

Contents

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[Coming Next Month: Star Trek™: S.C.E. #45](#)

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WHERE TIME STANDS STILL

Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore



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Chapter

1

Stardate 54200.9, Earth Year 2377

Sitting in the momentary quiet of the U.S.S. da Vinci 's conference lounge, Carol Abramowitz found

herself once again captivated by the silvery object on the polished oval table before her. A four-sided obelisk not half a meter tall, the object boasted no remarkable qualities that might make it of any great value, intrinsic or otherwise, to a casual observer.

In many ways, she mused, it's a lot like the world that produced it.

The obelisk was composed of an ore relatively common to its native world of Valzhan, a place that never had drawn her interest and one she had judged long ago to be an unimposing, somewhat minor member of the United Federation of Planets. It was so far off her personal awareness sensors that the obelisk was the first artifact Abramowitz had ever physically encountered from the planet, an admission she made somewhat sheepishly considering her role as a cultural specialist attached to the Starfleet Corps of Engineers.

"Guardian Royano," she said, breaking what she hoped had not become a noticeably long silence, "thank you again for allowing me to study this. I've never seen anything quite like it, and I'd be lying if I said it was anything other than breathtaking."

Bowing his head formally, the Valzhan courier replied, "I am happy to be of what limited service I am able to provide. It is the least I can offer, considering how accommodating you and your captain and crew have been during this affair."

Royano had come aboard the *Vinci* three days previously. Like the majority of his race, the Valzhan was essentially humanoid in appearance, with amber skin that contrasted sharply with his rich brown robes. His emerald-green eyes seemed to bore into anything he subjected to his gaze. Rather than an actual nose, his face featured a set of four small holes centered beneath his eyes, giving his face an oddly flat appearance broken only by the long blond hair cascading around his shoulders. Everything about Royano's comportment, from the way he spoke with a measured cadence to the dignified way he occupied his chair, worked to cultivate a scholarly air about him.

"I must admit I'm not as well versed in your culture as I'd prefer to be," she said to the Valzhan. The words sounded like a pathetic excuse to her ears, even if Federation databanks held only scarce information on the planet. The Valzhan had long been regarded as a private people, a trait they had retained even after finally accepting Federation membership.

Her gaze again settled on the obelisk, which was supported by a circular pedestal no bigger than the palm of her hand. Each of its four faces narrowed to the object's pyramidal top and featured an intricately detailed etching. One engraving was an unknown artist's rendering of a barren, rocky plain from which a vicious reptilian beast bared its teeth and raised one clawed foot, possibly poised to strike, while another portrayed a goggle-eyed, winged fish leaping just beyond the crest of a wave within a turbulent seascape. Yet another was an intricate, labyrinthine pattern that produced a mesmerizing effect on the young woman.

It was the object's fourth side that appealed to her the most, however. Arguably the simplest in execution, it depicted a waterfall framed by a mountainside and thick with foam and rage at its base. With no superfluous detail to distract her, Abramowitz found her gaze repeatedly following the water's path from its initial plummet to the rocks below. Her imagination took over where the obelisk ended, restoring the natural, powerful flow of the water that had been stilled in the engraving. The roar of crashing falls seemed to ring in her ears even here in the restrained calm of the briefing room.

"What is the significance of these etchings here?" she asked.

“The additions to eachjelorakem are unique to the clan that they represent,” Royano said. “Most are allusions to significant events, with members of the clan choosing the representations to act as a sort of family historical chronicle.” Lowering his head for a moment, he added, “I am sorry that I can offer only general information, but it is a long-standing tradition among my people that only a member of the clan to which the individualjelorakem belongs is permitted to explain the meaning behind its engravings. For anyone outside the clan to do so is considered a breach of ancestral privacy.”

Abramowitz nodded, half expecting such an answer. Despite his willingness to share information about his own life on Valzhan, Royano had repeatedly found a polite way of deflecting her queries whenever she broached the topic of the clanjelorakem.

“Do you think it will be possible to meet with its rightful owners when we present it to them?” she asked. The part of her that thrived on research desperately wanted to run a tricorder scan on the obelisk, which Royano had told her was more than eleven hundred years old by Earth measurements. However, her heightened attentiveness to cultural sensibilities, to say nothing of the courtesy and respect she felt was owed to the Valzhan courier himself, swayed her from such action.

Royano replied, “I do not see why not.” He reached for the obelisk, and after taking it from Abramowitz, held it in his own hands and studied it for several seconds in silence before looking up again. “Given the lengths to which Starfleet and the Federation have gone to honor our request, it seems the least that can be done. If not for your assistance, thisjelorakem would go unclaimed and would have to be destroyed.”

Simultaneously intrigued and disturbed by the notion, Abramowitz shifted in her seat. Her brow furrowing in confusion, she asked, “Is that the normal custom when there’s no patriarch to take possession?”

“With Clan Briphachi having faded from existence on Valzhan,” Royano replied, “theirjelorakem no longer holds any meaning, and only a properly designated overseer is allowed to possess it. Guardians such as myself can retain them for limited periods, and then only with special dispensation granted by the Ancestral Commission for the express purpose of transporting them to their proper custodians.”

“What is the Ancestral Commission?” Abramowitz asked.

Royano indicated a decorative emblem on the right sleeve of his robes. “It is charged with maintaining the records of all thejelorakems held by the various clans in our society, and it is they who ultimately determine the fate of the artifacts when a family can no longer do so for themselves.”

“What about someone with close ties to the family?” Casting another look at thejelorakem the Valzhan still held in his hands, Abramowitz was nearly incredulous that such an artifact would be so easily forsaken. “Aren’t they allowed to take custody of it to avoid having it destroyed?”

Shaking his head, Royano’s reply was simple. “It is not our way.”

It was an unusual and seemingly harsh way of handling a family’s affairs, Abramowitz decided, though she of course did not articulate that opinion. Instead, she said, “Well, whatever the reason, I’m happy we’re able to help you carry out your duties, though I confess I’m a bit surprised that they tasked the *da Vinci* with this assignment. I know that you specifically asked for an S.C.E. vessel, but I would have thought Starfleet might have offered to send a ship of the line for this occasion.”

And you’d think some diplomat would want to grab such a plum assignment, she mused, rather than leave

it for your average, everyday cultural specialist.

“Our leaders insisted that it be a vessel such as yours,” Royano replied, sounding almost surprised that Abramowitz would even question the situation. “We owe a great deal to your Corps of Engineers, after all.”

In actuality, dispatching a ship from the S.C.E. to ferry what essentially amounted to a family heirloom was anything but an ordinary use for such a vessel. However, she and the rest of her shipmates had become accustomed to performing all manner of duties that were not in line with their primary role as a shipload of engineers. No one, not even Captain Montgomery Scott and the others who directed the S.C.E. teams to their various assignments from Starfleet Command back on Earth, was able to predict when the diverse base of knowledge and experience harbored by the crew of the *Theda Vinci* would prove useful in addressing a decidedly nontechnical issue.

Abramowitz had read the relevant reports from the Valzhan’s last dealing with the Starfleet Corps of Engineers, which had taken place more than a century ago. It had happened at a time before the organization had evolved into the dynamic, multipurpose unit it was today, but the repercussions from the incident had been positive and long lasting, lending strength to what was now a formidable bond between the Valzhan people and the Federation. Those effects apparently were still being felt now, as evidenced by the *Theda Vinci*’s current mission.

Her brief reverie was interrupted by the voice of the ship’s captain, David Gold, sounding over the room’s intercom. “Bridge to Abramowitz. We’ve arrived, and I thought you and Guardian Royano would want to be here when we establish contact.”

“Thank you, Captain,” she replied as she tapped her combadge. “We’re on our way.”

Even as she rose from her chair, she could feel all of the enthusiasm and anticipation she had barely succeeded in restraining throughout the voyage to this region of space beginning to force their way around the mental barriers she had erected.

This is why I joined Starfleet in the first place. *Theda Vinci*’s destination, in addition to being a place she never thought she would ever have the opportunity to visit, was the very stuff from which a cultural specialist’s dreams were made.

She was, however, able to rein in her growing excitement as she waited for Royano to return the *jelorakem* to its ornate yet protective carrying case and take the parcel under his arm. Abramowitz knew better than to suggest that the Valzhan courier leave the artifact here rather than carry it with him wherever he ventured aboard ship. As the guardian had explained to her upon his arrival, his duties required that the object never leave his presence, and it was a responsibility he undertook with utmost care.

All appeared normal as she directed Royano onto the bridge. She noted the *Theda Vinci*’s command center’s typical muted tones as various workstations carried out their tasks, but she also observed that while personnel occupied each of the bridge stations, everyone seemed to be focused on the main viewscreen. Her own interest piqued, Abramowitz turned her attention to the viewer. Despite what she had read about this area of the galaxy, she was still surprised when the image on the main viewer depicted nothing but empty space.

“Doesn’t seem like anything special, does it?” said Fabian Stevens, the S.C.E. team’s tactical expert, from where he sat at one of the aft stations on the bridge’s upper deck. “I was hoping for fireworks, or

something.”

His mild sarcasm was unmistakable and elicited a few chuckles from other members of the bridge crew. There was no doubting that everyone here, just like Abramowitz herself, was familiar with this part of space as well as the history and mystery that surrounded it.

“Just mind your station, Stevens,” Captain Gold said, his tone communicating that, given their current situation, he was not in the mood to tolerate flip commentary. Abramowitz exploited the moment and shot the engineer a playful smirk, and he rewarded her with a mock glare before returning his attention to the matter at hand.

“The sensors are definitely taking a beating, Captain,” said Susan Haznedl from the ops station in front of the viewscreen, “but the readings are normal for this area of space.”

“What about communications?” Gold asked.

Looking up from his console, Stevens said, “The subspace beacon is functioning normally, sir.” He shook his head, and Abramowitz noted the small, appreciative smile forming on the tactical expert’s face. “Over a hundred years old and still kicking like the day it was deployed. They sure knew how to build those things back then.”

“What about the other one?” asked Commander Sonya Gomez, the *Vinci*’s first officer and the leader of the ship’s S.C.E. detachment. “Anything from it yet?”

Stevens did not reply at first, his attention focused on his workstation. After a moment, he nodded. “We just received the test message.” Looking over to Gold, he added, “We’re ready when you are, sir.”

“Good,” the captain replied. “Transmit the signal.”

Tapping a sequence of commands to the touch-sensitive console before him, the engineer said, “Transmitting now.”

Gold rose from his seat and turned to Abramowitz and Royano. “Guardian, I’m pleased to inform you that we’ve arrived on schedule, and if all goes well we should be receiving approval for passage anytime now.”

The Valzhan bowed his head in response. “On behalf of all my people, Captain, I thank you once again for all you have done to assist us in this matter. It is indeed a great service you are providing.”

Smiling, Gold replied, “The privilege and the pleasure are mine, sir, believe me.” To the rest of the bridge crew, he said, “Congratulations, people. We’re about to venture where no Starfleet vessel has gone for more than a hundred years.” Abramowitz thought she detected an almost boyish thrill in the captain’s voice. “For us, at any rate, this is likely to be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.” Casting a look of warning toward Stevens, he added, “Let’s try to behave ourselves, shall we?”

“Best behavior, sir,” the engineer replied, maintaining a stern expression while placing a hand almost reverently upon his chest. A beeping sound from his station caught his attention, and he moved to check the console. “We’re receiving an incoming hail, Captain.”

“On-screen,” Gold ordered.

After a moment, the image of empty space on the main viewer was replaced by that of a striking green-skinned woman with dark hair and exotic features, whom Abramowitz recognized as being of the Orion race. The woman said nothing at first, appearing instead to study the bridge crew with a gaze that, even to the cultural specialist, seemed to border on the hypnotic.

“Greetings, crew of the U.S.S. da Vinci,” the woman finally said. “I am Devna, representing the Elysian Council. Welcome to...”

Chapter 2

Stardate 5309.3, Earth Year 2268

“...the Delta Triangle.”

Even as he spoke the words, Lieutenant Commander Mahmud al-Khaled could not suppress an almost dismissive shrug. “It just doesn’t seem all that mysterious, does it?” he asked, more of himself than anyone else. Studying the main viewscreen on the bridge of the U.S.S. Lovell, al-Khaled saw nothing about the region of space displayed before him that differentiated it from anywhere else he had traveled during his Starfleet career.

“Come now, Mahmud,” said a gently teasing voice from behind him, and al-Khaled turned to regard his commanding officer, Daniel Okagawa. A wide grin brightened the captain’s face. “Do I sense a certain jadedness?” Okagawa rose from his chair at the center of the Lovell’s circular bridge and crossed the command well to where al-Khaled stood at the forward railing. “Surely, even after all your years in Starfleet, there must be something out here that can still impress you?”

Al-Khaled nodded in conceit, offering a smile of his own. “Of course, sir.” Shrugging, he added, “What I meant was that, given everything we’ve heard about this area over the years, I just expected to see something more dramatic, I suppose.”

Shorter than the engineer, Okagawa was a stocky, barrel-chested man who looked up at al-Khaled and chuckled as he ran a meaty hand through his close-cropped black and silver hair. “Well, we’ve still got time. Perhaps the Triangle will honor your wishes before we leave.”

Standing near the weapons and defense control station on the starboard side of the main viewscreen, Commander Araev zh’Rhun turned and cast a sarcastic frown in their direction. “You’ll forgive me, Mr. al-Khaled, if I don’t await that occurrence with your level of enthusiasm.”

Bobbing his eyebrows with a hint of mischief as he regarded the Lovell’s first officer, al-Khaled replied, “I’ve resigned myself to the fact that I’m just not that lucky, Commander.”

“Well then,” the Andorian said, keeping her voice level even as her antennae twisted independently of each other to point in the engineer’s direction, “may your lack of good fortune continue unchanged until we are well away from here.”

Okagawa exchanged smiles with al-Khaled in response to the commander’s comment. “You know how she is, Mahmud,” the captain said. “She’s not happy unless we’re at red alert and the phasers are fully charged.”

Both men resisted the urge to laugh as zh'Rhun turned her attention back to checking over each of the console's readouts without saying anything else. Contrary to Okagawa's remark and despite her heritage and the array of volatile emotions that normally characterized her species, the Lovell's first officer was the very model of a Starfleet commander, with steadfast bearing and poise. Even on those occasions when the ship or its crew encountered dangerous situations, zh'Rhun had always proven unflappable. Her imposing image was enhanced by her habit of opting for the standard uniform trousers and gold tunic instead of the short skirt variation favored by many female Starfleet officers and enlisted personnel.

If that was not enough, the commander's reserved deportment also lent itself to a droll, deadpan sense of humor that she often used to her advantage when dealing with subordinates and superiors alike.

"Somehow," al-Khaled said as he turned to study the main viewer once more, "I get the feeling it's her wish that will be granted." All the available evidence certainly seemed to point to that conclusion. The Lovell had been navigating this area of space for nearly two weeks but had encountered nothing out of the ordinary, and certainly none of the odd occurrences that had long fueled the legends surrounding this region of the galaxy.

Ah, but that's the rub. The beauty of the Delta Triangle, as well as its inherent danger, al-Khaled reminded himself, lay in its apparent harmlessness.

The U.S.S. Enterprise, along with the Klingon battle cruiser Klothos, had barely succeeded in escaping from the mysterious triangle and the equally peculiar rift in the space-time continuum it was now known to harbor. Inside the odd stellar anomaly, the Enterprise had discovered a vast collection of vessels representing over a hundred spacefaring species. Ships from Earth dating back more than a century could be found there, along with those from civilizations both familiar and previously unknown. All of the ships had been stranded within the rift by an unexplained dampening field that permeated the region and drained their power systems.

This same phenomenon had nearly succeeded in disintegrating the Enterprise's dilithium crystals and marooning the starship inside the Triangle along with the rift's other inhabitants. The people who had once traveled in the spaceships now ensnared within the Triangle, many of whom represented civilizations that had been and still were at odds with one another, had over time forged a joint nation within the confines of the rift. Such unity had proven a necessity for the society of Elysia, as it had been named, due to the region's other astonishing property. According to the report submitted by the Enterprise's science officer, time flowed at a different pace inside the Delta Triangle, far slower than outside it. For those who lived there, a century was nothing more than the blink of an eye.

Confronted with the chance to acquire firsthand knowledge not only of Earth's first deep space exploration efforts but also the histories of dozens of races never before encountered by the Federation, Starfleet had dispatched a science vessel to study the phenomenon more closely. Arriving on site only three days earlier, the U.S.S. T'Saura and its dedicated team of astrophysicists had been given the assignment of understanding the region's debilitating properties while finding a way for ships to enter and exit the rift without suffering those ill effects. Al-Khaled was also certain, although it had not been stated openly, that Starfleet Intelligence was also very interested in learning if the energy-draining properties of the Triangle could be reproduced artificially.

Nodding in the direction of the main viewer and, by extension, the mysterious void that lay beyond, Captain Okagawa said, "You never know, Mahmud. Our friends on the T'Saura might well find a way to control passage in and out of there. If that happens, then your friend Mr. Scott will be the one who's jealous while you get a guided tour of some of those ships."

The notion elicited another smile from al-Khaled. "Well, one in particular, anyway."

He had read his friend's report on the wondrous array of space vessels the Enterprise had found inside the Triangle, some of which had been trapped there for more than a thousand years. Included among the more recent additions was the U.S.S. Bonaventure, a piece of engineering history if ever al-Khaled had read of one. The first Earth vessel equipped with the second generation of Zefram Cochrane's warp drive and assigned to the planet's budding space fleet, the ship had been reported lost early in the twenty-second century during her third patrol mission.

At the time, it was generally believed that the Bonaventure had fallen victim to a design flaw in its warp engine, a theory Cochrane himself would continue to dispute vehemently until his eventual disappearance only a few years later. Still, the incident seemed to amplify the man's desire to push the boundaries of the technology he had pioneered for humanity, driving him to establish the Warp Five Complex and create the foundation for interstellar travel capability that many, including al-Khaled himself, now took for granted.

"Captain," he heard a gruff voice say, and both he and Okagawa turned toward Lieutenant Xav, the Lovell's science officer, seated at his station on the starboard side of the upper bridge. The stout Tellarite's heavy brow, large porcine nose, and recessed eyes gave him a perpetually sour expression, which he now directed at the two officers. "Engineering reports that the last of the navigational beacons has been deployed."

Unlike the enviable assignment given to the science crew of the T'Saura, the Lovell's task was much less glamorous although equally necessary: Establishing a network of subspace beacons to act as navigational hazard warnings for other ships traversing the area. Though two weeks spent deploying the devices had given Xav and his own small science contingent plenty of opportunities to record volumes of sensor data about the region, the mission had provided little else in the way of excitement for the rest of the Lovell's crew.

Nodding to the science officer, Okagawa said, "Excellent." He waved to the viewer. "Let's have a map of the area, Mr. Xav, and see why the Delta Triangle got its name."

The image on the screen changed from a view of empty space to a computer-generated map of the region. Al-Khaled watched as a line of blue dots began to materialize, outlining a triangular area on the two-dimensional schematic anchored at two points by the stars identified in Federation stellar cartography databases as Kessik and Bellatrix. The third position was the most recent entry to the catalogue, possessing only the unflattering entry number FGC-82659. A small crimson indicator denoted the location of the Lovell, currently traveling within the area defined as the Triangle.

"All of the beacons are functioning normally, Captain," Xav reported from his station. "I will have my final report for Starfleet Command ready for your review by the end of my duty shift."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Okagawa said. He continued to regard the schematic for a moment before pointing toward the upper left-hand corner of the viewer. "If my memory hasn't started to fail me, we're not all that far from the last known position of the Courageous."

Al-Khaled nodded in agreement. He had recently studied Federation star charts of the area and recalled the notation about the vessel. One of the early DY-500 class of ships designed for long-duration travel within Earth's solar system and launched before the start of the third world war, the Courageous suffered a failure in its propulsion system that made the ship unable to decelerate or deactivate its engines. The

vessel continued on its trajectory out of the Terran system, and support stations on Earth and Mars continued to receive periodic communications for years afterward, both from the doomed ship itself and from recorder markers left in its wake.

“Their last marker buoy was recovered twenty-six years ago,” al-Khaled said. Incongruously enough, it had also been found less than fifty light-years from the Lovell’s current position and nowhere near the projected trajectory for the ship that had been computed by various historians, astrophysicists, and assorted “lost ship” enthusiasts. The message stored in the marker’s tiny communications system was dated only thirteen months after the accident that had sent the Courageous on its ill-fated journey, and years before Cochrane’s inaugural warp-speed flight from Earth. Most people believed that it had probably encountered a wormhole or similar stellar phenomenon, and speculation also abounded that it might in fact be yet another prisoner of the Delta Triangle. However, nothing about the vessel had appeared in any of the reports submitted by Captain Kirk following the Enterprise’s escape from the region.

Well, maybe we’ll have a chance to find out for ourselves, al-Khaled mused, feeling his pulse quicken in anticipation of the unparalleled opportunities that this part of space offered.

“It is our proximity to the Gorn border that makes me uneasy,” zh’Rhun said. “They are almost certainly aware of our presence, even if they have not yet done anything.”

Starfleet’s first and only encounter with the reclusive, violent reptilian race had come nearly a year previously, when a Gorn vessel attacked and destroyed a Federation outpost on Cestus III, a planet claimed by them as being within their sovereign space. They had subsequently rejected all attempts at diplomatic overtures, instead offering repeated warnings that all future violations of their space would meet the same fate.

“We’re still outside their territory,” Okagawa replied, “and they’ve made it clear that so long as we leave them alone, they’ll return the favor. With that in mind, let’s see if we can’t find something more immediate to concentrate on.” He turned from the railing and made his way back to his chair at the center of the command well, pointing to the young Rigelian officer on duty at the communications station near the turbolift at the rear of the bridge. “Ensign Pzial, open a channel to the T’Saura.”

To al-Khaled he said, “Now that we’re done laying out street signs, maybe we can offer to help Captain Sivok and his people with their little project one more time.”

“Considering his reaction the first time you asked,” al-Khaled said, “somehow I doubt he’ll be any more receptive this time around.” The science vessel’s Vulcan captain had been quite plainspoken in his belief that his people could handle their assignment without any outside assistance.

Okagawa shrugged, the corners of his mouth curling into an impish grin. “He just doesn’t like the idea of getting help from anyone who travels around in an old rust bucket like ours.”

It was a good-natured jab, al-Khaled knew, and one that the members of the Lovell’s crew only tolerated from one another. After all, they were proud of their little ship, the Daedalus-class vessel being one of three the Corps of Engineers had retrieved from the salvage depot at Qualor II. Removed from active service seventy years earlier, the Daedalus ships at one time had been Starfleet’s workhorses. Their basic spherical and cylindrical hull sections had been designed with ease of manufacture and replication in mind, as the still-evolving United Federation of Planets found itself in need of large numbers of ships to secure its rapidly expanding borders in the aftermath of the Earth-Romulan War.

Now, however, the Lovell and her two sister ships were all that remained. Outdated and inferior in nearly every measurable sense to the more modern Constitution-class vessels that were the current pride of the fleet, they also suffered for the notable lack of replacement components available. The engineers assigned to the trio of craft therefore found their abilities and ingenuity constantly tested as they strived to keep their ships working at peak operational efficiency.

“Captain,” he heard Pzial call out from the communications station, “we are receiving an urgent incoming message from Admiral Komack at Starfleet Command.” After a moment, she added, “It’s been encoded for us and the T’Saura.”

Urgent? Given that any subspace message sent from Earth would take three weeks to reach the Lovell’s current position, al-Khaled had to wonder about the nature of any such communication. Besides, there was the unavoidable fact that their ship, assigned to the Corps of Engineers, was simply not in the habit of receiving priority messages from Starfleet Command, or anyone else for that matter.

“Let’s have it on-screen, Ensign,” Okagawa said, and the image on the main viewer shifted to show the weathered, lined face of Admiral Byron Komack, the staff officer in charge of all Starfleet operations in this sector of space. Seated behind a nondescript desk inside an equally austere office, Komack stared out at the Lovell’s bridge crew with the dour expression that had long been the admiral’s trademark.

“Captain Okagawa, Captain Sivok,” he said, “a situation has arisen that requires your immediate attention. Effective immediately, your first priority is to work together to find a safe method of passage into the Delta Triangle.”

Chapter 3

“Well, so much for Captain Sivok not wanting our help,” al-Khaled said, unable to suppress a grin.

“As you may or may not be aware,” the recorded image of Komack continued, “the Federation recently welcomed a new member race, the Valzhan. Given their star system’s proximity to the Klingon border, you can imagine the significance of having an ally in that part of space.”

Al-Khaled was indeed aware of the Valzhan’s admission to the Federation. According to the reports he had read, their civilization at one time had been quite advanced, having attained interplanetary travel capabilities before global war decimated their planet and the survivors spent centuries rebuilding. They had developed faster-than-light propulsion only within the last decade, but after their initial encounter with a Starfleet first-contact team, the Valzhan had shown great reluctance to accept an invitation to join the Federation.

While not strictly a pacifistic race, the Valzhan nevertheless held deep-seated convictions against violence except in defensive situations—and then only after all other conceivable options had been exhausted. Though they understood that the military portion of Starfleet’s charter was not offensive in nature, they had expressed concern over being drawn into the Federation’s ongoing political tensions with the Klingon and Romulan Empires, which had at times in recent years threatened to spill over into full-scale war. It had taken years of negotiations on the part of the Diplomatic Corps before Valzhan leaders would even agree to discuss the possibility of allying with the Federation, let alone convincing them of the virtues inherent in accepting an invitation to become a member world.

On the main viewscreen, Komack said, "As part of a cultural outreach program, Federation specialists have been working with Valzhan scholars to learn more about their planet's long and quite colorful history. Here at Starfleet Command, a team of stellar cartographers began tracking the course of a generation ship the Valzhan launched more than four hundred years ago, and they're trying to ascertain where it might have ended up." Pausing for a moment, the admiral leaned forward and rested his forearms on his desk, his craggy features staring out from the viewer. "Based on telemetry received in the years before the Valzhan's global war caused them to shift their priorities to that of simple survival, a probable trajectory for the ship has been determined."

"Don't tell me," Okagawa said.

As if knowing how his briefing would be received by those listening to it, Komack nodded and offered a knowing smile. "That's right, you guessed it: the Delta Triangle. Now, the Valzhan understand that we've deemed the area a hazard to navigation and that entry to and from the rift, if it's even possible, will be highly restricted. However, a review of the Enterprise's sensor logs during its encounter with the rift shows the presence of a vessel that looks to be of Valzhan design, and their planetary government is requesting our assistance to confirm the ship's existence and to make contact with any Valzhan who might still be alive in the Triangle."

Komack paused again, and this time his expression turned more serious. "Ambassador Robert Fox, the lead diplomat who brought the Valzhan to the Federation in the first place, is very enthusiastic about this idea and has promised Starfleet's full cooperation. As you can probably imagine, a lot of eyes are on you. Good luck to you and your crews. Komack out."

The message ended, and the image on the viewscreen reverted to that of empty space, and for several moments al-Khaled heard nothing save the chorus of background sound generated by the bridge's different workstations as well as the omnipresent thrum of the Lovell's engines. Looking around, he noted the variety of expressions on the faces of the bridge crew, from the usual neutral aloofness offered by zh'Rhun to the furrowed brow of Captain Okagawa as he considered Komack's message, to the uncharacteristic enthusiasm brightening Xav's rounded features.

"How exciting," the Tellarite said as he turned from his science console, and al-Khaled noted that even his normally caustic expression had brightened at the thought of the new challenge Komack had issued. "Searching for long-lost brothers and sisters has such a romantic, adventurous appeal, does it not?"

Okagawa said, "While I can't help but share your zeal, Lieutenant, you can be sure that Ambassador Fox has no interest in romance and adventure. Considering the importance of establishing a Federation presence in the Valzhan system that close to the Klingon border, you can bet he'll be watching us like the proverbial hawk."

Of that, al-Khaled had no doubt. Fox's reputation as a no-nonsense diplomat was long renowned, as was his lack of tolerance for Starfleet, particularly when achieving his goals was made more difficult by something they did or failed to do. With that in mind, the engineer gave silent thanks to whatever cosmic forces had conspired to keep the ambassador from being on hand to watch over this mission personally. Small favors, and all that, he mused.

"Well," zh'Rhun said as she stepped closer to the railing separating the upper bridge deck from the command well, "at least this falls closer to the types of missions we are supposed to be assigned. A salvage operation is infinitely more desirable than deploying navigational markers."

"That's the spirit, Commander," Okagawa replied, smiling. "When I was a boy, I used to read and

wonder about various ships that had gone missing over the years. Ares IV, the Hawking, the Mariposa. To think that any of those, and so many others, might be somewhere out here, just waiting for someone to find them.” He shook his head. “Fascinating stuff.”

Al-Khaled agreed, remembering a similar interest in such stories from his own childhood. Such tales were scattered throughout not only Federation history but also among that of just about any other spacefaring race that came to mind. On many of the occasions where a wayward vessel had been found, the discovery had been a grim one, with no heroic tales of survival in the face of overwhelming odds to honor the crews of the ships.

Could this time be different?

Besides, Commander zh’Rhun was right. Salvaging a lost or damaged vessel was more interesting than laying out a network of warning buoys. It was also right in line with the types of missions to which the Corps of Engineers typically was assigned, and when compared to tunneling through a moon or asteroid, building a colony, or repairing a remote starbase or space station, there was simply no contest.

When he realized he had allowed his mind to wander, al-Khaled looked up to see Okagawa regarding him as if he might be reading the younger man’s mind.

“Yes,” the captain said, “I think we might just have an interesting mission on our hands.” He turned toward the communications station. “Ensign Pzial, hail the T’Saura. I think it’s time for us to have a little chat with Captain Sivok.”

* * *

Al-Khaled had met his share of Vulcans over the years, and with few exceptions all of them sported the same neutral, stoic demeanor for which the proud, almost regal race had long been known. Captain Sivok, as far as the engineer could see, fit the typical mold.

“Our sensor scans of the region support the hypothesis of the Enterprise’s science officer,” Sivok said, “and show that an interdimensional rift does exist in this area of space, perhaps leading to an alternate universe. This rift appears to be protected by an energy barrier that is the source of the disruption in most shipboard systems reported by the Enterprise, notably sensors and propulsion.”

Occupying the position at one end of the angled conference table that was the dominant feature of the Lovell’s main briefing room, the Vulcan captain sat ramrod straight in his chair, with his hands clasped together in front him, and his two forefingers extended and joined at the tips. To his right sat Lieutenant Commander Curtis Danhauser, the T’Saura’s science officer. Rounding out the attendees in the small room were Okagawa, Xav, and al-Khaled.

“Commander Danhauser,” Okagawa said, “one of your reports also stated that you believe this barrier to be in a constant state of flux, which might explain why some ships can safely navigate the Triangle while others become trapped inside the rift.”

The young man nodded. “That’s correct, sir. Based on the sensor data we’ve collected, there are a handful of areas where the energy levels appear weaker than in the rest of the barrier. My best guess right now is that the ships that became trapped inside the rift passed through the field at one of these points.”

Leaning forward in his chair and resting his forearms on the conference table, al-Khaled said, “From

what I read of Commander Spock's report, the energy discharges the Enterprise's sensors detected from outside the rift could have been caused by the reactions of these weak areas when they come into contact with normal space. He's also quite certain that this is the cause of the energy drain on a ship once it's trapped inside the rift."

Danhauser replied, "We think it has something to do with an incompatibility between the barrier and the energy generated by dilithium crystals in a ship's warp drive." He paused, looking up as the doors to the briefing room opened before returning his attention to al-Khaled. "Of course, it's a theory we can't really test until we find a way to pass back and forth through the barrier." Sighing in mild frustration, he added, "Bit of a vicious circle, isn't it?"

"Maybe not."

The officers at the table turned at the sound of the new voice, its deep resonating tone instantly commanding the notice of everyone in the room.

"Captain Sivok," Okagawa said, indicating the new arrival with a wave of his hand, "allow me to introduce my chief engineer, Lieutenant Commander Moves-With-Burning-Grace. He also doubles as second-in-command to Mr. al-Khaled for our team from the Corps of Engineers."

Tall and possessing a lean yet muscled physique, smooth mahogany skin, and rugged features made even more prominent by his baldness, Grace was an imposing man, at least as far as al-Khaled was concerned. In keeping with his people's culture, swaths of red paint, their hue nearly matching that of his uniform tunic, adorned his cheeks and forehead as well as the top and sides of his hairless scalp, around which he also wore a thin blue headband.

Nodding in formal greeting to the T'Saura's captain and science officer, Grace then said, "I apologize for the interruption, Captain, but I have been studying the information sent to us by Commander Danhauser, and I believe I may have a suggestion that will allow us to safely enter and exit the Triangle."

"Then your arrival is no interruption at all, Mr. Grace," Okagawa said. "What've you found?"

By way of reply, the chief engineer took the unoccupied chair to the captain's left and pressed a control on the small pad set into the table near his right arm. In response to this action, the three-sided viewscreen in the center of the table flared to life and displayed a computer schematic illustrating a Constitution-class starship and a Klingon D7 battle cruiser, joined together by way of their secondary hulls. "According to the reports submitted by the Enterprise, the breakdown in the crystalline structure of their dilithium was a cumulative effect. This meant the Enterprise and the Klingon ship it partnered with still possessed enough power in their respective crystals to mount a joint venture to escape the rift."

Another tap of the control pad produced what al-Khaled recognized as a technical schematic of the Lovell. "I believe that if we introduce a more tightly focused nutation cycle in our deflector shields, and channel power to the shield generators directly from the warp engines, we can produce sufficient energy for the shields to protect against contamination of the dilithium crystals."

"It is an intriguing notion," Sivok said. "However, given what we know of the field's effects and how rapidly it appears to drain the power systems of a wide variety of spaceships inside the Triangle, this would seem to be nothing more than a temporary solution."

Nodding in agreement, Grace said, "It's not intended as a permanent fix, but by my calculations, we should be able to protect ourselves for nearly ten hours, as long as we do not overly tax our onboard

systems.” Looking to Captain Okagawa, he added, “That would mean no high-speed travel while inside the rift, and only limited use of weapons.”

“Well, considering what Captain Kirk reported about the people living in there,” Danhauser replied, “that shouldn’t be a problem. Some of the residents possess psionic powers, which they use to neutralize all weapons within the rift.”

“Channeling power to the deflector shield generators directly from the warp engines is not a conventional use for either system,” Captain Sivok said. “One must ask what led you to devise such a scheme, Commander Grace.”

The engineer smiled. “My previous assignment was on Earth, as a member of the design team for the proposed upgrades to the Constitution -class ships. One of the proposals put forth by some of the civilian engineers was the idea of channeling phaser power from the warp engines in order to increase their power.” Shrugging, he added, “I do not agree with the idea, mostly because I’ve been in enough situations where our engines were offline and yet we needed our weapons. Still, the concept struck me as having certain limited uses, such as what I’m proposing here.”

“Don’t let Mr. Grace’s modesty fool you, Captain,” Okagawa said. “Before joining us and before his stint on Earth, he served on three other ships, including a tour on the Enterprise under Christopher Pike. He’s the latest in a long line of great engineers, and he’s forgotten more about what makes a starship go than most people will ever know.”

And lucky for me this is where he ended up, al-Khaled reminded himself.

“So,” he said, nodding in satisfaction at Grace’s proposal, “how long to get this done?”

* * *

“Engineering to bridge,” the voice of the Lovell’s chief engineer echoed over the intercom system. “We’ve completed our modifications to the shield generators, Captain. We can proceed at your discretion.”

From where he sat at the engineering station behind and to the left of the captain, al-Khaled watched as Okagawa glanced at the chronometer set into the console between the helm and navigator’s stations in front of him, then shook his head and released a soft chuckle.

“Eight hours and thirty-seven minutes,” the captain said. “As good as your word, Commander. Please stand by.”

Grace had projected a time frame of nine hours to perform the task of realigning the ship’s deflector shield systems so that they could accept power directly from the warp drive. In contrast to other engineers, who as a group tended to err on the side of caution when providing estimates for how long a task would take to accomplish, Grace instead was known for his accuracy and bluntness when offering such assessments, even if it was something his captain or anyone else might not want to hear. Still, that practice engendered a trust from Okagawa and the rest of the Lovell’s crew, al-Khaled included, who knew that their chief engineer’s guesses were almost always more reliable than most other people’s attempts at fact.

Turning his command chair toward the science station, Okagawa said, “Mr. Xav, what about communications once we’re inside the rift?”

The Tellarite replied, "We are ready, Captain. I have fed the coordinates for one of the entry points plotted by Commander Danhauser to the helm. Once we maneuver into the rift, the T'Saura will deploy their subspace repeater beacon near the point where we pass through the barrier. Our own beacon is set to launch the moment we've made the transposition."

Though the beacons normally were used to amplify subspace communications signals over great distances, it was Commander Danhauser's opinion, based on the weeks of data collected by the T'Saura's science team, that they also presented the best option for establishing communications into and out of the rift. By positioning one of the powerful devices on either side of the weak area in the energy barrier through which the Lovell would pass, he believed that the beacons, working in unison, would be able to overcome any disruption generated by the rift and amplify any signals transmitted through the barrier.

Sounds good in theory, al-Khaled conceded. Here's hoping Danhauser's as good as he seems to be. If the plan did not work, they would have no way of contacting the T'Saura, a smaller and less powerful ship than the Lovell. The chief engineers of both ships had concurred that the science vessel would not fare well traversing the energy barrier, and was instead better suited to remain outside the Triangle in a support capacity. Truth be told, it would be of little help to the Lovell should there be any trouble inside the rift, a proposition that did not set well with the engineer.

If Okagawa shared that apprehension, he did not show it. "Commander zh'Rhun," he said, "are we set?"

"All sections report ready, sir. Thanks to Mr. Grace's modifications, the shield generators are operating at one hundred seven percent of peak efficiency."

The captain nodded. "Excellent."

When he paused, al-Khaled turned to see Okagawa studying the main viewer, his attention seemingly focused on the field of stars it displayed, and the engineer sensed that his captain might be taking a moment to consider what else was waiting for them. It was an enthralling question, one that al-Khaled himself hoped would be answered in short order. Though he had read the reports submitted by the Enterprise crew following their experience here, he knew that those cold, emotionless words could not compare to a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon.

"Well," said Okagawa, the beginnings of another playful grin playing at the corners of his mouth, "unless I've missed something, I don't believe there's any reason to put this off any longer." He waved toward the main viewscreen. "Helm, take us in."

Chapter 4

Al-Khaled knew when they hit the barrier.

It was not due to any sensor alerts fed to his console or because an alarm klaxon blared in the confines of the bridge or even because Commander zh'Rhun or Lieutenant Xav said anything. Instead, the first indication came from his stomach, which lurched at the precise instant that the Lovell struck the leading edge of the odd energy field that marked the true entrance to the Delta Triangle.

Then a flash of light engulfed the image on the main viewer and stars danced in al-Khaled's vision. A

slight but steady vibration began in the deck plating, its intensity increasing with each passing second as it moved upward into the bulkheads, the bridge consoles, and even his teeth. Everything around him seemed to fade into a haze, the blinking indicators on his workstation's array of status monitors stretching and shifting as they smeared together into a single chaotic mass of jumbled color. He tasted bile as nausea washed over him and his stomach protested as the deck suddenly shifted beneath his feet.

"Captain," called out Lieutenant Sasha Rodriguez from the helm, "I've lost maneuvering control. Everything on my console is going haywire." Al-Khaled heard the heightened concern in her voice, which echoed his own growing anxiety as his disorientation continued to worsen.

"Sensors are offline," Xav shouted over the rising din as the ship seemed hell-bent on shaking itself apart. "I cannot tell how far we've moved through the barrier."

His hands gripping the arms of his chair to avoid being thrown to the deck, Okagawa said, "Hang on, people. This will pass."

It was several more seconds before al-Khaled sensed his dizziness waning. The blur of color began to pull apart and resume familiar shapes on the console before him, and he could already feel his queasiness ebbing. Shaking his head in an attempt to clear it, however, unleashed a sharp reminder of the abuse his body had just undergone.

"Commander zh'Rhun," he heard Okagawa say, "collect damage reports from all decks." Even the captain sounded as though he was still recovering from the effects of their transfer through the rift.

"Reports are coming in already, sir," the Andorian replied, "but no indications of any serious damage." Al-Khaled noted that her left antenna seemed to be drooping, lying almost flat atop her pale white hair in a sure sign that the commander had also been rattled by their passage. "Systems that were disrupted during the transition are returning to normal."

In front of him, Rodriguez reported, "I can confirm that, Captain. Helm control is restored."

"Sensors are clearing," Xav added. "Once we passed through the barrier, all instruments began to register and record normally."

Okagawa nodded and looked up at the main viewer. "So if everything is okay, then I guess I'd better get used to seeing this, eh?"

Feeling comfortable enough to look away from his own console, al-Khaled turned to get his first glimpse at what lay inside the Delta Triangle. Struck first by the curtain of rich red rather than the all-too-familiar black star field, he could hardly believe his eyes as he beheld the score of spacecraft now depicted on the viewscreen.

"Scotty's reports don't do this place justice," he said, rising to his feet as he regarded vessels he recognized drifting alongside those whose origins baffled him. Any imaginings of the interior of this rift he may have conjured from reading the Enterprise's reports paled in comparison to this array of derelict ships, each hanging motionless in a sea of ruby-tinted light.

"A little caught up, Mahmud?" Okagawa asked.

"Oh, yes," the engineer nearly whispered in reply. Grasping for something to say that might seem appropriate to the vista displayed before him, he added, "It's like time-traveling through a history of

spaceflight.”

Their moment of shared awe was broken by Pzial, who, al-Khaled noted, was literally sitting on the edge of his seat, his bright red eyes wide in wonder. “That’s a Rigelian border frigate,” the communications officer said, pointing to a squat, boxy vessel near the top of the viewscreen. “The markings are unmistakable!”

“And that is aDuroc -class cargo freighter,” Xav said, tugging a tuft of hair on his chin. “By Kera and Phinda, my grandsire crewed on a ship just like that.”

“So much for calm, professional detachment,” Okagawa said in a mock defeatist tone as he toggled the intercom control on the arm of his chair. “Bridge to engineering. Mr. Grace, we’ve crossed into the rift. How are things holding up down there?”

Though he knew that theLovell ’s chief engineer undoubtedly had his hands full monitoring and calibrating the modified deflector shields, al-Khaled was not surprised when Grace promptly replied, “The shield generators are performing flawlessly, Captain. Everything is well within tolerance levels.”

“Keep me informed of any change, Commander. Okagawa out.” He tapped the control with the bottom of his right fist, severing the connection before turning in his chair to face Pzial. “Ensign, let’s test the subspace beacons. Try to raise theT’Saura.”

“Already doing that, sir,” the Rigelian replied with an obvious tone of pride at his own efficiency. “They are reporting a clear signal on their end.”

“Excellent,” the captain replied, clapping his hands together in satisfaction as he rose from his seat. “I suppose we should announce our arrival to our hosts. Open a channel to the Elysian Council.” There was a pause as Pzial activated the frequency, which had been identified and recorded by theEnterprise ’s communications officer during her ship’s encounter with the Delta Triangle.

After getting Pzial’s nod to proceed, the captain cleared his throat and said, “Elysian Council, this is Daniel Okagawa, commanding the Federation StarshipLovell. We have come on a mission of peace, and I request to meet with you in order to discuss a matter of some importance.”

Several moments passed before Pzial turned from his console and shook his head. “No response on any channel, sir.”

Al-Khaled felt a pang of disappointment at the ensign’s report. Had they traveled all this way simply to be ignored? Would the people of Elysia forsake them, refusing even to acknowledge their greeting?

It was a feeling that vanished quickly, however, along with Captain Okagawa.

* * *

The bridge of theLovell had dissolved into an orange burst of energy that seemed to overload Okagawa’s vision as a tingling sensation played across his exposed skin that was not unlike what he experienced when being transported. Then it was gone, the strange haze of color fading to reveal the sweeping arc of a semicircular meeting table appointed with twelve high-backed chairs. Each seat was occupied by a representative of a different species—Orion, Romulan, Klingon, Andorian, Phylosian, Vulcan, Tellarite, Gorn, along with a few that Okagawa did not recognize.

“Captain Okagawa,” a soft feminine voice said, and he turned to where the Orion, a woman, was seated. “Welcome to Elysia. I am Devna, interpreter of laws.”

Studying the green-skinned woman, Okagawa noted her lithe form, dark hair that swept down past her shoulders, and bright eyes that seemed to bore straight into him. He was familiar with Orion females and the captivating beauty they commanded, of course, but he had encountered them in person only on infrequent occasions. It took him an extra moment to realize he was staring, and he blinked several times in an effort to refocus his attention on the matter at hand.

Eyes on the mission, Daniel, he reminded himself, and not the host.

“Thank you, Devna,” he replied. “I appreciate your granting me this audience. As I stated before, I am here on a peaceful mission, representing the United Federation of Planets.”

“We know all about your Federation, Captain,” a deep male voice said. Its owner was seated near the center of the curved table, and Okagawa recognized the man’s clothing as being Romulan in origin. “I am Xerius,” he said. “Given the short span of time that has passed since your comrades visited us, I trust they are your reason for being here.”

“After a fashion,” Okagawa answered. “That ship’s captain made a full report of his experiences here, but he’s not the reason we’ve come.”

Xerius nodded. “In your transmission, you mentioned discussing a matter of importance. Given that you appear to have arrived here of your own free will, are we to assume that you have found a method for successfully navigating through the barrier that surrounds the Delta Triangle?”

“That is correct, sir,” the captain said. “We’ve made some technical modifications to our vessel’s systems that will allow our departure once our business here is concluded.” He watched as a wordless wave of skepticism crossed the features of the council members in response to his statement. Some of them turned to each other and nodded almost condescendingly.

Undeterred, Okagawa pressed on. “At the request of the people of Valzhan, we’ve come on a mission to contact and, if possible, retrieve the crew of a ship that became trapped here hundreds of our years ago. We’re also willing to provide that same capability to anyone who wishes to leave Elysia.”

A string of chattering noise erupted from one of the council members, a red-hued, insectlike being, which culminated in a sound that seemed to the captain as reminiscent of a human chuckling. In response to this outburst, the lone Klingon seated at the table expressed himself in a manner Okagawa had seen many times in the swarthy, aggressive race: He released a booming, hearty laugh.

“That’s very presumptuous, Earther,” the Klingon said. “We have built a model society for ourselves here. Why would we want to return to the life of struggle and conflict that you apparently still enjoy?”

“Please, Kelthos,” said a wide-eyed woman who spoke in a thickly accented voice, “open yourself to this idea. Not everyone shares your unwavering desire to remain here, after all.” Okagawa noted that the woman’s head was encapsulated in a transparent dome, presumably a device that allowed her to breathe freely within the council chamber.

Seated farthest to the captain’s right, the Gorn hissed and clicked something in its native language, leaning forward in its chair as it did so. The action caused its large muscles to ripple beneath thick, green-scaled skin.

“Yes, Glind,” the woman said, her voice carrying what Okagawa perceived as a hint of exasperation as she turned to the Gorn, “we know you will never leave here, but as much as my people have embraced Elysia, this eternity of peace and goodwill has come at the cost of our physical freedom. Many of my people—myself included—still long for home beyond the confines of our native spacecraft, a place to feel the warmth of the sun or a fresh breeze across our faces.”

Okagawa noticed the shock of surprise that seemed to grip several of her companions, most notably Kelthos, who folded his arms and sat back in his chair, his expression indicating that the Klingon was through with the current conversation.

“It seems obvious,” Devna said after a moment, “that the captain’s arrival and pronouncement have given us new fodder for debate.” To Okagawa, she said, “Make no mistake, Captain, though we live in peace as a requirement for our survival here, we do not always agree on all matters. Many of us have been here for centuries, and as a consequence, we are unaware of what has transpired outside the Triangle. As for your offer, there are many among us who will be intrigued by the possibility of returning to normal space. Of course, anyone who wishes to go may do so, and everyone will undoubtedly be interested in learning as much as possible about the worlds we left behind. Regardless, many of us have long since come to accept that this will forever be our home.”

“We are not here to impose our wills upon any of you,” Okagawa replied. “We will offer safe passage out of the Triangle for anyone who wants it, or my people can teach you what you need to do to your vessels so that you can leave on your own terms. You don’t have to stay here, not anymore.”

Indicating the other eleven council members flanking her at the large table, Devna said, “As you know, several of the races represented here were bitter enemies at one time or another. It would be interesting to learn if such situations were ever resolved. Do enemies now live in peace, or do they even exist at all? These are just some of the many questions that we have.”

Okagawa nodded. “I’d be lying if I said that the rest of the universe had achieved the level of collaborative spirit that you seem to share among yourselves in this place. You’ve demonstrated that even bitter rivals can find common ground upon which to build a lasting friendship. In fact, I have no doubt that you would have much to offer by virtue of the example you’ve created here.” As he spoke, he found himself looking once again at the wide-eyed alien woman, her face partially obscured by a glare reflecting off the surface of her protective helmet. Still, he saw her offering what he took to be a reassuring smile, and he realized that he had made at least one convincing connection among these people.

One step at a time, he thought.

“You raise an interesting notion, Captain,” Xerius replied. “However, you must remember that given the rather peculiar nature of our situation, we were forced to undertake actions, many of them very drastic, in order to forge our society rather than descend into chaos. We have long since come to believe that such success cannot, in many instances, be enjoyed outside Elysia.”

Frowning at what he considered to be a near condemnation of the rest of the universe, Okagawa almost as quickly conceded that the Romulan may well have a point. For a moment, he imagined how the Elysian form of cooperation might work if employed on Nimbus III, a planet located near the Neutral Zone where Federation, Klingon, and Romulan representatives had agreed to live together in the interests of fostering peaceful relationships between the three peoples. At last report, the so-called “Planet of Galactic Peace” was going through more than its share of growing pains, and many sociopolitical experts as well as the usual assortment of cynical naysayers were already foretelling the colony’s eventual

collapse.

The problems these people face are magnified exponentially compared to Nimbus, the captain mused, and yet they made it work. What does that say about us?

* * *

“It is a most unexpected and generous offer, Captain,” Saraven said from where he stood before the expansive table of the Elysian Council. “However, it is one I must decline.”

Tall and wide-shouldered, the Valzhan wore a simple arrangement of dark green robes that seemed to heighten his already bright amber complexion. His long gray hair was gathered at the nape of his thick neck, helping to frame a face lined deeply with age. Okagawa could not help but be impressed with the commanding air Saraven affected.

His eyes seeming to focus for a moment on some wistful memory, the Valzhan said, “Do not mistake me. Of course there is much about life on my homeworld that I miss. I was the patriarch of a large family at the time of my departure, but when I took command of our vessel so long ago, I made a commitment to the people traveling aboard it. That we arrived here instead of a planet we sought to colonize is not relevant, for my duty to those I lead has not changed.”

“Indeed,” Xerius said from where he sat near the center of the elongated conference table, “Saraven has become one of our most trusted advisers. His was among the first ships to arrive here that was designed for long duration, deep-space flight. It carried a variety of essential supplies and materials that the Valzhan graciously offered to share with the rest of Elysia. Saraven’s is a voice of reason and leadership that truly helped to create the lasting community we enjoy to this day.”

As he listened to the elder Romulan’s words, Okagawa tried his best to ignore Kelthos, who was just visible behind Saraven and who was making no effort to hide the smile of smug satisfaction creasing his dark features. Okagawa knew that the council member was not his enemy, but he decided that even the uncounted years Kelthos had spent among the Elysian community had done little to dull the edge of his typical Klingon sense of self-importance.

Keeping his attention focused on Saraven, Okagawa said, “I understand and respect your position, sir, though I hope you will at least communicate our offer to the rest of your people.”

The Valzhan nodded. “Indeed I shall, Captain, but do not be too hopeful of spirited many of them away with you. Life on my world was not pleasant, with clashes and clan disputes that sometimes lasted for generations. Elysia has given us a different way of life.”

“You’d be happy to hear that life on your planet has progressed quite well in your absence,” Okagawa said. “After a prolonged war, your people have thrived, and they were recently accepted as members of our Federation. Working in cooperation with us and the many other civilizations we represent, the quality of life on Valzhan will only continue to improve.”

He held out a padd that he had asked Lieutenant Xav to transport to him from the Lovell. “This contains a history of your family.” He paused for a moment, unsure of how the next part might be received by the Valzhan captain. “I regret to inform you that several of your children, including your eldest son, were killed during the war, and your clan was among those who suffered many losses as the fighting dragged on. Those who survived have played an integral part in the progress your world has made. It’s quite an exciting time for them, actually, but they very much want to know that you and your people are safe.”

Saraven said nothing for several seconds, no doubt contemplating the sobering news. Even though the tragic events had occurred centuries ago, Okagawa knew that the Valzhan captain's sense of time had been skewed by his lengthy stay here in the Triangle, perhaps even to the extent that his memories of home were as fresh and vibrant as the day he had departed on his ill-fated journey.

Finally, he said, "Perhaps you would be so kind as to take word back that we too have found peace and contentment, albeit of a different sort. And there may be those who wish to go with you. In that event, we will craft a suitable presentation to convey to our homeworld."

Buoyed by the progress he was making, however small it might be, Okagawa smiled. "It would be my honor, sir." Turning to the council members, he added, "Naturally, we would do the same for anyone who requested it."

"In the spirit of cooperation that is the hallmark of Elysia," Devna replied, "we will do all we can to assist those who wish to leave. However, do not be surprised if your offer is received with less enthusiasm than you might expect."

While he respected his audience enough not to dispute out loud what the Orion woman said, Okagawa could not fathom anyone's desire to remain here. To be cut off from everything and everyone he had ever known, locked in this pocket of space that hovered outside the regular universe for all eternity, even when a means of escape was provided? The very notion was anathema to everything the captain held dear. Could life here truly be that rewarding and fulfilling?

Ask that again, he reminded himself, after you've lived here a thousand years.

Chapter 5

"The Phylosian ship is exiting the rift now, Captain," Xav reported from the science station on the Lovell's bridge.

Turning from his own console, al-Khaled was in time to see a long cylindrical spacecraft waver and coalesce into existence on the main viewscreen. Though he had seen the effect repeated with half a dozen other vessels over the past two days, the sight still engrossed him. More than simply being a ship emerging from the depths of the Delta Triangle into real space, it represented a group of people freed from a prison and given the opportunity to return to the lives so cruelly taken from them.

"Outstanding," Okagawa said from where he stood next to his command chair. "Ensign Pzial, confirm that their navigator has the proper coordinates to get them home." The Phylosians had been trapped inside the rift for less than a decade, and had leapt at the chance to escape. Al-Khaled knew that their home planet had already been alerted to the discovery of the ship, and he was sure that arrangements to receive the wayward travelers were already under way.

After leading the first vessel, a Talarian battle cruiser, back to normal space, the Lovell had remained on station while the others followed at varying intervals over the last forty-five hours. Of the other vessels that had been helped so far, each of their crews had similar stories to tell. They had been among the more recent additions to Elysia, and as such had not yet formed the steadfast bond that seemed to join most of those who had lived in the rift for greater spans of time. Still, many of the long-term residents had also

changed their minds, citing first the Enterprise's miraculous escape and the Lovell's demonstrated ability to enter and exit the Triangle at will. As a result, they were making their own preparations to return to normal space and the worlds they had long ago left behind.

"Given the success we seem to be having here," Okagawa said as he stepped around the helm console to take up his habitual stance of leaning against the forward bridge railing, "you can bet Starfleet won't waste any time taking advantage of the situation." Indicating the screen with a nod of his head, he added, "I wouldn't be surprised if Captain Sivok and the T'Saura received new mission orders that take them inside the rift."

"If that is the case," Xav said, "then I will be envious." His gruff voice harbored more than a bit of what al-Khaled recognized as jealousy, but he knew it was more in jest than anything else. Disappointed though he might be at missing out on the incredible opportunity for scientific research the Triangle represented, the Tellarite also knew his place and his obligations were on the Lovell, which in all likelihood would receive its own new and markedly different assignment in short order.

Standing next to him at the engineering console, Moves-With-Burning-Grace said, "I for one would not envy the T'Saura if they should be given such a mission. To remain stationary for any length of time is not something I would enjoy. Our vessels are designed to travel the stars, after all."

"Ready for warp eight, Grace?" al-Khaled asked, unable to keep the teasing note from his voice.

His expression neutral, the chief engineer nodded. "That would be an acceptable beginning, yes."

Al-Khaled laughed at his friend's deadpan response, knowing that there was more than a bit of truth behind the words. Descended from the Masai, an African tribe who had traveled to the desert planet Eristas during the first wave of colonization from Earth in the twenty-first century, Grace's people had long been renowned for their almost religious appreciation for velocity. The names they took often reflected this symbolism, particularly with respect to those animals that moved with utmost speed and elegance. This, more than anything else, al-Khaled knew, helped to explain why Grace had left the Constitution refit project on Earth and requested reassignment to a ship—any ship—rather than remain stagnant at a planet-based facility.

"Captain," he heard Xav say from the science station, "long-range sensors are detecting the approach of three vessels, all of similar configuration." After a moment, the Tellarite turned in his seat to face Okagawa. "They're Gorn."

"The Gorn?" Okagawa exclaimed. "What the hell are they doing here?"

Al-Khaled exchanged puzzled looks with the captain. "Well, we know we're not that far away from their territory. I suppose it's possible they might be interested in what's going on out here." Even as he spoke the words, he felt a twinge of anxiety grip him. It appeared that Zh'Rhun's uncertainty about their proximity to the space claimed by the Gorn Hegemony had proven to be well-founded, after all.

"Their shields are raised and their weapons are powered," Xav reported.

Zh'Rhun turned to the captain. "Recommend alert status, sir."

"Do it," Okagawa replied, moving toward his chair as he gave the order. "Shields up, but let's leave the weapons on standby for the moment. There's no need to rush into this with hot heads, and all that." Waving to the viewer, he added, "Let's see what we're dealing with."

Having never seen a Gorn ship himself, it was with no small amount of curiosity that al-Khaled turned to the screen. Displayed on the screen was a trio of wedge-shaped vessels. Large and bulky, they possessed no aesthetic qualities whatsoever, at least in the engineer's opinion. Stabilizer fins mounted to the rear of the ships' main hull sections implied the craft were maneuverable within a planet's atmosphere.

Could ships like these have been used for the attack on Cestus III? The question came unbidden, rattling around inside his head and vainly searching for an answer al-Khaled knew he was unlikely to receive, at least not today.

"Where's the T'Saura?" Okagawa asked.

"They are currently studying another portion of the rift, sir," Xav replied. "Sensors detect no other vessels in their vicinity."

Nodding at the report, the captain said, "Pzial, alert Captain Sivok to our current situation, and advise him to maintain his current position. When you've finished that, hail the Gorn."

Moments later, the image on the screen shifted from the three vessels to show what al-Khaled surmised was the bridge of one of the ships. Cloaked mostly in shadow, the chamber did not offer much in the way of detail that he could see, except for the lone figure seated in the center of the frame. Large and muscular, the Gorn regarded the Lovell's bridge crew with silvery, seemingly compound eyes peering out from under horned brow ridges that echoed a third ridge dividing his skull. Al-Khaled felt himself gripped by an involuntary shiver as he noted that the creature's most intimidating feature was its mouth, with its double row of sharp-fanged teeth peeking from behind curled lips.

The Gorn was speaking in its native language, the flurry of hisses and clicks no more pleasant than the alien emitting them.

"What's he saying?" Okagawa asked.

"One moment, sir," Pzial replied, "The universal translator is deciphering and comparing it against the limited samples of Gorn dialects we have on file." Several moments passed before the Rigelian turned in his seat once again. "Switching over now."

The bridge's ambient noise was cut by a deep-throated voice. "...speak to us immediately, we will be forced to take action to defend our interests."

Standing up, the captain raised his voice in greeting. "Gorn commander," he said in a tone that al-Khaled hoped retained its friendliness as it was washed through the translator, "I am Captain Daniel Okagawa of the Federation Starship Lovell. We experienced some initial trouble with your message, and ask that you repeat it."

There was a pause, perhaps while the Gorn captain received the translation of Okagawa's message, before the large reptilian being leaned forward in his massive chair. Al-Khaled caught himself leaning back in his own seat in response to the Gorn's gesture as the alien finally replied.

"I am Lahr," came the computer-generated voice, "commander of this Hegemony protector vessel. We have noted the increased traffic of vessels in this region of space, an area we have long believed to be a spatial trap for unfortunate ships. What is happening here?"

Keeping his hands behind his back and adopting what al-Khaled hoped was a diplomatic and, more importantly, nonthreatening stance, Okagawa replied, “We have recently developed a means of safely traversing the Delta Triangle. In doing so, we have discovered many other ships from a large number of spacefaring races that have been trapped inside what is best described as an alternate universe. We are now using our newfound abilities to assist some of those vessels to leave this region and return to their home planets.”

Lahr appeared to digest this information for several seconds. When he responded, his voice seemed to take on an added layer of menace. “Tell me, human, is there one named Glind among them?”

Okay, that one was out of left field, al-Khaled thought.

The captain nodded. “Yes, that’s right. It may please you to know that there is a thriving community inside the rift, and that Glind plays an integral role in its government.”

Though al-Khaled did not think the Gorn captain could appear any more ominous, that was exactly what happened as the alien rose from his chair, muscles rippling beneath his thick, dark skin, and stepped forward until his visage nearly filled the screen.

“He is also a wanted criminal, Captain,” Lahr said, “and we want him. Now.”

* * *

Standing once more before the Elysian Council, Daniel Okagawa allowed himself a brief moment of contemplation. After all, navigating dicey diplomatic waters was not a specialty for which he had ever considered himself well suited.

Where the hell is Ambassador Fox when I need him?

“According to Gorn law,” he said to his audience of twelve, “murder is a crime for which there is no statute of limitations or other comparable legal term of expiration. Even though Glind and his accomplices left their homeworld more than a century ago, they are still criminals in the eyes of the Hegemony.”

“We are aware of this, Captain,” Xerius replied from his seat at the center of the group of council members, “as we have been since their arrival.” He gestured with an open palm to where Glind sat at the far end of the conference table. “It was obvious from the amount of damage their vessel had sustained prior to entering Elysia that they had been in some sort of confrontation, and it did not take long for Glind and his companions to confess to their crimes.”

“The damage was inflicted during our escape from authorities,” Glind said. “Only our falling into the trap that is the Delta Triangle saved us.”

Nodding, the captain said, “When they lost track of you, the Hegemony closed the matter, believing you to be lost forever.” Casting a downward glance toward the floor, he added, “That’s changed now, however, thanks to us. With a proven ability to enter and exit the Triangle at will, they either want you extradited back to normal space, or else they want the technology given to them so that they can come in here and retrieve you themselves. Their concern is that, now a proven method of leaving the rift is available, you and your friends will use that knowledge to escape from here, and from them.”

The corners of Xerius’s mouth turned down in a disapproving frown. “Though we of course do not condone such actions by members of our community, it is Elysian law that citizens cannot be punished for

crimes they have committed prior to being stranded here. It is a valued tenet of our society, one that must be preserved if new arrivals are to feel they have any chance of acclimating to this reality. In the case of the Gorn, Glind and his people have proven themselves over time to be valued citizens. We cannot allow them to be taken from here if they choose not to leave of their own free will.”

Okagawa’s attention was drawn to the sound of the doors at the near end of the council chambers parting, revealing an exotic-looking alien woman. Fair-skinned and with flaming red hair piled high atop her head, the woman’s narrow facial features and her yellow, catlike eyes that possessed an almost hypnotic allure easily identified her to the Lovell’s captain as a native of the Omega Cygni system.

“Welcome, Magen,” Devna said from where she sat next to Xerius. “Is something wrong?”

There was a look of worry in the woman’s eyes as she replied, “We have seen the presence of the ships beyond the barrier. There is much anger and distrust, and it threatens our sanctity.”

Sensing the mood of the council beginning to shift, Okagawa said, “Yes, we know of the psionic abilities some of your people possess. For what it’s worth, I conveyed that information to Captain Lahr, and we were at least able to reach a temporary understanding. They have no immediate plans to enter the Triangle, and I’ve convinced him that I need time to consult with my government before we can move forward.”

“It does not matter,” Glind said after a moment. “We have means of protecting ourselves from outsiders, and we will not leave this place. You have our word. My people will understand.”

Unable to suppress a tired smile, the captain shook his head. “Trust me when I say that, right now, your people are very skeptical. Still, Lahr is willing to report to his superiors that there may be a workable solution here. In order to secure his cooperation, I had to promise that you won’t leave Elysia, at least until this matter is settled.”

“That is most impressive, Captain,” Glind replied. “Given my people’s aggressive nature, I would not have expected such a compromise to be possible.”

Nodding in agreement, Okagawa said, “From what I know of your people, you’re probably right. However, we’ve had some limited contact with the Gorn in the past, a fact that seems to have helped us here.” In truth, Lahr had been the one to bring up Captain Kirk’s encounter with another Gorn vessel at Cestus III. The honor and integrity demonstrated by the Enterprise commander even when locked in mortal combat had earned him, and by extension the organization he represented, a measure of respect in the eyes of the Hegemony.

But it won’t last forever, Okagawa reminded himself. We need to come up with a solution here, and fast.

Chapter 6

“And considering the length of time the people of Elysia have been together and in light of the very real society they’ve formed here, they should be allowed to decide for themselves whether they leave, and their wishes should supersede those of any outside influence, be it ours or anyone else’s.”

Okagawa halted his dictation, reaching up to rub his tired eyes. “Computer, pause recording.”

Seated in the only other chair flanking the small desk in the captain's quarters, Commander zh'Rhun regarded Okagawa with an expression of worry. "Are you all right, sir?"

The captain shook his head. "I'm fine. I just want to make sure I get the wording of this right. Diplomacy has never been my strong suit, but it takes on a different level of complexity when you can't even rely on real-time responses to your questions or concerns."

Leaning against the wall of Okagawa's quarters with his arms folded across his chest, al-Khaled nodded in sympathetic agreement. A subspace message transmitted from their current location would take nearly three weeks to reach Starfleet Command, leaving the captain in the unenviable position of having to anticipate wishes and decisions that might not be conveyed to him for more than a month while continuing to deal with the fluid and chaotic situation unfolding right in front of him.

"If Starfleet agrees with your line of thinking," zh'Rhun said, "and the Gorn really do intend to stay in Elysia, then it would be equivalent to their being granted asylum."

Okagawa reached for the cup of coffee near his right hand and took a sip before replying, "I'm no lawyer, but it seems to me that there'd be some kind of precedent for what I'm proposing. A colony that's declared independence from its homeworld... something." Shrugging, he added, "I'm sure there's a legal expert or diplomat who can find some way to justify it and back us up, but saying they support our position and their being able to help us defend it are two different things entirely."

"Somehow I don't think the Gorn are going to side with our lawyers or politicians," al-Khaled said, shaking his head. Despite the Gorn captain's agreement to allow Okagawa a chance to consult with his superiors, the engineer knew that the situation here, already tense, would likely continue to deteriorate.

"Agreed," Okagawa replied, "which is why I've already dispatched a call for any Starfleet ships in the area to get here as quickly as possible. Ensign Pzial tells me that the Lexington is already en route, but Commodore Wesley says he can't get here in less than eighty hours even at his ship's maximum speed." He released a tired sigh. "For better or worse, we're on our own until then."

Though no one in the room said anything further, al-Khaled figured that the thoughts running through his own mind were not all that different from those preoccupying his captain and Commander zh'Rhun. The Lovell and the T'Saura were not ships of the line, possessing only minimum armaments and defensive systems. While the Lovell itself had benefited from a team of engineers eager to upgrade the ship's systems far beyond their expected operational efficiency, even that would not be enough should the Gorn ships summon reinforcements.

Enough of that, he thought, chastising himself for concentrating on aspects of their current circumstances over which he had no control. As an engineer, he knew he should be focusing on ways to improve their situation in any way possible. Sooner or later, Captain Okagawa would want options, and he needed to be ready. Focus, Mahmud.

His thoughts were rudely interrupted by the sound of a red alert klaxon, and the captain's quarters were suddenly bathed in harsh crimson as the alarm indicator mounted over the door began flashing.

"Bridge to Captain Okagawa," said the voice of Lieutenant Xav through the intercom system. "Sir, two of the Gorn ships have broken from their formation and are maneuvering away, and sensors show that the remaining ship is launching an unoccupied craft."

Sharing a puzzled look with zh'Rhun and al-Khaled, Okagawa's brow knit in alarm. "What the hell are they up to now?"

The turbolift ride from deck three to the bridge was quick, but not quick enough for Okagawa's liking. If al-Khaled had not known better, he would have sworn the captain was pushing through the still-opening doors even before the car had stopped moving.

"Report," he said, bypassing his chair and instead moving around the helm console to stand near the forward bridge railing.

Turning from the science console, Xav replied, "The vessel is deploying mines, sir." He touched a control on his console, and the image on the main viewscreen shifted to a computer-generated map of the Delta Triangle region. Blue indicators marked the current positions of the Lovell and the T'Saura, while a trio of red icons symbolized the Gorn vessels as they moved away from each other. Each ship appeared to be heading toward different areas of the Triangle. It was the red marker nearest the Lovell's position that drew al-Khaled's attention. Xav had programmed the schematic to represent the smaller, unmanned vessel in green, and while everyone on the bridge looked on, it began to describe its own arc across the screen.

His attention still on the viewscreen, Okagawa said, "I guess they've decided not to wait for us after all."

"The other two ships look to be heading for spots we've identified as potential entry points into the rift," al-Khaled said, watching as the schematic continued to update with information supplied by the Lovell's sensors.

From the science station, Xav said, "Assuming they are doing the same thing as the other vessel, they will be in position to begin deploying their own mines within the hour."

Acknowledging the report with a nod, Okagawa looked to al-Khaled. "What do you know about Gorn weaponry?"

The engineer shook his head. "Not a lot, sir. I've reviewed the sensor data collected during the Enterprise's initial encounter with the Gorn ship at Cestus III. The ship they pursued was different from what we're facing now." He knew that the Gorn had all but retreated into their own space following that first meeting with a Starfleet vessel, and that subsequent sightings of their ships were decidedly rare.

"Then let's start learning," Okagawa said. "Get me everything you can as quickly as possible, Mr. Xav." He looked over his shoulder to the communications station. "Pzial, hail the Gorn commander."

There was a momentary delay as the Rigelian ensign established the connection, and then the computer graphic on the main viewer was replaced with the still-imposing figure of Captain Lahr.

"Captain," Okagawa said, "may I ask what you are doing?"

Seated in the oversized chair at the front of what passed for the command center on the Gorn's ship, Lahr replied, "As your sensors have undoubtedly revealed to you, we are deploying a network of protective mines. Our superiors are concerned that the criminals will find a way to escape their prison despite your assurances. They do not believe our governments can resolve this situation in a timely manner, which only allows ample opportunity for the criminals to escape. Therefore, we are to prevent any ship from leaving the Delta Triangle until such a resolution is reached." He paused for a moment, lowering his massive head as if contemplating what to say next. Al-Khaled tried to read the Gorn's

expression, but of course that was impossible. “I apologize for this turn of events, Captain, but I have my orders. Please do not attempt to challenge us in this matter. I would regret destroying your vessel.”

The connection was severed an instant later, returning the map of the Triangle to the screen.

“That certainly went well,” Okagawa said as he turned away from the viewer, his expression of concern a mirror of al-Khaled’s own.

* * *

“The minefield has been deployed in a spherical configuration,” Commander zh’Rhun said as she stood next to the main viewer, which now sported a split screen. One half of the screen featured a computer rendering of the Gorn mines, while the other was an image of Captain Sivok and Commander Danhauser, standing on their own bridge aboard the T’Saura. “By our count, there are five hundred individual mines comprising the field. As you can see, we, along with the entrance to the rift, are at the sphere’s center.”

At the science station, Xav said, “The mines themselves are generating a dampening field that nullifies our attempts to scan them. We are working to find a way to counter that effect, but it will take some time due to our unfamiliarity with Gorn weapons technology.”

“One other thing,” zh’Rhun added. “The mines do not seem to be holding a single unchanging formation. Instead, they are repositioning themselves at irregular intervals. This suggests some kind of intricate onboard navigational system, or perhaps a centralized control scheme. We’re scanning communications frequencies to see if we can find any sign of transmissions being sent to the mines, but so far we have found nothing.”

Leaning forward in his chair in order to better study the screen, Okagawa shook his head. “Is there any good news?”

Zh’Rhun shrugged. “These do not appear to be gravitic mines such as those employed by the Klingons along the Neutral Zone, nor are they cloaked, as the Romulans have been known to do. We can see them, and they do not seem attracted to us as long as we remain stationary.”

From the viewer, Captain Sivok said, “We cannot be certain of anything until we learn more about the mines’ internal construction. Commander Danhauser has suggested capturing one of the devices for further study, though I confess I find the idea somewhat hazardous given our present lack of information.”

Nodding, Okagawa said, “Well, I don’t plan on sitting idle until Starfleet figures out what they want us to do here, and I think we can safely say that hoping the Gorn remain patient is a sucker bet.” He looked to al-Khaled, who with Commander Grace was standing next to the engineering station. “Mahmud? Do you or your team have anything to add?”

“Commander Danhauser’s right, sir,” the engineer replied. “We’re flying blind here until we get a good look at one of those things.” Reaching to one of the keypads on his engineering workstation, he tapped a sequence of commands and the image of the minefield on the viewer was replaced by that of another technical schematic. “My first suggestion would be to use a polaron burst to try and disrupt the dampening field surrounding one of the mines.” Al-Khaled knew that such an approach had been successful in disrupting deflector shields and tractor beams. “If we can do that, then we can give it a thorough scan before trying to bring it aboard.”

“Makes sense to me,” replied Danhauser from the screen. “It’s something we can do from a distance with

our shields raised, and configuring one of our deflector dishes to deliver the burst shouldn't take that long."

"Only a few minutes, I should think," Grace said. "In fact, I would submit that the deflector dish on the T'Saura is better suited to the task than our own."

Okagawa smiled at that. "I'll bet that hurt to say." To the screen he said, "Captain Sivok, are you agreeable to that?"

The Vulcan captain nodded. "It is also logical that you remain on station, Captain. Your vessel's armaments are superior to ours, and would be better suited to defend against any attempt by the Gorn to enter the rift."

"Sounds as though we have a plan," Okagawa said. "Our science and engineering staffs will be standing by to render any assistance you need."

Several minutes passed, with the Lovell's bridge crew continuing to carry out their various assigned tasks, before Ensign Pzial said, "Sir, the T'Saura is signaling that they are ready to make the attempt."

"Excellent," the captain replied. "Keep a frequency open to them, Ensign." Looking to the science station, he said, "Let's see what they're doing, Mr. Xav."

Hearing the order, al-Khaled turned from his station to see an image of the T'Saura as it moved away from the Lovell. The stout, utilitarian hull of the Antares-class science vessel was comprised of the same basic components that applied to most Starfleet ships, with two main hull sections and a pair of warp nacelles. Unlike other vessels in the fleet, however, the Antares ships held little in the way of aesthetic design features. Their nacelles were mounted below the engineering section, and their primary hull was little more than a blunt, rounded rectangle housing four decks, including the main bridge.

No one said anything as the T'Saura approached one of the mines drifting alone in space. As depicted by the Lovell's sensors and image-rendering software, the cylindrical device appeared inert, offering no clue that it might be an active and dangerous weapon. That made sense, al-Khaled knew, as part of a mine's effectiveness would be its ability to appear innocuous to a passing vessel until it was too late.

"We have selected one of the mines," the voice of Captain Sivok said over the bridge intercom. "We are holding our distance at twenty-five kilometers, and Commander Danhauser is preparing to activate the deflector dish and release the polaron burst."

"Acknowledged, Captain," Okagawa replied. "We are standing by."

As al-Khaled and the rest of the bridge crew watched, a golden beam of energy emitted from the T'Saura's main deflector dish, lancing out and away from the ship until it enveloped the squat cylinder.

"Captain," Xav said, "our sensors are detecting fluctuations in the mine's dampening field. The polaron beam seems to be working."

Just as quickly as the Tellarite offered his report, however, an alarm klaxon suddenly blared, echoing in the bridge's confines. Xav returned his attention to his sensors' displays even as zh'Rhun spun to face Okagawa.

"Energy readings from the minefield, Captain. Other mines are reacting to the beam. Seven of them are

moving out of position and converging on the T'Saura.”

“Captain Sivok!” Okagawa shouted, bolting from his seat. “Deactivate that beam! Now!”

On the screen, the energy beam disappeared, and al-Khaled watched as the science vessel abruptly rotated on its axis, its helmsman no doubt responding to orders for evasive action. Eight mines, including the one originally targeted by the polaron burst, were maneuvering to surround the T'Saura even as the ship continued to move away from the perimeter of the minefield.

“They’re still moving in,” the engineer said, feeling his mouth go slack as he watched the situation unfolding on the viewer.

“Commander zh’Rhun!” Okagawa prompted.

Standing behind Lieutenant Diamond at the weapons and defense station, the Andorian first officer said, “Phasers standing by, sir.” Even with the rising anxiety that was beginning to envelop the bridge, zh’Rhun continued to maintain her unruffled demeanor. To the lieutenant, zh’Rhun said, “Fire at your discretion.”

Diamond wasted no time carrying out the order, her finger pressing a fire control button even before the words finished leaving the first officer’s mouth. On the screen, blue phaser energy spat forward, closing the distance to the mine the lieutenant had targeted and washing over it an instant before the Gorn weapon detonated.

And then another alarm sounded.

“Captain!” Xav yelled. “Four mines are leaving the perimeter and closing on our position!”

Of course!

The words screamed in al-Khaled’s mind as realization dawned. “They’re swarming defensively to any threat they detect!” he shouted. “Cease fire!”

“Impact in five seconds!” Xav warned.

Al-Khaled sensed Grace moving toward his console and saw the chief engineer stab at the intercom control. “Engineering! Divert emergency power to the shields!”

The last thing al-Khaled heard was Okagawa’s warning for all hands to brace for impact before the first of the mines struck the Lovell’s shields. The lighting flickered, and nearly every display on the bridge went dark as a third and fourth collision came.

“Damage report!” Okagawa ordered even as the main lighting failed and was replaced by emergency illumination in the seconds following the final attack.

Zh’Rhun replied, “Shields are down seventy-nine percent, and there is some buckling on the outer hull near the shuttlebay.”

Al-Khaled added, “One of the mines struck near engineering and overloaded the shield generator in that section, Captain. We’ve got a host of circuit burnouts and a few power relays are down. Repairs should not take long to complete.”

Okagawa pointed to the viewscreen. “Get that thing back on. What’s the status of the T’Saura?”

“I am unable to reestablish contact, sir,” Pzial replied. “They are not responding on any frequency.”

Al-Khaled felt the knot of dread forming in his gut even as the viewscreen chose that moment to respond to Xav’s attempts to reactivate it. The engineer turned in time to see it sputter and shimmer before resolving into a picture of open space, along with an expanding cloud of debris—all that remained of the T’Saura.

Chapter

7

Somberness hung like an ominous dark cloud over the Lovell’s briefing room. His own mind consumed by the tragic events of the past hour, al-Khaled noted that all of the officers seated at the conference table appeared content to wallow in their own thoughts. Apparently unwilling to look at one another, each person’s attention was instead focused on something, anything, else. Commander zh’Rhun studied the padd she had brought with her while Lieutenant Xav kept his gaze fixed on the table’s polished surface. Engineer Grace merely sat back in his chair, his eyes closed and with his hands clasped in front of his face, adopting an almost Vulcan-like meditative posture. The sheer burden of emotion weighing on the room’s occupants seemed to al-Khaled to have been here forever, despite his having arrived mere moments ago.

“Okay, people,” Captain Okagawa said from where he sat at the head of the table, “we’ve got ourselves a situation here. We need some ideas on how to solve it, and we need them pretty damned quick.” He said nothing else as he settled into his chair, instead taking the opportunity to study the faces of the other people in the room who were now looking to him for guidance. Al-Khaled watched as Okagawa’s expression seemed to soften, and he nodded slowly.

“Losing a ship—any ship—is hard,” he said after a moment. “Even if we didn’t actually know anyone aboard the T’Saura personally, they were still our brothers and sisters. But I think you know we have to put our feelings aside for the time being and concentrate on our immediate situation.” Turning to Commander zh’Rhun, he asked, “What’s your tactical analysis of the minefield?”

Already seated ramrod straight in her chair, the first officer replied, “The mines are not simply holding station wherever they are deployed, sir.” Her voice and demeanor were all business, her bearing in place and holding steady as she concentrated on answering the captain’s question. “A scan of communications frequencies has revealed a steady string of encrypted burst transmissions between the individual devices and the unmanned vessel that dispersed them. We have not been able to decipher the encryption scheme yet, but our analysis shows a heavy correlation between the transmissions and the maneuvering of the mines into different spread patterns at irregular intervals.”

“Interesting tactic,” Okagawa said. “It lets them defend a large area with a limited number of devices by altering their dispersal pattern as needed to compensate for new threats.”

Nodding, zh’Rhun replied, “Yes, sir. They also appear to have standalone defensive capabilities that come into play whenever an outside influence attempts to compromise the field. Each mine is apparently programmed to react to any such situation within a predefined range of distance.” The Andorian paused for a moment, and al-Khaled noted the slow, deep breath she took before continuing. “That is essentially what happened to the T’Saura. When the ship fired its polaron beam at one mine, others within that

defensive sphere reacted to the threat, homing in on the source of the beam and attacking it en masse.”

Okagawa’s brow furrowed as he listened to the report, and al-Khaled imagined the various scenarios playing out in the captain’s mind as he considered their situation. “What if we try to disrupt this link between the mines and their control ship?”

Sitting across from zh’Rhun, Lieutenant Xav replied, “If their previous behavior is any indication, they will view such an act as aggressive and respond in similar fashion against us, sir.”

“It gets worse, Captain,” al-Khaled said. He had also spent the time since the destruction of the T’Saura performing his own sensor scans of the minefield, and his findings were no more encouraging than the information zh’Rhun had conveyed. “The control ship also has the ability to replenish the minefield. It’s already replaced those lost during the attack on the T’Saura, and it was able to reconfigure the existing devices into patterns that minimized the gaps created by any mines that were detonated. Between that and their preprogrammed defensive schemes, the field’s doing a pretty good job of hemming us in.”

Okagawa said, “Commander zh’Rhun reported earlier that the mines didn’t seem interested in us as long as we remained stationary. Is that still a valid assessment?”

Leaning forward in his chair, Commander Grace nodded. “They do not appear to be attracted to our propulsion system in a manner similar to devices employed by the Klingons or Romulans, sir. As long as we do not cross their defensive perimeter, or attempt to attack or disrupt them in any fashion, they seem content to ignore us. In fact, remaining in place and doing nothing seems to be the safest course of action.”

“Except that I have a problem when those terms are dictated to me,” Okagawa snapped. “The Gorn don’t get to decide who enters and exits the Triangle, and their actions have already cost us the T’Saura and her crew. That’s as far as they go, at least as long as I have anything to say about it. I want that minefield neutralized, and I want it done damned quick.”

The expression on the captain’s face appeared almost to be a challenge, daring anyone at the table to say that his demands were impossible to meet. Al-Khaled knew from past experience that offering such repudiation carried nearly the same risk as freefalling naked through a planet’s atmosphere. Simply put, Daniel Okagawa would not take no for an answer, especially now.

“If we can’t disrupt or disarm the mines without them turning on us,” al-Khaled said, “then it seems like the only other option is to figure out a way to disable their control ship.”

Shaking her head, zh’Rhun countered, “It makes sense that some form of protection scheme exists for it, as well.”

“Even if we disable the ship’s ability to communicate with the mines?” Xav asked.

“If I were designing a system like that one,” al-Khaled said, “the first thing I’d do is build in a program that reacted to that scenario. For all we know, the second the mines detect any kind of interruption in the signal from the control ship, they could attack any enemy ship in the area.”

“Well then,” Okagawa replied, “let’s try to avoid that, shall we?” His tone had lightened somewhat, the captain no doubt heartened by watching his people turning their energies toward the process of analyzing their current problem and devising potential solutions. “The ship is unoccupied, but the Gorn obviously have some method of retaining command of it. There has to be something there that we can imitate for

seizing control of that thing.”

“Perhaps the solution we need is not a technical one.”

The statement was simple, delivered in a subdued voice, but even then it was enough to make everyone else at the table turn to where Grace sat, his hands still held in front of him as he maintained his familiar contemplative pose.

“Mr. Grace?” Okagawa prompted, his raised eyebrows illustrating his curiosity.

His expression neutral, the Lovell’s chief engineer remained silent for an additional few seconds, appearing to compose his answer before saying, “It is prudent to assume that any strategy we attempt that can be traced back to the ship will prove disastrous. Therefore, it seems that we must look beyond mere mechanics for our answer.” Dropping his hands to his lap, he added, “Fortunately, we are in a position to request some rather specialized assistance.”

* * *

Sitting in the copilot’s seat of the Shuttlecraft Mizuki, al-Khaled could not ignore the knot of worry forming in his gut as the small vessel left the safety of the Lovell’s shuttlebay and maneuvered into the void of empty space.

“If anyone cares,” he said as he studied his console and reassured himself that all systems were operating normally, “I’d like to go on record one more time as being very uncomfortable with this idea.”

From where he sat in the pilot’s chair, Grace did not look up from his console as he replied, “This is not altogether different from a simulation that was once offered at Starfleet Academy as part of the strategic operations curriculum. During one of the more difficult exercises, you were confronted with a ship that laid mines in random patterns, which you were required to navigate while attempting to destroy the ship itself and avoid damage to your own vessel.”

“How did you do on the test?” al-Khaled asked, already feeling his stomach tighten again in anticipation of the answer.

Grace shrugged, his expression remaining neutral as he worked. “I passed the simulation two out of four times.”

“And this is supposed to make me feel better?”

“As team commander, you did have the option of remaining on the Lovell.” The words were delivered in a bantering manner, one al-Khaled recognized as the chief engineer’s usual way of defusing tension.

“You know me,” he said. “I’m a glutton for punishment.” In truth, he could count on the fingers of one hand the number of missions assigned to his team that he had not led personally. This was not due to an inflated ego or sense of self-importance, but rather that al-Khaled preferred to think of himself as one who led first by example. He did not exempt himself from the less glamorous missions to which the Lovell’s team of engineers often found themselves assigned, and if his people had to face a dangerous situation, they did so while following him.

Just like now.

“Lovell to Mizuki,” The voice of Captain Okagawa sounded over the shuttlecraft’s intercom. “Sensors aren’t detecting any activity from the minefield. So far, your flight isn’t attracting any attention.”

Confirming Okagawa’s report with the shuttle’s own sensor readings, al-Khaled replied, “Acknowledged, Captain. Everything reads good to go here, as well.”

“We’re preparing to maneuver back into the rift, Mahmud. You’ll be able to keep in contact with us via the subspace beacons, but otherwise you’re on your own.”

At Commander zh’Rhun’s insistence, it had been decided that Lovell would return to Elysia before al-Khaled and Grace put their plan in motion to combat the Gorn minefield. Okagawa had initially resisted the idea, preferring instead to remain in a position to offer possible assistance to the shuttlecraft, but had finally acceded to his first officer’s recommendations. If the engineers aboard the Mizuki did something that triggered some kind of defensive scheme and caused the mines to target any enemy vessel within range of the field, the safest place for the Lovell to be was inside the Delta Triangle.

“Understood, sir,” al-Khaled said. “We’ll keep you apprised of our progress.”

“See that you do,” Okagawa replied, a hint of teasing now apparent in his voice. “Not that I’m really worried about anything happening to you, but that is a brand-new shuttlecraft you’re flying there. Try to bring it back in one piece, if you don’t mind. Lovell out.”

“Always the doting dad,” al-Khaled muttered, exchanging knowing grins with Grace before turning in his seat to face the shuttlecraft’s third occupant. “Magen? Are you all right?”

Seated in the chair positioned behind Grace, the alien woman nodded in reply. “Yes, Commander. Thank you.” Slender and petite, Magen appeared too fragile to be able to withstand any sort of physical demands placed on her body.

Like the rest of her race, however, she was ideally suited to the undertaking for which the Lovell crew had called upon her.

“I see the mines,” she said after a moment. Seated with her arms folded across her chest, the Cygnian woman appeared to be staring off into nothingness, but al-Khaled knew she was instead focusing her considerable mental talents to the task at hand. “There are so many of them.”

Grace’s idea of employing the psionic abilities possessed by several of the Triangle’s inhabitants had been a stroke of genius, in al-Khaled’s opinion. Such individuals had been providing the eclectic community with an invaluable service for centuries, using their formidable mental powers to neutralize weapons and any other instruments that posed a threat to the peace of Elysia.

Still, even these remarkable people, including Magen, had limits. Within minutes of arriving aboard the Lovell, the Cygnian woman had determined that the Gorn minelayer vessel, currently positioned well outside the minefield it had created, was also beyond the range of Magen’s psionic abilities. For her to exert any influence on the ship, she would have to be closer.

This, of course, meant navigating through the minefield.

“Approaching the first mine now,” Grace reported. If the chief engineer was nervous, al-Khaled could detect no sign of it in the man’s voice. Instead, his attention was focused on his console and the viewing ports in front of him. He manipulated the Mizuki’s controls with the confidence and flair befitting his

well-earned status as the most accomplished shuttlecraft pilot among the Lovell's crew.

"One moment," Magen said, her eyes closing and her brow wrinkling in concentration. She had been the one to suggest this course of action, maneuvering through the minefield and attempting to divert only those mines that posed a danger to the shuttlecraft during its flight. It was not an idea that al-Khaled had welcomed, but neither he nor any of the other Lovell engineers had been able to propose an alternative.

Al-Khaled watched her, already beginning to wonder if the woman was attempting something that exceeded her abilities, when an alert tone sounded from his console. Turning in his seat, he checked his sensor displays, a smile tugging at his lips as he saw what the readouts were reporting.

"The mine just went inoperative," he said. "I'm picking up movement in three others." He looked up from his console at Grace. "They're reacting to the first one going offline."

"Magen?" Grace prompted, not turning from his controls.

"I see them," the Cygnian replied, her eyes still closed.

Within seconds, al-Khaled noted new sensor readings that showed those three mines deactivating. "She's got them," he said, but any excitement he might have felt was short-lived. "I'm picking up seven more reacting to the situation."

Tapping rapid-fire strings of commands to his console, Grace called out, "Increasing speed to one-half impulse."

The acceleration was so sudden that al-Khaled actually felt himself pressed into his seat in the instant before the shuttlecraft's inertial dampeners could compensate. A proximity alert beeped, and he had just enough time to register it before his stomach detected the ship's roll to port.

"Nicely done," he offered as the alert signal terminated.

Beads of sweat were now visible on Grace's forehead. "More of the mines are reacting to our presence."

"I know," al-Khaled replied, attending to the sensors. From the looks of things, Magen was doing a superb job diverting the mines that lay in the Mizuki's path, but for every one she disabled, several of its adjacent companions reacted to the strange disruption in the minefield's integrity. "Every mine within two hundred kilometers of our position is going haywire." Sparing a second to glance over his shoulder, he looked at their passenger. "Magen?"

There was no mistaking the strain that was now evident on the woman's face. "I cannot control them all," she said, her voice a tortured whisper. "I have to let some of them go."

Al-Khaled felt his pulse racing, heard the blood rushing in his ears as the shuttle's sensors told him what Magen was doing. "Okay, I see what you mean." To Grace, he said, "She's releasing control of any mines that aren't posing an immediate danger to us." According to his sensors, the first act of the reactivated mines was to assume a defensive patrolling posture, searching for whatever had disrupted their operation in the first place.

Still, it was not enough.

“The entire field seems to be reacting,” he reported seconds later. “The dispersal pattern is shifting, assuming a new configuration.”

“Almost there,” Grace said, biting off each word through gritted teeth. “Four thousand kilometers and closing.”

Then a secondary warning blared for attention, louder than the rest, and al-Khaled nearly felt his heart burst from his chest. “Mine, port side aft!”

Grace’s fingers moved as though possessed of their own will, almost too fast for al-Khaled’s eyes to follow, and the Mizuki lurched as the chief engineer applied more speed while attempting an evasive maneuver. The stars outside the viewports seemed to stretch and streak as the shuttlecraft banked hard to starboard.

The hull shuddered around them, and al-Khaled grabbed on to the console for support as he felt the deck plates pitch beneath his feet. “What was that?”

“I managed to make the mine miss us and collide with another one that was homing in on us,” Grace replied, his voice tense as he fought to keep the shuttlecraft under control.

“There’s too many of them for you to keep this up,” al-Khaled said. “We have to get out of here.”

Grace shook his head. “Eighteen hundred kilometers and closing.”

Casting a glance over his shoulder, he saw that Magen had nearly tucked herself into a ball, her entire body shaking as she struggled under the increasing demands being forced upon her. Her eyes were tightly shut and her lips moved, though she said nothing aloud.

Then the sensor board in front of al-Khaled suddenly lit up like a Christmas tree, and his attention was torn between multiple proximity warnings and more indications of mines maneuvering from their passive defensive positions than he could count. Most of them were altering their trajectories.

Toward them.

“I’m tracking twenty-seven mines heading for us!” he said, hearing his voice crack under the strain. For an insane moment, he mentally rebuked himself for his momentary loss of self-control before the alarms beckoned him once more. Between working to track the constantly shifting sensor readings and trying to keep from being thrown from his chair by any of Grace’s vicious evasive maneuvering, there simply was no time left over for him to be scared. His attention was locked on the sensor display and its representation of twenty-seven red indicators closing on a single point, the small blue dot that was the Mizuki. Some of the red dots winked out as Magen’s psionic abilities overcame individual mines, but far too many were still getting through. Not that it mattered, of course. Just one of the devices would be more than enough to obliterate the shuttlecraft.

The circle of red tightened with each heartbeat, and when his mind finally communicated to him that only a handful of those remained, al-Khaled closed his eyes.

Then the alarms ceased.

His eyes snapped open and immediately homed in on the sensor readouts, only to see that all of the red indicators were gone.

“What the hell just happened?” he asked no one in particular as he bent forward to get a better look at the sensors.

“The entire field has gone inoperative,” Grace said. “Magen?”

From behind the engineers, the alien woman had sunk into her own seat, fatigue clouding her exotic features. Perspiration ran freely down the sides of her face, and dark circles had formed under her yellow eyes, but nevertheless she nodded to al-Khaled. “Commander Grace was able to maneuver us close enough for me to disable the control ship.”

Releasing the pent-up breath he only now realized he was holding, al-Khaled blinked several times as he tried to comprehend what had just happened. “That’s it? It’s over?”

“Apparently so,” Grace said, his tone also exhibiting signs of unfettered relief. “The minelayer is completely inert, along with all of the mines.”

Still facing Magen, al-Khaled saw her rub her face with her hand. Her eyes fluttered, and she took several short, shallow breaths. “Are you all right?” he asked.

“The effort was more than I was prepared to cope with,” the Cygnian replied. “I must rest for a time.” Offering a weak smile, she added, “I will be fine.”

Entering another string of commands to his console, Grace said, “There’s a docking port on the top of the ship that we can link up with.”

“Let’s do it, then,” al-Khaled said, nodding tiredly and allowing himself to slump into his seat. A moment later he felt the hull of the Mizuki vibrate lightly as it made contact with the exterior of the Gorn ship.

His fatigue was pushed aside, though, replaced by a new wave of worry as a sensor alert sounded from his console.

“Let me guess...” Grace said, letting the sentence trail away.

Al-Khaled nodded. “The Gorn are coming back.”

Chapter 8

Red gave way to black and stars filled the viewscreen as the Delta Triangle yielded its grip on the Lovell, and for a second time Daniel Okagawa breathed a sigh of relief. Although he knew that Commander Grace’s modifications to the deflector shields protected the ship’s dilithium crystals from the region’s debilitating effects, it was still comforting to be back in normal space.

Well, he reminded himself, almost comforting.

“Go to red alert,” he ordered as he rose from his chair. “Mr. Xav, where are our friends?”

Bent over the hooded viewer at his station, the science officer did not look up as he replied, “Three

vessels, sir, approaching from different directions. All of them are closing on the minelayer. Estimated time of arrival is two point four minutes.”

“Rodriguez,” Okagawa said as he stepped up behind the helm officer, “get us there now. I want to be ahead of the Gorn.”

“Aye, sir,” the lieutenant replied as she entered the necessary commands. Leaving her to her task, Okagawa looked to Xav again. “Just the three? They didn’t call for backup?”

The Tellarite shook his head. “No, sir. There are no signs of other ship activity anywhere in sensor range.”

“I suppose we should be thankful for small favors,” Okagawa said. “They may not know what’s wrong yet, except that all of their mines suddenly fell asleep.” Had the Gorn somehow failed to detect the Shuttlecraft Mizuki as it navigated the minefield? Were their sensors more limited than those on the Lovell?

Too good to be true, he reminded himself.

“Let’s have the phasers, Lieutenant Diamond,” he said. “How are the shields holding up?”

“Functioning normally, sir,” the weapons officer responded. “Now that we are out of the rift, we are no longer experiencing the strain of the Triangle’s effects. We’ll be ready when the Gorn get here.”

It seemed obvious to Okagawa that the Gorn would not want to destroy the ship they had left to oversee the minefield, even if members of the Lovell’s crew were aboard. Still, they would almost certainly send a boarding party to deal with the intruders, a proposition that did not sit well with the captain.

Nodding in approval at Diamond’s report, Okagawa said, “While you’re at it, feel free to destroy as many of those mines as you can while we’re en route.” Looking to the communications station, he ordered, “Pzial, get me the Mizuki,” he said.

A moment later the Rigelian reported that he had established contact with Commander al-Khaled, and Okagawa turned to see the image of the young engineer on the main viewscreen, standing in a room that looked nothing like the interior of a Starfleet shuttlecraft. “Mahmud, I probably don’t have to tell you that we’ve got company on the way.”

“No, sir,” al-Khaled said. “We’ve managed to get ourselves aboard the minelayer, and we’re getting our first look at its systems now. Basically, this thing is a flying armory. There’s a small control center here, presumably for maintenance workers or technicians.” Shrugging, he waved to one of several workstations lining the bulkheads of the cramped room, all of which looked to be designed for the larger physiology of the Gorn. “It has what looks like a helm console for a living pilot, but otherwise it’s nothing but an automated dispersal system for the mines and the computer and communications systems to oversee them once they’re deployed.” Holding up his tricorder for emphasis, he added, “I’ve set up a link to what looks to be the weapons control system. With T’Laen’s help, we might be able to gain access.”

Looking over to where the young Vulcan woman was seated at the bridge station adjacent to Diamond’s, Okagawa said, “What about it, Lieutenant?” It was almost a rhetorical question, he knew, but one he still had to ask. As the resident computer expert on al-Khaled’s team, T’Laen was well versed not only in the hardware and software that comprised all of Starfleet’s systems, but also those of Federation allies and enemies alike.

Her long, slender fingers already moving over her console, she replied, “The system is not complex, but there is a great deal of inefficiency in its design. It will take time to negotiate some of the more cumbersome aspects of the software.”

“Captain,” Xav reported, “the Gorn ships will be within their weapons range in fifty seconds.”

Looking to the helm, Okagawa asked, “Where are we?”

“We’ll be in transporter range in less time than that, sir,” Rodriquez replied, her attention focused on her console.

“Time’s up, Mahmud,” the captain said to al-Khaled. “I’m pulling you out of there.”

On the screen, the engineer replied, “Captain, wait. If the Gorn get back here, they’ll just reactivate the minefield themselves. I don’t think Magen is strong enough to repeat what she did to get us this far, at least not without some rest.”

“Can she do anything about the ships heading this way?” Okagawa asked. “Disable their weapons? Anything?”

Al-Khaled shook his head. “Just getting here exhausted her, sir.”

The options available to them were dwindling with each passing second, the captain knew. For a moment, he considered simply transporting his people away from the minelayer and destroying it, but just as quickly discarded the notion. After all, he reasoned, such an act might trigger some sort of final defensive maneuver in any remaining mines.

“Captain,” zh’Rhun suddenly called out. “The Gorn are within weapons range.”

Anything else the Andorian might have said was drowned out as an alarm klaxon echoed across the bridge. An instant later something slammed into the Lovell.

“Return fire!” zh’Rhun shouted even as Okagawa cried, “Get me a visual!”

The image on the main viewer shifted to show one of the wedge-shaped Gorn vessels just as it moved beyond the edge of the screen. As it disappeared, another arrived to take its place, harsh green energy spitting forth from the foremost point of its hull and hurtling through space directly at the Lovell.

“Firing phasers,” Diamond said, and Okagawa watched as twin beams of blue energy lanced forward to strike the enemy vessel. The effects were immediate, with the Gorn ship veering up and away from its flight and maneuvering out of range of the viewer. Any sense of victory Okagawa might have felt, however, vanished as the Lovell once again came under fire.

“The Gorn vessels are faster and more maneuverable at sublight speeds than we are, Captain,” Xav said.

“Are they firing on the minelayer?” Okagawa asked.

“No, sir,” the Tellarite replied.

They don't want to damage it, the captain mused, which means they can't control the minefield without it. It also meant that the Gorn would almost certainly transport a boarding party to their wayward ship at the first opportunity.

"Give me a tactical view," he said. Xav entered the necessary commands, and a computer-generated graphic appeared on the main screen, showing the Lovell at the center of the display and a trio of red wedges moving about the ship. Okagawa tensed as he saw green indicators leap from two of the ships. The Lovell's shields absorbed the double strike.

"Captain," Lieutenant T'Laen said, though she did not turn from her station, "one of the Gorn vessels is attempting to access the minelayer's onboard computer system."

"Can you keep them out?" Okagawa asked.

Her fingers still moving with incredible speed over the array of controls on her console, the Vulcan replied, "I am endeavoring to do just that, sir."

Another energy blast struck the Lovell's shields, and this time Okagawa was sure the effects of the attack were more pronounced. How much more punishment could they take?

"Mines!" Xav suddenly yelled. "Sensors are registering activations throughout the field!"

Okagawa looked over to T'Laen, who only shook her head. "It is not me, Captain."

On the viewer, the tactical schematic was already updating its imagery to show dozens of the mines coming back online, represented by small crimson dots flaring into existence all across the screen.

"They are moving from their established configuration and heading in our direction," Xav reported.

"How many?" Okagawa asked.

"All of them, sir," the Tellarite replied. "Three hundred eighty-seven."

Okagawa watched the scene unfold on the viewer, the computer-generated map now showing the hundreds of mines in a spherical formation that had begun to contract in on itself. It took him an extra moment to realize that the network of weapons was adjusting its position not to the movements of the Lovell, but instead to the trio of Gorn ships attacking it.

And he smiled.

"It seems that al-Khaled and Grace have been busy," he said, making no effort to keep the rising excitement from his voice as, on the viewscreen, the bubble of red dots continued to tighten until the three Gorn ships were surrounded and they stopped moving altogether.

"Al-Khaled to Lovell," the voice of the engineer called out over the intercom. "Captain, as you might be able to see, we've had some success with the computer systems over here."

Nodding in satisfaction at the now stationary formation of Gorn vessels and mines depicted on the viewer, Okagawa said, "Nicely played, Mahmud. How long can you hold them there?"

"Now that we've figured out the system?" al-Khaled said. "How long did you have in mind?"

* * *

Al-Khaled forced himself to remain still as Ambassador Robert Fox made his fourth circuit of the Lovell's briefing room. Tall and thin, the diplomat was dressed in a muted gray suit that only served to highlight his severe, hawklike features, which at this moment seemed to be set in a permanent scowl. In keeping with his notorious reputation, the man had said little that was not related to the matter at hand since arriving aboard, his mood undoubtedly hardened not only by the nearly three-week journey out from Earth but also by the political quagmire into which he had stepped.

"The Gorn have accepted the Elysian Council's proposal," he said, his voice thick with that variety of egotism that seemed to al-Khaled to be standard issue for most Federation diplomats. "They have already withdrawn the minefield, and have agreed to take no offensive action against Elysia in exchange for the assurances they've made."

Seated at the far end of the conference table, Okagawa nodded. "They'll continue to take responsibility for those Gorn who reside there. Their laws won't permit punishment for any actions prior to their arrival in Elysia, but the council has agreed that the Gorn will never leave the Triangle."

"You can be sure the Hegemony will establish some type of observation outpost to keep an eye on things here," Commander zh'Rhun said, leaning forward in her chair, "but I don't think they'll ever venture into the rift itself." Shrugging, she added, "Not that it would matter, as the Elysians who possess psionic powers would be able to neutralize any threat that arose. It seems it will be a case of everyone leaving everyone else alone."

Sitting across from the first officer, al-Khaled said, "That'd seem to be the best we could hope for, all things considered. We can be thankful the Gorn are willing to give in to the peculiar dynamics of this situation in favor of the larger benefits it affords them with the Federation." Shaking his head, he exhaled a tired breath. "It seems that like us, they've learned a few things since our first encounter. Still, I'll be surprised if creating any kind of lasting understanding with them takes less than a century."

"You're not alone in that assessment, Commander," Fox said as he stopped his pacing and faced the table. "To say that the unorthodox tactics you used against Captain Lahr and his ships didn't sit well would be a gross understatement. They'll be smarting over that one for quite some time. While I wouldn't normally condone what you did, I've come to learn that in some extreme situations, such aggressive actions are necessary. In this case, it did have the effect of causing everyone to step back and take a breath." To Okagawa, he said, "Nicely done, Captain."

"Thank you, Ambassador," Okagawa replied, offering a polite nod.

Resuming his stroll around the table, Fox said, "What does raise concern is Elysia's request to be declared off-limits. Naturally, the Federation will honor their wishes, but we'd be missing out on a huge opportunity to tap into the historical and scientific knowledge the Triangle represents."

Al-Khaled had to force his expression to remain neutral. Was this the same Ambassador Robert Fox who despised such issues clouding the politics of any situation? Had he been replaced by some sort of alien with a better temperament?

We should be so lucky.

"I'm sure an agreement can be reached, Ambassador," Okagawa said. "Their request is meant more as

a means to further assure the security the Gorn have requested, as well as an attempt to keep their society as free from disruption as possible. As you've already pointed out, they present an unmatched allure to the curious, something they'd want to minimize as much as possible."

"So far as most of the rest of the galaxy is concerned," Fox replied, "the Delta Triangle is still a mystery of space, and we'll do our best to keep it that way. Now that the subspace beacons are in place, they'll call us if they want to talk to us." Pausing for a moment, the diplomat offered an appreciative nod to Okagawa. "As for you and your people, Captain, it seems you've got one last affair to tend to before you can call this mission complete."

Smiling in satisfaction, Okagawa said, "Indeed we do, Ambassador. We've got three very special passengers with us, and an entire world waiting to greet them."

The Lovell had already been assigned the enviable task of ferrying three members of the Valzhan colony ship back to their planet, so that they might tell the incredible story of the wayward vessel and its fate to the descendants of its passengers and crew. It promised to be an unprecedented homecoming, an event al-Khaled was already looking forward to witnessing. As for the other Valzhan and the rest of the people who had chosen to remain in Elysia, it was difficult for him not to be drawn to the fascinating and even awe-inspiring aspects of their reality.

Beyond the limits of the Delta Triangle, suns would be born and die out, civilizations would rise and fall, territorial boundaries would be drawn and redrawn, enemies would become allies and perhaps even adversaries yet again as the ages passed.

But for the people of Elysia? Things would continue as they always had, tucked away as the Elysians were in their small pocket of the universe where time stood still.

Chapter 9

Stardate 54201.1, Earth Year 2377

Standing in the reception chamber with Guardian Royano, Carol Abramowitz marveled at the size of the room. It was larger than she had expected it to be, especially considering the limited nature of the artificial constructs the people of Elysia had developed in order to sustain their existence here in the Delta Triangle. What it lacked in size, however, it more than made up for with its ornate beauty.

"This hall is magnificent," she finally said, no longer able to hold her admiration in check. "It's truly a monument to the society you've created here."

Had she not been told beforehand, Abramowitz would never have believed that this enclave had been forged from the hull sections of several vessels. Colocated with the meeting chamber used by the members of the Elysian Council, this hall was the single surrender to indulgence that she had yet seen. It was lavishly appointed with a vast collection of artwork, tapestry, and furnishings which had been donated by nearly every race represented by the ships trapped here in the Triangle and which were as varied as those who had created them.

One area of the chamber had caught her attention almost from the moment of their arrival: an anteroom of sorts that featured a gallery of portraits, rendered in a variety of styles and an equally wide variety of

materials. Still, the paintings all followed a common theme, with each offering a representation of an individual being.

Devna, the Orion woman who had first contacted the *Vinci* upon its arrival at the Delta Triangle and who was now acting as escort for Abramowitz and Guardian Royano, walked across the room to stand next to Abramowitz. “We have always felt it important to recognize each race of people who have joined us,” she said, her voice almost lyrical as she spoke. “Here we honor the leaders of the vessels who were drawn to Elysia over the centuries, and who by their example showed the way for all of our people to work through our differences for the greater good of our community.”

Watching and listening to Devna, Abramowitz could not help but be struck by the study in contrasts the woman represented. At first glance she appeared as feral and beguiling as Orion females were said to be, with her dark, voluminous hair and her scant dress that clung provocatively to her lithe, green-skinned body.

Abramowitz had never encountered an Orion woman in person before today, but she was more than familiar with the numerous stories and myths surrounding their sensuality and the hold they were known to have on other humanoids, particularly males. Yet everything about how Devna projected herself—her openness, her calm attitude to her surroundings, her almost passive behavior—flew in the face of what the cultural specialist had heard or read about the exotic women. She had to wonder whether Devna had always stood apart from others of her race, or whether she had merely learned over the centuries to suppress her baser instincts in this culture of strictly enforced peace in order to survive.

Either way, she mused, there’s still more to those old space tales than some people would like to believe. Fabian will be so very disappointed to hear that.

“We appreciate the opportunity to visit your society, Devna,” Abramowitz said as the Orion woman began to lead them down a short corridor toward a pair of polished silver doors. “After all, it’s such a rare occurrence for a Federation vessel to enter your space.”

Nodding, the Orion woman replied, “Lest you forget, a century means nothing to us. When the council notified the Valzhan delegation of your intent, they even remarked that it seemed as though your people had just left us.”

“Well, in that case,” Abramowitz said, smiling, “I hope we don’t wear out our welcome by dropping by too often. Of course, we can still return the favor by ferrying anyone who wants to leave Elysia out of the Triangle.”

Devna offered a knowing smile. “Yours is not the first such offer we have received, but my answer now is as it has always been. Though I have found myself longing to see my home planet, or even the stars of the galaxy it inhabits, this is my home now. I have made peace with that, and accepted life here along with all it offers.”

Her comments were the last for several moments as the group walked down the long corridor and finally arrived at the ornate doors, which parted at their approach. Beyond the entry was another room, this one featuring furnishings that lacked the extravagance of the reception chamber and an overall reserved décor that Abramowitz recognized as being intended to host more formal ceremonial activities, such as the one they were about to begin now.

Standing in the center of the room, dressed in a regal array of cobalt-blue robes that clothed him from neck to feet, was a distinguished-looking Valzhan male. Abramowitz recognized him instantly, having

seen his image in the files she had studied while en route to the Delta Triangle: Saraven, the ship captain who had volunteered to command the first Valzhan deep-space colony vessel. She also knew that while he was well over five hundred years old by Earth standards, he appeared no less affected by the passage of time than he had obviously been the last time he had confronted a Starfleet crew.

A wide smile spread across Saraven's face as he beheld the group before him. "I see we have visitors. This is indeed a special occasion." Looking to Devna, he asked, "Is this why I was summoned here today?"

Indicating the Vinci away team with a wave of her hand, Devna replied, "Saraven, our guests have traveled a great distance to be with you this day."

"With me?" Saraven replied. "I do not understand."

Stepping forward, Royano held the protective case he had been carrying since departing the Vinci in front of him with both hands before bowing formally. "Saraven, former patriarch of the Clan Briphachi, I come to you today as a duly appointed envoy of the Ancestral Commission in order to present you with this, the *sjelorakem* of your family."

The last vestiges of any smile disappeared from Saraven's face even as Royano opened the case to reveal the cherished heirloom cradled within. At first he appeared awestruck at the sight of it, but that sense of wonder vanished almost as quickly, and Abramowitz saw the elder Valzhan's features darken, his brow furrowing in apparent confusion. "Why have you brought this here?" he asked. "Guardian, what has happened? What has become of my clan?"

His voice measured and solemn as he carried out the duties of his office, Royano replied, "In keeping with our customs, when one family ceases to exist as an independent clan, its *sjelorakem* must be properly retired. Clan Briphachi is no more, its eldest son having married a daughter of another family. The two families are now one, and identify themselves as Clan Iggrazo." Bowing again, the Valzhan courier added, "I am told it was a joyous union."

"Joyous?" Saraven repeated, making no effort to hide his surprise at the revelation. "For generations, our families often found ourselves cast on opposite sides of numerous ideological conflicts, and faced one another in battle more than once. There was much fighting and suffering, and whenever the hostilities ended and we thought there might be a chance at peace, another conflict would arise."

He lowered his head as if momentarily lost in thought, saying nothing for a moment. Abramowitz was certain she perceived a moment of regret cross the Valzhan's features before he returned his attention to her and Royano. "I am pleased that our two families were able to leave our past behind, though I am saddened that I was not there to see them forge their new beginning together." A hint of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "It is yet another example of how time can be an interesting companion to those who reside outside of Elysia."

Holding up the carrying case still in his possession, Royano said, "Saraven, as is our custom, your family's *sjelorakem* would normally have been interred by the Ancestral Commission once they joined with Clan Iggrazo. However, given your unique circumstances the commission has granted an exception to established tradition so that you might look upon this *sjelorakem* one final time before its retirement."

Saraven smiled knowingly. "Yes, of course." He reached for the heirloom's carrying case, taking it gently from Royano's hands to cradle it in his own. His fingers caressed the container's smooth, polished surface for a moment before looking up again.

“When I was asked to command the colony ship on its long voyage,” he said, “I knew I would in all likelihood never return home. It was a difficult time for my people, and the ship was seen as a beacon of hope, a way to cast light into the darkness in which we found ourselves. I was one of a very select few people with the skills deemed necessary to make the journey a success, and so it was with great reluctance that I accepted the assignment. In doing so, I surrendered my place as head of my family and so entrusted that responsibility to my oldest son, Maltim.” Holding up the case for emphasis, he added, “That meant giving him responsibility for this, as well.”

Focusing his attentions on Abramowitz for the first time, Saraven said, “When the last Starfleet ship came to us and I learned that my clan had not fared well during the massive war that had plagued my planet, I was sorely tempted to leave Elysia and return home. However, I decided that I was needed here, and that my family would continue to persevere without me as they already had for so long.” He shook his head. “I have often wondered if I erred in my decision, but never so strongly as I do now.”

Abramowitz sensed an opportunity to lend her skills to the situation. “Saraven, like many of your people whom we have encountered since your world joined our Federation, you have repeatedly demonstrated a willingness to answer the call of a higher purpose without regard for personal sacrifice. Though I have no way to be certain, it seems that your family would have respected your decision as well as understood the reasons behind it. In fact, is it reasonable that your eldest son, and all who took up the mantle of leadership in your clan after him, would have strived to continue on in your stead, if for nothing else than to honor the commitment you made to the Valzhan people.”

Having stood in respectful silence just behind Abramowitz and Royano during the past several minutes, Devna now stepped forward and placed a hand gently on Abramowitz’s shoulder. “You have a wisdom about you that belies your age, my young friend.” After a moment, she smiled and added, “Of course, my perception of age has changed since my arrival here in Elysia.”

“It’s more a simple desire to learn than any real wisdom,” Abramowitz replied. “My role in Starfleet is to understand the many different cultures we come into contact with and to use that knowledge to build stronger friendships with them. I’m fortunate in that my duties are in actuality just extensions of a natural curiosity I’ve had all my life.”

Saraven nodded in approval at that. “I have no doubt that the Valzhan appreciate all that Starfleet has done on our behalf.” He held up the case and the prized family possession it contained. “It therefore seems appropriate that I ask you to remain while I carry out the final act of my clan.”

Releasing the case’s small latch, he pulled open the container’s front cover, revealing the obelisk ensconced inside. Withdrawing thejelorakem , he set the case on the floor at his feet so that he could hold the object in both of his hands. He placed the palm of his right hand on the heirloom’s apex, and Abramowitz heard a distinctive click as the entire crystal seemed to sink slightly into its pedestal.

Then thejelorakem ’s four faces rose upward, opening like the petals of an exotic crystalline flower and revealing the interior of the obelisk as a mosaic of vibrant and multifaceted gemstones. Feeling her mouth drop open as she beheld the breathtaking sight before her, Abramowitz instinctively stepped closer to get a better look as the stones began to emit a soft light. It reflected off the interior faces of the obelisk itself, producing an almost holographic image that was projected outward between her and Saraven. The light coalesced into what she now saw was a scene depicting a small group of Valzhan gathered around a fire.

“Who are they?” she asked, noting as she did so that both Devna and Royano appeared to be similarly enraptured by thejelorakem ’s effects. “Members of your family?”

Standing perfectly still as the obelisk continued to generate its remarkable imagery, Saraven replied, “Thejelorakem carries a clan’s history within itself, storing and protecting that history so that it can be passed on from generation to generation. In the case of our family, that history dates back several thousand years. Many of the stories that comprise such a chronicle are usually private matters and not usually shared with those who are not of the clan. Because of this, it is rare for an outsider to witness an event such as this.”

Abramowitz felt an almost electric sensation in the air that played across her exposed skin, no doubt a reaction to the enormous significance represented by the elegant object in the Valzhan’s hands. “I’m honored that you’re allowing me to see this, Saraven. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You have already done so,” the Valzhan replied. “It is through your efforts that Guardian Royano was able to bring this to me. Because of that, I am granted the privilege of carrying out one last act on behalf of my family.”

Closing his eyes, Saraven raised the obelisk over his head. “Our clan is no more. May those who once lived under that name find peace and prosperity in union with their new family. As a final testament to the heritage we embrace as well as the legacy we leave behind, we consign thejelorakem of Clan Briphachi to the ages.”

As she watched, Abramowitz saw the image generated by the cherished heirloom begin to shift and move, as the entire millennia-spanning record of Saraven’s family was played out before her.

“Fate saw fit to lure me and my ship to this place where time has no meaning,” he said as thejelorakem continued to present its chronicle of the family to which it had been entrusted for uncounted generations. “It drew us from the lives we had known, only to hold us here while our families and friends continued in our absence. Now, it has conspired with the peculiar qualities of Elysia to offer me some measure of recompense.”

“It’s magnificent,” she said, making no attempt to hide the wonder in her voice. The images passed almost too fast for her to comprehend fully, but she reminded herself that receiving a cold, straightforward history lesson was not her mission here, nor had she been tasked with devising a solution to a problem she and her shipmates faced.

Time had brought Saraven full circle in the sequence of events he himself had put into motion centuries ago, and in the process had also provided her with the unparalleled opportunity to bear witness to this extraordinary event.

Not a bad day’s work for your average, everyday cultural specialist, Abramowitz decided with no small amount of pride, unable to suppress a feeling of giddiness as she reflected on the circumstances that had brought her to this wondrous place. Not bad at all.

About the Authors

DAYTON WARD has been a fan of Star Trek since conception (his, not the show’s). After serving for eleven years in the U.S. Marine Corps, he discovered the private sector and the piles of cash to be made there as a software engineer. He got his start in professional writing by having stories selected for each of Pocket Books’ first three Star Trek: Strange New Worlds writing contests. In addition to his various writing projects with Kevin Dilmore, Dayton is the author of the Star Trek novel *In the Name of Honor*

and the science fiction novel *The Last World War*. Though he currently lives in Kansas City with his wife, Michi, Dayton is a Florida native and still maintains a torrid long-distance romance with his beloved Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Readers interested in contacting Dayton or learning more about his writing are encouraged to venture to his Internet cobweb collection at <http://www.daytonward.com>.

After fifteen years as a newspaper reporter and editor, KEVIN DILMORE turned his full attention to his freelance writing career in 2003. Since 1997, he has been a contributing writer to *Star Trek Communicator*, writing news stories and personality profiles for the bimonthly publication of the Official *Star Trek* Fan Club. Look for Kevin's interviews with some of *Star Trek*'s most popular authors in volumes of the *Star Trek* Signature Editions. On the fictional side of things, his story "The Road to Edos" was published last year in the *Star Trek: New Frontier* anthology *No Limits*. With Dayton Ward, he has also written the novels *A Time to Sow* and *A Time to Harvest*, seven other *Star Trek: S.C.E.* eBooks, and a story for the anthology *Star Trek: Tales of the Dominion War*. A graduate of the University of Kansas, Kevin lives in Prairie Village, Kansas, with his wife, Michelle, and their three daughters.

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