked over at the guard, who shook his head.

“I’m out, too.”

“And so are they,” Hawkins said. The three Gorn lumbered toward the two. “We’ve got to get out of here. Give me a hand up.” He tapped his combadge. “Hawkins toda Vinci.”

Angelopoulos tried his combadge as well and found it useless.

“Come on, move. We can outrun them.”

“But, sir,” Angelopoulos said, pointing toward their adversaries. The three Gorn had turned and were now moving in the opposite direction. One stopped at the mouth of the cave and stood guard there, while the other two continued along the path leading down and away. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know. But we’ve got to get word to Commander Gomez. Look, I’ll slow you down right now. This shoulder stings like a son of a bitch.”

“You have to have it looked at,” Angelopoulos said.

Hawkins shook his head. “It’s all right. The shot grazed me, but it hurts to move. I’ll stay here and keep an eye on our friends. You get to Commander Gomez and report on the situation. I want a team here to investigate whatever has the Gorn’s attention.”

“Aye, sir,” Angelopoulos said with a reassuring smile. “I’ll get back here as quickly as possible.” He turned and jogged off without another word.

Hawkins settled onto a nearby rock and gently touched the throbbing wound. It was still warm to the touch. He shook his head in frustration and looked upward. “Why me?”

A low rumble filled the air and the skies above thickened with dark clouds.

“Now what?” Hawkins asked as a gust of wind began to pick up. “Great. Just great.”

Chapter 9

P8 Blue watched as the humans wiped away the sweat from their foreheads. She understood why humans had sweat glands, but right at the moment, she was grateful that Nasats didn’t have them. Then again, this sweltering heat and humidity felt just like home to her.

Pattie and the other members of the S.C.E. away team had been attempting to open the large landing bay doors by force, with no success. The lack of proper ventilation and air-conditioning made the task all the more difficult and frustrating.

“Not like I’m trying to be all doom and gloom,” Corsi said, “but why hasn’t that thing crashed yet?”

“The craft is light enough that it can glide on air currents for a short period of time,” Shira said. “Thankfully, the pilot has determined that the doors are not open and its communications systems are most likely rendered useless, so it’s entered a holding pattern.”

“And with the winds picking up the way they are,” Gomez added, “I can’t imagine it can stay in such a pattern for long.”

“So why not just land somewhere else?” Corsi asked.

“There isn’t anywhere safe to land,” Shira said. “This is a heavily populated area. Besides, it won’t be able to land, it will crash.”

“So it’ll crash in here?”

Shira nodded solemnly. “But at least we can minimize the damage.”

“We can do more than that,” Gomez said. Corsi smiled at Gomez’s confidence.

“Not possible,” Milan said. “The emergency landing systems won’t engage without power.”

“What kind of systems are there?” Gomez asked.

Shira gestured upward to a series of pipes that ran along the walls and ceilings. “The foam in these pipes serves two purposes. It acts as a flame retardant in case of fire and as a cushion if released into the chamber.”

“Are there any manual releases?” Gomez asked.

“Yes, but they’re all on the main piping. We can’t reach them because we have no antigravity units working.”

“Leave that to me,” Pattie said as she glanced up and studied the latticework of pipes. “I think I can climb up there.” She walked over to the wall and began to feel around the surface.

“Be careful,” Gomez said.

Pattie turned and began her ascent of the wall, using a number of nooks and crags on the surface to aid her climb. She looked down at the others watching her from below. The ceiling of the landing bay was a good thirty feet high. Pattie felt a wave of dizziness as she took a moment to catch her breath.

On her homeworld, making such climbs through the densely populated towering trees would be second nature to her. But then there was the netting that covered the lower regions to catch her should she fall.

There was no net here.

* * *

From the ground, Corsi rubbed the base of her neck and tilted her head to either side, producing a soft cracking sound. Gomez looked at her with a grin. Corsi returned it. “What can I tell you? I get a stiff neck very easily.”

“Some might say you’re always stiff-necked,” Gomez deadpanned.

Corsi closed her eyes and tilted her head back and forth even farther, producing a louder crack this time. Gomez shuddered slightly but continued to smile. She was glad to see herself and Corsi falling back into old patterns. The wounds from Galvan VI still left scars, but they were healing and not hurting as much anymore. Like any scar, they still itched now and then, but life was going on.

Shira interrupted Gomez’s thoughts. “Commander, we’re going to need to leave the area when the foam is released. It will retard the atmosphere.”

“Yes, of course—the foam you use removes the air so the fire can die out.”

“Exactly.”

“But what about the door? We’ve got to get it open,” Corsi said.

As if in answer to her question or unspoken prayer, two Gorn entered the landing bay. Corsi’s first response was to reach for her phaser, but she hesitated, no doubt realizing that whatever killed the power in the bay must surely have drained the weapon. She took a defensive step forward in front of the two, creating a human barrier.

The Gorn stopped their advance some ten feet away from the others. One of them looked upward and watched as Pattie made her way to the roof.

“I am Kazar,” the lead Gorn said simply. “Why is that insect climbing the walls?”

Gomez stepped in front of Corsi. She could feel the security officer stiffen at the move, but Gomez knew she had to make it clear to the Gorn she was the leader. "I am Commander Gomez of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers. Why are you here?"

"You did not answer my question, Commander Gomez," Kazar hissed. "We do not have time to waste with trivial inquiries on your part. This landing area has suffered a power loss. According to our sources, the energy drain stretches from the lagoon and stops here. How long ago did this occur?"

Gomez sized up the large reptilian alien. He stood at least a foot and a half over her. Despite the distance between the two, she could feel his heated breath as he spoke. Along with his energy weapon, he carried a jeweled dagger, which remained sheathed.

"I'm afraid we're not in a position to discuss this situation with you at the moment," Gomez replied evenly. With effort, she met the stare of the Gorn.

"More Starfleet secrecy." Kazar let out a growl, which surprised even Corsi. "We do not care for your secrets, Starfleet! We want answers and we want them now!"

Gomez placed a hand on Corsi's wrist as she felt the security chief step forward. When Corsi settled, Gomez continued. "I didn't say we wouldn't tell you. I said we're not in a position to tell you. You see, I think we can help each other out here."

Kazar's eyes squinted in suspicion. "How?"

She pointed toward the landing bay doors. "Those doors need to be opened. We can't open them. I know of the strength of the Gorn people. With the two of you, it should be easy to pull them open."

"And you will share your information with us?" Kazar asked slowly.

"Yes. But you have to hurry."

The Gorn turned to his comrade. They didn't speak a word, but rather offered each other silent nods. Kazar turned back to Gomez. "We accept your proposal."

Gomez clapped her hands. "Great. Now, when you've managed to open the door, you'll need to find cover. We've got a flyer making an emergency landing. This entire chamber is going to be filled with flame retardant foam. It's going to make breathing very difficult."

"Wait a minute!" Milan cried out. He turned and ran toward a collection of crates in one corner of the bay. After a few moments of searching, he returned with what appeared to be a small projectile weapon. He stopped for a second and eyed the Gorn cautiously before handing it over to them.

"This is a flare gun," he explained. "Signal the flyer with it. They'll be able to see the open bay doors and can make their landing from there."

The Gorn took the gun and for a moment Corsi tensed on the off chance that Kazar might try something devious. The Gorn examined the weapon a moment before cradling it in the sash that hung across his chest.

Gomez glanced up at the Nasat. "How's it hanging, Pattie?"

“I’ve been in worse spots,” she replied. “But do you think we can speed it up a little?”

“You’re going to be all right when the foam is released, right?” Gomez asked.

Pattie made a tinkling noise of amusement. “I can survive in a vacuum, remember? I can handle a little oxygen deprivation.”

“Good—because you’re the only one who can retrieve the passengers, in case they aren’t in any shape to exit the craft themselves.”

“Will do, Commander.”

“All right, let’s get to cover.” Gomez looked at Kazar. “Good luck.”

The Gorn didn’t say a word as he and his comrade turned to the task before them.

* * *

Gomez entered the cramped control room last and closed the door behind her. She allowed the two Risan technicians to take their places at the control stations. She didn’t bother to point out that they couldn’t do anything while the systems were inoperative. Corsi and Soloman stood in the background, neither wanting to get in the way of the operation.

The Gorn took up positions on either side of the doors. They braced themselves, arching their backs for support. Large, clawed hands dug into the metallic surface, latching on and getting a strong grip.

Gomez glanced upward and saw Pattie hanging from the pipes, waiting for the cue to release the foam.

“Commander, if they are going to open the doors, they will need to do so now,” Soloman reported. Gomez looked toward the sky from one of the windows and saw the flyer making a sharp banking turn toward the landing bay.

“They know they can’t land anywhere else.” Shira’s voice trembled, ghostlike.

Below, the Gorn had managed to part the doors, but by less than a meter. They had stopped their work and appeared to be looking for a new way to attack the situation.

“We don’t have time for this!” Corsi snapped. “They need to pull open those doors now!”

“If they do not possess the strength,” Soloman said, “it is impossible.”

Gomez watched as the Gorn repositioned themselves and made another attempt. This time the doors opened a bit further. Gomez could make out the flyer as it neared the landing bay.

Kazar stepped into the opening and braced himself diagonally against both door surfaces, while his comrade reached out with both claws and gripped either side. Gomez could see Kazar’s body trembling with the struggle.

The doors began to give some more.

“They’re doing it!” Shira exclaimed. “We’re going to make it!”

“It’s not enough,” Corsi said.

“No, but there is a chance,” Gomez replied. “Let’s stay positive. Have we got an emergency medical kit here?”

“Yes,” Milan replied as he reached under the console and pulled out a small white box. “It doesn’t have much.”

Gomez opened the box and examined its contents. “As long as we can stabilize any shock conditions the passengers may have and prepare them to be moved to proper facilities, it’s perfect.”

“They’re doing it,” Soloman said, pointing downward.

Below, the Gorn were now in the opening doorway, pushing against the doors with their feet dug into the ground.

“Their backs are going to be a mess in the morning,” Milan said.

“Maybe you can offer them a free massage,” Corsi suggested with a smile.

“Estimating less than thirty meters to go,” Shira said. Gomez gave the thumbs-up signal to Pattie. The Nasat scurried along the network of piping, twisting open the valves and releasing the foam. The large landing bay quickly filled up with the white substance.

“Here we go,” Milan announced.

The flyer rumbled as it passed through the opening of the landing bay. The small control room shuddered as the craft struck the foam. Everyone grabbed hold of a piece of furniture or equipment to keep themselves steady. The flyer swerved and skidded toward a back wall.

“It’s going to crash!” Shira shouted.

“Get down!” Gomez ordered everyone.

They ducked under the console. Gomez closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable.

It never came.

She opened her eyes and slowly rose from her crouched position.

The flyer had managed to halt its skid. A thin stream of smoke wisped from the rear of the craft.

Gomez looked to see that Pattie was already scurrying across the wall toward the craft to provide assistance.

* * *

Pattie stepped out into the landing bay and threaded her way through the foam that covered the area. She could feel the heat coming from the flyer. While the foam had done the job of taking the brunt of the

crash and making it difficult for a fire to erupt, the billowing smoke pouring from the front of the craft was a warning of a possible explosion.

The Nasat stepped up to the large dome-shaped transparent aluminum covering and ran a pincer along the surface. She snapped her pincer away at the very intense heat. Inside, she could make out the two passengers, a male and female, both human. They were both unconscious. The female, who was the pilot, sported a large gash on her forehead, a thin river of blood flowing freely from the wound.

Pattie positioned herself to remove the covering, but found it impossible to do because the couplings that held it in place were fused due to the heat. She looked up at Gomez and shook her head. Gomez, in turn, pointed to several metal poles that leaned against a nearby wall.

Pattie retrieved one and proceeded to prop it against one of the couplings. She felt it give somewhat, but was startled by a loud moan from inside the flyer. The female began to convulse. Pattie dug the pole in deeper, frantically trying to pry it off.

She looked up at the sound of several more poles striking the couplings. The Gorn had returned and picked up the remaining poles. Pattie could hear the couplings begin to give. With a few more tugs, several ripped away, clattering on the floor behind her. She was still working on hers.

Kazar stepped up to her and shoved her aside without a word. He leaned over and gripped the edge of the covering and, with a low growl, tore it off. As soon as he did, the two inside began gasping for air. Kazar and his comrade grabbed the two, a little too roughly for Pattie's taste, and carried them quickly across the landing bay.

* * *

Gomez waited just outside the lower level entrance with Corsi. The Gorn released the two, dropping them roughly. Gomez ran her hand under the female's neck, while Corsi began to apply pressure to her head wound to stanch the bleeding.

Kazar stepped out into the corridor. "Commander, I have done what you have asked. The craft has landed safely and I have even aided in rescuing these two. You will now tell me what I want to know."

Gomez waved the Gorn commander off. "In a moment, Kazar. I want to stabilize these two first."

"Now, Commander. You made an agreement and my time is limited."

"Now wait just a minute," Corsi began to rise from her position, but stopped at the gentle restraining hand of Gomez.

"Kazar's right," Gomez said. "I want you and Pattie to finish up here. I'm no doctor, but I think they're more in shock than anything else. Milan should be right back with the medical team." She gave Kazar her best steely stare. "Commander, if you'll walk with me."

She turned and started off without waiting for an answer. Kazar and his comrade followed, having to take a few larger steps to catch up with the seething female.

Corsi stifled a laugh. "I think they may have been better off dealing with me."

Pattie only nodded as she ran her mandible along the human male's limbs. "This one has a fracture in his

left leg. I don't know if it was the crash or that Gorn's rough handling that did it."

"He's lucky to be alive," Corsi said as she pulled her blood-soaked cloth away from the female. "This one's going to need some attention, though. Hopefully, the hospitals are functioning. It's not like we can contact the ship and ask for help."

"I know," Pattie replied. "It's very frustrating."

Chapter 10

Surprisingly, Eddie's own hunger pains seemed to disappear as he watched the glowing entity absorb the energy around it. The walls of the cave they occupied reflected the light emanating from the two, giving an eerie glow around the cavern.

The entity hadn't spoken for some time, apparently preferring to concentrate on the task of taking in its sustenance. Eddie was starting to become antsy.

"So, what do you do for fun?" he asked aloud.

The entity shuddered slightly as contact with the energy feed was broken. It remained silent for a moment.

FUN? WHAT IS THAT?

"Fun. Fun is..." Eddie had to think about that one. "It's something you do. It's something you enjoy. It's...fun." Eddie shrugged.

Eddie felt a slight burning on his forehead. Suddenly, his mind's eye was flooded with a whirl of memories, mostly of himself and his mother engaged in a number of happy activities: playing a game on a rainy afternoon, running through a field where the cornstalks were as tall as the boy, eating ice cream and trying to catch the runoff before it hit the ground.

Tears began to well up in his eyes.

THERE IS TROUBLE? THIS FUN DOES NOT SEEM PLEASURABLE.

Eddie ran his hand across his eyes, wiping away the tears. He shook his head. "It is fun," he explained, "but they are what we call bittersweet memories."

WHY?

"My mother died over a year ago. It hurts to think about her now."

UNDERSTOOD. STUDIED YOUR MENTAL PROCESSES SUFFICIENTLY NOW.
CONFIDENCE IN REMOVING THE OFFENDING MEMORIES.

"What?" Eddie asked, shocked. "No! No! That's all right. I..." Eddie smirked, changing the subject. "You know, I don't know what to call you. What's your name?"

NAME?

“Yeah, name.” Eddie saw this meant nothing to his new friend. He searched his memory for something that might make more sense. “How about designation? What is your designation?”

NO DESIGNATION, EDDIE JOHNSON. IDENTIFIED BY RESONANCE.

“Well, I might not be able to recognize you in a crowd of your people. I gotta give you a name.”

ACCEPTABLE. IDENTIFIED AS AN INDIVIDUAL.

“It isn’t easy being you, right?” Eddie asked. “I know how you feel.” Eddie looked down at his hands and watched as the swirling energy that was the entity sparked and snapped with loud crackles.

“I know,” he said, looking up. “I’ll call you Sparky!”

Chapter 11

On board the *Vinci*, Captain Gold paced the length of the rear of the bridge back and forth in such a way you would have thought he had worn a hole in the floor. There had been no word from the away team in some time.

“Sir, I think you should take a look at this.” Tev interrupted his routine in midstep.

Tev had been spending a great deal of time with Shabalala at tactical, poring over the various readouts from his scans.

“What do you have, Tev?” Stepping up to the station, Gold could see from the look on Shabalala’s face that the Tellarite officer had been putting the young lieutenant through the paces. He appeared grateful to see his captain approach.

“I think we may have the source of the energy drain, sir,” Tev said matter-of-factly.

“You do? Where?”

“Well, based on how the surges took place and the concentration of—”

Gold held out a hand to halt the lecture. “Tev, I’m sure this is fascinating and I look forward to reading it in your report, but all I need to know right now is where.”

Tev appeared somewhat taken aback for just a brief second. He then turned and pointed at the monitor in front of him. “Based on our scans, we believe it is occurring here, in the lagoon area. We have not been able to pinpoint the exact location as of yet.”

“Very good. Nice work, the two of you. Any word yet from the away team?”

Shabalala shook his head. “No, sir. There was another surge just a short while ago and the region

experienced a power loss.”

“Sir, there is something else,” Tev said. “The peninsula region cannot handle much more of this strain. Based on models I’ve been developing, I predict that another shutdown of the weather grid system in that area will be catastrophic.”

Steeling himself for one of Tev’s long-winded lectures, but suspecting that this time he’d need to hear the whole thing, Gold prompted, “How do you mean?”

“In order to maintain such consistent weather year-round, the control grid creates a constant low pressure system, thus essentially warding off any climactic disturbances. Now that the grid has been shut on and off, it’s been allowing those disturbances to build in intensity. The higher-pressure systems that cause these storms are becoming stronger than the grid can defend against. Eventually, the grid will become useless, especially in its weakened state.”

Gold let out a low whistle. “All right, Tev, I want you to take a couple of tricorders and combadges and beam down to the away team’s last known position. I would imagine their equipment has been rendered useless.”

Tev straightened himself. “Yes, sir.”

“Give Commander Gomez the information regarding the weather situation as well.”

“Aye, sir.”

Tev stood there for a moment, as if waiting for something else.

“Well, go, Tev. Timing is important here.” Gold made a little shooing motion with his hands.

Tev left the bridge quietly. Gold sighed and gave Shabalala a look as if to say, “No, you may not comment on Tev.” The tactical officer returned to his scans, hiding a smile.

The captain turned away and walked back to his chair. He settled and wondered how centuries ago, when humanity first set out to explore the stars, all they had was one another on board those cramped vessels.

In the present day, commanding officers were always playing a juggling act, between accepting the cold logic of a Vulcan to the warrior mentality of a Klingon to the in-your-face directness of a Tellarite.

“Captain.” Shabalala drew his attention to the matter at hand once again. “I’m picking up a large energy reading approaching Risa.”

“Large?” Gold repeated.

Shabalala nodded. “Yes, sir. And it appears to be similar to the energy readings I’m detecting from the lagoon below.”

Gold rubbed his temples and frowned. “Great, more feeders to join the party.”

“This won’t be a party, sir,” Shabalala said. “This reading measures forty AU’s in diameter, enough to envelop the entire planet and drain it completely.”

Gold closed his eyes. "It just keeps getting better and better." He opened them again. "Shabalala, I want to alert Director Tonais of the situation, have him prepare for a possible evacuation. Then contact Starfleet Command and have them send us anything that can help."

"Sir, the energy masses will be in the system in less than two hours. There aren't any Starfleet ships in the area."

"Well, there are a number of ships in orbit right now. They'll just have to do their part. Tev should be planetside by now. Contact his away team and have them beamed directly to the lagoon."

"Aye, sir."

Gold rose from his seat and stepped up behind the conn officer. "Wong, plot an intercept course with those energy masses. Prepare to break orbit and take her to warp five."

"Aye, sir. Course plotted and laid in," Wong said as he tapped the commands into his console.

Gold stepped back and settled into his chair. "I hope you have a name ready for your yacht, Wong. We're going to need it to help in the rescue operations."

Wong smiled. "Well, if they have to go, some of them will go in style."

"The away team has been transported to the lagoon, Captain," Shabalala called out. "Chief Hawkins has returned with a slight phaser wound."

Won't he ever learn to duck? Gold mused to himself. Aloud, he said, "Engage, Wong."

Chapter 12

If one were to watch the away team materialize on the beach of the Monagas Lagoon, they would observe an interesting case study of differential behaviors of a multitude of species.

Gomez and Tev both immediately reached for their tricorders and began scanning the area, each trying to discover their quarry first. Soloman's face was a mix of wonder and fear. All his life he had been used to the sterile simplicity of his homeworld. Yet, even though he had been to many a planet, the look of raw nature always filled him with a mix of emotions. Pattie always gave a slight shudder whenever she first materialized on solid ground. Even though she didn't visit her homeworld often, she still had her tree legs and was much more used to clambering about from limb to limb.

Corsi reached for her phaser and turned with a scowl to Angelopoulos who immediately drew both his phaser and tricorder. She didn't say a word to him, waiting for him to complete his task.

"There's nobody in the area for about one hundred meters. I'm picking up the unusual energy reading in that direction," Angelopoulos said, pointing to the caves. "That's where our Gorn friends were looking before."

"Me, too," Gomez said even as Tev said simultaneously, "As am I." They looked at each other for a

moment, waiting for the other to say something. Their staring contest was cut short by a clap of thunder overhead.

“All right,” Gomez broke the silence. “We’re moving into the caves. I want security scanning ahead; I’ll follow with Soloman and Pattie in the middle and Tev covering the rear.” She brushed away a lock of her hair blown in front of her by a developing wind.

Tev was about to object when a streak of lightning sizzled across the sky. Everyone suddenly realized just how humid it was becoming.

“It looks like we’re in for a storm,” Gomez said. “Let’s move out, people, and let’s be careful. We don’t know where that third Gorn is or if Kazar has joined him.”

They began their trek across the sand, moving toward the cave entrance. The wind picked up its pace, staggering some of the crew with its buffeting force. Pattie reached out and steadied Soloman, who looked as though he was going to be lifted off the ground.

As they advanced, Corsi stepped up to Gomez and whispered, “I’m impressed. Tev didn’t put up a fight or anything.”

“He’s learning. Sometimes he forgets that he’s second in command—and I didn’t help matters on our first mission when I dropped the command ball. But I think I’ve earned a grudging respect from him.”

“That says a lot.” Corsi let a grin slip out.

“Exactly,” Gomez replied. “But by the same token, I can’t let his brusqueness take command of any situation I’m in charge of handling. I’ve still got to sometimes remind him that I’m in charge.”

“Heavy is the head that wears the crown,” Corsi sighed.

“Speaking of crowns, how about you?” Gomez looked at Angelopoulos. “How are the new recruits adjusting?”

Corsi shrugged. “All right, I guess. I haven’t heard any complaints.”

“Do you ever?”

“From the recruits? No—but I trust Hawk to let me know if something’s up. I’ve been trying to keep a looser hand, anyhow. Most of these people know their stuff—Lauoc, Krotine, even Konya.”

“What about him?” Gomez asked, indicating Angelopoulos.

“Pretty straightforward and clever, based on his record. And he asked to transfer here.”

“I’m impressed, Domenica—you’ve mellowed in your old age.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Corsi said with a smile. “I just think that, especially after everything that’s happened to us in the past year, there are some really important things in life you have to appreciate in the here and now.”

Gomez knew exactly what the security chief was talking about, especially in regards to a certain Fabian

Stevens, who was waiting for her back at the ship. Gomez was of two minds about their slowly developing relationship. On the one hand, Fabian and Domenica were a good match.

On the other hand, Gomez harbored a thin, green streak of envy. Watching the two always reminded Gomez of what she and Kieran had and she wanted it again. How many times had she been the one who cooled down Duffy's advances, even hesitating when he proposed to her just before the Galvan VI mission began? Despite her words, hadn't Corsi learned anything from Gomez and Duffy?

The area around the away team began to darken, and a call from Angelopoulos ahead of them drew Gomez from her morose thoughts.

"I've pinpointed the source of the energy pattern," he reported. He held up his tricorder and tapped a command into the small unit. "I've also mapped out the interior of the cave system. I'm sending it to your tricorders. There are two entrances into the cavern."

Gomez turned to Corsi. "Well?"

"We keep it simple to start, Commander," Corsi replied quickly. "You and I and Blue will enter from one side while Tev, Soloman, and Angelopoulos will enter from the other."

Gomez nodded appreciatively. "Good. I like it. Let's make no sudden moves here. Wait for my signal to move in." She was looking at Tev as she said this. The Tellarite grunted his acknowledgment.

* * *

Sparky had been silent for some time. Eddie didn't bother his new friend as he was still getting used to the sensation of the absorbed energy washing over him. There was that little part of Eddie that wondered if he was causing any harm to himself being joined to Sparky.

Physically, he looked the same, save for the hairs on his hands and arms standing up. He reached up and felt his hair swaying about in an upright position. Other than his odd hairstyle and the tingling sensation coursing throughout his body, Eddie felt fine.

DANGER.

"What?" Eddie still wasn't used to hearing Sparky's voice in his mind.

DANGER. OTHERS OF YOUR KIND APPROACHING.

"My kind?" Eddie repeated. "Humans?"

SOLID MATTER. ENERGY DEVICES. Sparky paused. WEAPONS. MAY HARM EDDIE JOHNSON.

"Me? How do you know they're going to hurt us? They might be here to help us."

TRUST NO ONE.

"You trusted me," Eddie argued.

FRIEND.

“And these people could turn out to be friends too.” Eddie continued to press his point. “My father could be among them.”

ANGER AT FATHER. HE HURT EDDIE JOHNSON. FATHER HURT SPARKY.

“I was mad at my father, yes, but I wouldn’t want to hurt him.”

NOT HURT. INCAPACITATE.

Sparky began to glow again, preparing itself for an assault. Eddie tried to call out, but found that his voice wasn’t echoing off the cavern walls.

CANNOT ALERT THEM. INCAPACITATE AND THEN INVESTIGATE.

“No!” Eddie cried out. “You don’t know if you’ll hurt them! Stop!”

The young boy, now a part of the energy being, struggled to stop the surge. He willed himself to halt the process.

STOP. EDDIE JOHNSON CANNOT CONTROL THIS.

“I have to try,” Eddie said, gritting his teeth as he tried to maintain his concentration.

* * *

In the large outer cavern, Corsi and Angelopoulos checked the setting on their phasers.

“Somehow, I don’t think that’s going to have any effect on something that can suck the energy from an entire peninsula,” Gomez said.

Corsi tapped at her phaser. “It makes me feel more secure.” She lifted the weapon and examined it. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter now. It’s been drained.”

“As has my tricorder,” Soloman reported.

“I’ve still got my phaser,” Angelopoulos said, lifting his weapon.

“As do I,” Tev added. “Interesting. Some of our equipment is being affected this time, while others are not.”

“Yes.” Gomez was interrupted from continuing her thoughts by a cry from Soloman. He dropped to the ground, writhing in agony. Gomez was quickly to his side, pulling out her tricorder.

“Whatever is causing this drain is affecting Soloman. It’s feeding on his neural impulses. He’s slipping into a coma.”

“That does it,” Corsi said, taking Angelopoulos’s weapon from his hands. “Let’s take this thing out.”

Before she could take another step, she was knocked off her feet by a concussive force, brought about by a phased explosion nearby.

“Well,” Angelopoulos said, pointing toward the entrance to the cavern. “And I thought things couldn’t get worse.”

The three Gorn had entered the cavern, their weapons raised. They advanced slowly, making sure they had the entire away team covered.

“Do not move,” Kazar hissed.

Chapter 13

“Get down!” Corsi ordered as she jumped behind a large boulder. She drew a bead on the lead Gorn and fired Angelopoulos’s weapon.

Kazar stumbled back and toppled over like a great pine tree, crashing with a heavy thud. The two remaining Gorn strafed the area with their weapons fire.

Gomez ducked behind the boulder, settling beside Corsi.

“Isn’t anything ever easy?” she asked.

Corsi’s only reply was a shrug as she took another shot.

The chamber reverberated with the loud echo of crashing thunder and sizzling lightning from just outside the cave.

“That storm’s getting worse,” Gomez said, trying to look over the shoulders of the Gorn to the cave entrance beyond. The sky had darkened considerably and the wind was whipping up the sand into little tornadoes.

Gomez spotted Pattie standing close to the opening featuring the energy reading. She signaled Pattie to go in. The Nasat nodded her head in acknowledgment.

“I need some cover for Pattie,” Gomez said.

“Got it,” Corsi replied. She began to fire wildly above the heads of the Gorn, sending a shower of debris upon the two. The Gorn ceased their fire for a moment as they tried to protect themselves.

“Go!” Gomez shouted.

* * *

Tonais tried to wend his way through the crowds of panicked guests who had gathered in the lobby of the Sheltered Arms resort, one of the largest in the region. He allowed himself only a moment to appreciate the effort it had taken on his part to organize the evacuation.

That was the easy part.

Now, he had to make sure that the people made it off-planet safely. That was the difficult part.

Many of the guests had arrived on transports that would not return for days. What ships were currently in orbit were not enough to transport the entire planet. According to his people, the weather instability would not affect the entire planet right away. Thankfully, he would be able to get himself and the guests on Monagas Lagoon off-planet in less than twenty-four hours.

Bander, never far away from Tonais's side, had spent the better part of the afternoon coordinating the evacuation effort. He entered the spacious courtyard area, clutching his padd. Rivers of sweat poured down his balding head.

"Bander!" Tonais snapped, belying the gratitude he was feeling at seeing his assistant. "What news do you have?"

"All is ready, Director," Bander reported. He raised his data padd and began ticking off items with his fingers, rapidly playing across the screen like an accomplished pianist. "The Daniella is the first vessel, which will take approximately sixty-five people."

Tonais looked out at the people gathered and made a quick count. "They could take everyone here. Contact them with the coordinates."

Bander nodded. "Yes, sir."

The room erupted in a panicked scream as a lightning bolt struck a streetlamp just outside, causing it to explode in a shower of sparks. Tonais stepped forward, placing his arms out in a placating gesture.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please settle down. We're ready to begin transport. If you'll all gather your belongings and place yourselves in groups of six, we'll start the process." He turned to Bander. "Calm these people down and get them organized."

Bander looked at the growing panic and gulped. "Yes, sir." The little man moved slowly out into the crowd. "Excuse me." He turned his gaze upward as most of the guests towered over him and spoke a little louder. "Uh, excuse me."

He stopped short at the sight of a Nausicaan. The alien looked down at Bander with a scowl.

"I am going first."

Bander nodded. "Of course you are, sir." Bander struggled to keep from fainting.

* * *

Tonais walked off in the opposite direction, leaving the chaos to Bander for a moment. He tried to recall when such a disaster had occurred on Risa and could only think of the time the food synthesizers were distributing only prune danish. It was fine for breakfast, but by lunchtime the guests were getting ugly.

There was also that time when a group of subversives took control of the weather control station. If not for the intervention of two Starfleet officers, they might have succeeded in doing great harm to Risa.

But this was different. This was appearing to become something they could not rectify, not even with the aid of the S.C.E. Tonais looked out the window at the gathering storm. In the distance, he could make

out a number of complexes buckling under the intense winds that were whipping up wildly. Several of the roofs of these structures had already been torn off and the destruction of the rest appeared imminent.

“Excuse me.”

Tonais was drawn from his thoughts by a human, an Earther from the looks of him. His clothes looked as though they had been slept in for some time and his face was in need of a shave. But what most stood out for Tonais were the man’s eyes. They were bloodshot as if the man had been crying for hours.

Tonais smiled with the warmth he usually saved for either visiting dignitaries or wealthy socialites. “Friend, you have nothing to fear. If you’ll just stay with the group, you will be beamed off-planet shortly.”

The man shook his head. “No, you don’t understand. My name is Ray Johnson. I’m missing my son.”

Tonais looked around the concourse. “I’m sure he must be here somewhere.”

“You don’t understand,” Johnson said, his voice becoming panicked, his eyes welling up with tears again. “He’s not here. He was exploring some caves by the lagoon and never came home. And now the storm’s getting worse! You’ve got to help me!”

Tonais saw this was not something that simple public relations was going to resolve. He looked over toward Bander, who was stuck between a Nausicaan and an Andorian who appeared to be jostling the little man back and forth.

“Very well, Mr. Johnson,” Tonais said reassuringly. “Now why don’t you tell me again what happened to your son, from the beginning?”

Chapter 14

Captain David Gold watched the forward monitor as the warped star field re-formed into normal space. He focused his vision on two pinpricks of light, moving forward at a rapid speed. He looked toward Shabalala, not asking the question.

The tactical officer magnified the screen, bringing the energy waves into view. “Confirmed, sir. I’m reading just under forty AU in diameter with a power output of. . .” he adjusted his console and leaned back with a slight whistle. “You don’t want to know, sir. Shall I raise shields?”

Gold thought about it for a moment. “No. Not yet, anyway. Let’s try the hand of friendship. Open hailing frequencies.”

“Frequencies open,” Shabalala said.

The only sound the bridge crew heard for the next several moments was that of the various instruments at work. Shabalala broke the silence with an exhalation of panicked breath. “I’m reading fluctuations in the energy output. The two masses are slowing down.”

“Let’s do the same. Take us to half impulse, Wong.”

“Aye, sir,” Wong replied.

“Any response?” Gold asked Shabalala.

The tactical officer shook his head. “No, sir. Just a minute.” He tapped on his console. “We’re getting some sort of emission, sir.”

“A weapon?”

Shabalala shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“Let’s not take a chance. Shields; go to yellow alert.”

Personnel scattered about, moving themselves into position, ready to play their part in the situation.

“Impact in ten seconds,” Shabalala said. “It’s not a weapon, sir.”

The bridge shuddered slightly with the impact. The bridge lights winked out for a moment, but immediately snapped back on. Several monitors began to display schematics of the ship.

“It’s a scan of some sort, Captain,” Shabalala said. “It’s reading everything in our data banks.” He tried to cut off the flow of information but was not successful. Shabalala looked to Gold and shook his head. “And we’ve lost shields.”

The lights flickered again, to be replaced by emergency lighting. It cast disturbing shadows throughout the room.

Shabalala softly pounded his console in frustration as he watched the information from their records flow. The final image on the monitor was of the warp core chamber. It slowly faded away.

“Uh-oh,” Shabalala said softly.

* * *

Pattie, having curled herself into a near-perfect sphere, rolled toward the chamber entrance. One of the Gorn, ignoring the fact that he was being pelted by large chunks of falling debris, focused his weapons fire on the Nasat. Luckily, her shell provided protection.

Gomez yelled above the whine of the firefight, “Keep them back!” She turned and made her own dash for the cavern. Bits of the cavern wall exploded on her with each impact of the Gorn’s weapons.

Pattie was the first to make it through the opening, with Gomez following. As Pattie emerged from her rolled-up position, she let out a series of chime-like noises that Gomez recognized as her being startled.

“Commander,” Pattie said, “I believe we’ve found our energy disruption.”

Gomez took a cautious step forward toward the glowing ball of light. She placed a hand before her eyes, trying to block out the glare, but it was no use. Her hand appeared translucent in the being’s presence.

Tears began to stream down Gomez's eyes as she struggled to take in the image before her. She blinked several times, unsure if she saw something in the middle of the pulsing orb.

"Hello?" she asked tentatively.

HELLO. The voice appeared to be that of two people speaking at the same time. There was a stereophonic tone to the slightly reverberating speech.

Gomez took in a breath. "All right, you can understand me. My name is Commander Sonya Gomez."

ARE YOU WITH STARFLEET COMMAND? The voice was now only one and very excited. I WANT TO BE IN STARFLEET WHEN I GROW UP.

Gomez stopped for a moment to think about how to answer. There were many alien races among Starfleet's personnel, but she wasn't sure how such a being would fit in the organization.

Pattie, who had been slowly making her way around the pulsing orb, examining it as best she could without her instrumentation, said, "Commander, there is a humanoid being within the pulse."

Gomez turned and took another look, despite the slight headache she was developing. She managed to make out the form. "Who are you?"

The pulse shuddered slightly for several seconds before replying. MY NAME IS EDDIE JOHNSON AND THIS IS MY FRIEND, SPARKY.

"Then there are two of you?" Gomez asked.

YES, MA'AM. The voice was singular once again. MY FATHER IS RAY JOHNSON. WE'RE HERE FOR A CONFERENCE.

"Eddie," Gomez said slowly, trying to make sure she didn't lose control of the situation, "where is your father now?"

PROBABLY AT SOME BORING LECTURE OR SYMPOSIUM. I'LL BET HE DOESN'T EVEN KNOW THAT I'M GONE.

"I'm not so sure of that," Gomez replied. "Eddie, are you aware that you're disrupting many of the services on Risa?"

I KNOW. ISN'T IT FANTASTIC?

"Yes, it is," Gomez said, "but, it's also dangerous. The weather control station has been shut down and a storm is brewing that could destroy this entire region."

The being pulsed another moment. Probably discussing this with each other, Gomez thought.

WE ARE SORRY FOR THE PROBLEMS WE ARE CAUSING. The voice was once again plural.

"We appreciate that, Eddie, but you have to do more than that. You have to stop feeding on the planet's energy."

WE MUST FEED TO SURVIVE.

“And you can survive,” Gomez continued. “We can help you. We can take you to a world where you can feed all you want. There are countless stars full of energy orbiting dead planets. But you have to stop here.”

The being pulsed somewhat brighter as the argument between the two began to become more intense.

NO. The vocal tone was singular again, but different in its pitch. NO HELP FOR SPARKY. HURT SPARKY.

“Eddie! Please listen!”

EDDIE IS NOT SPEAKING NOW.

The pulse erupted into a bright light strobe, causing Gomez to fall back and cry out in pain. Pattie dropped quickly to her side.

“The light!” Gomez said with tears falling down her cheeks. “It’s blinded me!”

THERE IS FIGHTING. WHO WILL TAKE SPARKY? NOBODY! I... WILL NOT BE TAKEN!
WE WILL NOT BE TAKEN!

Chapter 15

The bridge crew of the *Vinci* sat in tense silence as they watched the growing masses quickly approaching on the main viewscreen.

“Captain, I can give you shields again. It’s limited, though,” Conlon reported from engineering.

Gold rose from his chair and approached the tactical station. Shabalala looked up at his commanding officer and asked, “Shields, sir?”

Gold nodded. “Modulate frequencies so we make it difficult for them to get through. Weapons on standby.”

“Aye, sir.”

Gold turned toward the viewscreen. The twin energy fields slowed their pace.

“I think they’re aware of what we’re doing, sir,” Wong said.

“Thankyou, Wong,” Gold said with a wry grin. “Let’s look sharp, people. Stand ready.”

Shabalala’s station suddenly lit up and a low beeping sound filled the bridge. “Sir, we’re getting a signal. It’s coming from the energy masses.”

“Can we make it out?”

“It appears to be...” Shabalala shook his head. “No, wait a minute. It’s in Standard.”

Gold raised an eyebrow in surprise. “Let’s hear it.”

An electronic tinged voice echoed from the ship’s speakers. GREETINGS, WE WISH TO INITIATE CONTACT WITH YOU AND YOUR SHIP.

“I am Captain Da—” Gold began.

DAVID GOLD, CAPTAIN OF THE U.S.S. DA VINCI. WIFE IS RACHEL GILMAN. FIRST OFFICER IS COMMANDER SONYA GOMEZ.

“You have me at a disadvantage,” Gold replied. “You know who I am. Who are you?”

WE HAVE NO NAME AS YOU WOULD BE ABLE TO IDENTIFY US. WE ARE WHO WE ARE. WE WISH TO SPEAK WITH YOU. MAY WE ENTER YOUR SHIP?

Gold looked about the bridge. The crew waited to see what move he would make next. They did ask, he thought. Aloud, he said, “Drop shields. We look forward to meeting you.”

Shabalala cut off communication at a gesture from Gold. “Sir—”

“I know, son, but you see the power they’re generating. They asked if they could come aboard when they could just as easily barge in. Let’s see what they want.”

“Captain!” the voice of Laura Poynter, the transporter chief, called from the speakers. “My console just came alive—something’s beaming aboard.”

“Don’t touch anything, I’m on my way. Security to the transporter room. Wong, you have the conn.”

Gold raced for the turbolift as it opened to admit him. As the doors closed, Wong rose from his station and settled slowly into the captain’s chair. He looked around the bridge at his fellow crew members.

Susan Haznedl turned in her seat at ops and looked up at him. “How does the chair feel?”

Wong shifted slightly. “It’s not very comfortable.”

Haznedl shook her head. “I don’t think it’s ever supposed to be.”

Wong stopped moving and leaned forward in the chair with a sigh. “I guess so.”

* * *

The doors to the transporter room parted and Gold reached up to cover his eyes. The intense glow from the transporter platform reflected off some of the surfaces in the room, making vision next to impossible.

“Any way to tone down the light?” Gold asked.

There was a moment as some consideration on the matter was given.

YOU MAY REMOVE YOUR HAND NOW, CAPTAIN GOLD.

Gold slowly lowered his hand, surprised at how the lighting was now near normal. A soft glow emanated from the platform. Gold was even more surprised as his eyes adjusted. He noticed that Lauoc and Krotine from security were already present, phasers at the ready, flanking Poynter at the transporter console.

The two energy beings now assumed humanoid form.

“Lower your weapons,” Gold said to the guards.

Krotine placed her weapon back in her holster. Lauoc did the same, but his hand remained poised over the weapon.

AH! THIS IS A PERSONAL VERSION OF YOUR SHIP’S ARMAMENTS. INTERESTING.

“Yes,” Gold said slowly.

One of the figures stepped forward and extended a hand to the captain. Gold wasn’t sure what to do. It withdrew its hand slowly.

I MERELY WISH TO GREET YOU IN A MANNER YOU ARE FAMILIAR WITH, CAPTAIN. IT WILL NOT HARM YOU.

What the hell, Gold thought, and accepted the handshake. A tingle went up his arm, but that was all. “Would you care to follow me? I would like to give you a tour of the ship, give us a chance to get to know each other a little more.”

THANK YOU, CAPTAIN, BUT THAT IS UNNECESSARY. WE ARE MORE THAN FAMILIAR WITH YOUR SHIP. WE WISH TO DISCUSS OUR CURRENT SITUATION WITH YOU AND TO SEE HOW YOU MAY BE ABLE TO HELP US.

“To be honest, I’m not going to be much help at the moment as you have incapacitated my ship.”

The being nodded its head and turned to its partner. A low hum filled the transporter room as the instrumentation panel came to life.

“Captain, this is engineering,” Chief Engineer Conlon’s voice sounded quite relieved. “We have full power again.”

“Thank you,” Gold replied. He turned to the entities. “I think I can help you.” He tapped his combadge. “Bridge, set course back to Risa.”

“Aye, sir,” Wong replied.

Gold stepped up to the doors, which parted at a gesture from him. “If you’d care to follow me, we can discuss your problem in my conference room.”

TIME IS CRITICAL, CAPTAIN.

“I’m aware of that, but I also feel that I need to know a little more about you. As I’ve said, you have me

at a disadvantage.”

The two stood silent for a moment.

They must be telepathic or something, Gold mused. I wish I knew what they were saying.

One being looked to the other and giving a nod, they stepped out into the corridor.

* * *

Bander winced at Tonais’s shrill scream, uttered as a large chunk of the ceiling above him came crashing down. The rains had become so heavy that the roof could not hold up under the pressure.

“What was that?” Tonais asked angrily.

Bander shrugged. “I’m just thinking how remarkable our world was.”

“Was?” Tonais sounded outraged. “What do you mean, was? Is. It is a remarkable world and it will be again.”

Bander shook his head. “No, sir. I’m not speaking of Risa now, but of a time before we introduced technology to it.”

Tonais rolled his eyes. “Please, don’t tell me you’re one of those naturalists who want to return the planet to its original state.”

“No, sir,” Bander repeated. “We cannot return the planet to its natural state as you can see by the view outside. There was a time when Risa was like a paradise.”

“It’s a paradise now, Bander.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but it’s not.” Bander could see the anger rising in his director’s eyes. But uncharacteristically, he felt the need to press on with his thoughts. “What we have now is an illusion. Risa has been unstable for centuries. Our atmospheric, meteorological, and tectonic equipment keep it from sliding over the edge.” Bander pointed out the window. “This is the real Risa.”

Tonais started to say something and then stopped. He folded his hands behind his back. “How many more transports remain?”

Bander only nodded before looking down at his padd again. “Five, sir.”

“Good. It will be nice to be somewhere civilized again. I am tired of all this humidity.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What is the status of the Johnson boy?”

Bander shook his head. “The teams have returned, sir. The storms are becoming too intense. The winds have reached a sustained strength of a hundred and twenty KPH. It’s impossible to maneuver people out there, especially without powered equipment.”

Tonais grunted. “And nothing from the S.C.E. team either?”

“Not a word since they beamed away from the landing bay. And the da Vinci left orbit a short while ago.”

“Left orbit?” Now Tonais sounded startled. “Why?”

“We don’t know, sir. We’ve had no contact with them for some time.”

Bander followed Tonais’s gaze out at the storm. The complexes by the lagoon had been swept away. The very building they were standing in was on the verge of falling down. He turned his gaze toward Ray Johnson, trying hard not to meet his stare of expectation.

“This can’t be the end,” the director whispered.

* * *

Pattie gazed into Gomez’s eyes trying to see if she could identify any type of damage that may have occurred.

“As far as I can tell,” she said, “I can see nothing wrong with your eyes. They’re not reacting to the light, but that is to be expected. How do you feel?”

Tears were still streaming down Gomez’s face. “It stings a little. And I can’t see anything. Otherwise, I’m fine. What’s happening?”

“The entity is still just hovering there,” Pattie replied. “Corsi and the others are keeping the Gorn at bay.”

“Help me up,” Gomez said, reaching out with a hand, which the Nasat took. She rose slowly. “Now turn me in the entity’s direction.” Gomez cleared her throat. “Please, if you would give me a moment. I can explain everything. You’re friends with Eddie. I am sure he can tell you that you can trust us.”

The entity did not reply immediately. TRUE. BUT EDDIE IS YOUNG. EDDIE DOES NOT UNDERSTAND THE DANGER.

“You trusted Eddie,” Gomez said.

HE IS YOUNG.

“I would think compared to you, we’re all young,” Gomez said with a smile. “If nothing else, could you at least tell us how you came to be on Risa?”

I...EXISTED. I WAS CONTENT. MY PROGENITORS WERE NOT PRESENT. I THEN FOUND MYSELF RIPPED AWAY FROM EVERYTHING I KNEW, WITHOUT ANY CONTROL. I FELT MY ESSENCE BEING DRAINED AWAY. I MANAGED TO ESCAPE AND DISCOVERED THIS WORLD. I DISCOVERED EDDIE.

“And I’m sure his father is very worried about him,” Gomez said.

The tone of the entity changed again. Eddie was speaking. SOMEHOW I DOUBT THAT.

“Eddie, does your friend have a name?”

SPARKY. I NAMED HIM THAT.

“Well, Sparky,” Gomez began. First contact with an alien named Sparky. Can’t wait to write this report. “I think we may be able to help you. You have been taken from what we call a nebula. If you allow us to examine you, we could determine where you came from.”

POINT OF ORIGIN? THIS IS POSSIBLE?

“If that’s what you want.”

I DO NOT KNOW.

* * *

Within the mass of energy, Eddie squirmed excitedly. “What’s there to not know? Sparky, these people are the real deal! If they say they can get you home, they mean it. Besides, I can come along with you and see the actual insides of a starship!”

BUT EDDIE, WHAT IF THEY ARE LYING? HAVE YOU EVER KNOWN A PROGENITOR TO BE ENTIRELY TRUTHFUL?

“Well, my parents did keep me in the dark about Santa until I was six,” Eddie admitted. “But this is different! This is Starfleet!”

I DO NOT TRUST THEM.

“Look,” Eddie said, “you scanned my mind before. Do it again. See what I mean when I speak about Starfleet and its people.”

VERY WELL.

Eddie felt the slight surge tap the front of his mind once again. Images of Starfleet operations that he had viewed from newscasts began to flood his mental senses. The Dominion War. Wolf 359. Voyager Six. Captain Jonathan Archer and the launch of the first warp-five vessel called Enterprise. Zephram Cochrane discovering warp drive.

YOU ADMIRE THESE PEOPLE GREATLY.

“They’re fantastic,” Eddie said.

IS THIS A SUBSTITUTE FOR YOUR FATHER?

“What?” Eddie asked, shocked.

* * *

In the cavern outside, the phaser fire had stopped, thanks to the entity’s last power surge. Every weapon had been rendered useless.

Tev was the first to throw down his phaser and lunge himself with a growl at the Gorn. He struck one of

them with a balled-up fist to the jaw. The Gorn's head jerked slightly. He laughed at the Tellarite officer before backhanding him against the wall.

Corsi and Angelopoulos circled around the other Gorn, making sure they kept out of reach. At a signal from Corsi, Angelopoulos dropped to all fours. The Gorn, momentarily surprised by the odd movement, was unprepared for Corsi's dropkick to his stomach.

The alien fell down hard. Angelopoulos rolled and grabbed a large rock, bringing it crashing down on the Gorn's head. He didn't try to get up after that.

Corsi turned her attention to the remaining Gorn as it made its way slowly to the cavern entrance.

"Oh no, you don't," Corsi said as she tried to dropkick him. The Gorn reached out and caught her foot and twisted it just enough to hear a cracking sound. He then threw her like a rag doll against the cavern wall.

Angelopoulos started to move to her side, but she held out a restraining hand. "I'm fine. Stop him."

The young security guard ran off after his target. Corsi turned and saw that Tev was coming around.

"Are you all right, Commander?" Corsi asked.

"Just tell me when the quakes have stopped. It is difficult for me to get my bearings." He looked around. "Where is Crewperson Angelopoulos?"

"Gone after the Gorn," Corsi replied.

"He stands little chance on his own without a weapon." Tev spoke in his usual dismissive tone.

Corsi snapped, "This is what he's trained for, Commander."

Tev shrugged. "If you say so."

* * *

The Gorn lurched into the chamber, leveling a device that Pattie had never seen before. It was beeping softly and a small red light flashed in time to the sound.

Pattie stepped up before the Gorn. "Stop." "What am I doing?"

The Gorn regarded the Nasat with a look of disdain. "Out of my way, insect," he hissed threateningly.

Out of the corner of her eye, Pattie spotted Angelopoulos entering the chamber and moving himself into position to attack. She took a step back, far enough away to keep her out of the Gorn's reach, but still holding her ground.

"You're not getting through me," she said, trying hard not to let her voice quiver.

"I have not killed anyone," the Gorn replied, adding, "today."

"It doesn't have to be this way," Pattie said, steeling herself for what she had to do next.

“Only if you let it happen,” the Gorn growled. “We discovered the energy being first. It is ours by right! With such an energy source at our command, we will rule the quadrant as we were meant to!”

“You discovered him?” Pattie asked. “How?”

“We found it in a nebula and followed it here after it fled the nebula.”

“Are you sure it fled?” Pattie asked. “Perhaps it caught on to your sensors or maybe you were using a ram scoop?” “Come on, kid. I can’t keep him talking much longer.

“It doesn’t matter. The entity is ours. Stand aside and you can live another day.”

Angelopoulos finally made his move. Racing forward, he launched himself at the Gorn. Pattie dropped into her spherical position and rolled away from the danger.

The young security guard struck hard, startling the Gorn into dropping his device. It clattered on the ground and rolled toward Gomez.

Angelopoulos tried a roundhouse kick that the Gorn caught. But before he could inflict the same damage he did to Corsi, Angelopoulos swung his arms out, slamming them into the sides of the Gorn’s head.

The Gorn released the young man, who quickly ducked under and attempted to punch the Gorn in the stomach.

That was his mistake. The Gorn connected with an uppercut to Angelopoulos’s jaw, lifting him off the ground and knocking him against the wall where he collapsed in a pile on the floor.

The Gorn turned and advanced on Gomez, who was reaching out, trying to find the dropped instrument.

“Give it to me!” the Gorn hissed.

* * *

Within the energy mass, Sparky and Eddie continued to argue.

“This is not about me!” Eddie said. “This is about you and your unwillingness to trust anyone!”

I TRUST YOU.

“Then why won’t you trust me when I say to trust these people?”

Eddie felt a slight jolt run through him.

“What’s wrong?”

DANGER. WE ARE IN DANGER.

“What? How?”

MUST PROTECT US. MUST PROTECT SELF.

Eddie felt an energy surge build around him.

“What are you doing?”

I WILL NOT ALLOW ANY HARM TO BEFALL US.

Eddie felt as though every nerve was on fire. Whatever Sparky was going to do was affecting him as well.

“Please! You’re hurting me!”

ONLY FOR A MOMENT.

Sparky released the surge and Eddie screamed worse than the time he broke his leg in three different places and had to have it set without painkillers.

And then he blacked out.

Chapter 16

David Gold had sat with any number of different species in the observation lounge since taking command of the *Vinci*, from the usual array of Nasats, humans, Bynars, Tellarites, Atreans, Vulcans, Bajorans, and so on, to the Klingons of the Qaw’qay to representatives from worlds all across the quadrant.

This, however, definitely qualified as one of the strangest. He was speaking to two energy masses that were currently in humanoid form only as a courtesy. They had even taken seats, in order to make the proceedings appear more normal.

But they were far from that.

Gold knew that he was conversing with two beings powerful enough to wipe out an entire star system. Despite their cordial appearance, he kept up his guard, waiting to see if the other shoe was going to drop.

Lauoc and Krotine were stationed on either side of the conference room door, ready to offer assistance should the situation warrant. But given the power the two possessed, Gold wasn’t sure what kind of aid they could offer.

CAPTAIN, WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR KINDNESS AND HOSPITALITY, BUT WE COULD HAVE ARRIVED AT THIS PLANET IN MUCH FASTER TIME.

“I’m sure you could,” Gold said, “but it is not that often I get to engage in a first contact situation, especially one of such importance. Now, how did you happen to lose your, well, for lack of a better word, your child?”

WE EXIST WITHIN STELLAR NURSERIES. YOU DESIGNATE THEM NEBULAE. WE HAVE OCCUPIED WHAT YOU CALL THE KELLER NEBULA FOR SOME TIME. THERE CAME A

TIME WHEN IT WAS DECIDED THAT WE CREATE OFFSPRING.

“And it is your offspring that we believe is on Risa.”

IT IS HIGHLY LIKELY, BASED ON WHAT YOUHAVE TOLD US OF THE SITUATION THERE. IT WILL BE IN NEED OF LARGE AMOUNTS OF ENERGY TO SUSTAIN ITSELF. THE NEBULA PROVIDED SUCH SUSTENANCE ADEQUATELY.

“And how did the child come to leave the nebula?”

THERE WAS A VESSEL, SCANNING THE NEBULA. THE CHILD WAS ATTRACTED TO THE ENERGY OF THE SCAN AND WENT TO INVESTIGATE. WE ONLY REALIZED WHAT HAPPENED WHEN THERE WAS A DISRUPTION IN THE NEBULA. WHEN IT ENDED, THE CHILD WAS GONE. IT TOOK SOME TIME TO DETERMINE ITS WHEREABOUTS.

A chime from the intercom interrupted them. “Now entering orbit of Risa, Captain.”

“Very good, Wong,” Gold said. He noted the two entities sitting straight up in their chairs. “What’s the matter?”

THE OFFSPRING IS FEEDING WILDLY. THERE IS GREAT STRESS TO THE ECOSYSTEM OF THE PLANET.

Gold nodded. “It has affected the weather control station.”

THERE IS MUCH MORE. THERE IS GREAT DANGER. Before Gold could say another word, the two winked out of view.

* * *

Within the caves, the two energy beings materialized.

YOU CAME! an excited voice called out to them.

They surveyed the number of bodies about the caves.

WE HAVE BEEN SEARCHING FOR YOU FOR SOME TIME. They stepped forward and scanned their offspring. WHAT IS YOUR STATUS?

WE’RE FINE.

WE?

The younger energy being made itself more translucent, revealing a young human boy inside. THIS IS MY FRIEND, EDDIE.

THE HUMANOID IS NOT A PET.

I KNOW THAT. EDDIE IS MY FRIEND.

DO YOU SEE WHAT DAMAGE YOU HAVE CAUSED? ARE YOU AWARE OF WHAT IS

HAPPENING OUTSIDE?

The voice changed as Eddie answered. IT WAS NECESSARY, SIR—MA'AM. SPARKY WAS FEELING THREATENED BY EVERYONE. HE WAS ONLY PROTECTING HIMSELF.

SPARKY?

THAT'S MY NAME FOR HIM.

IT IS NOT A PET FOR YOU EITHER, EDDIE.

NO, SIR. NO, MA'AM, Eddie stuttered.

THE STARFLEET HUMANOIDS WOULD NOT HAVE HARMED YOU. THEY HELPED US FIND YOU.

THEY DID? Sparky asked, surprised.

TOLD YOU SO, Eddie said, matter-of-factly.

YES, AND NOW WE MUST REPAIR THE DAMAGE YOU HAVE CAUSED. WE WILL START BY RETURNING THESE HUMANOIDS TO THEIR SHIP FOR TREATMENT. THEN WE SHALL CORRECT THE ECOSYSTEM.

Sparky/ Eddie rumbled slightly. ARE YOU THINKING WHAT I'M THINKING? They asked simultaneously. Without another word, Sparky/ Eddie winked away.

WAIT! one of the two elder beings called out.

NO. The other realized what was happening. LET THEM GO. THEY MUST MAKE AMENDS.

Its companion thought over this for a moment and nodded. VERY WELL. WE SHALL TRANSPORT THESE.

A soft glow filled the two chambers as the energy beings, the away team, and the Gorn faded from view.

* * *

On the bridge of the *Vinci*, Shabalala reported to Gold that a force-five gale was brewing and increasing in strength at Monagas. It was enough to wash the entire peninsula away if something wasn't done about it.

Gold twitched in his seat as he watched the viewscreen, which was filled with the image of Risa from orbit. He was startled, intent as he was on the screen, by the sound of the intercom.

"Sickbay to bridge." Dr. Elizabeth Lense's voice sounded over the speakers.

"Yes, Lense, what is it?" Gold asked a little more tersely than he intended.

"Captain, the away team has just—well, materialized here. They're being treated, but otherwise they're unharmed. Soloman appears to be worst off. He's in a self-imposed type of coma, which I am

monitoring. It appears he will come out of it.”

“Appears, Doctor?”

“Well, for lack of a better explanation, Soloman is going through some kind of systems check. His vital signs are improving slowly, so I’m hesitant to administer any treatment to him. I’ll keep you posted. I am going to need a couple of people from security to handle the three Gorn we have here as well.”

“Gorn?” Gold repeated. Suddenly, a swell of cloud cover, moving rapidly into the northern region, caught his attention. “Very well, bridge out.” He turned to the tactical station behind him. “Have Lauoc and Krotine report to sickbay, then get whoever’s next up on the duty roster, along with Stevens and Conlon, and have them report to the transporter room.”

As Shabalala moved to carry out the orders, Haznedl said from ops, “Sir, we can’t transport down there. That storm is out of control. It’s ionized the region, making transport impossible.”

Gold frowned for a moment, before snapping his fingers with the realization. “The energy beings. They can take us down.”

Shabalala said, “Sir, I’m getting a signal from Risa.”

“Put it through.”

HELLO. CAN ANYONE HEAR US? IS THIS THEDA VINCI?

Gold frowned. “Yes, this is theda Vinci. Who is this? What are you doing playing on an official Starfleet channel?”

FANTASTIC. I TOLD YOU THIS WOULD WORK IF YOU CONCENTRATED HARD ENOUGH. SIR, MY NAME IS EDDIE JOHNSON AND I’M AT THE WEATHER CONTROL STATION WITH MY FRIEND, SPARKY.

As the voice spoke, the senior two energy beings faded into view before Gold.

“Do you know anything about this?” he asked the two.

OUR OFFSPRING AND ITS HUMANOID COMPANION ARE TRYING TO CORRECT THE ECOLOGICALDAMAGE THEY HAVE CAUSED.

“They sound a little young. What can they do?”

The young voice said, THAT’S WHY WE CONTACTED YOU, SIR. IF YOU CAN EXPLAIN TO US WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE, WE CAN MAKE THE REPAIRS.

Gold rolled his eyes in frustration and looked at the older beings. “Can you just help us to beam down a team that can work on the problem?”

WE COULD, CAPTAIN, BUT THEN WHAT LESSON WOULD BE LEARNED? THEY NEED TO CORRECT THE PROBLEM IN ORDER TO LEARN. HOW ELSE WILL WE AVOID THE SAME SITUATION IN THE FUTURE?

By locking them up in their rooms until they're ancient, Gold thought. He nodded, knowing full well he didn't have time to argue the point. "Very well. Shabalala, get Stevens up here."

"Aye, sir."

* * *

Eddie/Sparky walked about the small room, which was lined with banks of consoles and computers. A number of Risans lay about the floor, unconscious.

"Now do you see the damage you've caused?" Eddie asked. "These people meant you no harm."

WE DO NOT KNOW THAT.

"And you don't know that they did either. You never gave them the chance the way you did me. You never talked to them. You never..." Eddie stopped and chuckled. "How do you like that? I think this is what a counselor would call a breakthrough."

EXPLAIN.

"I've been so wrapped up in my own guilt and sorrow over my mom's death, I never really gave any thought to my father's. I never really talked to him. All we've been doing is talking the same talk, the same speeches, avoiding how we really feel."

DETERMINED THAT?

"Yeah, isn't that something? Now I really want to set things right here and see my dad again."

"Hello, my name is Fabian." Eddie could hear the Starfleet engineer's voice clearly through the link Sparky had established. "Can you just give me a rough description of the consoles before you?"

I THINK WE CAN DO BETTER THAN THAT, SIR. SPARKY, TAP INTO MY MIND AGAIN. I'VE GOT AN IDEA.

* * *

On the bridge of the *Vinci*, the view of the northern hemisphere faded from the main screen to be replaced by a level view of the main monitors and computers of the weather station. The image was in monochrome.

"How the hell—?"

FANTASTIC. RIGHT, CAPTAIN?

"Yes, very fantastic," Gold replied. He looked to Fabian Stevens, who was now seated at one of the aft consoles.

Stevens smiled. "It works for me." All the monitors were dead. What lights lit up the consoles were all blinking a dull, dark red. Stevens's smile quickly faded. "This isn't good. This isn't just a case of repowering the system. It looks as though they may have fried a number of them as well. I need to get a look at the thing's innards."

HOW DO WE DO THAT?

“I want you to walk behind the environmental console and remove the backing. It’s the large console with the silver trim.”

ALL RIGHT. The image shifted slightly as Eddie/Sparky moved around to the rear. They easily removed the back panel, exposing a network of wiring and circuits. Many of the circuits were dark and burned out. The wiring appeared to be intact.

“Eddie, can you touch the larger blue wire leading into the console, please?”

A glowing hand reached out and grabbed the wire, producing a spark.

“Good. We don’t need to worry about replacing that one. Can you feed a little juice into the system from there?”

There was a moment’s hesitation. IT’S ALL RIGHT, SPARKY. WE CAN DO THIS. LET’S JUST TAKE IT SLOW.

“Yes,” Fabian said quickly, “just a little. We don’t want to damage the system any more than we already have.”

The hand’s luminescence increased slightly, and the bridge crew heard a sparkling sound coming from the speakers.

IS THIS GOOD?

“I really can’t tell from here,” Fabian replied. “Can you see any of the monitors coming back on?”

NO, BUT SOME OF THE RED LIGHTS HAVE GONE OFF.

“Primary circuitry is fried,” Shabalala said softly from tactical.

“I know,” Fabian said, “but why didn’t secondary systems kick in?”

Shabalala shrugged. “Probably the same reason.”

“Which means we’re going to have to rewire the system and we don’t have time for that.”

AM I TO UNDERSTAND THAT YOU NEED A CONDUIT FOR THE TRANSFER OF POWER TO THIS EQUIPMENT?

“That’s right,” Stevens replied, trying not to think about the fact that he was talking to a glowing ball of light.

THEN WE VOLUNTEER OURSELVES AS A CONDUIT. WHERE MUST THE POWER FLOW?

“That wiring you were looking at. You must discharge a steady flow of energy at three thousand joules.” Stevens turned to Gold. “I need to get down there, sir.”

One of the “parents” said, WE CAN BE OF ASSISTANCE, CAPTAIN.

Gold pointed to Stevens. “Take someone from security with you.”

* * *

A few moments later, Stevens and Security Guard Frank Powers appeared in the center of the weather control room. Monitors were coming online as well as a number of the consoles. While power to the lighting hadn’t been restored, the room was well lit thanks to the glow emanating from Sparky.

“That’s it,” Stevens said encouragingly. “Keep it up. I’m gonna start initiating the weather pattern program.” Settling into a seat before the main console, he added, “Thank goodness nothing’s burned out here.” He began to tap in a series of instructions.

On the viewscreen above, a topographic image of the peninsula appeared, covered by a grid. Various areas of the grid, normally green in color, were a deep maroon.

“How are we looking?” Powers called out, sounding nervous.

“What’s the matter, Frank, worried about a little rain?” Stevens asked with a smirk.

“I’m worried about the glowing balls of energy that fried the entire away team,” Powers said, putting a hand to his holstered phaser.

“You security guys worry too much.” Stevens chuckled. “Anyhow, the program is engaged and running. The satellites are generating the proper low-pressure system to disperse the clouds and lower the temperature.”

A low rumble from beyond the station filled the room.

“Are you sure?” Powers asked.

“This isn’t good.” Stevens leaned over and tapped further instructions into the computer. “We can’t generate a strong enough low-pressure system to combat the storm. It’s out of control.”

THERE IS TOO MUCH ENERGY? Sparky/Eddie asked.

“Yeah. Mother Nature’s got her hold back on this planet and she won’t let go. We need to reduce the temperature of the land and water, reduce the high humidity.”

I CAN DO THIS. It was Sparky only speaking now. It detached itself from the console. PLEASE BE PREPARED TO TAKE CARE OF EDDIE. HE WILL NEED TO ADJUST TO BEING OUTSIDE MY ENERGY STATE.

With that, Eddie emerged from Sparky, dropping to his knees. Stevens placed a hand on his shoulder to steady him.

“Are you all right?”

Eddie ran a hand through his hair, which was standing on end. “I think so. It’s a strange feeling being away from Sparky.”

I SHALL RETURN.

Sparky reduced its size to that of a marble before winking out of sight. The viewscreen registered the new energy source as a bright yellow on its grid. The yellow expanded across the entire grid field.

Outside, the pitch-black clouds that covered the sky lit up with the expulsion of energy from Sparky. The wind began to pick up in intensity.

“What’s happening?” Powers asked.

“I’m not a meteorologist,” Stevens said, “but I think some of this storm will have to run its course. I should be able to control it now.” Stevens sat back down in his seat and tapped on the console. “Yes! It’s working. It looks like there’s gonna be rain throughout the hemisphere for a while.”

“The entire hemisphere?” Powers repeated.

“Just sharing the love.” Stevens smirked. “It has to go somewhere or else the peninsula will get washed away.” He winked at Eddie. “Nice work, kid.”

A large smile crossed Eddie’s face. “Thank you, sir.”

Stevens rose from his chair and held out a hand to Eddie. The young man was unsteady on his feet as he tried to walk to a nearby window. A gentle rain was falling, guided by a brisk wind.

“I’ve always liked rainy days.” Stevens smiled.

Chapter 17

Tonais stepped into the courtyard of the resort and let out a low moan of frustration. Parts of the ceiling had caved in due to the heavy rains. Deposits of mud, washed in by wind-swept floods, were scattered about the area. The courtyard’s main feature, a large marble statue of a nude couple holding hands, was missing a couple of appendages.

“What do we do now?” Tonais asked with a groan.

Bander entered from the rear of the courtyard, his nose buried in his padd. He looked up briefly to survey the damage and let out a low whistle before returning to his padd.

“That’s all you have to say about this?” Tonais struggled to keep his anger in check. He knew, although he would never admit it, that he needed Bander.

“We have a great deal of work to do, sir,” Bander replied, not looking up from his padd. “I would estimate repairs to take over a month to complete.”

Tonais felt his knees go weak. “A month? We can’t remain out of operation for a month.”

“I’m afraid we’ll have to, sir. Many of the complexes in the resort are structurally unsound. We can

salvage a number of them, but some will have to be torn down and rebuilt.”

“You can add this courtyard to the list of buildings to tear down, Director,” Commander Gomez called out as she and the Nasat entered the courtyard.

“Commander,” Tonais said with only a halfhearted smile. “How are you feeling?”

“Better, thank you,” Gomez said. “Dr. Lense was able to fix the damage to my eyes, and Soloman is recovering nicely as well. He should be leaving sickbay by the end of the day. Everybody else was patched up pretty quickly.”

“Wonderful news.” Tonais looked around the courtyard and let out a sigh. “This courtyard was one of the first structures built when the resort was designed.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but it can’t be salvaged. In fact, we shouldn’t be standing here now.”

“Yes, yes, of course. Let’s step outside, Commander.”

The four exited the courtyard where the view of the washed-out bay was still breathtaking on an early morning.

“So much to do,” Tonais muttered.

“All good things take time, Director,” Gomez said with a smile. “But when it’s done, you can make this resort even better.”

Tonais’s eyes lit up. “Yes. We can make this better. I never liked the rugs in the main reception area or the way the lights hung and the shape of the aqua pool. This is fantastic. Bander! Come with me! We have a great deal of work ahead of us.”

Tonais didn’t look back or say good-bye as he walked off. Bander gave one look to the two Starfleet officers before walking off. He stopped and shrugged. “We have a great deal of work ahead of us? Who is he kidding?” Bander turned and walked away, muttering to himself.

* * *

“Commander.” Pattie tapped Gomez on the shoulder and pointed toward the approaching Eddie and Ray Johnson.

Ray stepped up to Gomez and extended a hand. “Commander, I want to thank you for helping in rescuing my boy.”

“Dad!” Eddie said, his voice tinged with warning.

“I think it’s safe to say that Eddie helped rescue everyone, sir,” Gomez said, winking at the young man and bringing a tinge of red to his face.

“Thank you,” Eddie replied softly.

“Well, in any case, now that the conference is over, I’m going to take some time off. I’ve done all the work I can on the warp coil for now. I think it’s time I work on my relationship with my son.” Ray placed

an arm around Eddie's shoulder.

"I'd like that, Dad," Eddie said, looking up at his father with a grin. "Have you seen Sparky, Commander?"

"It and its parents have been busy helping to restore power to areas of the region and by dispersing any residual storms that the weather system couldn't handle. But everything's under control now. I would imagine they're ready to return to their home."

"Oh," Eddie said quietly. He turned to walk off, but stopped at the appearance of three glowing humanoid forms. "Sparky!"

EDDIE, MY FRIEND. IT IS TIME TO RETURN.

"For me too," Eddie said. "Will I ever see you again?"

I THINK THAT IS POSSIBLE. I CAN SEND YOU MESSAGES THROUGH YOUR SUBSPACE CARRIER SYSTEM. AND SOMEDAY, YOU CAN VISIT ME WHEN YOU COMMAND YOUR STARSHIP.

"You really think I can do it?" Eddie asked.

MY FRIEND, I BELIEVE YOU CAN DO ANYTHING YOU WANT. I WILL MISS YOU.

"I'll miss you too." Eddie tried hard not to let the tears in his eyes fall.

Sparky took a step back to his parents.

"Thank you for your help," Gomez said.

WE ARE SORRY FOR THE PROBLEMS OUR OFFSPRING CAUSED.

Gomez looked about and shrugged slightly. "Boys will be boys. Have a safe trip home. And make sure you avoid any ram scoop collectors."

FAREWELL, COMMANDER GOMEZ.the three said in unison as they faded away.

Gomez's combadge chirped sharply.

"Commander Gomez."Shabalala's voice came from the small device."We're reading the departure of the three energy beings."

"That's right, Tony," Gomez said.

"Commander, Captain Gold has requested that if you have completed your duties planetside, you are to report to the transporter room to help in one more engineering task."

"What is it?" she asked.

"He didn't say. He's already on his way to the transporter room and I'm leaving as soon as my relief gets here."

Gomez looked to Pattie, who only shook her head. “Don’t look at me.”

“All right,” Sonya said, “alert the transporter room to beam us up.”

She turned to the Johnsons. “Good-bye, Professor Johnson, Eddie.”

“Good-bye,” they said in unison.

She offered a friendly wave as the transporter beam gathered around them and they faded away.

* * *

Gomez materialized into darkness. She had no clue what was going on. And apparently neither did Corsi, Stevens, Wong, Shabalala, or Haznedl, who had just gathered in the transporter room several seconds earlier. Wong was the quietest of the bunch, which led Gomez to believe he might know.

“All right,” she said. “Now can you tell me what’s going on?”

“Lights,” Wong called out.

Gomez blinked, startled by the sudden brightness around her. It took her a moment to adjust to the illumination. She let out a gasp as her vision cleared.

The crew was aboard the bridge of a luxury yacht. Gomez recognized the leather trim around the seating in the rear of the cabin. She stepped over and ran a hand along the surface of one of the seats.

“Andorian leather,” Gomez smiled.

“This has to be a Starstream-line yacht,” Stevens said.

Corsi looked at Stevens and chuckled. “All the engineering knowledge at your disposal and you determine that based on the type of leather on the seats.”

Stevens shrugged. “Sometimes it’s not about the technology. Only Starstream yachts use Andorian leather for their interiors.”

“That’s one of the reasons I chose this particular vessel,” Wong said. “I also like the fact that she gets up to warp one-point-five.”

“It’s beautiful, Songmin,” Haznedl said.

“Congratulations,” Shabalala offered a hand to shake.

The doors to the cabin opened and Nancy Conlon entered. “Well, I’ve inspected the engine room. It’s a bit cramped down there, but everything’s in order. I also took care of that little bit of business you asked me about, Songmin.”

“Thank you,” he replied.

“Well, Wong,” Gold said, giving a slight tap on the shoulder to the Vinci’s helmsman, “what say we

take your yacht out for a little spin?"

Wong grinned. "Yes, sir."

Gold held out a hand. "Oh, no. The only 'sir' here is you." He straightened himself at attention. "Permission to take her out of orbit, sir?"

Wong nodded. "Granted." He gestured to the leather seats in the rear of the cabin. "If you'd all take your seats, please, we'll get under way."

Gomez noted Corsi limping ever so slightly. The security chief's ankle had been broken in her fight with the Gorn and although Lense had healed the break neatly, it was going to be a day or two before Corsi could put her full weight on it.

So much for paradise, Gomez thought. Quite a few of us have some scars from it. Thank goodness they're not permanent.

Gomez stepped forward and offered a salute to Wong. "Captain, I would like to assist, er, the captain."

Wong laughed. "Take your station."

Gold and Gomez settled into the conn and ops positions. Wong stepped up behind them.

From the communications board, Stevens said, "I have Risan Control for you, sir."

"Risan Control—" Wong paused for a moment. "—this is the pleasure yacht Nagus, requesting permission to depart." Wong could swear he could feel the wind hitting his back from the quickly raised eyebrows of those behind him.

"Granted, Nagus. Have a safe and pleasant trip."

"Mr. Gold..." Wong said, feeling a little self-conscious as he said it.

Gold picked up on it immediately. "If you want the center seat for good someday, son, you're going to have to get used to it."

"Yes, sir," Wong replied and then caught himself. "Take us out."

David Gold tapped a series of instructions into his console. The yacht hummed to life and tilted slightly as it moved into escape orbit.

"We'll be clear and free to navigate in one minute," Gomez reported.

"Give me an image of the hull, please," Wong asked.

"Switching visual," Gomez said.

The viewscreen showed the greenish-blue color of the hull. Emblazoned across the side was the name, NAGUS.

"It looks great," Wong said with pride. "Thanks, Nancy."

“My pleasure,” she said as she took a seat with the others in the rear. “This is a fine yacht you have. Although I’m curious about the name.”

“I figured I should acknowledge how I obtained this craft. I won some latinum playing the Ferengi stock market.”

“Be careful the nagus doesn’t try to tax you for using his name,” Corsi teased. “I’m sure there’s some kind of Rule of Acquisition that covers it.”

“Escape orbit achieved,” Gold said.

“Let’s get a look at Risa,” Wong said.

“Aye, sir,” Gomez said.

The viewscreen changed again and the main continent on Risa came into view. Its deep green landscape was charred somewhat now due to the extreme storms of recent days.

“It’s such a shame,” Shabalala said. “Risa is such a beautiful world.”

“And it will be again,” Gold replied. “It’s just going to take some time. Just like everything else that’s worth having.” His console chirped. “Warp power at your command, sir.”

“Let’s take her to half impulse,” Wong suggested. “We’ll cruise out of the system and then take her to warp.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Gold said.

“So how about a tour?” Haznedl asked.

“Sure,” Wong said. “Mr. Gold, take us to warp one as soon as we clear the system.”

“Course, Captain?” Gold asked with a smile.

Wong looked out into space and nodded. “How about the nebula? We can check in with Sparky and his parents.”

“Nice choice,” Gold replied, tapping in the commands to make it so.

The Nagus pulled away from Risa and the orbiting da Vinci, gathering speed as it traveled. Wong stared out one of the viewports that lined the walls of the bridge and admired the view of the departing starship.

Haznedl stepped up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder. “This will make a nice retirement vessel someday.”

“Yes, it will.” Wong smiled as he took the ops officer’s arm and crooked it in his. “Someday.”

About the Author

JOHN S. DREW has been a doorman, librarian assistant, waiter, bartender, restaurant manager, and is currently earning his Masters in Secondary Education to become an English teacher. He has written stories that he hopes people will enjoy in the areas of Doctor Who and Spider-Man. He also has a number of audio dramas to his credit. To learn more about this man than you might care to know, check out his website at www.drewshi.com.

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