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THE ART OF THE DEAL

Glenn Greenberg



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Chapter

1

U.S.S. da Vinci, Captain's Log, Stardate 54153.6:

Theda Vinci has been assigned to the planet Vemlar in the Norvel system, where the Federation has entered into a partnership with business tycoon Rod Portlyn to transform the planet from a farm world into a major industrial complex and scientific research and development center. This partnership is expected to benefit both sides greatly. Portlyn will gain access to technology and resources normally beyond his reach, and the Federation will share exclusive proprietary interest in any and all scientific breakthroughs and inventions developed on Vemlar by some of the most brilliant minds in the galaxy. The role of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers is to assist in the construction of the new key facilities on Vemlar. I expect this to be a reasonably easy mission.

* * *

Captain David Gold finished recording his log entry into the ship's library computer. Alone in his quarters, he leaned back in the chair situated at his work desk and sighed deeply. His ship and crew were now coming out of a relatively slow period, in between assignments. Of late, during these slower periods, Gold tended to look back on his long career and the choices he'd made.

Like any ambitious being, Gold was prone to wondering from time to time if he'd done as much as he could to go as far as he could in his career. Commanding the relatively small Saber-class da Vinci, with its crew of forty, was satisfying, to be sure, and he never felt any regrets. But of late, during his periods of downtime, Gold found himself reflecting on how things might have been different for him if he had been more ambitious, if he had tried harder, pushed harder.

If he were in command of a larger, more powerful ship, maybe a Sovereign-class vessel like Jean-Luc Picard's Enterprise, perhaps he would not have had to endure the tragic loss of half his crew, which occurred during the da Vinci's fateful mission at Galvan VI. Perhaps he would not have lost his hand, now replaced by a realistic but nonetheless artificial appendage.

Gold knew that even a ship like the Enterprise was not invulnerable. Hell, Picard was now on his second ship of that name, the previous one having crash-landed on Veridian III a while back. But that knowledge did little to change how Gold was feeling.

Exactly five months had passed since Galvan VI, and this anniversary served to remind the captain that while he had since come to terms with what had happened and was moving on, it would never be far from his thoughts. Losing people like Kieran Duffy and David McAllan and Stephen Drew and...

Enough, Gold finally told himself, shaking his head as if to wipe the slate clean in his mind. But he knew he would never completely be able to stop looking back and wondering about all the "what ifs."

Looking at the chronometer on his desk, he realized he was about to get a reprieve from his downtime. He was due in the transporter room, to beam down to Vemlar with his senior officers for a meeting that would officially get this project started. That was good; keeping busy would help him get his mind off the question that crept in and would not go away: Is this really how things were supposed to be?

* * *

Gold strode into the main transporter room to find the rest of his away team already there: Commander Sonya Gomez, first officer and head of the S.C.E. team; Dr. Elizabeth Lense, the ship's chief medical officer; Lieutenant Commander Domenica Corsi, the ship's security chief; Soloman, the Bynar computer specialist; and Fabian Stevens, tactical specialist and one of the most reliable and trusted engineers on board.

"So, what have you heard about this Rod Portlyn fellow we're meeting with?" Lense asked him as he came up beside the group.

"Not much more than what's in the official records," Gold replied. "Self-styled, independent entrepreneur and real estate mogul, friends in pretty high places. That includes Starfleet Command, by the way. He's known for buying up the majority of the real estate on various worlds, so that he essentially ends up owning the planets and adding them to his ever-growing business empire."

"Which the Federation is now getting involved in," Corsi chimed in with a tone that could only be interpreted as skeptical. Apparently, the blond security chief was not in complete support of this new business arrangement.

“I guess he made us an offer we couldn’t refuse,” Stevens said with a grin. Turning serious, he added, “On paper, it seems like a good situation for us. Who knows what kind of great stuff they’ll come up with here once this place is up and running? And the Federation will own a piece of all of it.”

Gomez said matter-of-factly, “It also brings the Federation into an area of space we’ve never really gone to before.”

Soloman, apparently in agreement with Stevens, then spoke up. “It is not as if the Federation has never before involved itself in civilian projects. The late twenty-third-century Genesis Project was partially funded by the Federation, and even involved the participation of that era’s Starfleet Corps of Engineers.”

Corsi responded, “It’s not exactly the same situation. The Genesis scientists were Federation citizens. Portlyn is a nonaligned, independent tycoon who mostly operates outside of Federation space—like this solar system, for example. He’s been pretty much a law unto himself, not having to answer to anyone—”

Gold finally cut off the conversation with a wave of his hand. “What say we stop talking about the man and start talking to him? We’re due at his headquarters right about now.”

The group fell silent and followed Gold up to the transporter platform, where they took their places on the pads.

Gold nodded to the transporter chief, Laura Poynter. “Energize.”

Poynter activated the console, and seconds later, Gold felt a brief, familiar wave of dizziness. He knew that he and the rest of the away team had just been transformed into shimmering columns of energy. But from his point of view, the transporter chamber faded away, to be replaced by a huge indoor reception area on the surface of the planet Vemlar.

The away team materialized on the ground floor of a sprawling, partially completed, five-story building complex. This was to be Rod Portlyn’s headquarters on Vemlar, and as such, it was the first structure on which work had begun. Construction workers—a hardy-looking bunch of men and women—were scattered all around the chamber, engaged in heavy lifting, laser-drilling, and energy-sawing. Some were taking coffee breaks. All were dressed in dark blue uniforms bearing the Portlyn name in large, stylized letters emblazoned on the backs. Before long, the S.C.E. would be working with these people.

Suddenly, a thin, tall, young human man with flat dark hair, dressed in an expensive-looking business suit, approached the da Vinci team.

“Captain Gold?” the young man inquired. When Gold nodded, the young man continued, “I’m Wellim Belvis, Mr. Portlyn’s assistant. He asked me to escort you to his office.”

“After you, Mr. Belvis,” Gold replied with a smile.

Belvis guided the away team to the building’s sole working turbolift, which he noted was reserved exclusively for transport to and from Portlyn’s office suite. The lift deposited them on the top floor, which looked almost totally completed. The floors were newly carpeted—that distinctive “new carpet smell” was the first thing that Gold noticed when the elevator doors slid open. The suite’s waiting area was furnished with several new, comfortable-looking chairs and a matching sofa. At the far end of the room was a plain-looking metallic desk occupied by a pretty young Andorian whom Gold assumed was Rod Portlyn’s secretary. She was unpacking some of her belongings and getting her cluttered desk into some

semblance of order, but she paused long enough to smile at the new visitors. Behind her were two tall, massive doors, which presumably opened into Portlyn's private office.

"Mr. Portlyn is wrapping up another meeting," Belvis said. "He'll be with you shortly."

Gold and his team headed over to the sofa and chairs to sit as they waited. But the two massive doors suddenly opened, and a beautiful, regal-looking, older human woman walked out, headed directly for the elevator. She carried a briefcase and wore a somewhat conservative red dress that began at her neck and ended at her ankles, although her shoulders were exposed. Her hair, jet-black with streaks of silver, was long and lustrous, but pinned up in a manner befitting a serious, businesslike atmosphere. Gold initially gave her no more than a passing glance, until something clicked inside his head and, almost involuntarily, he blurted out, "Patrice? Patrice Bennett?"

The woman turned abruptly, searched out the source of the voice that called out to her, and settled on Gold. She narrowed her eyes, scrutinized the captain's face, locked on to his eyes, until she finally displayed a look of recognition, then surprise. This was followed by a smile that could melt the heart of a Vulcan.

"David," she said in a voice that was both soft and captivating. She walked over to Gold and met him in a fond embrace that he happily returned.

She smells exactly the same, Gold thought as he felt the decades falling away.

After a long moment, they broke from their embrace and looked each other over.

"You look wonderful," Gold told her. "Just as I remember." And it was true, she was exactly as he remembered her, despite wrinkles and silver hairs that weren't there when he last saw her. How else could he have recognized her so quickly, after all this time?

"You don't look so bad yourself, old-timer," she responded wryly. "The white hair makes you look very distinguished. And still in Starfleet, I see. What are you now, the commanding admiral or something?"

Gold was grateful for the fact that she apparently hadn't been following his career. That meant there wouldn't be any questions about things like Galvan VI, or his hand, or anything else he was trying not to dwell upon.

"No, just a humble starship captain," he told her with a grin. "Here on business, a special project with Rod Portlyn."

She chuckled. "Oh, you've got business with ol' Roddy too, huh? That's why I'm here, as you've probably guessed. I needed to go over some details of a new venture of his I'm investing in—a planetwide resort on Rando III, something he says will rival Wrigley's Pleasure Planet and even Risa. I didn't know he'd gone into business with the Federation. He sure does get around, doesn't he?"

"I guess so," Gold replied. "But the same can be said about you. You've come a long way since... the old days." He couldn't help but smirk at that phrase.

Turning to his crew, he said, "This is Patrice Bennett, one of the sharpest, shrewdest, most successful business leaders in the Alpha Quadrant."

"Flatterer," Patrice laughed.

“She’s an . . . old friend. Patrice, these are some of the senior members of my crew.” He introduced each of them.

“A pleasure to meet all of you,” Patrice said. She then turned her attention back to Gold. “I wish I could stay longer and talk, David, but I have to get back to Tau Ophiucus—that’s where I’m headquartered these days. Pending business meetings, contracts to read, inventory shipment arrivals to oversee—”

“In other words, the usual,” Gold said with a chuckle.

“Precisely,” she replied, laughing. “Oh, David, it’s so good to see you.” She hugged him again.

“You too,” he told her softly, then gently kissed her cheek.

Patrice Bennett then walked toward the elevator again, but turned one last time and said to Gold, “Don’t be a stranger!”

Gold nodded. “I’ll get in touch with you as soon as I can. We should catch up with each other, reminisce about old times.”

With a final wave, Patrice entered the elevator and was gone.

Gold was disappointed that she had to leave so soon—seeing Patrice again gave him a nice, warm feeling inside, took him to another time and place, and he could not help but smile.

The smile was still lingering on his face when he turned back to his crew, all of whom had expectant looks on their faces. But if what they were expecting was a more complete explanation of his connection to Patrice Bennett, they were going to be disappointed.

“Always nice to bump into old friends, isn’t it?” was all Gold would say as he sat down.

“Especially if you don’t owe them any money,” Dr. Lense responded dryly.

After a few moments, Belvis reappeared to tell Gold and his crew that Rod Portlyn was ready to meet with them.

* * *

Portlyn’s office was enormous, at least twice as large as the bridge of the *Vinci*. The windows extended from ceiling to floor and provided a breathtaking view of the terrain of Vemlar and the tall, majestic Kirtko Mountains in the distance. The chairs and couches were of the highest quality, even better than what was in the waiting area outside. The office was decorated with exotic paintings and sculptures from different worlds, including Earth, Betazed, Delta IV, and Argelius II.

Portlyn came out from behind his massive desk to meet his guests. The tycoon was humanoid, albeit with pale green skin and scarlet-colored eyes. He was balding on top of his head, and his slight potbelly betrayed the fact that he could do with some more frequent physical exercise. But he was impeccably dressed, in a dark brown suit made of the finest silk from Rigel IV. And he was smoking a long, thick Yridian cigar.

Gold introduced his team to Portlyn, who happily shook their hands. The captain explained each of their

roles in the project: Commander Gomez would oversee the entire operation on the S.C.E. side of things, as the senior officer in charge; Dr. Lense would consult on the construction of the medical facilities; Corsi would do the same with the security systems; Soloman would lead a team in setting up all of the computer systems; and Stevens would help to finalize and install the emergency and damage control functions of all key facilities. Other members of the S.C.E. would beam down the next day to work under these section leaders and take part in the actual building of the various structures, including the main power plant, the central transportation center, and the laboratory complex.

Portlyn seemed pleased with everything and everyone. He sat back down behind his desk, a beautiful, centuries-old antique made of rich, burgundy-colored Arcturian wood. Atop the desk sat the tycoon's state-of-the-art personal computer system, which had yet to be set up. Puffing on his cigar, he waxed enthusiastic about his joint venture with the United Federation of Planets.

"I've sought this partnership for a long time. I'm looking forward to making it a success for me and for the Federation. I plan for Vemlar to be the capital of my business empire, and I couldn't be happier that the Starfleet Corps of Engineers is involved in getting things rolling. I've long had an admiration for Starfleet and its technical wizards."

Seated in the chair closest to Portlyn's desk, Gold leaned back into the profoundly comfortable cushion behind him. "So, Mr. Portlyn, have you ever done such extensive rebuilding of worlds before?"

Portlyn's face broke into a wide grin, and there was a twinkle in his eye. "I'm glad you asked that question, Captain. But instead of just answering, how about I show you? Allow me to give you and your team a tour of my properties in this system. Once you see what I've accomplished, I think you'll agree that all will benefit from my purchase of Vemlar."

Gold was intrigued, and he saw from the looks on his away team's faces that they shared his curiosity.

"We'll take you up on your offer, Mr. Portlyn. Shall we beam up to the *Vinci*?"

Portlyn waved him off with a chuckle. "No need, Captain. I'll bring all of you aboard my yacht. Let's do it in style. A nice little cruise around the Norvel system. Once we're done, I think you'll see why this region of space has been nicknamed 'The Corporate Corridor.'"

Chapter

2

Domenica Corsi had to admit it: she was impressed. Aboard Portlyn's streamlined, luxurious space yacht, Corsi and the rest of the *Vinci* away team were treated to a guided tour of the Norvel system and the various properties owned and operated by Portlyn, hosted by the tycoon himself.

As the yacht made its way to the core of the system, the *Vinci* crew members were shown several planetoids that, under Portlyn's guidance, were transformed from moderately developed, underdeveloped, or totally undeveloped worlds into fully operational chemical plants, computer manufacturing factories, dilithium cracking stations, and uridium processing centers. They also saw asteroids that had become mining colonies and reliable sources of various desirable minerals and metals. One of the system's larger planets, Creccus, housed Portlyn's shipbuilding facilities. Another planet, called Jemada, served as the location for a continent-size shopping mall and a family-oriented amusement park.

Seeing what Portlyn had accomplished, Corsi could not help but think of her father and his beloved freighter business on Fahleena III. She reflected on how hard he had to work even now to keep it a success, how tiny and fragile it seemed next to Portlyn's thriving empire.

Finally, the yacht turned and began making its way back to Vemlar and theda Vinci. The conversation turned to the S.C.E.'s role in the construction project, which would begin in earnest the next day. Gomez, Lense, Corsi, and the other team leaders would beam down first thing in the morning with their various subordinates. Theda Vinci would remain in orbit around Vemlar until the project was completed.

Corsi noted that Captain Gold and Portlyn had established a friendly rapport in the short time they were together. It made sense—both men were in important positions of power and authority, with many people working under them who depended on their leadership abilities. And Captain Gold obviously felt comfortable among people of Portlyn's social status, given his past involvement with that woman, Patrice Bennett. Corsi briefly wondered about the exact nature of that involvement, before getting her thoughts back on track and deciding that the captain's rapport with Portlyn would certainly make the project run more smoothly. Corsi stood nearby as the captain and the tycoon, each holding a glass of Saurian brandy, engaged in conversation as they looked out at the stars through one of the yacht's large windows.

"This won't be the most glamorous or exciting assignment for you, will it, Captain?" Portlyn asked good-naturedly.

"They can't all be life-and-death missions to save the universe," Gold replied with a grin. "Besides, our voyages are usually more about investigation and problem solving anyway. But we're proud of the part we play in the grand scheme of things."

"As well you should be, Captain. I was quite happy when Admiral Adair made sure you were assigned to this project. Ian and I go way back, as you may know, and I must admit to having pulled a string or two to get the best engineering crew in Starfleet out here."

Pays to have friends in high places, Corsi thought. She heard the captain reply simply, "We appreciate your confidence in us."

The conversation turned to the subject of the yacht they were aboard. Gold mentioned that he admired the vessel, and Portlyn replied by telling Gold how much he paid for it, and for the five others he owned.

Corsi, remaining a silent bystander and following the conversation between the two men, noticed that Portlyn had a tendency to attach a price tag to nearly everything he talked about. She found that somewhat off-putting. Corsi doubted she would ever be completely comfortable around someone like Portlyn, who had no qualms whatsoever about showing off his vast wealth, power, and influence to anyone and everyone. His aggressive capitalism and naked materialism reminded her too much of the Ferengi, and that put a bad taste in her mouth. But Corsi accepted this as her own shortcoming—it certainly wasn't Portlyn's problem. She knew she'd just have to accept that Portlyn was someone who seemed to subscribe to an old saying she'd heard over the years: "If you've got it, flaunt it."

* * *

By the time Portlyn's yacht returned to Vemlar, it was already local nighttime. Corsi was relieved that the tour was finally over. Portlyn had proved to be a gracious host, but she was anxious to get back to theda Vinci, devote some time to preparing for the next day's activities, and get a good night's sleep.

She knew that not all of her crewmates felt as she did. Her close friend and occasional lover, Fabian Stevens (one of these days, they'd figure out exactly what they were to each other), thoroughly enjoyed himself and was disappointed that his time aboard the luxury craft had come to an end.

"And I thought the Nagus was a beaut," he'd said to Corsi, referring to the luxury ship recently purchased by da Vinci conn officer Songmin Wong. "But the impulse engines on this baby are so state-of-the-art, they're not even available to the general public yet! And the leather on the seats—it's from Sarpeidon! You know how rare Sarpeidon leather is? Their sun went nova a hundred years ago!"

Corsi, not wishing to trample on his enthusiasm, simply smiled and nodded as Stevens went on—and on. About the gracefulness of the vessel's overall design, the quality of the warp core, and even the wood that the bar in the main lounge was made of. She just hoped his eagerness to point out every edge that Portlyn's ship had over Wong's would give out before her patience did.

Standing together in the yacht's main lounge, Gold and his team wished Portlyn a good night as they were caught up in the da Vinci's transporter beams and brought back to the starship.

"Quite an operation Mr. Portlyn has out here," Gold commented as he stepped down from the transporter platform.

"The 'Corporate Corridor' is a very appropriate nickname," Gomez said.

The group exited the transporter room and walked down the corridor together toward the nearest turbolift.

"Portlyn's quite a character," Lense said with an amused tone in her voice. "Very...larger than life."

Gold nodded and replied, "He would have fit in very well on Earth a few hundred years ago, when 'Big Business' dominated and wealthy tycoons were the major driving forces around the world."

Corsi privately wondered if those old-time tycoons were as enamored of their own wealth and material possessions as Portlyn was of his.

"I was most intrigued by the methods by which his computers are manufactured, and how their standard systems are set up," Soloman commented, obviously enthused about his upcoming responsibilities on Vemlar. "It will be an engaging exercise, getting our systems to fully integrate with his."

They arrived at the turbolift and stepped through the open doors. As the doors closed and the lift began moving, Corsi turned to Gold and asked him point-blank, "So, what's the story between you and Patrice Bennett?"

If Gold was at all surprised or uncomfortable by being put on the spot, he didn't show it. No doubt he was used to the security chief's forthrightness by now, and maybe even expected the question to come up eventually.

He folded his arms across his chest and said, "Okay, we dated, as you probably surmised. It was a long time ago. We were kids, really. I was in my early days at Starfleet Academy; she was attending Stamford University. It was...very nice." A gentle smile appeared on his face.

The smile seemed to turn wistful as he continued. "But we drifted apart. Patrice found that she had a real

head for business and finance, and that took up most of her time. And I eventually came to realize that I needed to be with someone a bit more...spiritual.”

“So you married a rabbi,” Lense said.

Gold shrugged his shoulders and chuckled. “Hey, if you’re going to aim, aim high.”

With that, the doors to the lift opened and Gold stepped out. “My stop—and just in time. Good night, all. Get some rest, tomorrow’s going to be a busy day.”

The doors closed and the lift started moving again. The remaining occupants rode in silence. Gomez, Lense, Stevens, and Soloman cast long glances over at Corsi.

“What are you all gawking at?” the security chief finally blurted out. “You all wanted to know just as much as I did.”

After a brief moment, they shrugged their shoulders, smiled sheepishly, and nodded their heads in agreement.

Chapter 3

From what Corsi could tell, things were going well on the S.C.E.’s first day as part of the Vemlar development team. As security chief, it was her responsibility to know the whereabouts and activities of everyone from the ship who was down on the planet, on top of her own responsibilities to the project.

She knew that first thing that morning, the S.C.E.’s structural engineering specialist, the eight-limbed Nasat named P8 Blue (informally known as “Pattie”), had a meeting with Portlyn’s designers and construction team. They were discussing ways in which the building being constructed to house the main power generator could be extra-reinforced, in the unlikely event of a major systems overload.

Elsewhere, da Vinci cultural specialist Carol Abramowitz met with the leading citizens of the native Vemlarite population to determine what cultural barriers, if any, needed to be addressed to ensure that cooperation and harmony among all parties were maintained. Although Vemlar was being transformed from a farm world into something entirely different, its native inhabitants were still an important part of the planet and its future. The Vemlarites were all farmers who sold their land to Rod Portlyn and were now employed by the tycoon in various capacities, particularly as construction crews, food service workers, and sanitation teams.

The fact that everything seemed to be going smoothly was satisfying to Corsi, even if she wasn’t overly enthusiastic about the mission itself.

Corsi didn’t know exactly why she had such a prejudice against Portlyn. Clearly he had worked hard for his success, and she respected him for that. He possessed a great deal of personal charm, even if she found him to be insufferably materialistic. But there was something about him and his empire that made her uncomfortable. Perhaps it was the fact that this tycoon, who had always operated outside of the Federation and made a point of the fact that he owed allegiance to no one but himself, wielded such power and influence and had connections to certain higher-ups at Starfleet and within the Federation government. Striking a deal with the Federation allowed Portlyn, in Corsi’s view, to use that power and

influence to suit his own needs and involve Starfleet personnel—specifically the crew of the *Vinci*—while he was at it.

But Corsi was nothing if not a consummate professional, and she would not let her feelings get in the way of the job.

At lunchtime, she caught up with Gomez, Abramowitz, Soloman, and P8 Blue, who were sitting at a table at a makeshift outdoor cafeteria near the site of the main headquarters. Blue, of course, was seated in a special chair designed for her insectoid body structure.

Corsi caught the tail end of Blue's status report as she plopped down on the bench next to Soloman.

"Mr. Portlyn's engineers seemed receptive to my suggestions," the Nasat was saying. "Best of all, they told me that my ideas could easily be incorporated into the plans, even though construction on the building began today. They assured me it was not too late."

"Excellent," Gomez responded. "Thank you very much, Pattie."

Blue bowed her head humbly.

Gomez then turned her attention to Soloman. "So how goes getting this place online?"

"It is going quite well," the Bynar answered brightly. "We had to start with Mr. Portlyn's personal system."

"Yes, he gets first dibs on everything around here, doesn't he?" Gomez interjected with a mischievous smirk.

"Rank has its privileges," Corsi replied as she unwrapped a baked Altairian dogfish sandwich and opened the lid of a cup containing iced coffee, which she'd brought down from the ship.

"Most of the morning was dedicated to Mr. Portlyn's system," Soloman continued, unfazed by the interruption. "Mr. Portlyn's computer connects to the main network, but it also has a separate, exclusive system, strictly for his use, and he wanted access to that as soon as possible. It took some time to get it running, but now that we have, he seems very pleased. We are now working on setting up the main network."

Gomez nodded. "How long do you think that'll take?"

"The initial stages should be done by the end of the day. The most crucial parts of the network should be accessible, at least in a limited capacity, at that point. Tomorrow, we will begin working on all the other computers and getting them to interface with our software."

"That's great! Good work," Gomez told him enthusiastically. He gave her an appreciative nod.

Corsi saw that they were being joined by a new arrival: a middle-aged, male Vemlarite, with the pale orange skin and small, round, pitch-black eyes of that species. He was dressed in dark blue construction coveralls. Abramowitz introduced him as Delfo, one of the Vemlarites' leading citizens. He sat down at the table, pulled a meat-filled sandwich out of a tan-colored paper sack, and ate with them.

"So what made you all decide to sell your land to Portlyn?" Corsi asked Delfo after several minutes of

casual conversation. She was genuinely curious about how the tycoon managed to convince the Vemlarites to sell out to him. She then chuckled. “What did he do, hold your families prisoner till you signed the real estate over to him?”

She thought Delfo would understand that she was only kidding around, but his face remained impassive.

“You might want to be more careful what you say about Rod Portlyn around here, ma’am,” he told her, looking around at the various Vemlarites and Portlyn employees passing by. “He’s got a lot of admirers here, including me, and comments like that could be mis-interpreted.”

Corsi wasn’t sure what to say. She certainly did not share Delfo’s high regard for Portlyn, but she immediately regretted offending the Vemlarite. She hoped Delfo was not so offended that whatever cultural bridges Abramowitz established had not just been irreparably burned.

“I’m sorry,” Corsi told him. “I was just trying to make a joke.”

Abramowitz then stepped in, trying to smooth things over with a smile that Corsi recognized as desperately upbeat. “Sometimes we humans forget that not every species in the galaxy shares our peculiar sense of humor.”

Delfo shook his head. “No harm done. Just a little friendly advice. To answer your question about why we sold our farms—we didn’t have much of a choice. Not long ago, the soil on Vemlar became infertile, totally incapable of growing any more of our crops. All of a sudden, the land was just...barren. You have to understand—our farms had been our lives, and our livelihoods, for...well, I don’t know how many generations. And now they were useless. After that, we just started sinking into poverty. We became desperate.”

Delfo paused for a moment, and though his face remained expressionless, Corsi could tell that he was silently reliving that dark period. Finally, he continued.

“Luckily, Mr. Portlyn came along with a very generous offer to each and every one of us, to buy our land. And he offered to keep us all on, give us jobs helping him build this place up. And once that’s done, he’s promised us steady work helping him to keep things running day to day. It was the best solution we could get, and he made it possible.” Delfo then looked Corsi squarely in the eyes and told her, “Rod Portlyn’s a hero and a savior in my book, and most other folks here feel the same way.” He then went back to his sandwich and ate in silence.

Corsi was left with much to think about. Her skepticism about Portlyn remained—she’d learned long ago to always trust her first impressions about people and situations. But clearly there was another side to the tycoon. He personally saved the inhabitants of Vemlar and provided them with a future. In that sense, he was exactly the kind of person with whom the Federation should be doing business. Having come to that realization, Corsi felt a bit more enthusiastic about the Vemlar project and her role in it.

* * *

As night fell on Vemlar, Sonya Gomez and some other members of the S.C.E.—including Stevens, Soloman, Abramowitz, and Blue—chose to remain on the planet overnight. For Gomez, it was out of a desire to feel more connected to Vemlar and the construction project, and to get used to the environment, since she was going to be spending a lot of time there for an extended period.

In the aftermath of Galvan VI, Gomez was grateful for assignments like this and the responsibilities that

came with them. She'd found that keeping as busy as possible was instrumental in getting her to move past the tragedy and the loss of Kieran Duffy, who gave his life to save the *Vinci* on that fateful mission. . . and who had asked Gomez to marry him shortly before. Having a goal, focusing on it, working toward achieving it, helped to ease the pain and get her moving forward with her life.

Guest quarters had not yet been set up, so Gomez and her companions had to camp out in Federation-issue tents and sleeping bags. They didn't mind—they thought it could be a lot of fun "roughing it," and even had marshmallows beamed down from the *Vinci* for toasting later in the evening. But Gomez quickly discovered that not everyone shared that enthusiasm—starting with the *Vinci*'s security chief.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay tonight, Domenica?" Gomez asked as she stood outside of her tent with Fabian Stevens and watched Corsi gather up her gear and prepare to beam back to the *Vinci*.

"I have some paperwork to catch up on, reports to fill out. . ." Corsi replied. That sounded like a lame excuse to Gomez. It was more likely that the notoriously no-nonsense Corsi just didn't feel comfortable socializing with her crewmates in such a fashion.

"C'mon, Dom, it'll be fun," Stevens chimed in cheerfully. "There'll probably be a singalong and everything."

Corsi grimaced. "Was that supposed to be an enticement?"

Suddenly, they were joined by Dr. Lense, who was carrying her own gear and looking eager to get back to the ship.

"Not you too, Elizabeth?" Gomez asked with disappointment.

"No offense, but given the choice, I'll pick the relative comfort of my bunk over a sleeping bag any day. Besides, I spent enough time 'roughing it' during those weeks I was on that *Shmoam-ag* ship."

"But, Doc, you haven't lived until you've heard my rendition of 'Moonlight Bay,'" said Stevens.

"Guess I'll have to stay among the nonliving, but thanks," Lense replied wryly.

Corsi tapped her combadge. "Corsi *toda Vinci*, two to beam up." A moment later, she and Lense were gone.

"Their loss, right, Commander?" Stevens asked with a lopsided grin. "I'm going to go set up my tent. See you at the campfire!"

* * *

As it got later into the night, with the campfire dying down and everyone's voices hoarse from all the songs they sang together, the Starfleet engineers finally went to sleep. Gomez had fallen into such a deep slumber that she barely heard the beep of her combadge well past local midnight. But once it registered in her mind that the device was summoning her, she suddenly bolted up in her sleeping bag, wide awake, and reached over to tap it.

"Gomez here," she said, her voice dry and rough.

“Gomez, it’s Captain Gold. Sorry to wake you.” His voice sounded serious.

“No problem, sir. What’s going on?”

“We picked up distress calls from two of Portlyn’s other properties in this system—a planetoid named Kalibiss and an asteroid called P-12. It seems that maintenance workers at both locations discovered activated time bombs.”

“When are they set to go off?” Gomez asked, surprised by this news.

“We’re not sure. The maintenance workers saw the bombs and fled to safety before contacting Portlyn. I spoke to him and offered our assistance, which he’s accepted.”

Makes sense, Gomez thought. If there are time bombs needing to be deactivated, why turn down help from a ship carrying some of Starfleet’s best engineers?

“What do you need from me, sir? Should I beam back up?”

“No—I’m not sure how long we’ll be gone, and you’re needed on Vemlar to keep the project moving along. That’s why we’re here in the first place. But I’m going to need Stevens, Soloman, and Blue back aboard. Theda Vinciis heading to Kalibiss and since we can’t be in two places at once, a second team will travel by shuttlecraft to P-12. Hopefully we can stop both of these things in time. I’ll be in touch when there’s something to report.”

“Take whoever you need. And good luck, Captain.”

“I hope we won’t need luck, but I’ll take it. Gold out.”

Gomez sat in silence in her tent for half an hour before concluding there was no way she was getting back to sleep. She had too much on her mind. Theda Vinci had already left orbit and was well under way by now. Who would plant time bombs? Why? Would the S.C.E. be able to stop them from detonating? Would her crewmates be all right? Her tent began to feel very small and cramped. It was still several hours before sunrise, but she decided to go for a short walk and get some air. Maybe that would help clear her head.

Gomez wandered aimlessly until she walked up a hill and found herself overlooking the construction site for the main laboratory complex. This would be the center of everything on Vemlar, the point around which everything else revolved, once Portlyn’s operations were up and running. The lab would, for all intents and purposes, be the “heart” of Portlyn’s Vemlar. Gomez remembered what Stevens had said earlier, about all the amazing things that could potentially be created at this place in the future. She silently acknowledged that this facility could one day be one of the most important places in the galaxy.

She walked down the hill to get a closer look at the building. Maybe she would see areas in which she could make suggestions for revisions and improvements once work resumed later in the morning.

As she approached the building, she tried to keep her mind off Theda Vinci’s dangerous mission and to stay focused on her own responsibilities. She did not expect the blinding flash of light that burst forth suddenly from the site. Or the searing heat. Or the deafening, thunderous boom.

Then everything went black.

Chapter 4

Captain's Log, Stardate 54154.9:

Theda Vincihas arrived at Kalibiss, the location of Rod Portlyn's warp engine manufacturing company. Lieutenant Commander Corsi, P8 Blue, and Soloman have beamed down to the operations center to examine and hopefully deactivate the bomb. I have been informed by the crew of the shuttlecraft Kwolek that they have arrived at asteroid P-12, which houses Portlyn's robotics factory. Lieutenant Commander Tev, Fabian Stevens, and Deputy Security Chief Vance Hawkins are on site and conducting their own investigation.

* * *

Captain Gold, seated in the captain's chair on the bridge of the *Theda Vinci*, did not have long to wait before he heard back from the away team on Kalibiss. Corsi contacted him seven minutes after beaming down.

"It looks like the bomb is set to explode in two hours, twenty-three minutes, sir," she reported. "It seems we had plenty of time to get here."

"Fortunately." Gold then thought for a moment. "Almost two and a half hours from now... that would be the middle of the night here. Who would be in the building at that time?"

"No one, sir."

"So no one would be hurt or killed when the bomb detonated," he pondered aloud.

"Thoughtful terrorists—go figure."

"Corsi, how was the bomb discovered in the first place?"

"A maintenance worker was cleaning the ground floor of the operations center for the evening. He heard a loud beeping that lasted about ten seconds. He was able to follow the beeping to its source—it was the bomb, planted inside a supply closet."

"So the bomb might never have been discovered if not for the noise. Any idea what the beeping was about?"

"So far, Soloman and Pattie don't believe it served any particular purpose. They think it might have been a minor design flaw in the bomb."

"A flaw that's certainly seemed to work in our favor. Are we going to be able to defuse this thing?"

Gold was answered by the voice of Soloman. "We are already finishing up, Captain. Pattie is just about to disconnect the final wire from the explosives."

Gold's curiosity grew. "What kind of bomb are we dealing with here? Could it take out the whole site?"

Now P8 Blue herself answered, though her voice sounded muffled. She was apparently working on the

bomb as she talked. “It’s a fairly simple device, sir, although it seems well made, and I estimate it would cause a fair amount of damage if allowed to detonate.”

“Okay. Just be careful, all of you. And good work.”

The conversation was interrupted by a transmission from Tev on asteroid P-12. Gold anxiously opened the channel to hear the report from the *Vinci*’s Tellarite second officer and S.C.E. second-in-command.

“It turns out there was no need for urgency, Captain,” Tev told him. “The bomb is not set to detonate for another seven hours.”

A theory immediately popped into Gold’s head. “At which point it would be the middle of the night cycle on the asteroid, and no one would be in the factory?”

“Quite correct, sir. But most unusual was how the bomb was discovered. You see—”

“Loud beeping?” Gold interrupted, his theory catching fire.

Tev hesitated before answering. “Affirmative, Captain,” he said in a bemused voice. “As for the bomb itself, it is—”

“A simple design and fairly easy to deactivate.”

“Sir, would you like to give the report to us?” Tev was clearly frustrated and confused.

Gold chuckled. “Sorry, Tev. Needless to say, what you’re telling me is not coming as a shock. Okay, you and Stevens finish deactivating the bomb. We’ll set up a rendezvous point to retrieve you.”

“Aye, sir. We will contact you again once the bomb is neutralized. Tev out.”

Gold’s mind was racing. Obviously the two incidents were linked. But what was all this about? Who was behind it? Why these targets?

Before he could ponder these questions any further, the *Vinci* received an emergency transmission, this time from *Vemlar*. It was Carol Abramowitz. Her image popped up on the main viewscreen, and Gold was struck by how shaken she looked. Her dark hair was a mess and her cheeks and uniform were covered with dust, dirt, and... was that blood?

“Captain, we were attacked.” Abramowitz’s voice revealed her dismay, yet somehow remained controlled. “The main lab construction site was bombed! It’s completely demolished. Sir, Commander Gomez was in the vicinity when it happened.”

“Dear God,” Gold muttered. Sonya Gomez just recently had a near-death experience, on the planet *Teneb*, and Gold’s first thought was that this time, her luck had run out. Maintaining his composure, he asked, “Is she all right? Is she...?”

“Minor burns, slight concussion, some cuts and bruises. Luckily, she was far enough away that it wasn’t more serious. She’s resting right now, but she needs proper medical attention—I’ve just about used up my knowledge of first aid. The local *Vemlarite* physician is on his way to take over and get her to his hospital.”

Gold was well aware that any Vemlarite hospital was downright primitive by Federation standards. “We’re on our way,” he assured Abramowitz. “Lense will take over as soon as we get there. Was anyone else hurt?”

“None of us or Portlyn’s people, sir. No one else was at the site at the time of the explosion. But Portlyn’s security force chased down a suspect trying to leave the planet shortly afterward. Shots were exchanged, and the suspect’s craft was hit and crash-landed.”

“What kind of shape is this suspect in?”

Abramowitz frowned. “He sustained serious burns and extensive injuries, sir. He’s being taken to the hospital too, of course. . . .but I’m not sure he’ll survive.”

“Lense will be the judge of that,” Gold told her sharply. It then dawned upon him that this explosion on Vemlar happened in the middle of the night.

“Abramowitz, this bomb wasn’t discovered ahead of time? There wasn’t any kind of loud beeping from it that could have led to its discovery?”

“Not as far as I know, sir. If there was any loud beeping, I think it would have been heard by someone. The lab site was one of the busiest areas today until work ended for the night.”

Gold nodded gravely. “Where’s Mr. Portlyn right now?”

“At the construction site, assessing the damages. He’s extremely agitated, sir.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Gold then turned in his chair to Lieutenant Anthony Shabalala, stationed at the tactical console.

“Shabalala, contact the away team on Kalibiss. Tell them we need them back aboard. The second they’re done with that bomb, I want them beamed up.”

“Aye, sir,” Shabalala replied. He began to send the call signal, but the captain was not finished.

“Then, contact our team at P-12. Tell them that when they’re done there, they should head back to Vemlar on their own aboard the Kwolek.” Time was of the essence, and a rendezvous with the shuttlecraft would only slow the Vinci down.

Gold then turned in his chair again, this time to address his conn officer. “Wong, plot a course for Vemlar. Full impulse power, as soon as we’re under way.” At that speed, they would be back at Vemlar in less than an hour.

“Course already plotted, Captain,” Wong replied.

Gold smiled inwardly—he liked when his people showed that kind of initiative.

“Captain,” Shabalala called from tactical. “The away team has just beamed aboard.”

“Go, Wong,” Gold told the conn officer. He then turned his attention back to the main viewscreen, where Abramowitz’s face remained.

“Abramowitz, we’ll be back as soon as possible. da Vinci out.”

Gold felt the ship smoothly accelerate as it left Kalibiss behind. The situation had become very clear to him: the da Vinci had been lured away from Vemlar. The bombs on Kalibiss and P-12 were intended to be discovered, so that the da Vinci, the only Federation vessel in the region, would rush to deactivate them and therefore not be able to interfere when the true target was hit.

So much for the reasonably easy mission.

* * *

“He’ll probably live, but he may end up wishing otherwise,” said Dr. Lense, delivering to Captain Gold her report on the condition of the suspected terrorist. They stood side by side in the da Vinci’s sickbay, looking down at her patient, who was lying unconscious on a diagnostic bed within a sterile field. His burned and broken body was covered with a clear healing gel and wrapped in loose bandages.

Lense looked exhausted. Six hours of nonstop emergency surgery and two and a half hours of intense post-op examination and research will do that to the hardest of doctors, even one who was aided by her Emergency Medical Hologram.

“Third-degree burns over eighty percent of his body,” she continued. “There are more bones broken than not. His vocal cords are destroyed—he’ll never speak again.”

“Damn,” Gold muttered. “He’s our only link to the terrorists responsible for those time bombs and the explosion on Vemlar.”

“Assuming he is a link,” Lense noted pointedly. “We don’t know that for sure. Innocent before proven guilty and all.”

Gold nodded. “Is there any way we can determine his identity?”

Lense frowned and shook her head. “Not at present. His fingerprints are completely burned away. And so far, there are no DNA matches. Right now, I can’t even be sure what species he belongs to. His blood type doesn’t match anything in our database.”

Gold let out a disappointed sigh. “All right, tell me about this chip you found.”

Lense lifted up a small pair of tweezers that held a tiny metal square, no larger than a centimeter, in its prongs.

“This was inside him, at the base of his skull. I’m not sure if it’s a computer chip, a transmitter, a receiver, a medical device, or a joy buzzer. Which is why I asked Soloman to join us. I figured with his ability to interface with computers, he could determine—”

Suddenly, the doors to sickbay opened and the Bynar entered, looking very curious about why the doctor had summoned him.

“Right on time,” she said, and handed the tweezers over to Soloman. “Here. Maybe you can make heads or tails out of this thing.”

Soloman examined the chip closely, slowly cocking his head from left to right as if looking for an entry point. Finally, he placed his index finger against the chip and closed his eyes. He remained that way, completely motionless, for five minutes. Gold and Lense waited in silence until Lense yawned, plopped down in a nearby chair, folded her arms across her chest, and closed her eyes.

“Wake me up when he opens his eyes,” she murmured.

Three minutes later, Soloman did just that.

“It took some time to familiarize myself with the device and determine how to tap into it,” he explained, the sound of his voice immediately waking the doctor. “However, I think I can safely say that this is a combination receiver and data storage unit.”

“What kind of data is stored on it?” the captain asked.

“I don’t know, sir,” the Bynar answered. “The data is in some sort of complex language or code with which I am totally unfamiliar.”

Gold and Lense exchanged a glance. “Language or code, hmm?” the doctor said, raising her eyebrows.

The captain nodded, knowing exactly where she was going with this. “Faulwell. Let’s get him in here now.”

* * *

Bart Faulwell liked challenges. But theda Vinci’s linguist and cryptography expert quickly realized that the one laid out before him by Captain Gold was the toughest thing he’d faced since he cracked Dominion codes during the war.

Soloman had downloaded the data from the chip onto theda Vinci’s main computer, and now this data was displayed on the computer screen in Faulwell’s quarters. He had been working at it nonstop for nearly four hours, a cup of French roast coffee with half-and-half never far from his reach. But things were not progressing as quickly as he wanted, and his sense of frustration was growing.

At least he no longer had to worry about Commander Gomez. She received proper medical care as soon as theda Vinci returned to Vemlar, and was already back on active duty on the planet surface.

But this strange code was throwing Faulwell for a loop, and he was feeling very tense. He was about to take a short break—and a quick shower—when Captain Gold summoned him to the main conference room to give a status report. Faulwell felt a momentary flash of panic. It had been at least ninety minutes since he felt he’d made any real progress with the code, and as far as he was concerned, that progress was minimal at best. He would have preferred to give his report when he had more to say.

He arrived at the conference room to find Gold with Lense, Corsi, and Soloman.

“I’m afraid I haven’t really been able to crack this code yet, sir,” Faulwell began reluctantly, scratching his beard.

He activated the small viewing screen atop the table at which everyone was seated, and the code popped on the screen for all to see.

“However,” he continued, a bit more brightly, “a few things show up a number of times within the code—names or phrases—which I think I was able to decipher. One is ‘Vemlar.’ That was easy enough. Another seems to be ‘Taru Bolivar.’ Is anyone familiar with that?”

Everyone in the room thought for a moment before shaking their heads “no.”

“The other is ‘Fantasixun’—I think. That’s the closest I could make out so far.”

No one reacted, so Faulwell assumed that the second name was as unfamiliar to everyone as the first.

Soloman accessed the ship’s library computer and entered both names. Within seconds, he had results.

“No listings for ‘Taru Bolivar,’” the Bynar said. “However, there is a planet named Phantas 61, located on the outskirts of this system. Perhaps this is ‘Fantasixun?’”

“What’s on record about it?” Gold asked.

Soloman read the information on the monitor out loud. “A somewhat isolated planet, known as a thriving, financially successful, independent mining world with an abundance of dilithium crystals and other natural resources. Purchased by Rod Portlyn ten years ago, when the inhabitants agreed to sell out to him. Portlyn kept the inhabitants on to run day-to-day operations, and he publicly vowed to ‘exploit Phantas 61’s equities to the fullest potential.’ Under his control, Phantas 61 became more productive and more profitable than at any other time in its history. It remains part of Portlyn’s business empire to this day.”

Gold sat silently for several moments, mulling this over. Finally he spoke.

“Maybe we should pay a little visit to Phantas 61, try to find out what the connection is—if indeed there is one.”

“Makes sense,” Lense responded. “Maybe my anonymous patient is from that world.”

The captain reached for the communications transmitter. “I’ll contact Mr. Portlyn, let him know what we’re doing.”

“Sir, before you do that...?” Corsi interjected, causing Gold to pull his hand away from the transmitter.

“Go ahead, Corsi,” the captain said as he leaned back in his chair.

“These terrorists, whoever they are, apparently know quite a bit about Portlyn and his operations—when and where to strike. We don’t know how they know so much, but it’s reasonable to assume there’s a leak somewhere inside Portlyn’s organization. If too many people know about us heading to Phantas 61, the terrorists could find out and interfere with our investigation.”

Gold nodded in agreement. “Yes...from this point on, maybe it’s best if we kept our actions and whereabouts on a strictly need-to-know basis.”

“That’s what I’d suggest, sir,” Corsi responded.

“All right, then,” Gold said as he stood up. “Meeting adjourned. We’ll get under way shortly. And Faulwell—good work.”

“Thank you, sir,” Faulwell replied with a smile, pleased that what little he had accomplished was apparently enough, at least for the moment.

Chapter 5

The frowning face of Rod Portlyn dominated the main viewscreen on the bridge of the *Vinci*.

“Let me get this straight, Captain—you’ve got a possible lead on the terrorists, but you won’t give me any details?”

“Only that we’re looking into it, Mr. Portlyn,” replied Gold. He added, as earnestly and reassuringly as he could, “It’s really for the best. Until we learn how the terrorists know so much about your operations, releasing any details of our investigation could hamper our efforts. But we’ll be in touch if we learn anything. In the meantime, Gomez, Tev, and a team of S.C.E. specialists will be staying behind to help clean up the site of the explosion and get the construction project moving again.”

“But surely you can tell me what you’ve learned from the suspect?”

“In the interests of security, sir, I really think it’s best to keep that on a need-to-know basis, as well.”

Portlyn pursed his lips and nodded once. “Very well, Captain Gold. Good luck.”

With that, Portlyn signed off and his image disappeared from the screen.

Corsi, standing behind Gold during the conversation, stepped up and stood beside the command chair.

“I get the distinct feeling he’s not used to being told ‘no,’ sir,” she said wryly.

Gold shrugged nonchalantly. “We’re just doing whatever’s necessary to accomplish our goal—and accomplishing our goal directly benefits him. Portlyn’s a big boy, a seasoned businessman. I’m sure he understands.”

Gold turned in his chair to face the helm.

“Wong, take us out of orbit.”

The viewscreen showed the ship’s orbital departure, with *Vemlar* quickly receding. “Next stop, *Phantas 61*,” the captain said to the helmsman. “Have gravitational potentials been taken into account?”

“Yes, sir,” Wong replied confidently. “We can safely go to warp speed inside the solar system.”

“Very good, Wong. Warp factor two, please.” At that speed, the *Vinci* would arrive at *Phantas 61*, located across the *Norvel* system, in just two hours—an eighty-eight-hour trip at full impulse power.

The ship accelerated, approaching warp factor one and beyond. Gold settled back in his chair, expecting an uneventful journey for the next couple of hours. He watched the stars as they began to streak by on the viewscreen.

“Captain!” called Lieutenant Shabalala. “Urgent incoming transmission for you, sir, from Starfleet Command. It’s Admiral Adair, sir. He, uh, wants to talk to you—immediately, sir. About Mr. Portlyn’s grievances.”

Gold rose from his chair. With a good-natured smirk, he told the young officer, “You’re lucky Starfleet captains are no longer allowed to kill the bearers of bad news. I’ll take it in my ready room. You have the conn, Shabalala.”

Stepping off the bridge, Gold waited until the doors closed behind him before muttering to himself, “Lousymomzer went right over my head.”

* * *

“Captain Gold, why is Rod Portlyn waking me up in the middle of the night with complaints about how he’s being treated by Starfleet?” asked Admiral Ian Adair, his scowling face on the viewscreen in David Gold’s ready room.

Adair was five years younger than Gold but appeared to be about ten years older, with thinning white hair, many wrinkles on a face that seemed perpetually grumpy, and a wiry frame that bordered on being frail-looking. But it was clear that there was still plenty of fire in the admiral’s belly, and his piercing blue eyes remained filled with energy.

Gold took a breath before responding, and concentrated on maintaining his composure.

“Admiral, I strongly believe it’s in the best interests of our investigation that the details remain classified to all but the most essential participants, at least for now.”

“Consider me one of the essential participants. So what’s going on?”

Gold knew he had no choice in the matter. He took another breath.

“We’re en route to Phantas 61, Admiral,” he told Adair, and then he explained why. When Gold finished, Adair remained silent as he considered everything he had just heard.

Finally, the admiral said, “This investigation isn’t the kind of assignment you and your crew normally handle, Gold. The da Vinci is a boatload of engineers. These are terrorists we’re talking about here. Maybe you should wait for assistance from a ship better suited for this situation.”

“As you’re undoubtedly aware, sir, no other Starfleet vessels are currently available to take this on. And these terrorists seem able to strike anywhere, at any time. The da Vinci is the only ship currently in a position to act right now. Besides, we’re already on the way.”

Adair still seemed skeptical. Gold pressed on.

“Above all else, Admiral, the people aboard this ship are problem-solvers, and this is a problem that needs solving. At the moment, we have the best chance of doing that.”

Gold could almost see the wheels turning inside the admiral’s mind.

“What about the Vemlar project? I don’t need to remind you how important it is to the Federation.”

And to your close personal friend Rod Portlyn, Gold thought. But out loud, he said, “No, sir, I’m well aware. Rest assured, Commander Gomez and most of her team are hard at work back on Vemlar.”

Adair finally nodded. “All right, Captain, proceed as you see fit. I’ll contact Portlyn and try to soothe his bruised ego. I’m sure that’s what this is all about.”

“Thank you, sir,” Gold said, relieved.

But on the screen, Adair pointed a warning finger at Gold. “Now, I don’t want any more complaint calls, so you’d better become more of a diplomat, and I mean pronto.”

“I’ll work on that, sir,” Gold replied with an amenable grin that disappeared as soon as Adair signed off and the screen went dark. He leaned back in his chair and shook his head.

“Mr. Portlyn,” Gold said aloud, “you are a royalputz.”

* * *

Rod Portlyn was seated in his office on Vemlar with his feet up on his desk, trying to look as calm and casual as possible, as he listened to Starfleet Admiral Ian Adair, whose image was being transmitted to the tycoon’s desktop viewing screen.

“Rod, Captain Gold and his crew are among Starfleet’s very best. I wouldn’t have had them assigned to this project if they weren’t. I understand Gold’s decision for secrecy, and I believe it was made for the right reasons. It’s in the best interests of all of us.”

Portlyn folded his arms across his chest and sighed. Injecting a slight edge into his voice, he replied, “Look, Ian, I have no doubts about Captain Gold’s abilities or his competence. I just don’t understand why I, of all people, have to be left out of the loop. I mean, ‘essential participants only’? Who’s more essential than me? Who’s been more affected by these terrorist activities than me? Don’t I deserve to know what’s going on in my own backyard?”

He sighed again, displaying his frustration and dissatisfaction.

“I’m just disappointed, Ian,” Portlyn continued with a frown. “I thought there would be more trust here in this joint venture.”

Adair mulled that over. Finally, he replied, “You’re right, Rod. You have been the one most adversely affected by these terrorists. All right. I’ll qualify you as someone who ‘needs to know.’”

Portlyn’s raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Won’t Captain Gold have a problem with that?”

“I outrank him, old friend. It’s my prerogative.”

Adair proceeded to tell Portlyn about the microchip, “Taru Bolivar,” and the da Vinci’s trip to Phantas 61. Once he was done, Portlyn nodded and told the admiral, “Whatever it takes to stop these terrorists once and for all. Thank you for sharing this with me, Ian.”

“Just keep it to yourself for the time being, Rod. Gold was right about the need to keep a lid on this.”

“Absolutely, my friend. Thanks again, and be well.”

With that, Portlyn signed off. Then, he punched a numerical code into his communications console, a code he had committed to memory. A moment later, a new face appeared on his screen: a gray-skinned man with ivory hair, violet eyes, and a thick, almost square-shaped head.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Portlyn?” the man on the screen asked.

“Mr. Gerard, what is your current status?”

“I’m departing Asteroid Station P-16 now, sir. I’ve made sure that security at the chemical plant has been beefed up, as per your request. I guarantee, no terrorists will be infiltrating that location.”

P-16, Portlyn thought. Very good. Not far at all.

“I have a new assignment for you, Mr. Gerard. A very important one. One that can only be assigned to my Senior High Security Agent.”

“What do you need, sir?”

“I need you to go to Phantas 61. Keep a very low profile. Watch for the arrival of a Starfleet crew, find out what they’re doing there, and report back to me on their activities.”

“I’m not far from Phantas 61, sir. I can be there within thirty minutes.”

The tycoon smiled faintly. “Yes, I know. I’ll be waiting for your call, Mr. Gerard.” He then cut the transmission.

Portlyn leaned back in his chair and looked out the window of his office, gazing at the stars in the evening sky.

“Phantas 61,” he said softly to himself. “Very interesting.”

Chapter 6

Captain’s Log, Stardate 54152.5:

Theda Vinciis approaching Phantas 61. An away team led by Lieutenant Commander Corsi will beam down upon our arrival to investigate the planet and find out what connection, if any, it has to the terrorist activities aimed against Rod Portlyn’s properties. We also hope to find out what “Taru Bolivar” means. Is it a person? A place? A weapon? Hopefully, we are not far from the answer.

* * *

The turbolift doors on the bridge slid apart and Corsi stepped out, accompanied by P8 Blue.

“Captain,” Corsi began as she approached Gold, who was seated in his command chair. “We have a volunteer for the away team.” She tilted her head toward P8 Blue.

“Oh?” Gold replied, somewhat surprised. He turned to the Nasat. “Blue, this is really a matter for security, not engineering.”

“Captain, I may be able to help facilitate communication with the inhabitants of this world,” Pattie said. “Or, at least some of them. When I heard we were going to Phantas 61, I recalled that there are a number of Nasats who settled there several decades ago. They’re probably still there.”

That piqued Gold’s interest. “Any relatives of yours, by any chance?”

“I doubt it, sir. From what I understand, they were all Reds who decided to leave the homeworld and forge new lives for themselves. Naturally, they were viewed as ‘strange’ by mainstream Nasat culture—I can certainly relate to that. And I’ve always admired them for their fortitude.”

Gold nodded. “If they know anything, they may feel more comfortable talking to you. Okay, Blue, you’re on the team.”

“Thank you, sir,” Pattie replied with a grateful nod.

On the main viewscreen, the small yellowish planet that had come into view a short while earlier was rapidly increasing in size. Theda Vinci entered its final approach.

“Captain, we’re receiving a hail from the planet,” Shabalala said as the ship achieved standard orbit.

“On screen, Lieutenant.”

A moment later, a smiling male with pale yellow skin appeared on the viewscreen. He was apparently in early middle age, with long, slightly graying hair that was pulled back in a small ponytail and matched by a thick mustache. He wore a maroon jacket and slacks and a collarless white tunic.

“Greetings,” the man said in a smooth, easygoing voice. “Welcome to Phantas 61.”

“Thank you. I’m Captain Gold of the U.S.S. da Vinci. And you are...?”

“Ramark,” the man replied. Then he added, with a chuckle, “The only one here who still has an actual job—or at least a reasonable approximation.”

“I...see,” Gold replied. He glanced over at Corsi, who stood beside the captain’s chair and looked as bemused by this introduction as he was.

“I run the communications center,” Ramark continued. “Not that anyone really contacts this mudball anymore. So, what brings you here? You get lost or something?”

“An investigation on behalf of the Federation, actually. Perhaps you can put us in touch with your local authorities?”

Ramark grinned. “I’m about the closest thing there is to that here. I’d be glad to help you, if I can.”

“Thank you very much, Mr. Ramark. An away team will beam down momentarily, if you don’t mind.”

“That’s fine. Have them beam down in the center of our main city—I’ll send the coordinates, and I’ll meet them there.”

Ramark signed off, and Gold turned to Corsi with a small grin. “He seems... interesting.”

“Hopefully he can point us in the right direction,” she replied, all serious.

“We’ll know soon enough. Happy hunting, Corsi.”

* * *

It was midday on Phantas 61 when Corsi and her away team materialized on the surface. Standing on one side of her was her trusted deputy chief of security, Chief Petty Officer Vance Hawkins. On the other side was security guard Frank Powers, a brown-haired, capable young man from Earth, who joined the crew following Galvan VI and the ship’s refitting. Bringing up the rear was P8 Blue.

“Not exactly the thriving, successful mining world I was expecting,” Corsi commented.

They stood at the center of a wide avenue and gazed upon a long, pothole-filled, broken road that extended several miles in each direction and was littered with rubble and old garbage. Along both sides of the avenue stood shut-down, boarded-up businesses—a clothing shop, a hardware store, several restaurants and saloons, and a barber shop were just a few.

“Business seems to have taken a turn for the worse in this neighborhood,” the dark-skinned Hawkins commented as they passed a building in disrepair that had once been a holographic entertainment theater.

In the distance, the away team could see a number of tall office buildings that at one time must have been beautiful, gleaming structures, but were now nothing more than abandoned husks. The gray, murky sky provided the perfect backdrop for this gloomy scene.

Farther down the avenue, they saw several four-story residential buildings still in use. These structures too were in disrepair, with numerous cracked windows, crumbling façades, and an overall dingy appearance. The occupants of these buildings could be seen walking into, out of, and around the structures. They included male and female humanoids of the same species as Ramark, of all ages, shapes, and sizes. And there were several Red Nasats there, too, huddling together. Corsi glanced over at P8 Blue, who seemed eager to approach these former inhabitants of her homeworld.

But Corsi also noticed that there was a certain...aimlessness to all of them. Some of the humanoid males sat on the front steps of one of the buildings, looking like they had all the time in the world and absolutely no idea how to spend it. Several of the older humanoid females cooked some sort of food on old, dented garbage cans that had been converted into makeshift stoves. Everyone had on outfits that were worn-out, shabby, looking about ready to be turned into rags.

Turning to her teammates, Corsi said, “They don’t look like they’re part of a successful mining operation. They look like...this is all that they have going on in their lives.”

“Hey there!” shouted a voice from behind her.

Corsi turned to see Ramark approaching, waving and bearing a friendly smile. He was of medium height, a few inches shorter than Corsi, but he carried himself with confidence. After introductions were made, he pointed to a small, nondescript building down the avenue. “The comm center is right over there. We can go to my office and talk. I’d love to know how Phantas 61 is involved in this investigation of yours. I can’t imagine its name coming up in anything other than a cautionary tale.”

“What do you mean?” Corsi asked.

Ramark smirked. “Well, look around you. Things aren’t exactly what they used to be around here.”

“And why is that?”

“How about we talk while we walk?”

“Very well, Mr. Ramark, lead the way.”

* * *

The doors to the main chamber in the communications center slid open, and Ramark led his guests in. He continued his explanation about the fate of Phantas 61.

“So when Portlyn bought the mining operation and all the real estate here, we had a really good thing going. I mean, we werethriving. Portlyn kept us all on as his employees, to keep things running smoothly. But pretty soon, ol’ Roddy-boy needed more funds to buy up more planets and businesses. So he started giving us ridiculous, unrealistic budgets that we were supposed to meet, to generate enough revenue to support his other deals. We became his cash cow. At first, we became more successful than we’d ever been, but we couldn’t sustain that forever, not at the rate he had us going. He didn’t seem to understand, or care. In the end, he ended up draining Phantas 61 of its natural resources, leaving us with this sad, desiccated corpse that we proudly call home.”

The walls of the chamber were lined with outmoded, but still functioning, computers and monitor screens. As Corsi and the away team walked around the room inspecting the technology, Ramark activated the main communications console, which was built into a circular desk at the center of the chamber. He sat down in the chair behind the desk and put his feet up on the console.

With a melodramatic flourish, he raised an imaginary glass and said, “So here’s to Rod ‘The Shaft’ Portlyn, who’s made the people of Phantas 61 what we are today—broke.”

This guy is just lucky that Farmer Delfo isn’t here listening to this, Corsi thought. Ramark’s portrayal of Portlyn was in sharp contrast to the image of the tycoon that was so popular back on Vemlar. It only served to reinforce her own misgivings about him. But that was not why she was here.

“You said you might be able to help us,” she reminded him.

Ramark nodded. “What do you need to know?”

“There have been several terrorist actions taken against Portlyn-owned properties in this system. We have reason to believe there may be some sort of connection between these actions and Phantas 61. Would you know anything about it?”

“No, not at all,” Ramark replied without hesitation. “I haven’t even heard gossip about it on the subspace channels.”

Corsi pressed on. “What about the term ‘Taru Bolivar’? Have you ever heard of it? Would you know what it means?”

Ramark turned his gaze upward, apparently searching through his memories. He then looked back at Corsi and said, "No, I can't say that I have." He gave her a quizzical look. "So, are you people working for Portlyn?"

"We're here to protect Federation interests," she told him.

"I see. Well, look, let me check through the communications archives for the last month or so. If Phantas 61 is somehow involved, maybe there's a past transmission we picked up that can provide you with a lead."

Ramark placed a communications earpiece in his ear, adjusted various controls on his console, and started checking through his archives. As the minutes passed with no hint of success, Corsi began to think it might be more productive for her and her team to search elsewhere. She appreciated Ramark's cooperation, but now doubted that his efforts would lead to anything. If he hadn't heard anything about the terrorists before now, it was probably too much to expect for him to suddenly stumble upon a direct line to them. But she would give him at least a few more minutes before she and her team moved on.

Corsi was just about ready to thank Ramark for his efforts and depart with the away team when he perked up and said, "I found something, Commander Corsi. Some mention of...Kalibiss. It seems to be in a language I don't recognize, but I'm sure that's what I heard."

Corsi glanced over at the other members of her team, all of whom looked as intrigued as she felt. Kalibiss. That's promising.

Ramark continued adjusting the controls. "I'm feeding it through our translator. If it recognizes the language, the transmission will start showing up as text on the large monitor screen." He pointed to a unit on the far side of the room.

P8 Blue glanced over at the screen and became enthusiastic. "It looks like text is showing up now!" She rushed toward the monitor screen.

Corsi and the rest of the away team joined the Nasat at the screen. They all wanted to see what the transmission said. But Corsi noticed that Ramark remained at his console. He seemed uninterested, which was odd, considering all the effort to which he had gone. Sure enough, text scrolled across the screen. Corsi scowled.

"It's just gibberish," Hawkins said, voicing Corsi's own thoughts.

Something didn't feel right to her. She slowly reached for her phaser, just to have her hand near it, just to be on the safe side. Suddenly, on the other side of the room, one of the large computers, about seven feet in height and positioned up against the wall, popped open and swung away from the wall, revealing a secret entryway behind it. Four humanoid figures—three males and one female—burst out of the entryway, armed with crude hand weapons they immediately aimed at Corsi and her team. They were dressed in tan-colored paramilitary uniforms.

Phony computer—how clever, Corsi thought. I should've known. She swiftly pulled out her phaser and fired at the figure in front—a tall, burly male with straight blond hair, who went down in a stunned heap. She saw Hawkins and Powers following suit, but the ambushing figures scattered so fast that the phaser beams missed their targets and struck only the far wall.

At least the odds are pretty much even, Corsi thought. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ramark

duck behind his communications console for shelter.

One of the ambushing figures—the female, a short, tough-looking young woman with her dark hair in a buzz-cut style—aimed her hand weapon at Corsi and fired. Corsi scrambled and managed to evade the blast of energy, but Hawkins was not so lucky. The blast hit him across the shoulder, knocking him off his feet.

Out of the corner of her eye, Corsi then saw five more armed ambushers emerge from the entryway. Three of them were Red Nasats.

P8 Blue, who had been aiming her phaser at the tough-looking woman, also noticed the new arrivals. “Wait! Stop!” she called out to them, waving six of her eight limbs. “Let me talk to you—I’m a Nasat, too!”

One of the Red Nasats fired its weapon at P8 Blue. The blast hit her phaser, knocking it out of the limb that was holding it.

“Drop your weapons and surrender!” shouted the tough-looking woman.

Corsi realized there was no way for her team to come out of this situation on top. They were outnumbered and outgunned, with an injured man. But she would not surrender to them.

She hit her combadge. “Corsi toda Vinci —emergency beam-out now!”

No response.

She hit the combadge again. “Corsi toda Vinci, come in, da Vinci .”

Still no response.

She heard Ramark clear his throat, and glanced over at him. He was standing at the communications console, with a smug grin on his face, waving to her mockingly. Then, he pointed to the console, looking quite mischievous.

Jamming communications, she thought, stifling a particularly strong curse.

Still more armed ambushers entered the room through the secret entryway. Another Red Nasat, an Arcturian, a Betelgeusian, and several more humanoids. The group now numbered thirteen, and they closed in and surrounded Corsi and her team, hand weapons at the ready. Corsi looked over at Powers, P8 Blue, and Hawkins, who was still conscious and rubbing the shoulder that had been hit. Corsi saw no blood or even burn marks on Hawkins’s shoulder—he was apparently grazed by nothing more than a stun blast. The ambushers’ weapons weren’t set to kill. That was interesting.

Corsi nodded at her team reluctantly, conveying silently that they didn’t stand a chance. They dropped their phasers to the floor. The tough-looking woman—“Buzz-cut” was as good a name for her as any—confiscated the phasers and handed them over to a compatriot.

“You and your people, come with us,” Buzz-cut told Corsi, pointing her hand weapon directly at the security chief’s chest.

“Powers, Pattie, help Hawkins,” Corsi said, her eyes never leaving Buzz-cut’s.

Powers and P8 Blue walked over to Hawkins and helped him to his feet.

“I’m all right, I can walk,” Hawkins said, waving them off. “Shoulder and arm are just numb, that’s all.”

Elsewhere in the room, two of the ambushers lifted up the unconscious body of the man Corsi had stunned. They shot smoldering glares at the da Vinci security chief as they passed her by, carrying the unconscious man over to the secret entryway. They headed inside.

Buzz-cut then motioned Corsi and her team over to the same entryway. A flight of stairs leading downward lay before them, dimly illuminated by a series of small glowing light rods attached to either side of the stairwell. With a wave of her hand weapon, Buzz-cut indicated that she wanted Corsi and her team to enter.

As she walked down the steps, Corsi could hear the large computer being put back into place so that it would once again block the secret entrance.

“I’m sorry, Commander,” Hawkins told her, his voice filled with self-recrimination. “I should have been more alert. I never should have let my guard down with that weasel.”

“Same here, Commander,” added Powers.

Corsi waved off the apologies. “I’m as much to blame as anyone,” she said.

They reached the bottom of the stairs and, at the prodding of the ambushers, moved on through a narrow corridor until they entered an underground cavern converted into a headquarters of some kind. Corsi saw a long conference table covered with various maps, charts, and graphs, fifteen chairs, and several computer consoles.

The ambushers, weapons still in hand, continued to surround her, Hawkins, Powers, and P8 Blue.

“Where are we?” Corsi demanded.

A gruff masculine voice responded. “You’re where you wanted to be, Commander Corsi.”

A fairly young-looking, yellow-skinned humanoid male with wavy brown hair and intense, piercing blue eyes stepped out from a side alcove. He moved forward to face her.

“You wanted to find the Taru Bolivar,” the male told Corsi. It was his voice that had answered her. “Well, here we are.”

* * *

In the communications center, Ramark was chuckling to himself about how easy it had been to defeat those Starfleet suckers, when he heard a noise behind him.

He stood up swiftly, pulling a small, laser-powered firearm out of a pocket in his trousers.

“Who’s there?” he called out. No one should have been able to get into the building without the proper authorization code. And everyone with proper authorization was now down below.

Suddenly, he felt a sharp pain in the wrist of the hand holding the firearm—so much pain that he dropped the weapon. He looked down to see a large, gray-skinned hand holding his wrist. How could anyone have been able to sneak up beside him so fast? He twisted around to see who had seized him.

“Gerard?” he said in shock.

“Hello, Ramark,” said Rod Portlyn’s Senior High Security Agent with a malevolent grin.

Gerard, towering over Ramark, shifted his expression to a cold glare. “I need to get down to that underground hideout, and you’re going to show me how.”

“What underground hideout?” Ramark responded defiantly, placing his free hand on the communications console and reaching for the toggle that would sound the alert signal to warn those down below.

But Gerard pulled Ramark closer to him and squeezed harder on the wrist, causing Ramark to wince despite his best efforts to show no weakness.

“I’m dead serious, twerp. And unless you tell me what I want to know, you’ll just be plain dead.”

“I can’t hear you, Gerard. Your head is too far up Portlyn’s rear end.”

“Wrong answer,” the big man replied.

Continuing to hold Ramark’s wrist, Gerard strode over to the wall where the seven-foot-tall computer blocked the secret entryway. He lifted Ramark, turned him in a horizontal position, and then placed the smaller man under one of his large, muscular arms.

“I figure both sides of this wall have their own control switches to open the computer. The one on this side has to be hidden around here somewhere,” Gerard commented in an almost casual manner. “All I have to do is find it. And I can’t think of anything better to use than your head.”

Without warning, Gerard slammed Ramark’s head into a section of the wall. Ramark was too shocked to even cry out in pain.

“Nope, it’s not here,” Ramark could hear Gerard say through the intense pounding in his ears. “Let me try this section here...”

Wham!

Amid his agony, Ramark was filled with anger and hatred, wanting nothing more than to tear out Gerard’s eyes and wrap his fingers around his throat and squeeze the life out of him. But Portlyn’s agent was too big, and too strong.

“Nope, not there, either. Guess I should try a little further up. Gee, I might have to cover this whole room. This could take a while...”

Ramark felt Gerard rushing him toward another section of wall. “Wait,” he managed to croak out. “I’ll talk.” He couldn’t take another blow to the head. And he hated himself for it.

“Where?” Gerard demanded.

Ramark pointed weakly to the computer itself.

“Now what?” Gerard hissed.

“Button, side of ’puter,” Ramark mumbled.

Through blurred vision, Ramark saw Gerard examine the sides of the computer and find a small camouflaged stud near the top. The big man pressed the stud and watched in triumph as the front of the computer popped open, exposing the entryway and the dimly lit stairway leading downward.

“All right, Ramark. I won’t be needing you anymore.”

Gerard dropped Ramark onto the floor and quickly inspected the entrance. Ramark tried to get to his feet, but he was barely holding on to consciousness. He looked up to see Gerard pull out a phaser.

“It’s set for stun,” Gerard told him. “This way, you can live out the rest of your life knowing that you betrayed your friends down there.”

That was the last thing Ramark heard before he was bathed in the light of the phaser beam and all went black.

* * *

Gerard descended the winding stairway quietly and carefully, until he entered a narrow corridor and then heard a voice echoing from up ahead. He stopped as soon as he could make out clearly what the voice was saying.

And Gerard found that he recognized the voice.

Elless,he thought.

“We intend to be a constant thorn in Portlyn’s side, and prevent him from spreading his taint to other worlds,” Gerard heard the voice say.

This is good stuff,he thought as he pulled a small transmitter out of his jacket, activated it, and began broadcasting to a specific location: Rod Portlyn’s private office on Vemlar.

Chapter

7

“My name is Elless,” the young man with the piercing blue eyes told Corsi.

“I take it you’re the leader around here?” she replied in a cold tone.

The young man shrugged his shoulders. “More or less.”

Corsi’s tone remained cold. “I hope you realize this terrorist organization of yours will be stopped, one way or another.”

Elless frowned. “I was hoping you and your Federation would be more reasonable.”

Corsi scowled. “You don’t know much about the Federation if you believe we would ever condone acts of terrorism.”

Elless stood his ground. “We’re not terrorists. I assume Ramark told you what happened to this world under Portlyn’s ownership?”

“He told us. So we have one side of the story now. That doesn’t mean we buy it. And even if it’s true, that doesn’t excuse your actions. Planting time bombs, blowing up a key facility under construction, endangering lives—”

“Oh, come on!” Elless interrupted. “We arranged everything so no one would be killed—or even hurt! We made sure of it!”

“Not as well as you think,” Corsi fired back angrily, thinking of Sonya Gomez and the anonymous suspect who remained in the da Vinci sickbay.

At that, Elless looked as if someone had suddenly splashed ice-cold water in his face. “Someone was... killed?” His body seemed to deflate.

“Two people injured on Vemlar, one severely,” Corsi said. “He’s one of yours, I think.”

Elless closed his eyes and lowered his head. “Jaxxon,” he whispered. “My brother. Vemlar was his assignment.”

Corsi felt a brief flash of sympathy, but was determined not to show it. Not to a terrorist. She told him flatly, “That’s the danger of playing with fire—you can’t always control the forces you unleash.”

“You have to believe me,” Elless insisted. “Bloodshed isn’t what we want.”

Corsi looked upon him doubtfully. “So what exactly do you want?”

Elless straightened up, looked her square in the eyes, set his jaw firmly, and told her with passion, “We intend to be a constant thorn in Portlyn’s side, and prevent him from spreading his taint to other worlds.”

“Don’t you think you’re overreacting a bit?” Corsi asked. “I mean, assuming everything we’ve heard is true, the bottom line is, his business here took a downward turn. It happens—believe me, I know. That’s no reason to view him as some sort of disease.”

Elless chuckled bitterly. “Let me tell you about the real Rod Portlyn. We’ve learned that he’s found a way to keep profiting from Phantas 61, but it doesn’t include us. He intends to turn this entire planet into a giant dumping ground. For a price, he’s going to offer space to any interested governments across the galaxy, provide them with a place to dump their excess trash. All Phantasians will have to get off the planet, or else willingly live in a cosmic garbage dump.”

Corsi was unmoved. “Assuming this information is true, I agree, it’s an unfortunate situation for all of you. But Portlyn is well within his rights. You sold him your land. He can do whatever he wants with it.”

Elless exploded. “We don’t have anyplace else to go! And we’re down to the barest essentials here—we don’t have the means to transport our whole population to another world!” He then took a breath and spoke more calmly. “Besides, this planet is our home—has been for generations! We made it

the success it was, not Portlyn. We have a vested interest in this place that goes beyond balance sheets and profit margins. That's why we created this group, the Taru Bolivar. That's a Phantasian term that means 'to see reality as it should be.'"

"And just what should your reality be?" Corsi asked skeptically.

"Our ultimate goal is to regain this planet's independence and make it a success again. To do that, we need to make Portlyn realize it's in his best interests to relinquish his ownership. Until then, we intend to do whatever we can to interfere with his operations, to prevent him from doing to other worlds what he's done to us. That's why we targeted Vemlar."

Corsi sighed, growing increasingly frustrated. "Look, the fact of the matter is, the soil on Vemlar became infertile. Had Portlyn not offered to buy the land from the farmers, they would've had nothing but famine and starvation. Like him or not, he saved those people."

Elless snorted. "You think you know everything, don't you? Portlyn himself oversaw a top-secret bio-engineering project conducted on Vemlar, well before he bought it up. That project involved reorganizing the molecular structure of Vemlar's soil, using a newly developed viral agent. One that rendered itself undetectable after it was used."

"What are you saying? That Portlyn—"

"Portlyn secretly ruined the soil on Vemlar, to intentionally create the famine and ultimately manipulate the farmers into selling their land to him."

Corsi rolled her eyes. "This is getting ridiculous."

"What, you think I'm some paranoid conspiracy nut making wild accusations?"

"I have to admit, Elless, the thought is crossing my mind. I'm supposed to just believe a gang of terrorists over a respected businessman with no criminal history?"

"We're not terrorists!"

"Terrorists rarely see themselves as such. They usually call themselves, what? Freedom fighters? Revolutionaries? Heroes?"

"What I've told you is true."

"If it is, we'll need solid proof."

Elless turned away from her and walked over to one of the computer consoles. He held up a small computer file that was sitting atop the console.

"This is a highly classified data file that details everything about the Vemlar project," he explained. "I read it myself, and then managed to extract it directly from Portlyn's home office."

"Fine, let's take a look at it."

Elless grimaced and sighed heavily. "Once I brought the file back here, I tried to show the data to the rest of the Taru Bolivar. But it wouldn't open. We discovered that it was encoded so intricately that it'll

only open on Portlyn's personal computer." He shook the file and sighed. "The proof is right here, but I can't get to it!"

Elless then angrily shoved the file into a side pocket of his uniform.

He seems sincere enough, Corsi thought. But it's also mighty convenient that the one piece of evidence he has is unreachable. If I could get it to the da Vinci, have it checked up there...

"It doesn't matter, though," Elless continued. "We, the Taru Bolivar, know the truth. And we intend to prevent Portlyn from completing his project on Vemlar—regardless of whether you stand in our way. Don't you see, Commander? We're the only ones who can stand against him—with Portlyn's businesses located in nonaligned space, he doesn't have to answer to anybody but himself."

Now where have I heard that before? Corsi thought, with more than a hint of irony.

* * *

On Vemlar, Rod Portlyn stood in front of one of the huge windows in his office, alone, holding a half-full glass of Romulan ale. He stared out at the night-shrouded sky and the distant stars as he listened to the conversation being broadcast over the receiver unit in his desk.

"We, the Taru Bolivar, know the truth. And we intend to prevent Portlyn from completing his project on Vemlar..."

Portlyn turned off the receiver. He'd heard enough. He'd already set in motion his response.

Ah, Elless, Portlyn thought. He focused his gaze on one particular tiny spot of light in the sky: Phantas 61. Thanks to your antics, I've had to take harsh steps to solve this insurgency problem.

He glanced at the chronometer on the far wall and did a quick mental calculation.

The Orion mercenary ships should be arriving at Phantas 61 shortly. As should the robot freighter from Creccus. All in all, I would say I responded quite efficiently to this turn of events.

He then looked back at the sky, and that tiny spot of light. I knew you had to be involved in this, Elless. As soon as Adair told me that Phantas 61 was somehow connected.

Portlyn took a sip from the glass and closed his eyes as the ale went down his throat. He savored its powerful kick.

I told you time and time again, Elless, back when you were my right-hand man—never take business personally. But apparently, you never learned that lesson. A shame, really.

* * *

Elless ordered his operatives to holster their weapons and back off. But they remained in possession of the Federation team's phasers.

"You're in league with our enemy," Elless told Corsi. "But you're not our prisoners. Nor are you hostages. We've no intention of harming you in any way. Would that be the case if we were the terrorists you think we are?"

Corsi considered that, and the fact that their hand weapons had been set on stun, not kill.

“I’ll grant that your efforts to preserve life do seem genuine,” she replied. “And incidentally, we’re not ‘in league’ with Portlyn. We have a business arrangement with him that doesn’t extend beyond Vemlar.”

Elless nodded. “Understood. Maybe we can talk this out under less tense circumstances, perhaps open a real dialogue to understand each other better?”

“I’ll need to contact my ship and consult with my captain. He’ll decide how to proceed from here.”

“Absolutely,” Elless told her solemnly. “I’ve already signaled Ramark to stop jamming communications. You can contact your ship.”

Corsi nodded and slapped the combadge on her chest. “Corsi toda Vinci .”

There was no response. She slapped the badge again.

“Corsi toda Vinci, come in. Captain Gold, do you copy?”

Still no response. She looked over at the away team. They all started slapping their combadges and called to the ship, but were met with silence.

Corsi immediately turned to Elless and glared at him.

In response, Elless strode over to one of the computer consoles in the room and flipped a switch.

“Elless to Ramark. I told you to stop jamming outgoing transmissions.”

No response.

“Ramark, respond.”

Still no response. Elless turned to Buzz-cut.

“Vazga, check on Ramark, find out what’s going on with him.”

As Buzz-cut—Vazga—headed out of the chamber, Elless started adjusting the controls on the console. He became increasingly agitated as he studied the monitor screen while fiddling around with the knobs and dials.

“According to these readings,” he began, “our equipment up top is no longer jamming outgoing communications.”

“So what’s the problem?” Corsi replied with an annoyed scowl.

Elless pointed to an undulating energy pattern on the monitor. “All communications in this entire region of space are now being jammed by an outside source.”

Chapter

8

Captain Gold paced the bridge of the *Vinci*, wondering what was happening on *Phantas 61*. Corsi was supposed to report in an hour after beaming down, and those sixty minutes had come and gone ten minutes ago. She was a highly competent officer, and Gold trusted her completely, but she was also punctual to a fault, so missing her check-in deadline was not something he took lightly.

He decided that he'd waited long enough and turned to the tactical console.

"Shabalala, open a channel to Commander Corsi."

A moment later, Shabalala looked up from the console, concerned.

"Sir, I can't reach Commander Corsi—or any other member of the away team. Something is jamming all transmissions."

Gold scowled as he headed back to the captain's chair. Given the circumstances they were in, he could guess where this was headed.

Sure enough, Ensign Susan Haznedl, stationed at the operations console, suddenly said, "Captain, sensors detect ten vessels closing in on us. They just appeared out of nowhere, sir—they may have been cloaked."

"What do you make of them?"

"They're more than twice the size of one of our shuttlecraft, sir, and heavily armed—each ship has a torpedo bay, phaser banks, and disruptor cannons. They're essentially arsenals with warp drives."

"Any idea who they are?"

"Unable to ascertain, sir. The ships seem to be...cobbled together, from various alien technologies."

"Shields up," Gold ordered. "Shabalala, stand by on defensive maneuvers."

Soon, the ten vessels were close enough to be seen on the bridge viewscreen. They approached in a V-formation.

"Magnify, maximum setting," Gold ordered.

Instantly, the image on the viewscreen increased in size. Gold had never seen vessels like these before. As Haznedl surmised, they indeed appeared to be cobbled together from different technologies. From what Gold could tell, the warp engines were Ferengi in design. The disruptor cannons mounted to either side of the cockpits were most likely Klingon in origin. The torpedo bays were located on the underbellies of the vessels, but each one seemed to be of a different alien technology—there was no consistency from ship to ship.

"The terrorists, I presume," the captain said aloud.

"Shall I fire a warning shot, sir?" Shabalala asked.

But before Gold could reply, the lead ship on the viewscreen pulled ahead of the pack and opened fire with its disruptor cannons.

Theda Vinci shuddered slightly under the barrage, which was deflected by the Starfleet vessel's shields.

"Lock phasers on target and return fire," Gold snapped. "No warnings about it!"

Gold watched the main viewscreen as twin phaser beams erupted from the Theda Vinci. But the lead attacking ship swiftly banked to the side, completely evading the beams and pulling away.

Haznedl, eyes glued to her console, reported, "The other ships have broken off from the V-formation, sir. They're moving to surround us."

And as the attackers surrounded the Theda Vinci, they opened fire, their disruptors alternating with their phasers.

"Maintain phaser fire!" Gold ordered.

Shabalala targeted another attacker and fired. The phaser beams struck the small ship, but were deflected by its shields. The attacker fired back with disruptors that struck at the upper hull of the Theda Vinci's forward section, right near the bridge.

"Our shields are holding." Haznedl then looked up from her console. "Captain, another ship is arriving!"

"Another attacker?"

"A freighter of some kind, sir. It's heading away from us and toward the planet."

"Then we can't worry about it right now—our hands are full enough as it is."

As if to emphasize that point, three of the attacking vessels swooped in closer.

"Photon torpedoes one, two, and three—fire!" Gold shouted.

Shabalala complied, and the Theda Vinci launched three torpedoes, each aimed at one of the three attackers. Two of the attackers evaded the torpedoes, but one was hit directly on its side.

"No damage to enemy ship, Captain," Shabalala reported. "Its shields deflected the torpedo with a minimal loss of power."

Another attacker closed in, on a direct course for the front of the Theda Vinci. It became bigger and bigger on the viewscreen as it got closer and closer. Then, it began spitting disruptor bolts at the bridge, trying to continue the work of its sister ship.

"Quantum torpedoes one and two—fire!" Gold ordered in response.

The Theda Vinci unleashed two of the more powerful quantum torpedoes, both of which hit their target head-on. The small attacker seemed to stop in midstream, and then started tilting to its side.

"Its shields are down, Captain!" Shabalala exclaimed.

“Quantum torpedo three—fire,” Gold told the tactical officer.

Shabalala fired the additional torpedo, which hit the now drifting attacker dead center. The small ship exploded like a miniature supernova.

But there was no time to celebrate. The two other attackers closed in again, taking up positions on either side of the *Vinci*, and fired photon torpedoes.

Gold noted that the attackers held off on firing their torpedoes until they were at point-blank range, presumably because torpedoes were in short supply aboard the fairly small vessels and the pilots wanted to make sure that every shot counted.

“Our shields are down by twelve percent, Captain,” Haznedl announced.

The attackers’ strategy was starting to work.

Gold glanced at the viewscreen. Beyond the nine remaining attackers that streaked in and out of view, he could see the freighter entering low orbit around *Phantas 61*, completely ignoring the battle. But Gold had no time to even wonder what it was up to.

“We’re surrounded, sir,” Haznedl reported.

And then all the attackers opened fire.

* * *

Vazga returned to the *Taru Bolivar* underground headquarters, carrying the limp body of Ramark.

“Unconscious,” she reported as she placed him gently on the conference table. Two of the *Taru Bolivar*—one of the *Nasats* and the *Arcturian*—went over to examine him.

“Some kind of head injury,” Vazga continued. “Looks like somebody beat him up and then stun-blasted him.”

“Who?” Elless demanded.

“No idea,” Vazga replied. “There was nobody else up there—but I found the entryway open when I got upstairs.”

Suddenly, an alarm signal blared out. Corsi swiftly turned toward the large piece of machinery that was the source of the noise. Elless rushed over and started flipping switches. A large, flat-panel monitor rose up from inside and a schematic representation popped on, of a planet and the region of space surrounding it.

There were eleven blinking dots on the screen, in high orbit above the planet, clustered around one another. A twelfth blinking dot was off on its own, slowly getting closer to the planet.

“Is that supposed to be this planet?” Corsi asked, pointing to the schematic.

“Yes,” Elless replied. “This is our sensor device. It’s been monitoring local space. Those dots are all spaceships—there’s a lot of traffic above us all of a sudden.”

“One of those ships is ours,” Corsi noted. “Who are the others?”

Elless took a closer look at the sensor readings. “I’ve identified your ship, but I can’t seem to identify the ten circling it—they defy standard classification. But this other one seems to be a freighter of some kind.”

He then noticed something new, and grimaced. “There’s fighting going on. Looks like your ship is under attack.”

“But who would attack us?” P8 Blue asked. “And why?”

“There’s only one possibility,” Elless said, turning back to face Corsi and her team. “Portlyn.”

“How did I know you were going to say that?” Corsi responded with a sigh. “Now he’s behind an attack on a Starfleet vessel? I suppose he beat up your friend Ramark, too?”

“Well, if he didn’t, I’m sure it was someone connected to him. Look, it’s the only logical explanation. As for why he’d have your ship attacked... my guess is, he somehow connected the time bombs and the explosion on Vemlar to us. And he found out that you came here.”

“You’re making him out to be pretty damned omniscient,” Corsi told him.

“With all of his connections, and all the operatives he has running around spying for him, he might as well be.”

Elless then paused. He looked as if he had bitten into the sourest of fruits. Finally, as if spitting out the words, he said in a voice dripping with bitterness, “Look, I know Rod Portlyn. I know how he thinks. I was his right-hand man here. I helped him build this place up... and watched helplessly as he ran it into the ground.” He glanced back at the schematic. “My guess is that the attackers are Orion mercenaries. Portlyn often uses them on a freelance basis.” He turned back to Corsi, his intense eyes boring into hers. “Portlyn can’t take the chance of the Federation finding out the truth about him, not if he wants to keep the Federation as his partner on Vemlar. Those mercs are here to blow your ship out of the stars.”

Vazga abruptly called out to Elless. She directed his attention back to the monitor, and the twelfth blinking dot that was closest to the planet.

“The freighter just launched something,” she informed him.

Elless swiftly adjusted the controls and studied the sensor readings. “A missile of some kind. I’ll see if I can augment the readings so we can determine exactly what it—”

“What?” Corsi prompted.

Elless’s voice sounded hollow when he finally answered. “The sensors say the missile is loaded with contagion—the same kind that Portlyn used on Vemlar. But much more powerful. In this form, it’ll wipe out all life on Phantas 61.” He turned away from the screen and looked at everyone in the room. “It all makes sense—he wants the galaxy to believe the *Vinci* was destroyed by the *Taru Bolivar*. And to make sure no one can say anything different, everyone on this planet will be exterminated.”

“What about his investment in this world?” Corsi asked, hoping against hope that Elless was somehow wrong. “He’s going to just write it off?”

“Not at all,” Elless replied. “Phantas 61 doesn’t have to support life to be used as a dumping ground for space garbage.”

Corsi couldn’t argue with that. She had to face the very real possibility that Portlyn was far worse than even she had believed.

“Look, Elless,” she began. “We have to work together if we—everyone on Phantas 61 and theda Vinci—are going to have any chance of surviving this.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Do you have ground-to-air defenses?”

“No, we’re not that well-equipped.”

“If I may point out,” P8 Blue stepped in, “blowing the missile out of the sky would be most inadvisable. That would only release the contagion into the air.”

Okay, Corsi thought. That rules out all of my other ideas.

But then she had a flash of inspiration. “Elless, what kind of spaceship capability do you have?”

“We have a small fleet of ships that we’ve modified to act as escape vehicles and fighters.”

She nodded quickly. “Do they have tractor beams?”

“Yes, but not very powerful ones. They can only handle objects not much larger than a standard cargo container.”

“That’ll have to do.” Corsi turned to her team. “Hawkins, how’s your shoulder?”

“Uh, much better, Commander. I can do whatever you need.”

“Hawkins,” Corsi said to her deputy in a tone filled with skepticism.

The dark-skinned security officer frowned and sighed. “Okay, it’s still numb. And I can’t feel my fingers—yet. But I’m sure I can—”

Corsi cut him off. “Can’t risk it. You’ll have to stay here—no arguments, I don’t have the time. Powers, Pattie—you’re coming with me.”

She then turned to Elless. “Have a couple of your people stay here and try to find a way around the communications jamming. If they can, they should make contact with theda Vinci—our captain must be informed about what’s really going on here.”

Elless summoned over one of the Red Nasats and a small, middle-aged, humanoid woman with yellowish skin and frizzy, blue-tinted hair. “R1, Fila—I need you two working on this. Use smoke signals, if you have to.”

Corsi, stifling a smirk, turned back to Hawkins. “If they do make contact, I’ll want you to do the talking,

Vance—the captain will need to hear this from someone he knows and trusts.” Hawkins nodded.

“Now, let’s get to those ships of yours,” Corsi told Elless. “And you’d better bring your best pilots—we’ll need them for what I have planned.”

* * *

Captain Gold felt both gratified and frustrated watching another attacker explode on the viewscreen after a bombardment of quantum torpedoes and a barrage of phasers at full power.

That’s two down...and eight more to go.

The attackers continued their hit-and-run maneuvers, zooming in close to the *Vinci* to fire their weapons and then swiftly peeling away to avoid the Starfleet vessel’s retaliatory fire. The *Vinci* managed to break out of orbit to gain more maneuvering room and hopefully turn the tables on the attackers. But the smaller ships managed to keep pace and surround the *Vinci*, pounding at its shields.

“Our shields are now at forty-two percent efficiency, Captain,” Haznedl reported.

Didn’t take us long to lose that fifty-eight percent, Gold thought grimly. The *Vinci* endured several hits from all sides. He could almost feel the shields of his vessel weakening even further.

For this I argued to come to this planet?

“Phaser power starting to drop, Captain,” Shabalala called out.

Gold turned to Fabian Stevens, who was operating an aft bridge console that had been reconfigured during the battle to act as an engineering station. “Shut down all nonessential functions and divert every ounce of available power to shields, weapons, and life support.”

“Aye, sir,” Stevens replied as he quickly got to work. “But I’m afraid that won’t give those systems much more power than they already have.”

Gold bit his lip. As much as this wasn’t the appropriate time or circumstance, he couldn’t ignore the notion that suddenly rushed to the forefront of his mind—the notion that was lurking within ever since the aftermath of *Galvan VI*: If only he had another ship, a bigger, stronger ship. If he commanded such a vessel, it would have undoubtedly emerged victorious by now, instead of facing annihilation by a ragtag band of terrorists.

Chapter 9

Corsi braced herself as the small, snub-nosed, winged spacecraft she piloted abruptly lifted off the ground and began accelerating through a dark, spacious tunnel leading to the mouth of a cave outside the city. She was certainly no stranger to being behind the controls of a ship, and was relieved to find that this vessel flew well and was not too difficult to master, despite its somewhat ramshackle appearance and a control panel that was partially built from spare parts.

Elless explained to her before she climbed into the cockpit that the *Taru Bolivar* “fleet,” such as it was, consisted of vessels that were once shuttles, called “runners,” that transported the riches mined from

Phantas 61 to larger ships for distribution across space. But when Elless and his comrades formed the Taru Bolivar, they completely reconfigured the runners and outfitted them with whatever defensive and offensive ordnance they could obtain.

Pretty industrious, these Phantasians, she thought as her runner exited the long tunnel and began climbing into the gray sky. She followed Elless's ship, which was in the lead position. Behind her, six more runners headed up through the tunnel, each piloted by either a Taru Bolivar operative or a member of her own team. P8 Blue and Powers were each given a ship to fly, following Elless's pilots, one of whom was Vazga. Corsi had since learned that the tough-looking woman she had thought of as "Buzz-cut" was Elless's second-in-command.

Once all eight runners were in the sky, they accelerated together up toward the stratosphere, their sensors locked on the incoming missile. After several moments, the dart-shaped, ten-stories-tall projectile was in sight. The ships altered course to intercept it.

Corsi anxiously adjusted the controls of her runner so it would match the speed of the missile. She had to assume her fellow pilots were doing the same thing. With all communications still being jammed, there was no way for them to speak to one another directly, so all the details of Corsi's plan were worked out in advance on the fly. Taking a quick look around through the windows of her cockpit, Corsi saw the other ships getting into the agreed-upon flight formation, so she immediately followed suit. The eight runners formed two parallel lines, four ships in each line. Corsi took the lead position in one of the lines, and she could see that the ship marked as Elless's had done the same in the other. A wide opening was maintained between the two lines of runners, through which the missile could enter unimpeded.

The nose of the missile rushed through the opening. Corsi took a deep breath as she watched the nose slip past her. She waited until more of the missile's body had entered the gap between the two lines of runners. She could feel her heart pounding through her chest, the veins in her forehead pulsing madly. The missile continued to rush through the gap.

Wait for more missile... just a little more... now!

She slapped on her tractor beam, then briefly glanced at the other runners through her cockpit window. They had all activated their tractor beams too, more or less at the same time. All eight beams were now fixed on either side of the missile, from the nose to the long midsection to the base of the propulsion unit, where Corsi's ship was now located. So far, so good.

Considering the speed at which the missile had been traveling when they intercepted it, it was no surprise when the huge projectile continued its relentless descent toward the surface—or when it dragged the eight runners along with it. Corsi kept her cool and waited for any signs of a change. Slowly but surely, she began to detect a decrease in the missile's rate of descent. The tractor beams were having an effect on it, however slight. Now all the runners would have to do is gain complete control over the missile and alter its direction before it hit the surface.

The runners kept their tractor beams fixed on the missile and remained in their parallel lines on either side of it. Then they began to rise in unison and pull on the projectile through the tractor beams, trying to nudge the missile's nose up and gradually move the entire thing out of its downward trajectory.

The surface of the planet got closer and closer, but no great progress was being made.

Corsi hoped the others had come to the same conclusion as she: that it would be necessary to increase power to the tractor beams. She went with the assumption that they had, and began diverting some

power from her runner's shields and weapons systems. Glancing out the window, she could see the pale blue tractor beams generated by the other runners quickly become brighter, denoting an increase in power level. Good—they were all on the same wavelength.

With the tractor-beam power levels elevated, the runners made another attempt to pull on the missile and force it up and away from its descent. But despite a slight shift, it continued unabated on its headlong path to the surface. Corsi decided it was necessary to sacrifice even more power from the shields and weapons to boost the tractor beam, and made the adjustments.

She glanced out the window as she strengthened her tractor beam again. She noticed that the ship being flown by Elless's lieutenant, Vazga, which was in the other line of runners, was the first to follow her in this—its tractor beam suddenly grew even brighter.

But Corsi's eyes widened in shock and dismay as she watched chunks of Vazga's ship start to fall away—apparently it could no longer withstand the stresses placed upon it. Vazga's runner dropped out of the formation and began gliding—then plummeting—toward the ground, like a bird suddenly stripped of its wings.

As if serving as an echo, the last ship in Corsi's own line of runners began to break apart. Corsi frantically checked the identification marker on the vessel to figure out who was piloting it. She determined that it was one of her own: Powers. His crumbling ship followed Vazga's out of the formation and into a steep downward glide toward the surface.

Corsi swallowed hard, determined not to let her concern for her subordinate be a distraction. She told herself there was a chance—however slim—that Powers and Vazga could survive their crash landings.

But as the missile continued its long plunge, and with two less ships to act against it, Domenica Corsi silently, regretfully concluded that her plan was doomed. She would go down fighting—simply giving up was not in her nature—but success was not going to be in the cards, not this time. She and the rest of her team, along with Elless and the Taru Bolivar, and every living thing on Phantas 61, would soon be dead.

And up above, in space, theda Vinci was fighting for survival against overwhelming odds—assuming it hadn't already been destroyed. She thought of Fabian Stevens, wishing she could have at least had the chance to see him one last time, or even say good-bye over the radio.

Damn Rod Portlyn, she cursed bitterly. That smug, arrogant, greedy piece of slimy—

Suddenly, Corsi noticed a runner in the other line breaking off from the formation, and starting to descend toward the missile. She checked the ID marker, and determined that this ship was the one being piloted by P8 Blue.

What in the world is Pattie up to?

* * *

As P8 Blue brought her runner closer to the missile, she hoped Corsi was not being too hard on herself over the failure of her plan. The idea of using the runners to intercept the missile and alter its course was a good one, and definitely had the potential to succeed. It was unfortunate that the tractor beams simply weren't strong enough to do the job, and that some of these tough little recycled ships could not hold up under the strain.

Corsi's idea did have a positive effect, though—it got the runners up in the air. Had they not gone up, there would never have been a chance for Pattie to launch her own crazy scheme. With “Plan A” having fallen through and the situation even more desperate now, the Nasat did not doubt that what she was about to do would represent the very last chance to save everyone on Phantas 61.

She pulled her ship in so close to the side of the missile that it was practically touching the deadly projectile. Setting the ship on autopilot, she popped open the canopy of her runner, stood up in her cockpit, and hurled herself onto the topside of the missile.

With each of her eight limbs struggling against the staggeringly powerful winds, Pattie managed to crawl along the length of the missile until she came upon the hatch that she knew had to house the device's computer guidance system. She devoted two of her limbs to prying off the cover of the hatch—the other six clung to anything on the missile's surface that could be tightly grasped.

Pattie tugged on the hatch cover three times, using all of her strength, before it finally popped up and revealed the guidance system. A display screen and a small keyboard were set within a gold-colored panel. Each unit had wires and cables that ran through a central matrix in the panel, and then out of sight into the missile's innards. Pattie quickly checked the coordinates that were flashing on the display as bright red numbers. She determined that the missile was programmed to strike right in the heart of the main city. Pattie looked up from the guidance system to see the surface of Phantas 61 growing closer at an ever quicker rate. They were well below the stratosphere now.

Pattie turned back to the guidance system and tapped on the keyboard, trying to change the programming, but nothing happened. The coordinates were locked in, and could not be tampered with. She examined the wires connecting the keyboard to the display screen and to the central matrix. For a moment, she was paralyzed with uncertainty—she wasn't absolutely sure that what she was about to do was the right way to go.

She then told herself, At this point, you have absolutely nothing to lose.

Pattie yanked out a yellow wire that had run from the keyboard into the display. She tapped the keyboard again, randomly.

The numbers on the display changed. She had removed the lock on the system.

Buoyed with excitement, Pattie did some quick mental calculations and tapped in a new sequence of numbers. Once she was done, she looked up again to see the heart of the main city rushing toward her, less than eight miles away now. They were fast approaching the point of no return, where even if the missile started to change direction, it would not have time or room to avoid crashing into the ground. She went ahead and pressed a tiny key marked “commit.”

Pattie looked around, taking everything in, just in case these were her last few moments of life. Her runner remained at the side of the missile, its tractor beam still locked on to the projectile. She saw that the other runners continued in vain to use their own tractor beams to try to pull the missile out of its dive. She placed her head down against the metal skin of the missile, knowing she had no choice now but to await the outcome of her efforts.

Was it wishful thinking, or did she suddenly feel the missile start to push itself upward? She looked up and still saw the planet's surface looming ahead, much closer than it had been a few moments before—the tallest buildings in the main city looked as if they were rushing up to embrace her like a long-lost lover. And the other runners finally deactivated their tractor beams—there was no reason to

keep them on anymore—and pulled away from the missile.

But then, slowly but surely, and there was no mistaking it, she saw that the nose of the missile was starting to rise, away from the crumbling skyscrapers.

The missile completed a midair arc that brought it frighteningly close to the roof of Phantas 61's tallest structure. It missed the building cleanly, though, and then began climbing up. But in completing the arc, too much strain was placed on the tractor beam on Pattie's runner, and the connection between the missile and the small ship was broken. The runner continued plunging toward the city before finally crashing into the side of a skyscraper. Pattie was now trapped on the missile as it headed for its new destination: the sun of the Norvel system.

Higher and higher the missile climbed, returning to the stratosphere and fast approaching the mesosphere. Soon, it would be back in outer space, with Pattie along for the ride.

But then the Nasat saw one of the other runners rise up alongside the missile and pull in closer. She recognized the ID marking on the ship: It was Corsi. Pattie could even see the security chief through the cockpit window, motioning for her to jump. She did not need any further prompting. She released the hold that each of her limbs had on the missile and allowed her insectoid body to get yanked off and into free fall.

Pattie landed roughly on the nose of Corsi's runner, her protective shell bearing the brunt of the impact. She swiftly used her limbs to grab on to the ship, which was already descending out of the stratosphere. Pattie clambered up the length of the nose to the cockpit, where Corsi raised the canopy high enough so that the Nasat could crawl in and fill the empty copilot's seat in the rear.

"Pattie," Corsi began once the canopy had closed again, her voice filled with joy, anxiety, relief, and exasperation, "that was the stupidest, bravest, most reckless, ill-conceived, wonderful display I've ever seen!"

"Thank you, Commander," Pattie replied simply.

They watched in silence as the missile headed up into space, toward the sun.

"Time for us to get back to the stars ourselves," Corsi said as she adjusted controls and the runner began climbing above the clouds. Pattie saw the other five remaining runners approaching and heading up with them.

Phantas 61 was safe, at least for the time being. Now their efforts would be devoted to helping the *theda Vinci*.

* * *

Corsi was gladdened when the *theda Vinci* came into view, still intact and defending itself. It was taking a pounding, to be sure, and its shields were drastically weakened, but it was still there, and still putting up a fight. In fact, it was right then ripping into one of the attacking Orion mercenary ships with a barrage of quantum torpedoes, a relentless torrent that did not end until the attacker was blown to bits. Corsi did a quick survey of the scene, noting that there had been ten mercenary ships to begin with, but now there were seven.

Way to go, Captain!

“Is the communications jamming still going on?” Pattie asked from behind her.

“It is,” Corsi replied. “Thankfully, we don’t seem to need communications at the moment. Elless and his people followed us up here to help the da Vinci, just like they agreed to before we lifted off. It seems pretty straightforward from here on in: Each of us picks an Orion ship and opens fire.”

Corsi picked her target and dived in. With her tractor beam deactivated, she transferred power back to the shields and weapons systems and got them up to full capacity again. As she swept by the Orion ship, she fired the plasma guns mounted atop the wings of her runner. The weapons were fairly easy to master, somewhat similar to the kind found on the wings of an old-style Romulan bird-of-prey.

The plasma shots were deflected by the Orion ship’s shields, so Corsi came about for another attack. But the Orion fired its disruptor cannons first, catching Corsi’s runner across the starboard side. The runner shuddered from the impact, but its shields held. Corsi rushed toward the Orion ship and fired the plasma guns again at her opponent, at point-blank range, which had the desired effect—the Orion’s shields began to fluctuate. Corsi swiftly followed up with another bombardment of plasma energy, then switched over to phasers at full intensity. At last, the Orion’s shields came down. Corsi switched back to the plasma weapon and fired. The Orion ship burst into a ball of brilliant light before quickly disintegrating to nothingness.

Corsi turned her ship around to face the main battle and chose another target. She immediately saw the da Vinci pummeling two Orion attackers with quantum torpedoes, while Elless’s runner had gained the upper hand on another and was firing its plasma guns relentlessly.

Suddenly, without fanfare, the Orion ships began pulling away from the battle, retreating from the da Vinci and the runners. One by one, the Orions fled at top speed for parts unknown.

“Maybe that was their leader you destroyed,” P8 Blue suggested.

“Could be—or they simply decided Portlyn isn’t paying them enough for this kind of aggravation.”

Checking her sensors, Corsi located the one ship that remained: the freighter in low orbit that had launched the missile at Phantas 61. That was the last target. She set a course to intercept it, and saw that Elless and the other runners were also headed in that direction.

* * *

Above Phantas 61, aboard his private ship, Gerard watched from a safe distance as the remaining Orion mercenary ships fled and the Taru Bolivar ships raced toward the remote-controlled robot freighter. Mr. Portlyn will not be happy about this unfortunate turn of events, Gerard knew. But the agent also knew that his employer would undoubtedly find a way to turn it into a victory. For that to happen, though, there could be no evidence of what had transpired here.

Gerard activated the computer console on his control panel and tied it into the systems on the robot freighter. Tapping in a numerical sequence, Gerard finished by pressing ENTER.

On his viewscreen, he watched as the robot ship obliterated itself. He smiled as the Taru Bolivar ships scrambled desperately to get out of the way of the blast—they never saw it coming. Too bad the explosion didn’t take some of them, too.

Gerard then set a new course for his ship and turned away from Phantas 61. As his ship accelerated out of the region, he deactivated the communications jamming device on his control panel, took a deep breath, and prepared to transmit his status report to Mr. Portlyn.

Chapter 10

Corsi wasn't sure what surprised Captain Gold more—that she and P8 Blue were part of the mysterious squadron that came to the *Vinci*'s aid, or that the squadron also consisted of the terrorists that the *Vinci* had come to hunt down.

With communications no longer jammed, Corsi contacted Gold from her runner and gave him a brief update on what had happened on Phantas 61. She explained what “Taru Bolivar” meant and informed the captain about who had really attacked his ship. Gold ordered Corsi back to the *Vinci*, and at Corsi's urging, the Taru Bolivar leader, Elless, followed her to the Starfleet vessel in his own runner.

Thinking ahead to the full briefing she planned to give her captain, Corsi requested that both Soloman and Bart Faulwell be on the bridge of the *Vinci* upon her return.

Once aboard, Corsi and P8 Blue escorted Elless directly to the bridge to meet with Captain Gold. Stepping out of the turbolift and onto the command deck, Corsi was very pleased to see Fabian Stevens, and exchanged the briefest of smiles with him. She told herself they'd have to make some time to talk, as soon as possible. But Corsi quickly returned to “all business, no nonsense” mode, and approached the captain's chair.

“We picked up two distress calls from the planet,” Gold told her without preamble. “Powers and someone else.” The captain looked over at Elless. “One of your people, I presume?”

Elless nodded. “Vazga,” he said flatly. Corsi could tell from the look on his face how concerned the Taru Bolivar leader was about the fate of his lieutenant. Clearly, he considered Vazga a trusted comrade and confidante...and perhaps something more.

“They crash-landed,” Gold continued. “We beamed them up and Dr. Lense has them in sickbay. They both sustained some pretty extensive injuries—Powers especially. At the very least, he'll need hip replacement and some nerve regeneration in his spine. At any rate, right now, neither of them could even wrestle a tribble.”

“At least they're both alive,” Corsi said with a relieved sigh.

“Thank you, Captain,” Elless murmured, bowing his head briefly.

Gold nodded once at Elless, grimly. He then focused on Corsi. “Hawkins is there, too. He contacted us as soon as the communications jamming ended. Just getting his arm looked at—he should be back on duty shortly.” The captain then leaned back in his chair and looked squarely at his security chief and the Taru Bolivar leader. “Now, how about bringing me fully up to speed?”

Gold was obviously stunned by what Corsi and Elless had to say: Rod Portlyn was behind the attack on the *Vinci*. He was also responsible for the missile that nearly killed everyone on Phantas 61. And he intentionally ruined the soil on Vemlar to get the farmers to sell their land to him. Corsi knew all of this

was hard for the captain to accept, but she also knew that she had his trust, and that meant he had to believe what she was telling him.

Gold leaned forward in the center seat and rested his chin atop his fist. “We’re going to need hard proof,” he mused. “Without solid evidence, there’ll be no way to bring Portlyn down.”

Corsi then pointed to Elless. “You said the file you stole from Portlyn has all the information we’d need.”

Elless pulled the computer file out of his pocket and held it up, waving it derisively. “I also said it can only be opened on Portlyn’s personal computer. Believe me, we’ve tried to extract the information. Several times. It’s hopeless.”

“Not necessarily,” Corsi insisted. “Maybe we can use the da Vinci’s equipment, and the expertise we have aboard, to get it open. I mean, it’s worth a try, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely it is,” Gold replied, holding his hand out to Elless for the file. The Taru Bolivar leader shrugged and handed the file over to the captain. Gold then turned his attention directly to the Bynar computer specialist, who had been standing quietly with Bart Faulwell near the bridge’s aft stations.

“Soloman, get to work on this right away. If we’re going to get something on Portlyn, we’ve got to do it fast.”

The Bynar stepped forward and took the file.

The captain then looked over at Faulwell. “Your talents will come in handy if Soloman gets the file open and the data is in code.”

“I’ll be happy to help, Captain,” Faulwell replied enthusiastically.

As Soloman and Faulwell entered the turbolift and left the bridge, Gold focused on Elless. Corsi noticed from the moment the captain met the Taru Bolivar leader that there was tension between them. Corsi knew Elless and his group were terrorists in Gold’s eyes, just as they had been in her own. But a certain degree of trust had been established between Corsi and Elless through their shared experiences on Phantas 61 and in battle. Her view of the Taru Bolivar was no longer quite as harsh as it had been. She still did not approve of their methods, but she understood what motivated them. She wondered if Captain Gold would take a similar stance.

“We’ll be getting under way shortly, Mr. Elless,” the captain began. “You helped us against the Orion ships, and I appreciate that a great deal.”

“Just as I am grateful for the aid your people gave us in saving all the lives on Phantas 61, Captain,” Elless replied cautiously. All eyes on the bridge briefly glanced over at P8 Blue, whose singular efforts in stopping the deadly missile had been dutifully reported by Corsi once communications were reestablished.

Gold continued. “But I’m afraid you present us with a dilemma. You and your group have engaged in terrorist activities, and that cannot and will not be tolerated. Those activities have to end now.”

Elless replied coldly, “This is not your jurisdiction, Captain.”

“But it is our fight, now that Portlyn tried to wipe us out. Look, my primary focus now is to stop him. If

that's what you and your Taru Bolivar want, as you claim, then you'll stay out of our way and not interfere with our efforts. No more terrorist acts, Elless. I'd hate for us to end up on opposite sides after what happened here today, and I don't want to have to split my attention between Portlyn and you. So don't give me anysuris, okay?"

Corsi couldn't help but chuckle inwardly. Gold had to know that Elless probably never heard that term before. But the Taru Bolivar leader seemed to understand what it meant, and that was enough.

"All right, Captain. We won't cause you any trouble—for now. But if your efforts fail, the Taru Bolivar will act again."

"Until then, Elless, I would say our business is finished. There's just the matter of the two people from your group who are currently in our sickbay. I trust you have medical facilities on Phantas 61 to care for them?"

"Of a sort. The man you picked up from Vemlar is my brother. What is his present condition?"

Gold frowned and shook his head. "He's in bad shape, I'm afraid. Dr. Lense says there's not much hope for recovery."

Elless nodded. "I understand. I would appreciate it if your doctor would prepare him and Vazga for beamdown."

"I'll have Lense see to it," Gold assured Elless. "Commander Corsi will escort you to sickbay." The captain then turned to his helmsman. "Wong, once our guests have beamed down to the planet, set a course back to Vemlar, warp two-point-five."

Gold then stood up and headed for the turbolift. "Shabalala, I'd like you to contact Patrice Bennett at her residence on Tau Ophiucus, and have the call sent directly to my quarters, private channel."

With that, Gold left the bridge.

Corsi thought, It's none of my business, but why does he want to talk to an ex-girlfriend at a time like this?

* * *

"Why would the captain want to talk to an ex-girlfriend in the middle of all this?" Fabian Stevens asked Corsi as they rode together in the turbolift, on their way back to the bridge from visiting Hawkins and Powers in the sickbay. They were alone for the first time in what felt like days instead of hours.

"My, aren't you the curious little cat?" Corsi replied, putting a disapproving tone in her voice.

"C'mon, Dom, you're telling me that question didn't cross your mind?"

Her attitude became serious. "What do I look like, the ship's gossipmonger? I don't engage in that childish nonsense. It's none of my business."

Stevens stared at her blankly for a long moment before she finally broke into a grin. "Okay, you got me," she chuckled.

Stevens laughed. “You almost had me going there.” Now it was his turn to become serious, but in his case, he wasn’t play-acting. He said, “Computer, halt turbolift.” The car smoothly came to a halt. “You know, Dom, at one point today it really looked like we would never get another chance to be together like this. To share a laugh...or anything else.”

“I know,” Corsi replied softly.

He continued. “Look, I’ve been in Starfleet long enough to know that the end can come at any time, and I accept that. But with me almost getting killed on Teneb and you not being there, and what we just went through separately at Phantas 61...well, I just don’t want anything left unsaid between us in the event that the worst happens, and—”

She put her finger on his lips. “You don’t have to say anything, Fabe.”

They stared at each other for a few moments, Stevens staring into those eyes that were ice-cold most of the time, but which were now the pleasant blue they were that first night they slept together almost a year ago.

Finally, in a soft voice, Stevens said, “Computer, resume.” The car restarted its journey up the turboshaft.

* * *

Theda Vinci was minutes away from arriving at Vemlar when Captain Gold returned to the bridge. As he took his seat, Soloman’s voice piped in over the intercom.

“Soloman to Captain Gold.”

“Gold here, go ahead, Soloman.” The captain smiled, anxious to hear what the Bynar had to say. He was looking forward to good news, and to viewing the evidence against Portlyn.

“Sir, I regret to report that the file has indeed proven impossible to open.”

Gold’s face fell.

“The encryption is as intricate as Elless warned. We are unable to get around it to open the file and gain access to the data within.”

Gold was sorely disappointed, but not overly surprised. He had, after all, been warned in advance that the file might not be penetrable. But he nonetheless allowed himself to hope that the experts aboard his ship would somehow find a way around that.

“Thank you, Soloman,” he said with a sigh. “I know how hard you and Faulwell have been working on it.” Gold signed off and leaned back in his chair.

Behind him, the turbolift doors slid open and Corsi and Stevens stepped out. Gold updated the security chief on the Vemlar file as she came up beside him.

“Damned frustrating,” she groused.

Gold tried to come off as optimistic. “Well, we’ll just have to confront Portlyn with what we know, and

try to get a confession out of him.”

She shot him a look that told him she was thinking the same thing he was: Yeah, right.

Wong then announced, “We’re approaching Vemlar, Captain.”

Haznedl suddenly spoke up. “Captain, I’m detecting another ship in orbit around the planet. It’s one of ours, sir. Sovereign -class.”

“Oh?” Gold was intrigued.

Haznedl adjusted the controls at her station to augment her scan of the area, and then looked up at her commanding officer. “Sir, it’s the Enterprise.”

Shabalala spoke next, and his voice sounded grim. “Captain, I’m receiving a transmission from the Enterprise. They’re insisting that we stand down immediately.”

Chapter 11

That is one big, beautiful ship, Gold thought upon seeing the U.S.S. Enterprise on the bridge’s main viewscreen. The starship grew larger and larger on the screen as the *Theda Vinci* approached it over Vemlar.

Gold turned to Shabalala and said, “Put the transmission on screen, Lieutenant.”

The image of the Enterprise was replaced by the familiar, but now ultraserious, face of Captain Jean-Luc Picard, seated in his command chair. Gold had known the younger man since the Academy, when Gold was in his final year and Picard his first. They’d last seen each other about a year earlier.

However, any trace of their friendship was noticeably absent from Picard’s demeanor.

“Captain Gold,” Picard began flatly. “I have been ordered by Starfleet Command to take authority over this situation immediately, and to investigate the alleged illegal activities of you and your crew.”

That charge took Gold by surprise. “Captain Picard,” he said, trying to maintain a pleasant, friendly tone. “I would say that’s a bit of an overreaction on the part of Starfleet Command.”

“I’m afraid Admiral Adair doesn’t share your view, Captain. He asked me to come here, after being informed directly by Rod Portlyn that you and your crew had gone rogue and sided with the terrorists against Mr. Portlyn.”

“Don’t tell me Adair actually believed that? Or that you believe it?”

“I know what I’d like to believe, Captain, but that is in conflict with my orders—and what Admiral Adair and I have seen with our own eyes.”

“What are you talking about?” Gold did not like the sound of this.

“Mr. Portlyn has shown the admiral and myself recorded images of the *Theda Vinci* aiding terrorist ships over

Phantas 61, against a group of independent merchant vessels trying to help stop the terrorists' activities.”

Gold had to give Portlyn credit for ingenuity, and for acting so quickly. Presenting visual recordings in a way that made a specific event seem like it happened differently—that was one of the oldest tricks in the book, and still very effective, obviously.

“Captain Picard, I can explain all of this. If you and I can just talk privately—”

“That won't be possible, Captain Gold. I'm sorry.”

Picard did seem sincere. Gold sighed, well aware that he had little choice in the matter. He was certainly not going to fire on the *Enterprise*, nor was he going to try to pull a fast escape.

“Very well, Captain Picard. You can send over a boarding party at your convenience.”

Within moments, six shimmering images appeared on the bridge of the *Vinci* and solidified into humanoid figures both known and unknown. Captain Picard was front and center, as would be expected. He was backed by a short woman with round blue eyes and hair styled in a pageboy cut—Gold recognized her as Lieutenant Christine Vale, the *Enterprise*'s security chief, who had spent some time on the *Vinci* during their investigation of the *Beast*. She had three male security guards with her, all armed with phasers.

And bringing up the rear was none other than Rod Portlyn, looking around the *Vinci* bridge with his hands clasped behind his back and a satisfied grin on his round, pale green face.

“Mr. Portlyn, I wasn't expecting to see you here,” Gold said to the tycoon, barely containing his contempt.

“Oh, I insisted on coming,” Portlyn replied casually. “I won't be kept on the sidelines any longer. Captain Picard understands that.”

Gold looked over at Corsi to share a moment of mutual astonishment at the sheerchutzpah of the tycoon. But she was having a moment of her own, exchanging an uncomfortable glance with Vale. The two women had known each other a long time, Gold knew, and this was hardly the ideal circumstance for even a cordial reunion.

Picard stepped to the center of the bridge and faced Gold. “I'll start by saying that this investigation does not extend to Commander Gomez and her team on *Vemlar*. As far as Starfleet Command is concerned, they are in the clear, since they have been working on the construction project the whole time.”

“Fair enough,” Gold replied. “But before your investigation begins, Captain, there's something you should know. Before Mr. Portlyn bought up all the real estate on *Vemlar*, he secretly used a bioengineered viral agent to ruin the soil, in order to give the inhabitants no choice but to sell their land to him.”

Portlyn let out a hearty laugh. “That is the most absurd thing I've ever heard. I'll give you credit for originality, though, Gold. Very amusing.”

Picard brushed off this exchange and said, “A formal inquiry will begin shortly. Until then, Captain Gold, I'll have to ask you to confine yourself to your quarters.” There was no pleasure in Picard's voice as he said it, and Gold did not bear any animosity toward the *Enterprise* captain. Still, the thought of being

confined to quarters on his own ship galled him.

Picard motioned to his security chief. "Lieutenant Vale will escort you," he informed Gold. Vale and one of her security officers stepped forward toward Gold. If Vale was aware of the icy glare she was getting from Corsi, she did a good job of not letting on.

"Captain, if you'd please come with us," Vale said. She and her subordinate guided him to the turbolift. But then a strange beep sounded from the tactical station.

"The main viewscreen is being overridden," said Shabalala.

Ignoring Vale and her guard, Gold whirled toward the screen, in time to see the image of Vemlar disappear and be replaced by a large block of running text set against a plain white background, with the distinctive Portlyn logo adorning the top of the screen.

VEMLAR PROJECT, the text began. Gold didn't have time to read the whole thing, but there was enough information that could be picked out through skimming that his heart started pounding with excitement. Sections of the text were broken down under headers such as SOIL TRANSMOGRIFICATION and BIO-AGENT "V," with accompanying details, technical information, and scientific formulas. He also spotted terms such as INDUCED FAMINE, UNTRACEABLE, and, farther down, PURCHASE PLAN.

Soloman, Faulwell... bless you both, Gold thought, feeling a wave of relief rush through him. He turned to Picard, who was also skimming the text on the screen. "Look at the date on that file, Captain," he said to Picard. "If you check the records, you'll find that's a full year before Portlyn actually purchased Vemlar."

Picard nodded, but before he could say anything, the file on the viewscreen suddenly compressed in width and was pushed to the left half of the screen. On the right side, a series of sensor readings popped on, showing a schematic representation of a planet and the area of space around it, with a single blip identified as U.S.S. da Vinci. Gold didn't know what to make of this. He wasn't expecting it at all.

"That's Phantas 61," Corsi said. "Those are the sensor readings we saw at the Taru Bolivar headquarters."

Sure enough, the readings showed ten blips surrounding the one identified as the da Vinci, and then opening fire without provocation. Then came yet another blip, this one identified as a freighter, which went on to launch a missile at the planet. Technical data on the missile popped up on the screen and showed that it was carrying a viral agent—and the specifications showed that it was the same viral agent detailed in the Vemlar file on the left side of the screen.

Gold looked over at Portlyn, who gazed at the screen with his mouth hanging open and his scarlet eyes looking as if they were about to pop out of his head. Gold thought he heard the tycoon mutter under his breath, "How... how could they have gotten it open...?"

"You no longer seem amused, Mr. Portlyn," Picard said.

Portlyn managed to pull his gaze away from the screen and faced Picard and Gold, who now stood side by side. Gold had to give Portlyn credit—he quickly recovered from his shock.

"All right," Portlyn said tightly. "So it's out. I can't do anything about that now. But you can't touch me. I'm not a Federation citizen and, in case you've forgotten, we're in nonaligned space. You're out of your

jurisdiction.”

“And you’re out of your mind if you think the Federation is going to stay in business with you after this,” Gold said with a great deal of satisfaction.

Portlyn frowned and nodded, not even trying to conceal his great disappointment. “Yes...I’ll probably lose some other business too.” The tycoon then seemed to inflate himself with defiance as he continued. “But you know what? My empire still stands, and there are plenty of other species out there who’ll continue to deal with me, with no qualms—the Ferengi, for example. Not every civilization has the same air of moral superiority as the Federation. You people seem to view the pursuit of wealth, success, and power as something evil, something to be ashamed of.”

Gold shook his head, deciding that the tycoon just didn’t get it. “There’s nothing wrong with wanting any of those things,” he told Portlyn. “It all comes down to how far you’re willing to go, what actions you’re capable of taking, to attain them.”

Picard added, “And what you do with them once you’ve attained them.”

“Sure, whatever,” Portlyn replied, waving off the two captains. “Look, I’m ready to return to Vemlar. Where’s the transporter room around here?” He headed toward the turbolift.

Just then, Shabalala called out, “Captain!”

“Yes?” replied Gold and Picard. They then looked at each other awkwardly.

“Uh, I actually meant Captain Gold,” the tactical officer said, helping them out of the moment. “We’re receiving a transmission from a ship now entering this sector. It’s Patrice Bennett, sir.”

Gold smiled, openly delighted. Here’s where the real fun begins. “On screen.”

Patrice Bennett popped onto the main viewscreen. She had a very serious expression on her face, but Gold recognized the warmth in her eyes.

“Hello, Captain Gold. Ah, I see Mr. Portlyn is with you. Good. That means I can announce right now that I’m taking control of a number of Portlyn-owned properties—including Vemlar and Phantas 61.”

“Patrice, what are you babbling about?” Portlyn asked.

Patrice smiled sweetly. “I just finished a subspace radio conference with your creditors, Roddy. You remember them, don’t you? They’re the ones you borrowed money from to build your ‘empire.’ I’m sure you’re well aware that you’re past due on paying off your debts to them. Well, they agreed to sell those debts to me. Which means I now have the right to take control of the properties you put up as collateral—and I’m exercising that right.”

Portlyn’s face turned a darker shade of green. He started breathing faster and heavier. “This isn’t over. I’ll fight you, and I’ll win.”

“You’re out in the cold, Roddy. After Captain Gold told me what you did to Vemlar, I contacted your creditors, partners, and investors, and let them know. The word of a distinguished Starfleet captain was enough to make them all decide to wash their hands of you—to be honest, they never really liked being involved with you in the first place. Now, I’d appreciate it if you would be gone from the system by the

time I arrive. That'll be within the next thirty minutes or so."

Picard turned to Vale. "Lieutenant, I'd like you and your team to escort Mr. Portlyn down to Vemlar and make sure he's not delayed or distracted as he clears out his things."

"Oh, we'll make sure he maintains his focus, Captain," Vale replied. She and the guards surrounded the flabbergasted Portlyn, giving him no choice but to leave with them. As they entered the lift, Vale turned and gave a little salute to Corsi, who nodded back at her with a small smile.

Picard turned to Gold and patted him on the shoulder. "Looks like you've gotten yourself out of a rough spot, David—and saved the day."

"I had a lot of help, Jean-Luc," Gold replied with a relieved grin. "And believe me, only some of it was expected."

"And what will you do with all your new properties, Ms. Bennett?" Picard asked the image on the viewscreen.

"Well, for starters, I plan to have the appropriate resources look for a way to counteract the effects of the viral agent. I want to restore Vemlar to its original state, if possible."

"I'm sure the Vemlarites will appreciate that, if it happens," Corsi said, stepping forward to join the two captains. "But what will they do until then? They were counting on the jobs that Portlyn promised them."

Gold nodded. "That's been taken into account. Patrice, you want to answer that?"

"Certainly. I actually like the idea of a scientific research and development center, but I don't see why it can't be built on Phantas 61 instead. That's a better use for the planet than turning it into a garbage dump. It would be a big, long-term project, and if the Vemlarites and the Phantasians are willing, they can work together on building it. It'll be steady work and good pay. And if we can restore Vemlar, the Vemlarites can return and take back their land."

"Sounds like a plan," Corsi replied.

Gold added, "And if I have anything to say about it, Patrice, you can expect as much help from the Federation and Starfleet as you'll need. Of course, that's assuming I'm not getting drummed out of the fleet."

Picard chuckled. "I think it's safe to say that won't be happening. And I echo Captain Gold's sentiments, Ms. Bennett. If you need anything, let either of us know."

"Thank you both. I'll be seeing you shortly." With that, Patrice Bennett signed off.

"Very clever, bringing her into this," Picard commented.

Gold responded with a nonchalant shrug. "Just following a classic engineering maxim I picked up from Montgomery Scott: 'The right tool for the right job.'"

"Well, Captain Gold," Picard said, tugging on the bottom of his uniform jacket. "Shall we contact Admiral Adair and update him on the situation? I have a feeling my investigation won't be necessary after all."

“An excellent suggestion, Captain Picard. This is one conversation with the admiral that I’ll actually be looking forward to.”

Epilogue

Captain’s Log, Stardate 54156.2:

Admiral Adair has rescinded his order for Captain Picard’s investigation. Having made sure that Rod Portlyn has cleared out of Vemlar and the Norvel system, Picard and the Enterprise have departed for their next assignment. With our responsibilities at Vemlar now at an end, the da Vinci is departing, as well.

* * *

Captain Gold sat behind his desk in his ready room as the da Vinci prepared to leave orbit. Soloman, Faulwell, and Blue had just arrived, at his request, and stood in front of the desk at attention.

“At ease,” he told them. “I asked you all here because I wanted to let you know how proud I am of you. You all did remarkable work, under very difficult conditions.”

Gold then focused on Pattie. “Blue, your actions were nothing short of extraordinary.” The Nasat bowed her head gratefully.

“As for Soloman and Faulwell—well, what can I say? Thank you both for the work you did getting that file open at just the right moment.”

Faulwell and Soloman looked at each other sheepishly. Modesty, no doubt.

“So tell me, how’d you two manage it? Last you told me, the situation was hopeless—there was no way to open that file.”

Faulwell and Soloman glanced at each other again, unsure who should answer. Finally, Faulwell swallowed and looked up at the captain.

“Well, sir, the file really was impossible to open. But as we got within range of Vemlar, I, uh, suggested to Soloman the idea of hacking into the main computer at the headquarters and navigating into Portlyn’s private system. I knew it wouldn’t be too difficult—we helped set up that system, after all. I was thinking that once we were in Portlyn’s computer, we’d be able to open the file and retrieve the information.”

“I...see,” Gold replied, motioning for the linguist to continue.

“Soloman got through, and we were able to open the file, so we downloaded the information onto our system, and sent it to the bridge’s viewscreen. Then, I contacted Elless and had him transmit the Taru Bolivar’s sensor readings of the Orion attack and the missile launch. So there wouldn’t be any lingering doubts about Portlyn’s guilt. Sir.”

Gold didn’t know what to say. Faulwell and Soloman shifted uncomfortably.

“Our actions were not exactly aboveboard,” Soloman said.

“That’s...one way of putting it,” Gold said.

“We were worried that Portlyn would get away with what he’d done,” Faulwell said. “We couldn’t just do nothing, sir. We’ll gladly accept whatever disciplinary action you decide on for us.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you,” Gold replied wryly. He looked them over silently for a long moment before finally smirking. “I won’t tell the top brass if you don’t...but never do anything like that again.”

“Yes, sir,” said Soloman.

“Not without your say-so, sir,” said Faulwell, with a mischievous gleam in his eye.

Gold pursed his lips, trying to hold back a smirk.

“Dismissed,” he told them as he rose from his chair. He followed the trio out of the ready room and onto the bridge. Soloman, Faulwell, and Blue entered the turbolift to return to their duties as Gold sat down in his command chair.

Gomez and Corsi took up positions on either side of the captain’s chair.

“Wong, take us out of orbit,” Gold said.

“Aye, sir,” the conn officer replied, working his fingers across his console.

Settling back into his chair, Gold took a deep breath and was silent for a short time, until he glanced up at Gomez with a grin.

“Sir?” she asked him quizzically.

“I was just thinking about my meeting with Soloman, Faulwell, and Blue...quite a crew we have on this ship.”

Gomez smiled. “Yes indeed, Captain.”

As the *Vinci* broke out of orbit, Corsi said, “I wonder if we’ve seen the last of Rod Portlyn.”

“We can only hope,” Gomez replied.

“Well,” said Gold, “hope is a pretty powerful force in the universe—maybe even as powerful as ‘Big Business.’”

After watching *Vemlar* shrink away on the main viewscreen as the *Vinci* began its cruise out of the “Corporate Corridor,” Gold looked around at his bridge and his crew. He smiled. There was no question in his mind: This is exactly where he was meant to be. On this ship. With these people. Doing this work. He knew that this was reality as it should be.

Taru Bolivar.

About the Author

GLENN GREENBERG is an award-winning editor and writer whose work has appeared in numerous fiction anthologies, comic books, lifestyle and news magazines, and on several websites. *The Art of the Deal* marks his return to the *Star Trek* universe—he previously developed and wrote the five-issue *Star Trek: Untold Voyages* limited series for Marvel Comics, which chronicled adventures from the second five-year mission of Captain James T. Kirk and his crew aboard the U.S.S. *Enterprise*. Glenn’s writing work for Marvel also included stints on such world-famous characters as Spider-Man, the Hulk, Dracula, and the Silver Surfer. As a Marvel editor, he is proudest of having developed the *Starlord* limited series written by bestselling science fiction author Timothy Zahn, as well as the inter-company crossover project, *The Incredible Hulk vs. Superman*, which made Glenn one of the very few Marvel editors in history to edit a project featuring DC Comics’ flagship character, Superman. For the *Gray Haven Magazine* website (www.ghmonline.com), Glenn was cowriter of the much-acclaimed, thirty-five-part Internet column “The Life of Reilly,” in which he chronicled his rather reluctant role in the making of the infamous “Clone Saga” that ran through the Spider-Man titles in the mid-1990s. Glenn has written various articles for magazines such as *Smoke* and *Time Out New York*, and currently serves as editor and head writer for *Scholastic News*, a weekly newsmagazine for kids. In 2002, his work on that magazine earned him the prestigious Distinguished Achievement Award from the Association of Educational Publishers. Glenn also writes regularly for the *Scholastic News Online* website (www.Scholastic.com/news), for which he provided all-day coverage of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on America.

Coming Next Month: Star Trek™: S.C.E. #46 SPIN by J. Steven York & Christina F. York

The S.C.E. thought it would be a simple task: A derelict vessel heading straight for an inhabited world needs to be diverted to avoid catastrophe. But the derelict isn’t as easy to deflect as it would seem—the S.C.E. team must figure out how to operate the vessel before it crashes and destroys the native Lokra civilization.

* * *

But the derelict isn’t the only thing on this mission with a secret, and even as Commander Sonya Gomez and her crack team try to unlock the secrets of the ship, Captain David Gold must find out what the Lokra are hiding. . . .

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FROM POCKET BOOKS!

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