

## Chapter

### 1

F flames licked at Araneus's abdomen as another disruptor blast pummeled his tiny ship. One of his long, sinewy pedipalps shot down from his cephalothorax and silenced the shrilling alert signal on his wraparound helm console. Another tentacle-like appendage keyed the transmitter switch again. "Repeat," he said, trying to speak slowly and clearly. "This is the transport Lycosa, requesting assistance. Do you read me?" A squall of static rasped from the speaker.

The metallic, pyramid-shaped container tucked between his back legs seemed more fragile than it really was. It is probably faring better than I am, Araneus mused glumly.

The wheel-shaped space station was barely visible beyond his cockpit windshield. It was silhouetted against the sunset-red surface of the gas giant behind it. Though it was a mere few hundred toscams away, he despaired of reaching it.

Another cacophonous boom rattled his ship's critically weakened hull. Araneus scuttled sideways against the bulkhead, away from the tongues of fire snaking through fractures in the gray deck beneath his legs. The acrid odor of burned hair and scorched flesh crept into his spiracles. Another alarm confirmed that the Silgov had locked their weapons onto his engines.

It was all over. The greatest journey in Koas history was about to end in tragedy.

With a sound like crumbling lerfo bark, a reply to his S.O.S. spat in disjointed bursts from the console speaker and echoed around him in the cramped, circular cockpit. "Lycosa ...is Varkala Station...course one-four-four mark six..." A brief silence was followed by "...unidenti...stand down or we--"

The Silgov ship broke its weapons lock on the Lycosa and unleashed a volley of plasma fire at the space station. The barrage impacted on the facility's energy shield, which flickered like an ephemeral golden cocoon.

Then came the station's response--a quartet of fiery red projectiles that screamed past Araneus's ship toward the Silgov scout, which peeled away into an evasive maneuver. Unlike Koas weapons, which were extremely limited, the crimson missiles pursued the sleek, dartlike Silgov vessel relentlessly and eventually overtook it. Four brutal explosions hammered its shields, which collapsed. Without further delay, the ship broke off its attack and engaged its stardrive in retreat.

Araneus was about to thank his rescuers when his main console went dark. From the bowels of his ship came an ominous rumble, followed by the low, hungry roar of fire racing forward from the engines, looking for fuel to feed its wrath.

The station was still too far away. He would never reach it in time. With four legs he clutched the pyramid against his abdomen and prayed to the Architect of Time for forgiveness.

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Varkala Station commander Cody Mui watched with mounting anxiety as the unidentified vessel fractured on the main viewer. Most of the staff in the station's drab, utilitarian

command center worked in tense silence. Eric Theriault, his operations foreman, slammed his fist against his console. "They're breaking up. I can't tractor 'em in without ripping 'em apart."

Mui turned toward his station manager, Kari Spada. The blond young woman answered before he gave the order. "Boosting transporters to quantum resolution."

Wiping the sweat from his palms, Mui asked, "How long?"

"Ten more seconds," she said.

"Eric, can you get a lock on the crew?"

The beefy foreman punched in a new set of commands. "One life sign," he said. "Locked."

On the viewer, a bright orange flare pulsed in the rear third of the tiny ship, which resembled a spiny sea urchin. Mui had never seen a vessel like it before. He had no idea whether its origin lay within Thallonian space or if it had simply passed through it. The only thing he knew about it for certain was that, in a few more seconds, it would explode.

"Transporters ready," Spada said.

Mui nodded. "Energize." He opened a channel to the infirmary. "Doc, it's Cody. You got a patient comin' in."

"He better have an appointment," Dr. Safford grumbled over the comm, sounding like someone who'd been woken from a very nice dream and wasn't at all happy about it.

Spada initiated the transport sequence. She was still completing it as the vessel erupted and vanished in a rapidly dispersed cloud of atomized particles. Looking up from her console, she reassured Mui, "It's okay. Transport complete."

The commander heaved a relieved sigh, then said, "Nice work. I'll head down to meet our guest." Walking toward the turbolift, he felt an extra spring in his step; apparently, the diet his wife had inflicted on him by reprogramming his replicator was working after all. He made a mental note to thank her later.

Spada called after him. "Should we call this in?"

Stepping into the turbolift, he said, "Let's wait until we know what to call it in as."

\* \* \*

Inside the battered Silgov scout ship Starlit Wing, the temperature was falling rapidly. Maleiras, the chief scout, supervised the repair of the damage inflicted by the alien space station. "Never mind the weapons," she said softly. "Focus on restoring communications. We have to alert the fleet."

Sesslom, the ship's soldier-mechanic, shimmied out from under the main control panel. The honey-hued skin of his delicately symmetrical face was marred by irregular smears of smoky black filth, and his silvery hair--normally coiffed into a bold vertical crest down the middle of his head--was as tangled as a thokka nest. "Communications will take at least two shavs to restore, my lady," he said.

"I understand," she said. "Work as quickly as you can."

"As you command," Sesslom said.

Maleiras turned toward aft and kneeled down to look through the hatchway into the ship's lower compartment. Coleef, the pale and slender young pilot-engineer, had so far avoided soiling her pristine garments and her mane of metallic-violet hair. The chief scout called down to her. "Do you require my help to restore defense screens?"

"They are irreparable, my lady," Coleef said. "I can reroute their power to long-range sensors in an oloshav."

"Well done," Maleiras said, then returned to her post.

Without shields, her ship would be no match for the alien space station. The Starlit Wing's sensors had detected a matter-transference beam removing the pilot and the Koas's mysterious artifact from the courier's ship before it exploded. Now both were aboard the enemy stronghold, temporarily out of reach.

The artifact had eluded her for now...but not for long.

\* \* \*

Dr. Bob Safford was no expert in arachnid psychology, but the giant black spider in his infirmary seemed a tad agitated.

Its voice sounded like a guttural rasp. "No time to wait," it said, frantically waving the six tentacles that dangled from its octopoid head. It rambled on without waiting for Safford to attempt a reply. "Where is my ship? Must finish journey. Need to reach Starfleet. How did I get here?"

Mui entered like a man in a hurry, then came to a quick stop as the mammoth arachnid pivoted swiftly toward him. The commander recoiled, a reaction that Safford presumed was mostly instinctual. He certainly wouldn't fault his boss for cowering a bit; watching the creature take shape in the middle of the dingy, decades-out-of-date infirmary--smack dab between himself and the exit--had ranked very high on the middle-aged physician's list of all-time moments of gut-twisting terror.

"My name is Cody Mui," the commander said. "I'm in charge of this station. We rescued you from your ship."

"I am Araneus," it said. "You are Starfleet?"

"No," Mui said. "We're civilians. Mining survey."

Araneus wagged its pedipalps at the profusely sweating young commander. "But this is Federation?"

"Um, not exactly." Mui shot a tense look at Safford, who shrugged, unsure of what the commander wanted him to say. Mui pressed on. "We're just outside the Federation border, on the edge of the former Thallonian Empire."

With a sharp hiss, Araneus pivoted first clockwise, then back again. "Thallonians are gone," it said, moving forward.

"Yeah," Mui said, his voice a fearful tremolo. "We know."

Safford pointed at the pyramid-shaped box on the floor.

Mui followed Safford's gesture, then looked back at Araneus. Nodding toward it with his chin, he asked, "What's in the container?"

"The future of my people," Araneus said. Leaning back on its hind four legs, Araneus lifted the pyramid delicately with its four forelimbs. It brushed a symbol near the base of the object with one of its pedipalps, then held out the box toward Mui. Safford leaned cautiously forward to get a better look.

The pyramid's sides folded outward to reveal what looked like a planet the size of a large melon, encased in a shimmering, pale-orange sphere of energy.

Mui looked up inquisitively at Araneus. "A hologram?"

The spider made a gurgling sound. "Koa. My homeworld."

The doctor was surprised to see Mui absorb that bit of news with perfect sangfroid.

"I see," Mui said. Seconds later he shook his head. "Actually, I don't see. If that's...your homeworld...why do you have it in a box?"

"Star went supernova," Araneus said. "Must move world to new star." It scuttled over to a companel along the wall and, despite the apparent unwieldiness of its appendages and extremities, deftly manipulated the panel interface. An image of a star system appeared on the monitor display.

Mui joined Araneus at the screen. "Mu Arae," the commander said. "Eighteen light-years away. That's not so bad."

"My ship," Araneus said. "You can fix?"

Safford knew from the pained expression on Mui's face that bad news was just around the corner. "I'm sorry," Mui said. "We couldn't save your ship. It...well, it exploded."

The doctor was glad he wasn't the one staring into the beast's unreadable, huge, faceted eyes right now. After a tense pause, Araneus seemed to deflate. Its abdomen sagged to the deck and its legs crumpled and splayed around it like fractured black bamboo. Bowing its bulbous head, it muttered, "All is lost."

"Maybe not," Mui said, trying to sound encouraging. "We don't have a ship, but we can get one in no time." He used the companel to hail the command center. "Kari, get Starfleet on the horn, tell them we need a ship here, pronto."

"You got it, boss."

"Thanks." Mui closed the channel. Looking down at the ostensibly despondent arachnid, he said, "Don't worry, we'll get you to Mu Arae in a couple weeks."

Araneus groaned. "All for naught," it said again. "Journey has ended."

"No, you don't understand--we can get you there."

"My world is trapped," the creature said. "Key is lost."

Safford had a bad feeling brewing in his gut. He sat down at his desk, opened the bottom drawer, and took out a tall bottle of cheap vodka and two short glasses.

Mui asked the obvious follow-up question. "What key?"

"Key that releases my world," Araneus said. "On my ship."

"Could we make another key?"

"Ancient," Araneus said. "Unique. A code. Lost." It curled its legs beneath its abdomen and ducked its head, clearly withdrawing from further conversation.

Mui reopened the channel to the command center. "Kari, tell Starfleet we need tech-heads, good ones.

...We've got a planet stuck in a box."

Safford poured stiff drinks for himself and the commander, certain this would be only the first round of many.

Chapter

2

Captain Montgomery Scott's order, delivered with a broad grin, had been simple enough: "Jump in and see how far it goes."

Four mornings later, as Captain David Gold stepped from the turbolift onto the bridge and watched stars streak across the da Vinci's main viewer, he adopted Scotty's smile for himself.

His blissful moment was short-lived.

Lieutenant Songmin Wong stood next to the conn station, where Ensign Martina Barre sat, her hands planted firmly on the console. "Get up," he said to her. "It's my shift."

"Just a few more seconds," she said.

The captain shook his head; for the past three days, each shift change on the bridge had resulted in the same contest of wills between the pilots. Every morning, Wong wrested control from Barre, only to resist handing it over to Rusconi for beta shift eight hours later. Rusconi had proved equally possessive.

"Solve this in the next three seconds," Gold said to the quibbling pair, "or else I'll take both your next shifts."

Barre huffed softly, her shoulders sagging as she grudgingly pushed aside the conn panel and stood up. She and Wong locked eyes for a moment of half-joking challenge. Then Barre stepped aside and Wong took his post with a grin.

Gold didn't blame them for being eager; it wasn't every day that a Starfleet pilot was able to fly a ship at a steady warp 9.99 without risking calamity. As part of a classified research project, the da Vinci was charting a recently discovered, shifting subspace "slipstream" that could be entered by making the proper adjustments to the ship's warp field. Once inside, the phenomenon greatly accelerated warp-speed travel across vast distances. The da Vinci had traveled at high warp for three days to cross the twelve light-years from Earth to the nearest terminus of the slipstream; it had taken less than four days since then to traverse more than seventy light-years, out to the edge of Federation territory.

Ensign Susan Haznedl settled in at ops. Behind Gold, Ensign Winn Mara stepped gracefully aside as Lieutenant Anthony Shabalala took her place at tactical. Lieutenant Commander Mor glasch Tev, the da Vinci's Tellarite second officer, stood at attention next to the center seat as Gold approached.

"Status," Gold said as he settled into his chair.

"We've just passed Theta Indii," Tev said. "ETA at the Typhon Expanse is five hours. Long-range scans suggest the slipstream extends well past the other side of the expanse."

Tev handed Gold a padd. The captain reviewed the data. "Any sign of an end at all?"

"None yet, sir."

"Then I guess we're in for a long ride," Gold said.

"It is not an unpleasant proposition," Tev said. For the past few days, the Tellarite engineer's tireless work ethic had kept him on the bridge longer than anyone else. He had filled the hours by collecting raw data on the slipstream, running analyses, and charting projections. What had lately impressed Gold, however, was not Tev's indefatigable labors, but his complete lack of boasting about them. Tev gestured to the aft science console. "With your permission, Captain?"

"Of course," Gold said. Tev nodded politely, then moved quietly to the science station and resumed his research.

Gold decided to retire to his ready room and enjoy a cup of coffee while recording a mission update for Captain Scott. As he stood up, an innocuous-sounding chirp emanated from the tactical console and hushed the already muted chatter on the bridge. Everyone stopped and turned to look at Shabalala while he reviewed the incoming transmission. "Priority signal from Starfleet Command, Captain."

The captain's mouth tightened into a frown. "I'll take it in my ready room." Quick-stepping across the bridge, Gold mused darkly, I knew this assignment was too good to last.

\* \* \*

Commander Sonya Gomez stood next to Captain Gold in the transporter room. Like a study in contrast, Chief of Security Domenica Corsi (slender, pale, and blond) and Deputy Chief of Security Vance Hawkins (broad-shouldered, ebony-skinned, with a shaved head) flanked

the two command officers. Behind them, Ensign McAvennie stood by to assist Transporter Chief Laura Poynter, who was completing the beaming sequence.

A large, languid cyclone of shimmering matter coalesced above the transporter pad with a singsong hum. Both the glow and the sound faded as the energizer coils powered down, and a massive black arachnid with a head like that of an octopus was revealed. An odor of burnt hair, mild at first, quickly grew stronger. Clutched in the pedipalps that extended from either side of the creature's mandibles was a metallic, equilateral pyramid on a base approximately forty centimeters wide.

"Mr. Araneus," the captain said, sounding not the least bit unnerved to be addressing a gargantuan arachnid, "I'm Captain David Gold. Welcome aboard the Federation Starship da Vinci."

Araneus skittered forward, its eight legs rising and falling like gears in a dark machine. Poynter and McAvennie recoiled. Corsi and Hawkins held their ground without blinking. Gomez's jaw clenched with the effort of keeping her feet still. The captain, for his part, seemed perfectly relaxed.

"Thank you, Captain," Araneus said.

"This is my first officer, Commander Sonya Gomez," Gold continued. "Security Chief Domenica--"

"No time, Captain," Araneus interrupted. The lumbering alien scrambled down from the transporter pad. Everyone took two steps back to avoid being trampled. "Koa is in danger; we must reach Mu Arae as fast as your ship goes." It pushed the pyramid toward Gold. "We must find the key. No time!"

Glancing sideways, Gomez caught the subtle nod from Gold that meant he was handing off the conversation to her.

"Mr. Araneus," Gomez said, "we're aware of the rather...unique predicament your world is in. I assure you, after we collect some basic information from you, we'll be proceeding to Mu Arae at our best possible--"

The arachnid reared up on his hind legs and adopted a pose that reminded Gomez, in an unsettling way, of the Federation-standard "biohazard" icon. The creature let out a series of clicks, grunts, and hisses. Either the universal translator was unable to decipher the sounds, or they were never intended as anything other than an inchoate expression of frustration. After several seconds, with a voice like a breath from the grave, Araneus groaned, "No time!"

Then the giant spider collapsed on the deck.

A sickly gurgle escaped its maw as a viscous gray-white fluid oozed out of its mouth. As its legs splayed limply between the da Vinci personnel's feet, its pedipalps gently stroked the base of the pyramid, whose four sides unfolded to reveal the shrunken orb of Koa, imprisoned in its glowing energy shell.

Corsi and Hawkins pulled tricorders from their belts and sprang forward to kneel at Araneus's side.

"Poynter," Corsi said, "relay Araneus's transport bioscan to my tricorder."

"Aye, sir," Poynter said, keying in the commands.

Hawkins devoted his attention to scanning the open pyramid.

Gomez furrowed her brow. "Someone report, please."

Corsi replied, "Best guess? I think he had a heart attack."

"Well," Gomez said. "We're off to a great start. As usual."

Gold massaged his wrinkled brow with the fingers of his right hand. "Oy vey." He ran his hand through his sparse white hair. "Gomez, get your people working on that pyramid contraption. Poynter, beam our guest to sickbay--and warn Dr. Lense first, please." The captain turned away from the group as he tapped his combadge. "Gold to bridge."

"Tev here, sir."

"Set course for Mu Arae, maximum warp."

\* \* \*

The transmission from Viceroy Narjam was frazzled but growing stronger by the moment. "You're sure they removed the artifact from the station?"

"Yes, my lord," Maleiras said, maintaining eye contact with Narjam on the small screen attached to the arm of her chair. "With a matter-transference beam, to one of their vessels." In the front of the cockpit, Coleef was completing the preflight systems check. Down below, Sesslom was hard at work keeping the comm system functioning. "They have just departed," the chief scout continued, "following the Koas ship's original course."

"What is their velocity?"

"Factor five-point-two-three."

Narjam tilted his chin upward, clearly pleased at the news. "Very good." He looked down and checked his console. "We will reach you in less than a shav," he said. "Will you be ready to rejoin the fleet?"

"Yes, my lord." Coleef swiveled her seat toward Maleiras and gestured that the Starlit Wing was ready for flight. Though the frigid temperature inside the ship was betrayed by the wispy clouds of vapor produced by her exhaled breath, Maleiras suppressed her body's urge to shiver. She was determined to retain her dignity before her superior. "Shall we relay our tactical scans of the alien space station?"

The viceroy dismissed the query with a twitch of his delicate hand. "Unnecessary," he said. "The artifact has left their possession. They no longer concern us. Maintain sensor lock on the alien vessel."

"As you command, my lord. May I make a request?"

"Speak."



"My vessel requires a replacement for its defense-screen regulator," Maleiras said. Sesslom looked up through the aft hatch from the lower deck, eager to hear the viceroy's answer.

"I will see it done," Narjam said. "My engineer will transfer the component to your vessel after we arrive."

"Thank you, my lord. Most gracious."

"You've served well today, Maleiras," he said. "And the day is only just begun. We'll be with you shortly. Narjam out." Maleiras bowed her head, then the channel flickered off.

Turning fully to face Sesslom, Maleiras said, "Make as many other repairs as are possible. I want defensive screens restored before we overtake the alien vessel." Sesslom acknowledged the order with a half bow, then returned to his calm but tireless work. On the tactical display, an icon representing the alien ship crept slowly toward an unremarkable star.

Soon, the Koas technology will be ours, she told herself. Imagining the power that the mysterious, planet-shrinking pyramid must contain...trying to conceive of the energies it would have to harness to pluck a world, intact, from its orbit and hold it in stasis...such thoughts terrified Maleiras to the depths of her being. The only thing that terrified her more was the idea of being returned to bondage. When the pyramid is ours, she reminded herself, we will finally set our people free.

\* \* \*

A fearful silence lingered in the da Vinci sickbay. The unconscious, mammoth arachnid lay sprawled across two biobeds and two gurneys placed between them. Dr. Elizabeth Lense shook her head. "I don't even know where to start," the curly-haired physician said.

Behind her, Medical Technician Dantas Falcao and Nurse Sandy Wetzel peeked over Lense's shoulders. "The biobed's readouts are completely messed up," Falcao said, her pretty face twisted into a mask of frightened apprehension.

Wetzel, her arms folded across her chest like a shield, reluctantly said, "We have to do something."

Lense picked up her medical tricorder and trained its sensors on her patient. "Dantas, download comparative anatomy data on all known arthropod species and try to recalibrate biobed two. Sandy, take a sample of that discharge from its maw and run a full chemical analysis--enzymes, molecular structure, trace elements, everything."

Moving closer to Araneus, Lense tried to locate the center of its circulatory system--assuming that it even had one.

Wetzel collected a sample of the substance that was rapidly congealing inside the patient's mouth. She paused. "Should we try to clear its mouth, Doctor?"

"No," Lense said, shaking her head. "Don't stick your hands in there." Brushing her fingertips lightly across the arachnid's carapace, she said, "It appears to breathe through a network of large spiracles. Don't worry about clearing an airway." She looked up.

"Computer, activate Emergency Medical Hologram." Overhead holoprojectors awoke with a quickly rising hum. The holographic doctor took shape in front of her.

"Please state the nature of the--" The EMH eyed Araneus with an expression of clinical curiosity. "I see. How may I assist you, Doctor?"

Handing a large and, ironically, spider-shaped mechanical device to the EMH, Lense said, "I need to place a cardiopulmonary contact monitor on the patient, but I can't reach the center of its torso."

"Understood," he replied. Without a moment's hesitation, he lifted the CPCM over his head and strolled toward the center of Araneus's body. Adjusting his holographic matrix to make himself noncorporeal from the chest down, he passed like a ghost through the patient. He placed the monitor near the forward curve of Araneus's prodigious abdomen. No sooner did the device's radial extensions clamp down on Araneus's body than its six largest limbs snapped inward, stingers extended. Lense gasped at the swift, lethal, and obviously involuntary reflexive action, then heaved a relieved sigh as she remembered that the EMH was just a photonic construct, impervious to harm.

Striding back through the clenched tangle of dark limbs to rejoin Lense, the EMH said, "I await further instruction."

"Please assist Nurse Wetzel with her analysis."

The EMH acknowledged Lense's order with a brief nod, then walked away quickly to join Wetzel in the adjacent biolab.

A rattling groan from Araneus drew Lense's attention back to her patient. Fixating on its huge, dangerous limbs, she was grateful that she hadn't tried to place the cardio monitor herself. She had no interest in being on the receiving end of a giant spider's fight-or-flight reflex. Recalling her semesters of xenophysiology at Starfleet Medical all those years ago, she vaguely remembered learning about the medical advances that had been made by studying the synaptic development and seemingly precognitive reflexes of arachnids. That gave her an idea.

She tapped her combadge. "Rennan Konya, please report to sickbay."

\* \* \*

The turbolift thrummed along, quickly traversing the length of the da Vinci--but not quickly enough for Bart Faulwell.

"So what I'm thinking," Carol Abramowitz said, continuing a monologue that already had persisted all through their shared lunch, "is that his birthday is next week and I want to get him something nice. You know, something he wouldn't get for himself, but that he can use, or that he and I can use together."

Faulwell wanted to tell her to shut up, to stop talking, to keep her newfound romantic euphoria to herself, to stop being so damned happy when he was anything but. Instead, the middle-aged cryptography and linguistics expert smiled through his salt-and-pepper beard and nodded and made vague noises of acknowledgment.

He really didn't resent Abramowitz for her recently ignited romance with Vance Hawkins.

When he'd first heard the news, he'd been elated for her. Ever since she had revealed to him during the Galvan VI disaster that she had never truly been in love, he had been worried about her. Emotional openness had never been her strong suit, in Faulwell's opinion; sarcasm impelled by a mordant wit had always been the petite cultural specialist's forte. That shortcoming had almost led to her death on Vrinda, and he was glad that she was coming out of that particular shell.

The turbolift stopped and the doors parted to reveal the starboard corridor of deck five. Faulwell followed Abramowitz as they stepped briskly toward the science lab. She was still talking, staging a one-woman debate over what she ought to give Hawkins. Tuning her out, Faulwell reflected on the real reason for his black-dog mood. Only about a week had passed since the wedding of Captain Gold's granddaughter, Esther. During a lighthearted aside, Faulwell's longtime partner, Anthony Mark, had made a good-natured remark to him, suggesting that maybe the two of them ought to get married. It had been so casual, so off-the-cuff, that Faulwell had simply brushed it aside with a bon mot and forgotten about it.

But now the moment--and the suggestion--weighed on his mind.

He snapped out of his reverie as they reached the lab door.

"Anyway," Abramowitz finished, "we can finish this later."

Faulwell stifled a derisive snort. Yes, I'm sure "we" will.

He followed her into the lab, which was abuzz with excited voices that concealed the humming of its walls of computers. Gathered around a large worktable were Gomez and Tev; tactical systems specialist Fabian Stevens, who was engaged in a spirited but hushed debate with the chief engineer, Lieutenant Nancy Conlon; and Haznedl, who was showing her tricorder's display to Tev and Gomez while talking a rapid string of jargon that meant little or nothing to Faulwell.

It wasn't difficult to understand what the excitement was about. On the table, hovering above a small metallic square whose four triangular side pieces were open and folded flat, was a planet that had been compressed to the size of a human head and cocooned in a flickering, golden stasis field. Turning toward Abramowitz, Faulwell muttered, "There's something you don't see every day."

Gomez stuck her thumb and forefinger between her teeth and let loose a shrill, piercing whistle. The room fell quiet. "All right," she said. "We're all here, let's get started." Tilting her head toward the miniature planet, she said, "Our mission is to figure out how to get this box to release this planet, and to determine where and when we need to do so."

Tev keyed a command sequence into his padd. A holographic star map appeared above the worktable. "The planet's guardian has indicated that its destination is Mu Arae. A yellow-orange dwarf, spectral and luminosity type G3. Its high metallicity has resulted in an abundance of exploitable mineral resources in its asteroid belt. Because of the erratic orbit of one of its gaseous supergiants, no Class-M planets are known to exist in this system's habitable zone."

Before the deactivated holographic star map faded away, Conlon spoke up. "Multiple scans of the pyramid have proved inconclusive. Its metal--or whatever it is--is impervious to physical damage, so we've been unable to take samples or run tests. I can't tell you much about the device itself except that its plates appear to be exactly three centimeters thick at

their widest points, beveled on their edges, and covered on their exterior surface with raised markings."

Gomez nodded to Faulwell and Abramowitz. "That's where you two come in. While we tinker with the hardware, we need you two to try and make heads or tails of those symbols." She handed her tricorder to Faulwell. On its screen was a visual recording of the device in its closed configuration. Pointing to a marking near the object's base, she said, "Araneus pressed this symbol to open the pyramid. We don't know if the same one closes it. In fact, we don't know what any of them do, and we can't risk touching them until we know what they mean."

Faulwell frowned. "Do we have any records of Araneus's language, either spoken or written?"

Haznedl shook her head. "His ship exploded shortly after he was rescued by the crew of Varkala Station. The universal translator only picked up a smattering of his language so far. He spent most of his time on Varkala repeating himself."

Leaning in for a close-up look, Stevens all but pressed his nose to one of the pyramid's open sides. "No hinges or seams. Probably some kind of mnemonic polymer."

Conlon nodded. "Remarkable, isn't it? Better than ours, that's for--"

"Let's move on," Gomez interrupted. "What about this stasis field? How's it holding this planet in suspended animation? And how the hell do you compress an entire planet, anyway?"

"The shrinking part I can guess at," Stevens said. "The Defiant ran into something like this a couple years ago--a subspace compression anomaly. Shrank a runabout down to the size of my finger."

"I read about that," Haznedl said. "But that was a natural phenomenon--this was done artificially."

"Yeah," Stevens said, dragging his fingers through his dark hair. "Gotta say, I've never seen anything like this--any of it."

Strolling around the table, Conlon said, "As for the stasis field, Commander, the question isn't so much, how did the Koas get their planet in there? It's, how do they plan to get it out? There are so many values that would have to be restored: orbital distance and velocity, rotation and angular momentum, not to mention the quantum states of every living thing on the planet itself."

"And all with no moving parts," Stevens quipped.

An arrogant harrumph preceded Tev's retort. "Are you certain, Specialist? Can your eyes penetrate the box's shell and confirm that its workings are entirely nonmoving? Or are you merely wasting our time with glib remarks?"

Before Faulwell could point out that Tev's unnecessary rebuke was four times longer than Stevens's remark--certainly a more egregious waste of time by any measure--Gomez said sharply, "That's enough, Tev." Glancing at Stevens, she added, in a gentler tone of voice, "Fabian, try to stay focused." Faulwell suspected that Gomez had chided Stevens merely for

the sake of preserving the dignity of her fellow officer.

Within minutes, the conversation devolved into a verbal maelstrom of technical jargon. All of it was far outside Faulwell's area of expertise. Standing mutely beside him, Abramowitz seemed equally nonplussed by the engineers' technobabble. He tapped her shoulder. "Want to get out of here?"

She rolled her eyes. "Please."

Faulwell stepped beside Commander Gomez. "Commander, with your permission, Carol and I would like to continue our research elsewhere."

Gomez nodded her approval. "Let me know the moment you find something." He assured her that he would, then led Abramowitz back out into the corridor. For a few blissful moments, the only sound in the corridor was their footsteps.

As they reached the turbolift, Abramowitz spoke.

"Maybe I should give Vance something homemade," she said as the doors swished open.

Stepping into the turbolift, Faulwell valiantly resisted the urge to suggest that she give her lover the gift of silence.

\* \* \*

Unlike the serene slipstream voyage out from Arcturus, the high-warp voyage to Mu Arae was giving the da Vinci a thorough shaking. Captain Gold was in the midst of a double shift on the bridge while Gomez and Tev searched for the key to unlock the Koas homeworld from its...

He found himself at a loss for words when trying to describe the pyramid. Was it a vessel? A shelter? A disguise? Whatever its original designation might have been, without the key that would free Koa and restore it to new life in orbit around Mu Arae, only one descriptor now seemed appropriate: prison.

At least the conn officers' tug-of-war is over, Gold mused. Ensign Rusconi had relieved Wong without a word passing between them, and the young woman now held the da Vinci steady as it hurtled back through Federation space at warp 9.6. While she worked, she chatted amiably with Ensign Saldok, an occasionally overeager but very reliable young Benzite man. He had just joined the da Vinci's crew as its beta-shift operations officer during the ship's recent stopover on Earth.

Gold was about to summon Corsi to the bridge, to take over command while he took a break for dinner, when a chirping alert sounded on the tactical console. "Captain," said Ensign Joanne Piotrowski, "incoming signal from Varkala Station, priority one."

"On-screen."

The image of station commander Cody Mui appeared on the main viewer. He looked alarmed. "Captain Gold, the ship that attacked us has friends--big ones--and they're moving fast, on a pursuit course for your ship."

"Are your people all right?"

"We're fine, sir. They went right past us." He nodded to someone off-screen. "We're sending you all the sensor data we could collect before they moved out of range."

The captain's posture stiffened. "Out of range? How long ago did you detect them?"

"Less than half an hour," Mui said. "Like I said, they're really moving. Had to be at least warp nine-

point-ninety-nine."

Piotrowski chimed in, "Sir, I'm tracking forty-one unidentified vessels, on the farthest edge of sensor range. Closing at warp nine-point-nine-nine-four. They'll overtake us in less than one hour." A new signal beeped from her console. "Another incoming transmission, sir--from the pursuing fleet."

Gold nodded to Mui. "Thanks for the heads-up, Commander. Gold out."

As the screen blinked back to the warp-distorted starfield, the captain nodded to Piotrowski to patch in the next signal. He turned back toward the main viewer to see the image of a delicately featured humanoid man, attired in ornately tailored robes and sporting a meticulously coiffed crown of multichromatic hair. "Attention, alien vessel da Vinci," he said. "I am Viceroy Narjam of the Silgov. Your vessel is carrying an artifact stolen from my people. We demand its immediate return."

Narjam's imperious demeanor rankled Gold. Even more important, something about his claim of ownership of the pyramid struck the captain as inherently suspect.

Hunching his shoulders and feigning ignorance, Gold replied, "An artifact? Like a crystal vase? Or a stone tablet?"

The viceroy bristled at the query. "It is a metal pyramid."

"A solid metal pyramid?"

Despite all Narjam's delicately symmetrical beauty, from his enormous almond-shaped eyes to his nigh-imperceptible nose, he looked ready to fracture from the stress of hiding his anger. "No," he said. "It contains precious cargo."

"Spice?" Gold taunted. "Frankincense? Myrrh?"

"A planet," Narjam all but growled.

"Could you describe the planet?"

Narjam closed his eyes briefly, then opened them. They had changed color and were now a radiant crimson. "I will not discuss this with you further," he said. "Halt your vessel and surrender the artifact to us--or we will take it from you by force."

The channel blinked off, returning the elongated stars to the main viewer. Gold sighed and looked back at Piotrowski. "You know what to do."

With a knowing grimace, she sounded the red-alert klaxon.

## Chapter

### 3

Never one to sugarcoat her opinions, Corsi struggled to tread the very fine line between conscientious objection and outright insubordination. "Captain, we don't even know which side is telling the truth," the statuesque blond security chief said, pacing back and forth in front of Gold's ready room desk. "Taking sides before we know what we're getting into--"

"--is the hand we've been dealt," Gold said. "We embarked on a humanitarian mission, and I intend to finish it."

She stopped pacing. "But what if the Silgov are telling the truth? They claim the artifact is stolen property."

The captain shook his head. "I gave them a chance to state their case. They responded with threats."

Planting her fists accusingly on her hips like a scolding parent, she said, "The way I hear it, you provoked their viceroy pretty openly."

Gold shrugged. "What can I say? I don't care for people who begin a conversation with demands and threats."

"All the same, sir, we might have just landed on the wrong side of a criminal matter." She was briefly distracted by the tantalizing aroma of the mug of sweet-smelling java on the captain's desk. Refocusing, she said, "In less than an hour, the Silgov fleet will be looking to force the issue. We need to know who's lying to us before they get here."

Nodding slowly, the captain said, "All right. Those are your orders, then."

"Sir?"

"Find out which side we should believe."

Frustration and annoyance flushed Corsi's face with warmth. "Aye, sir....I presume we'll continue to advance Araneus's side of the matter until then?"

"Call it a hunch," Gold said. "Given a choice between siding with a big fleet of pushy shlubs who snap orders at me, or a lone traveler who just lost his ship and is now entirely at our mercy..." He let his statement trail off, apparently confident that his meaning was clear.

Resisting the urge to roll her eyes, Corsi said, "Point taken, Captain."

He picked up his mug of steaming-hot coffee. "Dismissed."

\* \* \*

Rennan Konya found the sensations he detected in Araneus's motor cortex fascinating, to say the least. Using a finely honed psionic talent known as proprioception, the trim, angular-featured Betazoid security guard tapped into the unconscious mind of the semi-conscious Koas. Subtle pulses of pain mingled with fleeting flashes of reflex reaction

to heat or contact. Despite the exotic origin of the enormous creature, Konya found its nervous system less alien to his telepathic sense than its physical appearance was to his eyes.

He sensed Dr. Lense much more easily, as she tried to step up quietly behind him. Compared to the delicate, hard-to-reach synaptic web of Araneus's mind, Lense's mind was like a clarion. "No change, Doctor," Konya said, anticipating her question.

"So far, so good," she said. "Let--"

"--you know if I detect any change," he interrupted. "Will do." He could feel the curt nod of her head even though he couldn't see her. Proprioception was not nearly the same as having eyes in the back of one's head, but for a trained practitioner it came very close. In hand-to-hand combat it gave him an almost imperceptible edge. However, as he had been more than happy to demonstrate to Dantas Falcao the past few nights, it was a skill that also could be put to more pleasurable uses.

Ire and aggression flooded Konya's senses, affording him several seconds' warning of Lieutenant Commander Corsi's arrival. The doors parted with a soft pneumatic gasp, and the chief of security strode into sickbay with a look on her face that made clear she was in no mood to be trifled with. She stepped briskly between Konya and Araneus, then snapped at Lense, "Wake up your patient, Doctor. Now."

Konya silently noted a tiny twitch in Araneus's pincers.

Showing an inner fortitude that Konya couldn't help but admire, Lense calmly looked back at Corsi and said, "No."

Her answer brought Corsi up short. Corsi took a moment to recompose herself. "Doctor, this isn't the time for an ethical debate. Your patient has information we need if we're going to get out of this mess alive."

"Forget it," Lense said. "We've served together how long?"

"Awhile," Corsi said.

"Right, awhile. And have I ever just ignored my professional ethics and done whatever you told me to do, just because you said it was an emergency?"

Corsi wore a glum expression. "Most of the time, actually."

Even from across the room, Konya felt that Corsi had struck a nerve with her roommate the doctor, who waved her hands in a defensive, crossing gesture. "Well, not today," she said. "I'm sick of it. Cite your emergencies, your regulations, your orders--I don't care. I'm not reviving my patient prematurely just so you can harass him."

Sickbay lay gripped in a tense hush. Konya sensed Dantas and Nurse Wetzel lurking in the adjacent lab, cramped together, anxious to stay clear of the two officers' conversation. Empathy was not one of Konya's principal talents, but the two women were broadcasting their shared emotion in powerful waves.

Tapping her foot, Corsi eyed the doctor suspiciously.



"You have no idea how to revive that thing, do you?"

"Not a clue," Lense admitted, shoulders slumping.

"Tell me you're kidding," Corsi said, pacing inside a small zone of personal space. "How hard is it to diagnose a spider?"

"Corsi, the only thing Araneus has in common with spiders is general body shape and the number of limbs. Until I see its gene sequence, I'm not putting any meds into it."

"Fair enough," Corsi said. The security chief turned toward Konya. "Rennan, that thing you do--"

"You mean proprio--"

"Yeah, that," she said. "Can you send as well as receive?"

"I'm not sure," Konya said. "I have trouble sensing Araneus as it is. Sending a complex message would--"

"Nothing complex," Corsi said. "Just wake him up."

Shrugging his shoulders, he said, "Hang on. I'll try."

Reaching out with his psionic abilities, Konya projected a basic waking impulse into Araneus's nervous system.

A piercing shriek, like the amplified cry of a wounded eagle, split the quiet hum of sickbay. Konya, Corsi, and Lense all reflexively covered their ears with their hands. Araneus thrashed across the biobeds, its multiple limbs extending and retracting, its head tentacles flailing. One leg cracked a computer display screen, while another flung a rolling cart of surgical tools across sickbay with a deafening crash.

Fighting to concentrate and focus his thoughts through the din, Konya pushed more thoughts into the mind of the frightened Koas: Calm...Safe...Calm...

Araneus's panic subsided. Its enormous faceted eyes swiveled slightly. Certain that the Koas was awake and alert, Konya nodded slowly to Corsi.

She leaned carefully over Konya's shoulder. Her tightly wound bun of hair was mere centimeters from his face. Speaking softly, she said, "Araneus, my name is Domenica Corsi. I'm the chief of security on this ship. I need to ask you some questions."

Gurgling noises rattled deep inside the creature's throat. Konya remained alert for any sign of renewed anxiety, but for now the Koas seemed at ease. "Ask," it said, drawing out the word in a long breathy rasp.

"Did your people build the pyramid?"

A very long pause followed. Then the weak Koas said in a thin whisper, "Old ones."

Corsi arched an eyebrow at Konya, as if she expected him to elaborate on Araneus's cryptic answer. The Betazoid guard shrugged and shook his head.

Clearly frustrated, Corsi soldiered on. "The Silgov accuse you of stealing the pyramid from them. They claim it's their artifact."

This time Araneus tensed. Its pedipalps quivered. Drawing its huge limbs inward, it raised its body off the biobeds and the supplemental gurneys toward the ceiling of sickbay, all the while emitting an angry growl that rose steadily in volume.

Konya felt the crash coming. "Doctor! It's suffering some kind of seizure!"

Lense rushed forward, and Falcao and Wetzel entered swiftly from the lab to assist her. All three women froze as they watched Araneus's limbs tremble and give out. Its dense, ponderous bulk slammed back down onto the biobeds. As the echo of the impact faded, Konya heard a distinct cracking of polymer from one of the beds' foundations.

Singsong oscillations from overlapping medical tricorders filled sickbay. The sound was almost enough to drown out Corsi's darkly resigned sigh.

"Well," Konya said. "That was fun."

"I'll go see if the engineers learned anything from the pyramid," Corsi said, then turned toward the door. "If you need me, I'll be in the lab."

\* \* \*

Tev took an apple rancher candy from his pants pocket and untwisted the coiled ends of its wrapper. The brittle crinkle of the unfolding paper was all but inaudible in the busy lab. No one seemed to be paying attention as he placed the tart, hard confection inside his mouth, but when he glanced to his right, he noticed Fabian Stevens looking askance at him.

In a conspiratorial tone, Stevens said, "Whatcha got there?"

"An apple rancher candy," Tev said.

"Where'd you get it?"

Irritated at being interrogated by an enlisted man, Tev said simply, "From Bartholomew."

The engineer made a small sound of acknowledgment, gave a small nod, then continued, "Got any more?"

"Yes," Tev said. "I do." He hoped that the human would not ask for one of his candies. Refusing such a request would likely be perceived by Stevens as a slight.

Stevens stared at Tev for several seconds, as if expecting some further statement. His suspicious manner verged on the impertinent, in Tev's opinion. Finally, he broke eye contact without saying anything more.

Thank goodness he did not ask for a candy, Tev thought with relief. That might have become awkward.

Tuning out the chatter of his colleagues in the close quarters of the lab, Tev studied the readings from his tricorder. He was convinced that the Koas pyramid had compressed the

planet by enveloping it in a complex series of nested subspace shells. Though the energy fields that surrounded the shrunken planet had showed no signs of instability in repeated scans, Tev was curious to see whether he could cause a controlled disruption of the containment mechanism. If the code to deactivate the device eludes Bartholomew, he reasoned, it would be wise to have another means of releasing the planet from its confinement. At the very least, it would provide me with data to measure against the baseline.

He stepped over to a companel on the wall and began to initiate a low-power bombardment of tetryons toward the Koas containment shell. While he worked, Gomez and Conlon cycled through another series of passive scans that he had already told them would be ineffectual in discerning the device's true workings. The first officer's unwillingness to accept his professional expertise--to say nothing of Conlon's outright hostility to his recommendations for improving the efficiency of the warp and impulse systems she maintained--baffled him. It was as if they preferred to settle for inferior results.

Seeing that the tetryon pulse was charged, he primed an array of active sensors to probe the inner subspace shells. Satisfied that all was ready, he triggered the tetryon pulse. Instantly, the data from the compression fields changed.

From behind him, Conlon yelled, "The planet's expanding!"

Tev turned and saw that the shimmering cocoon of energy around the planet now swirled with activity. Conlon, Gomez, Stevens, and Haznedl all took half a step back from the planet while keeping their attention on their tricorder screens. "It just enlarged by .0014 percent," Gomez said.

Haznedl added, "Current rate of expansion, if steady, will be sixteen percent per hour." Tev turned back to his companel and decided that he had collected enough data. As he terminated the tetryon pulse, Haznedl continued, "If we don't contain it--" She looked down at her tricorder, her face a portrait of confusion. "It stopped. The compression field is reasserting itself."

"Confirmed," Conlon said. "The planet is returning to its fully compressed state."

Gomez flipped the cover of her tricorder closed. "Okay, folks, I want to know what the hell just happened." Pointing at Stevens, she said, "Get me sensor logs, see if the ship encountered anyth--"

"The expansion was caused by a tetryon pulse," Tev interrupted. Four angry faces looked back at him. "There is no cause for alarm. My experiment confirmed that the compression geometry is fractal in nature, and that the critical threshold for--"

Her eyes shining with fury, Gomez cut in, "Everyone who isn't Tev, get out."

A deadly chill filled the room as Stevens, Haznedl, and Conlon hurried out of the lab to the corridor. Gomez waited in silence while they exited, and fixed her enraged glare on Tev.

The door swished shut, and Gomez snapped.

"Does the word 'insubordination' mean anything to you, Tev? How about the phrase 'chain of command'? Or 'standard procedure'?"

"It was a simple experiment," Tev protested. "I assessed the properties of the--"

"That's just it," she said. "You assessed the risks of your little stunt, but you didn't confer with the group, or with me, your commanding officer. You can't just--"

"My efforts were successful," he said. "We learned more about its--"

"What part of what I'm saying are you not hearing? I don't give a damn if your test revealed the meaning of life--you ran a potentially disastrous experiment without telling the rest of us what the hell you were doing. Didn't you think we might have been able to help?" Sarcasm crept swiftly into her voice. "Or were you afraid we'd just slow you down? Maybe you think the da Vinci crew is just so much dead weight, a millstone Starfleet put around your neck to keep your brilliance in check."

"Quite the contrary," Tev said. "You're all exceptionally competent."

"Well, thank you so much for your stamp of approval," she retorted. "'Exceptionally competent.' That ranks right up there with 'superbly adequate' and 'remarkably acceptable' in the backhanded compliment hall of fame." In two quick steps she put herself nose-to-snout with Tev, thoroughly encroaching on his personal space. "You do not work in a vacuum aboard this ship. I know you've made efforts to ingratiate yourself with the crew--"

"As long as I have their respect," Tev cut in, "I don't require their friendship."

"Let me give you the same advice. The next time you step out of line with me, I'll have your ass in front of a court-martial at warp ten. Do you get me?"

Tev was shocked by Gomez's assertion of her absolute authority over him. When he had first come aboard the da Vinci months earlier, she had seemed indecisive, hesitant, gun-shy after the death of her lover--who also happened to be Tev's immediate predecessor as second officer. But now she was brash, aggressive, confident...and, apparently, openly hostile to him.

He tried to suppress a grin, but the more his facade cracked, the angrier Gomez became. Every uptick in her fury widened his smirk and deepened his pity for her, because he knew he could never requite the rawness or intensity of her passion.

Poor, deluded woman, he mused. She obviously wants me.

\* \* \*

Rounding the corner into the lower-deck corridor, Corsi was surprised to see Stevens, Haznedl, and Conlon loitering several meters away from the lab door. The trio conferred in hushed tones and halted their discussion when they noticed Corsi.

She joined their huddle. "Do I want to know?"

"Gomez is tearing Tev a new orifice," Conlon said.

"Maybe two," Haznedl added.

About time, Corsi decided. Looking at Stevens, she said, "Details?"

"It's been getting worse by the minute."

Straining to hear Gomez's shouts through the acoustically insulated bulkhead, Corsi nodded. "Sounds like she's having fun. What did he do?"

Conlon raised her eyebrow and shook her head in dismay. "You don't want to know."

"That bad, huh?" Noticing the padd in Stevens's hand, she asked, "Unlocked the pyramid's mysteries yet?"

Stevens shook his head. "We don't even know what it's made of."

Corsi had hoped that the research team would have found at least a modicum of physical evidence that she could analyze. In the absence of anything that even remotely resembled proof, she was at a loss for how to carry out her orders to determine whether Araneus or his foes--or both--were lying to the captain.

She was turning back toward the turbolift when the lab door opened. Gomez stepped halfway out and said, "You can come back in now." The foursome in the corridor traded brief expressions of reluctance, then ambled back toward the lab.

Before Corsi had taken more than a few following steps, she heard the swish of turbolift doors opening around the corner, followed by the frantic patter of running footsteps. Faulwell turned the corner at a fast jog. He waved the padd in his hand toward the group. "Stop! Don't touch the pyramid!"

Gomez moved quickly out into the corridor and intercepted the lumbering cryptographer. "Bart, what's going on?"

"I might know how to find its key code," he said, speaking quickly. "But you have to stop messing with that thing, and we need to brief the captain. Now."

Although the commander was fairly informal in her dealings with her S.C.E. team, she seemed to bristle at the tone Faulwell had just taken with her. "This had better be good, Bart."

"I know who made the pyramid," Faulwell said excitedly. "Trust me, Commander--we're way out of our league."

Chapter

4

Captain Gold settled in behind his ready-room desk as Gomez and Faulwell walked in behind him. The petite first officer moved off to one side, giving Faulwell center stage. Uploading data from his padd to the station on Gold's desk, Faulwell said, "The Starfleet historical database was able to match the symbols on the pyramid."

Symbols filled the screen, which was split into two parallel images. On the left was a detail from the pyramid that Araneus had brought aboard. On the right was an image from the archives. Even a cursory examination confirmed their similarity.

"This is from an artifact, an obelisk, that was found by the crew of the Starship Enterprise in

2268 on planet FGC-351772 III."

Gomez looked simultaneously amused and skeptical. "That's the planet's name? Bit of a mouthful, isn't it?"

Faulwell shrugged. "Apparently, its official name is still pending. Prime Directive issues." He switched to a wider image of the obelisk. "The device protected the planet from asteroid impacts. The Enterprise's science officer deduced that the symbols on the structure's exterior were from a complex tonal alphabet and served as instructions for using and repairing the device."

Gomez held up a hand to interrupt. "Hold on--whose alphabet? You said you knew who built the pyramid."

"I do," Faulwell said. Gesturing toward the screen, he continued, "That's the language of the Preservers."

Gold let out a long, low groan. As far as he was concerned, the Preservers were the working antithesis of the Prime Directive. Though no one knew who they were, where they had come from, or even whether they were even a race unto themselves or some kind of multispecies coalition, the fruits of their labors were well known to Starfleet. In a word, they were meddlers.

Just like that, Gold had a headache.

"Tell me one thing, Faulwell--can you make heads or tails out of those squiggles?"

"Yes, Captain. It'll take a few hours, but--"

Pointing to the door, Gold said, "Get to it." As Faulwell stepped quickly out to the bridge, the captain turned his attention to Gomez. "The Silgov are going to catch up to us any minute, and they don't seem inclined to talk this out."

She thought for a moment. "How do you want to handle it? Run or fight?"

Rising from his chair, he said, "Whichever one gets us to Mu Arae in one piece."

\* \* \*

At Narjam's bidding, Maleiras entered the viceroy's inner sanctum aboard the Silgov flagship Justice Maker. She stepped cautiously, as if fearful of despoiling hallowed ground. After months confined in the cramped quarters of the Starlit Wing, Maleiras felt strangely vulnerable in such wide-open spaces.

Space-time twisted past the wide, wraparound windows on either side of Narjam's home-in-exile. His desk had reconfigured its normally blank surface into a detailed report from Silgos Prime. Judging from his expression, Maleiras concluded that the already bleak situation back home must be growing worse.

"Bad tidings, my lord?"

"Sadly, yes." With a wave of his hand he blanked the desktop and looked up at her, his expression serene once more. "Your message sounded urgent."

"Yes, my lord."

Emerging from behind his desk, he said, "Speak."

"I humbly request your permission to be candid, lord."

Shooting her a wary look, he said, "Granted."

"Forgive my impertinence, lord, but I think we might be pursuing the wrong strategy with regard to the Federation."

His mood quickly grew defensive. "In what way?"

"Rather than make a foe of the Federation, could we not court them as allies instead?"

"Preposterous!" Narjam circled her like a predator. "Their ships are bulky and slow, at least a century behind ours. Such a backward civilization is of no use to us."

Maleiras replied hotly, "I disagree, my liege." She took a moment to rein in her temper. "Their propulsion is unrefined, but their weaponry is formidable. Even a remote civilian outpost was able to disable my vessel with a single volley. Such armaments would strike terror into the Vekhal."

Passing behind the anxious woman, Narjam asked, "What are you proposing?"

"A trade, my lord. Our propulsion secrets for their armory knowledge. And perhaps an alliance."

"Entrust our fates to an unknown interstellar power? Are you quite mad?"

"The Koas have sought them out in a time of distress--a telling detail. They did not seek refuge with the Danteri, or the Breen, or the Romulans. Why travel so much farther to reach the Federation?"

Halting in his circuit of the room, Narjam seemed to consider that for a moment. Then he shook off the notion like a winter chill. "When we disable the Federation vessel, its weapons will be as available to us as the pyramid." He returned to his desk and sat down. "Our mobility is the only thing that has kept our rebellion from being crushed by the Vekhal. I won't give away our most precious tactical asset to strangers." Calling up a map of Silgos Prime on his desktop, he added, "Once the pyramid is ours, no weapon in the galaxy will be able to stand against us. And our people will be free."

\* \* \*

Armed with the complete Koas gene-sequence, Dr. Lense had just finished administering a series of stabilizing agents, painkillers, and tissue-regenerative compounds into Araneus's battered body. Only after she'd determined what its outer carapace was supposed to look like was she able to see that Araneus had, in fact, been terribly burned. Why the stubborn Koas hadn't shared this information with Dr. Safford after being transported aboard Varkala Station, she hadn't a clue.

Through all of her labors, Rennan Konya had sat quietly with Araneus, projecting soothing

moods into the patient's central nervous system and alerting Lense when her treatments provoked distress. Amazing, she thought. All these gadgets, and not one as sensitive or as accurate as this security guard.

The doors swished open and Captain Gold entered sickbay, followed closely by Corsi. The two officers split up and took positions facing each other from either side of Araneus's octopus-like cephalothorax. Gesturing toward the dazed Koas, Gold asked Lense, "He's stable, you said?"

"For the moment," Lense said.

"Wake him up, Doctor," Gold said. "It's life or death for us and him, and we're out of time."

Nodding to Konya, Lense instructed, "Carefully, Rennan."

Concentrating behind closed eyes, Konya reached out and placed his fingertips gently against Araneus's head. Seconds later, the Koas's faceted eyes swiveled a small bit, then its voice ushered from its maw like a note from a whispering bassoon. "Captain..."

"Araneus," Gold said. "Can you speak?"

Groaning with the effort, Araneus said, "Yes."

Gold nodded to Corsi, who took over the questioning. "We're being pursued by the Silgov," she said. "They claim the pyramid belongs to them."

"Lies," Araneus said.

Lense noted the mutual eye-rolling between the captain and the security chief. Corsi continued, "We think we've identified the writing on the pyramid. Where did your people get it?"

Araneus hesitated. Its eyes shifted from one person in the sickbay to another. Konya, apparently sensing that Corsi was becoming suspicious of the Koas's reluctance, gestured subtly for her to be at ease. The Koas spoke at last. "A visitor. Looked like one of us. An alien, from another star and ages past."

Gold jumped back in. "Who was this alien?"

"Preserver," Araneus said. "Called his people Preservers."

Knowing glances and satisfied nods passed between Gold and Corsi. Meanwhile, Araneus continued. "Said his people made a vow to the Koas six million years ago. Their kind...almost gone. But honored their pledge. Kept their promise. Saved my people."

Corsi leaned closer to Araneus. "The Silgov think they can make the pyramid into a weapon."

"No," Araneus said, drawing out the word for several seconds. "Works only once. Pyramid gone when my world is free."

Gold straightened and motioned for Corsi to follow him out of sickbay. Lense watched the pair hurry out, then looked to Konya for a report on Araneus's condition. Before she even



had to ask, he reassured her with a careful thumbs-up.

Friendlier than my tricorder, that's for sure, the doctor mused--while wondering if there was any way she could convince Konya to study medicine.

\* \* \*

Gold and Corsi exited the turbolift onto the bridge, which was awash in the crimson glow of battle-stations lighting. Moving to his chair, he relieved Piotrowski, who resumed her post at tactical. Corsi situated herself behind the captain's right shoulder. Typically, that would be the first officer's post, but with Gomez and Tev both belowdecks leading the effort to thwart the Silgov attack, Gold was happy to have Corsi there in their stead.

Leaning forward with a cold gleam in his eye, Gold commanded, "Hail the Silgov flagship."

Piotrowski keyed in the transmission and was answered seconds later by a beeping signal on her console. "Viceroy Narjam responding, Captain."

"On-screen."

The delicate features of Narjam appeared on the main viewer. "You wish to surrender, Captain?"

"Not quite," Gold said. "But I see now that I might have been hasty in not acknowledging the possibility that your claim of ownership is genuine."

"I see. How do you propose to remedy this slight?"

Denying himself the pleasure of sarcasm or the catharsis of harsh language, Gold said, "A simple parley, Viceroy. To avert unnecessary violence."

"Most sensible, Captain," Narjam said, his smug pretension galling to Gold even from several light-years away.

"If your lordship would be so kind as to indulge my explorer's curiosity," Gold said, "could you share with me the significance of the markings on the pyramid?"

Despite the fact that Narjam had rebuffed a similar request less than an hour ago, Gold hoped that by adopting a more subordinate tone he might induce the Silgov leader to elaborate on his assertion of proprietorship.

The viceroy did not disappoint him.

"Those symbols are part of the Silgov language, Captain," Narjam said. "Read in sequence, they tell the history of my people."

Wrinkling his brow in mock confusion, Gold countered, "You told your people's entire history in just twenty-one symbols?" As trick questions went, it wasn't a subtle one. Even a fleeting examination of the pyramid had made it obvious to Gold that there were many dozens of symbols on the pyramid, and he was fairly certain that no two were alike. Time to see if Narjam can call my bluff, he thought.

Narjam neither hemmed nor hawed; he simply kept the same vacant look of drab politeness

plastered onto his bland, soft-featured face. "Silgov is a subtle language, Captain. Though it might look to you as if there are only twenty-one symbols, they contain myriad subtle differences, which, read together, lend nuance to the overall inscription."

Gold turned to Piotrowski and symbolically slashed his fingertips in front of his throat. The dark-haired young woman muted the ship-to-ship channel. Looking at Corsi, Gold saw that she had recognized Narjam's lie, just as he had. "He's never even seen that box," he said to her.

"Permission to kick his ass?"

"Granted."

\* \* \*

"Think faster, folks," Gomez said to the da Vinci personnel who were gathered in the main shuttlebay while donning their specialized environment suits for damage-control duty. "The Silgov are going to start shooting any second now."

"We know their shields are subpar," Stevens said, shimmying into his gear. "If we hit them hard enough--"

"There's too many of them," Hawkins interrupted. "We'd get flanked, then fried."

Powering up her suit, engineer Brenda Phelps said, "Let's just ditch 'em, then."

Security Guard Madeleine Robins shot back, "How? We're in deep space, there's nowhere to hide."

Engineer Chris Turpin piped up. "Maybe we could jury-rig a cloaking device."

Winn Mara laughed out loud. "Sure, and while we're at it, let's reinvent the Tholian Web."

Stevens inspected everyone's suits and repair kits as the debate continued. Lauoc and T'Mandra argued over whether the da Vinci's shields could be reconfigured for metaphasic operation, enabling them to take cover inside a solar mass--until Gomez pointed out that there wasn't a star close enough for the ship to reach before the Silgov would surround them. Rizz and T'Nel from engineering, meanwhile, vetoed several outrageous ideas in a row by security guard Makk Vinx, who then vexed the Bolian man and Vulcan woman by implying that a "tommy gun" was somehow the solution to every problem. Gomez resolved to find out one of these days what a tommy gun was.

Shabalala was growing frustrated. "Can't we spoof their sensors? Make them think we've got heavy reinforcements?"

"We don't have the faintest idea what their sensor protocols are," Haznedl said. "Unless we learn all about their technology in the next five minutes, I'd say forget about it."

Ken Caitano from security grinned at Gomez. "Guess it's a bit late to say we're sorry, huh?"

Gomez smiled good-naturedly at him. "A diplomatic solution is probably off the table, yes." Looking around at the rest of the damage-control team, she said, "Three minutes, people. We need an idea now."

"Too bad we're not running the other way," Wong said. "They're fast, but in the slipstream we were faster."

Engineer Cade Bennett's face lit up. "Hang on--could we make our own artificial slipstream?"

"Sure," Martina Barre said. "We probably have a few spares in the cargo bay."

From across the shuttlebay came Tev's exasperated sigh. All conversation ceased. The crew turned in unison toward the grouchy Tellarite. Gomez felt her ire rise as if by instinct. Facing him with a withering glare, she said, "Yes, Tev?"

He droned as if he were being asked to address a class of unruly children. "If the Silgov fleet pursues us into the slipstream," Tev said, "the phenomenon's peculiar subspace physics would make their ships exponentially faster than ours."

"We already know they're faster than us," Gomez said. "That isn't helping."

Tev grimaced as a condescending, petulant whimper of annoyance issued from the deepest reaches of his sinus cavity. "Grease under their wheels, Commander," he said. "Lure them into the slipstream at maximum velocity, then collapse our own warp field and let them race past us. They will be several dozen light-years away before they can correct their error."

"Hang on," said gamma-shift operations officer Alexandre Lambdin. "We had to modulate our subspace field harmonics to within a picocochrane to get inside the slipstream. How are we supposed to lure them in unless their warp-field harmonics match up?"

"A trap door," Tev said. "We use our own warp field to create a zone of instability in the slipstream's threshold, fracture it for a split second with a modified phaser discharge, then collapse our warp field before we enter the slipstream."

Transporter Chief Laura Poynter looked dumb-founded by the suggestion. "Would that work?"

"Of course it will work," Tev said. "Provided the rest of you pay attention while I explain..."

Listening to Tev hand out duty assignments with arrogant surety, Gomez stifled her surging desire to throw him into the brig. Issuing orders and taking action without obtaining her approval was the very thing for which she had just excoriated him, and now, mere minutes later, he was doing it again.

The fact that Tev could be so casually brilliant irritated Gomez as much as everything else about him. She waited while the Tellarite taskmaster finished giving the crew instructions. When he got to her, he seemed on the verge of delivering another order. No doubt reading her mood from the scowl on her face, he paused, then said in a less confident voice, "With your permission, of course, Commander."

Swallowing her anger, she said calmly, "Sounds like a plan. Let's get to work." She put on her helmet, and the rest of the damage-control team followed suit. Leading them out of the shuttlebay, she silently lamented that fixing Tev's defective understanding of the chain of command was far more complicated than any engineering task for which she had been trained. The brash second officer shouldered past her into the narrow corridor. Watching

him move away toward main engineering, she realized that correcting his major mental malfunctions very well might be a task best left to someone else.

A professional.

Chapter

5

Alone in the lab, Faulwell compared the symbols on the pyramid in front of him to the ones found more than a century ago on a massive obelisk on a planet dozens of light-years away. He shook his head in frustration. For all their technological prowess, he wondered, why couldn't the Preservers have simplified their system interfaces? He rotated the pyramid--whose instructions he had deciphered enough to close the artifact, for easier inspection--and followed a string of text that wrapped around its middle section. Its metal surfaces were cold in his hands.

Scribbling on a sheaf of linen-textured paper (which he normally reserved for his letters to Anthony on Starbase 92), he rendered a translation of what he suspected was a formula for calculating the correct time and place at which to deploy the pyramid around Mu Arae. As far as he could tell, the device had only two innate functions--one to put the planet in the box, and another to remove it. Once the pyramid was safely in position, he reasoned, the planet's release would be as easy as entering the expansion sequence.

He was about to conduct a test of his hurried translation, then stopped himself as his fingertip hovered over the first symbol. Probably not a good idea to expand this thing inside the ship, he realized. Then a troubling notion occurred to him. This has to be deployed in space. Which means I have to be out there to manually enter the code. But what'll happen to me?

Realizing that his entire plan had just acquired a potentially fatal complication, he gathered up his notes and sprinted out of the lab. Less than a minute later, he was scrambling into sickbay, where the still incapacitated Araneus lay sprawled over most of the main room. Konya, who had seemed asleep, looked up at Faulwell with an alert expression. Sighing, he reached out toward Araneus. "Hang on," Konya said to Faulwell. "I'll try to wake him gently."

Araneus shuddered horribly, and its legs twitched as if they possessed a grotesque life of their own. In a thin and hollow voice, it said, "Who are you?"

"My name is Bart Faulwell. I'm the one trying to decipher the code on the pyramid."

"You can...save my people?"

The sad desperation of Araneus's query tugged at Faulwell's sympathies. "I'm trying," he said. "But I need an answer to a question."

"Ask."

"Where and when were you told to unlock the pyramid?"

"Space," Araneus said. "Orbit."

"You'd manually enter the key code while space-walking?"

"Yes."

Though he dreaded the answer, he asked anyway. "What were you told would happen to you when the planet expanded?"

Long, rasping sounds from inside Araneus's throat preceded his reply. "Did not ask. Not important."

Faulwell's shoulders sagged. Though it was possible that the Preservers had designed the pyramid to expand the planet without harming its courier, it was just as possible that the ancient, inscrutable beings had decided that one casualty was an acceptable collateral loss in exchange for saving a world. It was entirely possible that whoever was sent into orbit to enter the code would not come back.

Before he could brood too long on that bad news, a muffled blast shook the da Vinci from the outside, and Piotrowski's voice sounded over the intraship comm: "All hands to battle stations!"

\* \* \*

Captain Gold shouted to be heard above the rapid sequence of exploding enemy ordnance that hammered the da Vinci's shields. "Tactical! Report!"

"They're too fast, Captain," Piotrowski said. "Our torpedoes can't get a lock!"

"Target an area of effect," Gold ordered. "Spread pattern Echo." Another barrage from the Silgov fleet rattled the ship and dimmed the overhead lights. "Rusconi, drop to impulse!"

Entering the command into the helm, Rusconi confirmed, "Aye, sir. Full impulse." The da Vinci lurched out of warp.

Gold felt the wave of apprehension sweep the bridge. "Let's see if the Silgov are as nimble at impulse as they are at warp. Helm, full evasive. Alter course and speed at will."

"Aye, sir," Rusconi said.

As the ship's inertial dampers strained to compensate for its chaotic pitching and rolling, Gold tightened his already white-knuckle grip on the arms of his chair. It amused him to note that his artificial left hand imitated the cosmetic effects of stress perfectly. Whoever made it thought of everything, he thought with a wry chuckle.

"Saldok," Gold said to the Benzite ensign seated at ops. "How're we doing with Tev's trap-door modifications?"

Reviewing the status reports on his console, Saldok said, "Modifications to the forward deflector dish are hampered by the need to keep our shields raised, sir. But Lieutenant Conlon reports we should be ready within a minute or two."

More muffled blasts hit the ship. An alert shrilled from the tactical console. "They're flanking us," Piotrowski said. "Six marks, coming in fast from starboard!"

"Got 'em," Rusconi said as she accelerated into a dizzying corkscrew maneuver that

doubled them back toward the majority of their pursuers. She deftly tapped her little finger on a blinking control pad, and the stars blurred on the main viewer. The image sharpened back to normal, and Gold noted that his tactical display showed the Silgov fleet behind them and scrambling to reverse course. A half-second warp-jump, Gold noted as Rusconi plotted her next maneuver. Though she couldn't see him, he smiled at her with proud approval. She's good.

His moment of elation was short-lived.

"Multiple incoming," Piotrowski declared.

Saldok's webbed fingers slapped commands into his console. "Routing secondary power to shields."

Rusconi piloted the ship through a trifecta of warp jumps, each time evading the brunt of a Silgov barrage by a swiftly decreasing margin. Gold recognized the Silgov's tactic--the da Vinci was being herded into a crossfire. It would take the Silgov several minutes to close this noose, but with their superior numbers and greater speed, the capture of the da Vinci would be inevitable. Even now, the Silgov's relentless assault was rapidly weakening the shields, one blast at a time.

"Rusconi, Piotrowski, use every dirty trick in the book," Gold said. "Every second counts."

Returning to his chair, Gold listened as the two women plotted their next roll-and-fire counterattack. As Saldok warned of another impending Silgov fusillade, the captain steeled his nerves and waited for the blow to fall.

\* \* \*

A conduit exploded in a bulkhead just as Stevens ran past it. Stumbling, he nearly fell, but Ken Caitano reached out and steadied him.

"Easy," Caitano said. "You all right?"

"Fine," Stevens said. "Thanks."

Caitano jogged down the corridor to start repairs on the conduit. Stevens continued toward his own assignment, decoupling the phaser generators and linking the weapons to the warp nacelles' EPS system. Using the phasers as a pinpoint warp-field disruptor was far-fetched, possibly disastrous if the system overloaded, and undeniably ingenious. It sickened Stevens to have to give Tev credit for it.

Inside his pressure suit, the reek of sweat grew stale as he struggled to make minute adjustments in the high-energy system without the benefit of fine motor controls. The gloves of the pressure suit were okay for heavy labor but unsuited to precision work. Tiny wires slipped repeatedly from his grasp.

He was cursing bitterly under his breath as his suit's helmet comm warbled. "Gomez to Stevens, report."

"Primary generators decoupled," he said, partly distracted by the fact that he was trying to work and talk at the same time. "Load-balancing the EPS tap now."

Gomez sounded worried. "How long?"

"A few more minutes." He swallowed a litany of vulgarities as his gloved finger proved too fat to reach an isolinear chip in a rear control bus.

"We're losing shields," Gomez said. "Tev's standing by at the warp core. We need that phaser link online now."

"Working as fast as I can, Commander. Just let me--"

Feedback howled over Stevens's suit's comm as another brutal explosion rocked the da Vinci. Inertial dampers overloaded, and he tumbled chaotically and hit the wall. A bulkhead-gray blur of motion rushed toward him, then a dull crush pushed him past his already blurred edge of consciousness.

\* \* \*

Ricocheting off the corridor wall, Caitano saw the forward bulkhead of the phaser control bay break loose and pummel Stevens, who collapsed to the deck, pinned beneath the massive chunk of duranium.

Turning toward his Nasat damage-control partner, the young security guard shouted, "Pattie!"

Clicking and whistling in bright, excited tones, P8 Blue scrambled over a tangled mass of ceiling struts that had collapsed into the corridor between them.

Caitano pointed to Stevens. "He's in trouble! Come on!" He sprinted ahead through a growing wall of flames that blocked the door of the phaser control bay. P8 followed close behind him, curling herself and her custom-made pressure suit into a ball as she bounced over the half-blocked threshold. Caitano had found P8's use of pressure gear odd until the Nasat reminded him that her carapace offered her no protection from fire, charged plasma, or radiation. Grabbing the edges of the bulkhead plate, the duo strained together to lift it off Stevens.

At first the ponderous slab refused to budge, then it rose a few centimeters. Burning pain surged deep inside Caitano's trembling arm muscles as he used his foot to slide a loose piece of equipment under the bulkhead, wedging it into place. P8 grabbed Stevens's arms and began pulling him clear.

"Get him to sickbay," Caitano said as he hurdled over the fallen wall section to the open panel where Stevens had been working. "And seal the door on your way out."

P8 started to protest, "Don't be--"

"That's an order."

"I outrank you," P8 said, just before a surge of plasma-fueled fire tumbled her out of the bay, back into the corridor. Apparently no longer interested in arguing with him, P8 sealed the door. Satisfied that this fire would now be contained, Caitano set to work.

Reaching through the narrow panel, he found that his gloved hands were unable to reach the back of the control board to make the final adjustments. He turned away to remove his

gloves. A gust of heated air blasted greasy black smoke and aerosolized particles into his faceplate, coating it with an opaque layer of greasy filth. Attempts to wipe it clean proved fruitless. Great, he mused sarcastically. Now I can't even see the things that I can't reach.

Captain Gold's voice squawked inside his helmet. "Caitano, Blue says you've taken over for Stevens."

"Affirmative, sir," he replied while unfastening the seal on his helmet.

"We're about to lose shields and main power, son. It's now or never."

"Hang on, Captain." He pulled off his gloves and felt the searing heat that now filled the room. "Bringing the link online now." Flinging aside his helmet, the hissing crackle of flames assaulted his eardrums. He pushed his hands back inside the machinery and squinted through the stinging shroud of thickening smoke. His every gasp for breath scorched his throat. Working by touch, he shuffled isolinear chips, removed safety lockouts, and opened the power conduit that would turn the phasers into an extension of the da Vinci's warp-drive system.

The new link throbbed to life.

Caitano pulled his hands free and sealed the maintenance panel. Slapping the comm switch on the wall with his palm, he said, "Caitano to--" A hacking cough interrupted him. "Caitano to bridge! Link online!"

Garbled and muffled by the rising roar of the fire, the captain's reply was inaudible. Caitano turned to try and stumble toward the exit, but a new avalanche of broken deck plating and sparking cables blocked his path. Flames stabbed mercilessly at him from every side. He spun toward the collapsed forward section, hoping to spy a way out, but tripped over Stevens's tool kit. Landing face-first, his chin struck something hard. He gagged as the acrid stench of burning hair filled his nostrils. Panic set in when he realized it was his own hair that was starting to singe.

As the blaze encircled him, he hoped that his efforts had not been in vain.

\* \* \*

Their tenacity is remarkable, Maleiras reflected as she watched Coleef pilot the Starlit Wing through its frantic pursuit of the Federation vessel da Vinci. The small starship lacked the velocity to outrun the Silgov fleet, and despite the power of its weapons it was no match for an entire armada. She had half-expected its commander to surrender once his ship had been over-taken--and she was secretly pleased to have been wrong.

Sesslom--the grime of his repair efforts now scrubbed away, returning him to his normally immaculate self--monitored the primary sensors, as well as the tactical feed from the Justice Maker. Looking up from his console, he reported, "The da Vinci's shields are collapsing, my lady."

Alas, all your valiance has been for naught. She acknowledged the report with a nod, then turned toward Coleef. "Bring us about, and fall back half a tolloc, in case the da Vinci doubles back on its current heading."

"As you command, my lady," Coleef said as she altered course.



Maleiras pondered what attitude Viceroy Narjam might effect when demanding the da Vinci's surrender in a few moments.

Then the diminutive vessel looped around and charged through the center of the Silgov fleet's battle formation. The tactic surprised her. A suicide run? Such an end for the da Vinci and its crew struck Maleiras as senseless and tragic. Bitter sadness coursed through her. Have we become the fiends from whom we fled? Are we no better than the Vekhal? Taking what we want and leaving only death in our wake?

The da Vinci fired a burst of its beam weapons, hitting nothing, then leaped into subspace at its best possible speed. A final, futile gesture, Maleiras thought. A comm from Narjam on the Justice Maker commanded all vessels to pursue and overtake, at maximum velocity. "Engage stardrive," Maleiras said.

The petite, violet-haired pilot keyed in the command.

Space-time itself disintegrated around the Starlit Wing.

Coleef clung to her helm console. "Subspatial disruption!"

The sensor station strobed, sparked, then went dark. Sesslom tumbled gracefully from his seat and dove headfirst through the aft hatch to the engineering deck below, no doubt moving to the auxiliary sensor console.

All around the Starlit Wing, the rest of the Silgov fleet tumbled erratically, struggling to regain navigational control. Equilibrium stole away from Maleiras as the normal streak of stars in subspace melted into a muddy blur of light.

Realizing that it would take her less time to do what needed to be done than it would to verbalize the orders to Coleef, Maleiras sprang from her seat and reached past the pilot. The chief scout disengaged the stardrive and initiated an energy pulse that was the inverse of the one that had snared them moments earlier.

With a gut-wrenching sensation of arrested motion, the Starlit Wing dropped out of subspace. The blur outside the cockpit window vanished and was replaced by a placid vista of stars. Coleef stared ahead, petrified and likely not yet aware that the crisis had passed.

Poking his head up through the aft hatch, an unusually frazzled-looking Sesslom said, "All systems nominal, my lady."

Maleiras moved back to her seat. "Do we have a reading on the rest of the fleet?"

"Negative," Sesslom said. "I believe they are still caught in the disruption. We lost contact with them when we returned to normal space-time."

"Helm, position report."

Coleef blinked a few times, regained her presence of mind, and checked her console. "Coordinates one-

eleven-point-seventeen, two twenty-three-point-six,

eighty-four-point-zero-one-five." Then she blinked again, in disbelief. "Nine-point-six light-nokoshavs from the da Vinci, my lady."

Checking the readings herself, Maleiras was stunned to see that they were correct. Most ingenious, she mused. Though she had no idea how the da Vinci could have hurled her vessel--not to mention the rest of the Silgov fleet--so far from the battle, she had no doubt that the Federation vessel was responsible for their displacement. Both impressed and amused, she couldn't help but smile. Narjam is wrong to disregard the Federation, she decided. They are more powerful and more clever than he realized. Only a fool would make foes of such people.

Interrupting the chief scout's musings, Coleef asked, "Course, my lady?" Maleiras looked at the pilot, but did not respond immediately. Coleef added, "Shall I plot a course to regroup with the fleet on its last known heading?"

Maleiras considered that suggestion. She imagined that Viceroy Narjam would be livid. Judging from the distance her own vessel had been thrown, she suspected that the rest of the fleet would likely find itself dozens of light-nokoshavs away before it escaped the disruption. There was no longer any chance that it would intercept the Koas pyramid before its deployment inside Federation space.

The Starlit Wing, however, was still close enough to try.

"Resume pursuit course," Maleiras said. "Maximum speed."

Chapter

6

C orsi watched with a knot in her stomach as Vinx and Lauoc forced open the door to the phaser control bay. The portal slid open slowly, one grinding centimeter at a time. A stench of scorched polymers and pungent smoke reached her nose. She dreaded to look. Ken Caitano had been with her security detail less than a week, having just replaced Frank Powers during the da Vinci's recent visit to Earth. Now she would have to face Agosto Caitano, her most respected mentor at Starfleet Academy, and break the news to him that his daring, bright-eyed son had perished under her supervision.

Vinx scanned the charred compartment with his tricorder. "Nothin' in there but ashes," he said with his trademark nasal accent. Looking back at the unapologetically distraught Corsi, he added softly, "Sorry, doll." Though she had told the lotian security guard a dozen times to address her as "sir" or "Commander," she was in no mood to mete out a reprimand just now. She stepped into the middle of the blackened room and idly kicked aside a chunk of burned debris.

Never any guarantees in this job, she brooded. She had felt an almost sisterly sense of duty to Caitano when he came aboard, but she had shown him no favoritism. Now she wished she had.

From beneath her feet came an insistent tapping.

"Vinx! Lauoc! Get in here and lift this plate!"

The two guards scrambled into the room and searched for purchase with their fingertips

around the sides of the deck panel. It came free with a dry scrape. Chilly gray mist mushroomed out of the space below. Coughing at the bitter, bile-inducing fumes, Corsi took a step back. The plume evaporated to reveal Ken Caitano, smiling from inside his soot-stained damage-control gear. Still clutching a plasma cutter in his hand, he was snuggled against a neatly perforated phaser-coolant intake pipe that had flooded his cramped nook under the floor with frigid coolant fluid.

Chuckling, Corsi flashed the pretzel-posed security guard a relieved grin. "Lying down on the job, Caitano?"

Keying his suit's external comm--which buzzed and crackled badly from the extremes of thermal abuse it had just suffered--he said, "Nice to see you, too, Commander."

No doubt about it, she thought, He's Agosto's boy, all right.

\* \* \*

Bart Faulwell drifted in space, his breath close and warm inside his EVA suit, the Koas pyramid clutched in his hands. Several minutes had passed since Poynter had beamed him off the da Vinci. He enjoyed the quiet, but the weightlessness was making him queasy, and he felt impotently small floating alone amid the infinite reach of the universe.

The ship had made excellent time to Mu Arae, leaving him barely enough time to decipher the remaining marks on the artifact. As he had suspected, they were instructions, but they had proved so vague as to be all but useless. About the only thing he knew for certain that it said was that it should be deployed in space, within ten light-minutes of the star. Beyond that there was nothing--no formulae to calculate, no cryptic patterns to parse. Just a blessing from the Preservers, and a notation that the pyramid itself would be consumed in the process of releasing Koa.

That last fact provoked a deep pang of regret in Faulwell. He had hoped to study the device afterward, perhaps team up with Abramowitz and write a paper on it for the Daystrom Institute...but once the S.C.E.'s good deed for today was complete, this priceless piece of the elusive and enigmatic Preserver culture would be lost forever.

Of course, so might I be, he knew. One detail he'd been unable to glean from repeated readings of the pyramid's symbols was what would happen to the device's courier as the planet expanded.

"Gold to Faulwell," the captain said over the comm. "The da Vinci has reached station. Proceed when ready."

"Aye, Captain." Captain Gold had been concerned that the Silgov might catch up to the ship sooner rather than later, but Araneus was still in no condition to make the spacewalk. Consequently, the decision was made to initiate the release as soon as possible. There had been no shortage of volunteers for the mission--Pattie, Tev, Gomez, Corsi, and most of the ship's security detail had offered to make the spacewalk and enter the commands as given by Faulwell.

Then he had pointed out to the captain that the symbols on the pyramid couldn't be easily described; they had no analogs in any of the crew's native tongues. Admirable though the team's offers were, Faulwell made it clear that he was the only one qualified to enter the code. Of course, he could have recorded a visual guide for someone else, or even observed

through a secure visual uplink. For whatever reason, however, no one had chosen to point out those alternatives at the time. Standing in the shuttlebay minutes later, Gold had shaken Faulwell's heavily gloved hand, patted his shoulder, and bid him a simple farewell with the words "Good luck."

Now the heavens yawned around him, endless and cold.

Turning the device slowly in his hands, Faulwell looked for the first symbols of the release sequence. The Preservers had designed their artifact to be triggered by a Koas, whose multilimbed physiology would have made it easy to hold the object while pressing symbols on opposite sides simultaneously. Because he needed both his hands to enter the code sequence, Faulwell held the pyramid steady by tucking it between his knees and doubling over it, into an almost fetal curl.

His fingers hovered unsteadily over the first two symbols. Swallowing nervously, he found his mouth was dry and sour with fear. Straining to sharpen his focus, his eyes felt incapable of blinking and were opened as wide as they could go.

"Faulwell to da Vinci. I'm about to begin the sequence."

Committing his hands to the task, he touched the first two symbols and pressed gently down. The two raised markings receded into the metal surface of the pyramid and vanished. Pair upon pair of symbols were reclaimed by the lustrous artifact, until only a final pair of activation markings remained. Faulwell hesitated for only the briefest moment, then finished the sequence. Stillness enveloped him.

Then he began moving.

Stars streaked past, becoming circles. Light and darkness pinwheeled around him, and he was held motionless. Zero gravity gave way to a crushing press of acceleration.

Light flared through the edges of the pyramid. Faulwell let go of it, and it drifted away in what seemed like slow time.

The sides fell open.

Koa began to swell, towering above him, dwarfing him, humbling him as its majesty was resurrected all but beneath his feet. Still the stars spun, and Koa grew, all in eerie silence.

The planet's gravity tugged at him as together they hurtled madly through the void. A whooping holler fountained up from inside his chest, not out of fear, but from sheer exhilaration. Watching the continents resume their shapes on the rapidly turning sphere below, seeing the clouds reborn from a slumbering memory, his prolonged shout of excited alarm matured into gales of joyous laughter.

\* \* \*

It was the most amazing thing Sonya Gomez had ever seen.

One moment, the main viewer had shown only the speckling of stars. Then a planet had appeared, like a suddenly inflated balloon, and sped away.

"Report!" Gomez said. At ops, Saldok checked his readings, but Gomez could tell even

from across the bridge that there was more data pouring in than he could possibly be expected to process at once. "Saldok," she added, "track the planet's movement. Joanne, keep a lock on Bart. Tev, monitor--"

Eyes fixed on the aft science station, Tev interrupted, "The gas giants are moving!"

Captain Gold turned toward the main viewer. "On-screen!"

Saldok switched the image on the forward screen while Tev narrated more of his sensor readings. "The erratic orbit of the outer gas giant is changing," Tev said. "Orbital forces are being equalized into a stable ellipse." He adjusted his settings. "The inner gas giant's orbit is shifting outward, to a distance of approximately two AUs." He peeled himself away from the sensor display. Gomez was vaguely amused by the stunned look on his face. "The artifact is completely reshaping this star system," he said in a dazed monotone.

"Saldok," Gold said, "what's Koa doing?"

"Establishing a stable elliptical orbit at a distance of one-point-two AUs, Captain. Orbital velocity slowing...planetary rotation stabilizing." The Benzite was trembling--with excitement, Gomez figured, judging from the pitch of his voice--as he tapped in more commands on the ops console. "The gas giants are stabilizing into their new orbits, as well, sir. Orbital profiles normalizing."

For a moment, no one said anything. Around the bridge, faces stared in wonderment at a unique technological marvel. Orbs that normally appeared static in space were being visibly and effortlessly rearranged while the crew watched.

Gomez noticed the dark look that crossed Gold's face. The captain turned slowly toward the tactical officer.

"Piotrowski," he said. "Where's Faulwell?"

\* \* \*

High above Koa, Bart Faulwell glided, arms wide, tears of joy in his eyes. A world, a civilization, had teetered on the precipice of oblivion, and he had helped pull it back from the edge. He knew that the Preservers were the true authors of the miracle, but he couldn't stop looking at his hands.

If I do nothing else with my life, he told himself, this I can be proud of. This is what being in Starfleet is all about.

Sweetest of all would be putting these moments into words, inscribing them on paper for Anthony's eyes, sharing them with the one man who knew his soul, in all its imperfection.

Regardless, doubts lingered in his heart.

How can married life be more liberating than this?

Floating in solitude, Faulwell savored the privacy, the breathing room of his life aboard the da Vinci. It seemed almost like a paradox--the notion that committing oneself to a single other individual could somehow impart a sense of freedom. When Anthony had made his wink-nudge suggestion of matrimony last week, Faulwell had thought such a notion absurd.

Now he wondered whether any of this would seem so grand, so noble, if he didn't have Anthony to share it with.

Envisioning such an empty life filled him with despair.

Before melancholy could close its grip on his heart, he caught sight of a familiar shape: The da Vinci cruised gracefully into orbit above him.

Captain Gold's voice was a welcome presence inside the suddenly lonely confines of his pressure suit. "Faulwell, this is da Vinci, are you all right?"

"Affirmative, da Vinci. I'm okay." He cast one more look down at the planet, then returned his gaze to the ship overhead. "And I'm ready to come home."

\* \* \*

Captain Gold waited patiently for the bridge crew--minus Tev, of course--to cease patting Bart Faulwell's shoulders and slapping his back, in gestures that he could tell were equal parts congratulation and relief at Faulwell's safe return. When the cryptographer finally joined him in the center of the bridge, he said, "Sorry to keep you waiting, Captain." Smiling at the beaming faces around him, he added, "I was delayed."

"No need to apologize to me, Faulwell. I just hope Caliph Sicarios hasn't taken umbrage at being left on hold."

Faulwell stumbled over the honorific alone. "Caliph--?"

Gold knew that he shouldn't enjoy watching the man squirm like this, but it was all in good fun. Turning to Piotrowski, he said, "Open the channel."

The image of a sepia-hued Koas appeared on the main viewer. Though it was adorned by a few bejeweled ceremonial vestments, Gold saw that the caliph's true badge of office was its throne. The round, concave perch sat atop an obsidian pillar many meters above a sprawling, web-patterned grid of walkways and gathering areas, within which bustled more than a thousand Koas VIPs.

"Caliph Sicarios, I am Captain David Gold of the Federation Starship da Vinci. It has been our pleasure to assist your people in reaching our space. On behalf of the United Federation of Planets, I welcome you in peace."

"Please accept our deepest thanks, Captain," Sicarios said. "I have already spoken with Science Minister Araneus, and he has told me of the great personal risk you took in coming to our aid. You have honored us with your bravery."

Gesturing to Faulwell to step forward next to him, Gold said, "Caliph, please permit me to introduce to you Bart Faulwell."

Faulwell made a small bow toward the screen. "Greetings, Caliph Sicarios."

"You are the one who recovered the lost Preserver key."

"Yes, Caliph."

"Koa owes its life to you," Sicarios said. "My people are forever in your debt."

"Please, Caliph," Faulwell said. "There is no debt. It was my duty to serve you in your hour of need. Because that is what friends do for one another."

A gentle murmur wound its way through the assembly of Koas dignitaries beneath Sicarios, who waggled its tentacles at them, apparently signaling for silence. "We are pleased to find that the tales we have heard of the Federation have not been exaggerated."

That attracted Gold's curiosity. "Tales, Caliph?"

"Yes, Captain," Sicarios said. "Though your Federation has only begun to reach out into the galaxy, your reputation far precedes you. Travelers speak of an egalitarian meritocracy, a coalition of worlds and peoples who band together by choice rather than by coercion. Some call it a utopian fantasy. Some see it as a threat to old ways and old ideas. But to some, the idea of your Federation...is the beginning of hope."

"No doubt you will find foes aplenty as you push deeper into the galaxy," Sicarios added, "but I suspect that you also will find more friends and allies than you expect."

"I hope you're right, Caliph," Gold said.

"Bart Faulwell, please accept our invitation to visit Koa as an honored guest. It is our wish to present you with our world's written petition for membership in your Federation, so that you may carry it in person to your government."

Looking embarrassed, Faulwell said, "I would be honored, Caliph, but such a task should belong to my captain."

Gold placed a hand on Faulwell's shoulder. "Faulwell, I think we can dispense with protocol in this case." Turning toward the screen, he added, "He'll beam down to join you shortly, Caliph."

"Thank you, Captain. Bart Faulwell, we look forward to meeting you."

"Likewise, Caliph."

The channel blinked off, returning the broad, gray-green curve of the planet to the main viewer.

Now it was Gold's turn to slap Faulwell's shoulder. "Well done, Faulwell."

"Thank you, Captain. Permission to go ashore, sir?"

"Granted. Report to the transporter room. Piotrowski--inform Chief Poynter that Faulwell will be beaming down to the Koas capital." Faulwell walked quickly to the turbolift as Piotrowski relayed the order. Gold settled back into his chair and admired Faulwell's handiwork on the main viewer.

A proximity alert chirped on the tactical console.

"Report," Gold said, swiveling his chair.

"One ship," Piotrowski said. "Silgov design, small. Looks like a long-range scout."

Gomez moved to the tactical station and looked over Piotrowski's shoulder. "Any sign of its friends?"

"Negative. It's--" Piotrowski looked up. "It's hailing us."

Gold turned back toward the main viewer. This should be interesting. "On-screen."

The Silgov woman was, by almost any human standard, eerily beautiful. Her rich, golden-brown skin was offset by a blue-black mane of intricately coiffed luxurious hair, which swept around her head like a swirling wave. Enormous, almond-shaped, jade-green eyes looked back at Gold with an expression that seemed almost innocent. If he didn't know better, he would have thought she was literally glowing with vitality.

He remembered one of his first lessons from the Academy: Appearances can be deceiving.

"Hail to you, da Vinci . I am Lady Maleiras, of the Silgov scout vessel Starlit Wing."

"Captain David Gold." After a moment of no one saying anything, he added, "What can I do for you?"

"I am here unofficially," she said. "My lord viceroy has not authorized the deal I am about to propose."

"Excuse me," Gold said, unable to restrain his ire. "Did you just say 'deal'? Weren't your people just shooting at me?"

Frustration tainted Maleiras's expression. "Please forgive us, Captain. Our fleet represents the last free members of our species. Our homeworld is enslaved, and Viceroy Narjam had hoped that the Koas's pyramid could be made into a weapon--one that we could use to free our people."

"It's not that I'm unsympathetic," Gold said, "but I think you can understand why I'm reluctant to trust you."

"Of course," Maleiras said. "Trust must be earned."

"That we can agree on," Gold said.

"My people must take the first step, but Viceroy Narjam will resist. Now that the Koas pyramid is no more, he will likely lead our fleet back toward home--to endless futile skirmishes and battles of attrition...unless I can convince him to ask the Federation for help."

"We still haven't solved our trust issue, Lady Maleiras. I don't think we're quite ready to discuss foreign aid."

"I'm certain you've noticed the speed of our vessels, Captain. Though our respective technologies might prove incompatible, I would be willing to permit your engineers to study my vessel while we meet in person--if you will permit my vessel to come aboard your own."

"You would let us study your ship? Without restriction?"



"That's what friends would do...is it not, Captain?"

Gold lifted an eyebrow. She monitored our conversation with the Koas, he realized. Maybe our reputation has preceded us once again. "And what do you ask in return?"

"A fresh start," she said. "And a chance to take the first step toward friendship, on behalf of my people. I believe that we can help each other, Captain. We might be able to aid your mission of exploration. And you could help set my people free."

Rubbing his chin thoughtfully, Gold said, "If we take this first step together, will Viceroy Narjam follow?"

Maleiras considered that for several long moments. "I will show him the way," she said finally. "And if he will not listen, I am certain the rest of my people will."

Gold weighed her words cautiously, balancing the risks against the rewards. Forging an alliance with a civilization in bondage could mire the Federation in a foreign conflict in which it didn't belong, but turning the Silgov away might be the same as imposing a death sentence on an innocent people.

He recalled Sicarios's words: To some, the idea of your Federation...is the beginning of hope.

"Lady Maleiras, we look forward to welcoming you aboard the da Vinci. Signal us for instructions when you're ready to land."

"Thank you, Captain. I look forward to our next step. Maleiras out."

The captain shushed his second-guessing inner voice. Certainly, he might be taking an unadvisable risk. Perhaps this "first step" would lead the Federation into a dead-end diplomatic fiasco, or into a prolonged and bloody quagmire. But Gold chose to be optimistic: If all went well, he would forge two new alliances for the Federation today.

That would be a good day's work, indeed.

#### About the Author

DAVID MACK is a writer whose work spans multiple media. With writing partner John J. Ordovery, he cowrote the Star Trek: Deep Space Nine episode "Starship Down" and the story treatment for the DS9 episode "It's Only a Paper Moon." Mack and Ordovery also penned the four-issue Star Trek: Deep Space Nine / Star Trek: The Next Generation crossover comic-book miniseries *Divided We Fall* for WildStorm Comics. With Keith R.A. DeCandido, Mack cowrote the Star Trek: S.C.E. eBook novella *Invincible*, currently available in paperback as part of the collection *Star Trek: S.C.E. Book 2: Miracle Workers*. Mack also has made behind-the-scenes contributions to several Star Trek CD-ROM products.

Mack's solo writing for Star Trek includes the *Star Trek: New Frontier Minipedia*, the trade paperback *The Starfleet Survival Guide*, and the best-selling, critically acclaimed two-part eBook novel *Star Trek: S.C.E.: Wildfire* (reprinted in the paperback compilation *Star Trek: S.C.E. Book 6: Wildfire*). His other Star Trek credits include "Waiting for G'Doh, or, How I Learned to Stop Moving and Hate People," a short story for the *Star Trek: New Frontier*

anthology No Limits, edited by Peter David; S.C.E. eBook #40: Failsafe; the short story "Twilight's Wrath," for the anthology Tales of the Dominion War, edited by Keith R.A. DeCandido; and the Next Generation duology A Time to Kill and A Time to Heal. He currently is working on an original novel and developing new Star Trek book ideas, including the first volume of a new series, Star Trek: Vanguard.

A graduate of NYU's renowned film school, Mack has been to every Rush concert tour since 1982. He currently resides in New York City with his wife, Kara.