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MALEFICTORUM

Terri Osborne



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Historian's Note

This story takes place after *Ferenginar: Satisfaction is Not Guaranteed* in *Worlds of Star Trek: Deep Space Nine Volume 3*.

Dedication

For my grandfather, Charles Edward Hazned, Senior, and for my little buddy Mitters. Take care of each other.

Chapter

1

The first thing Lieutenant Commander Domenica Corsi did when the mess hall doors opened was drop to the deck on one knee.

The second thing she did was draw her phaser.

Before she could figure out exactly what had flown through the doors at eye level, it changed shape, morphing until a winged yellow ball about the size of her head floated in the air before her, complete with a strange, almost cartoonlike smiling face on its surface. The idea of Dominion incursion crossed her mind, but she quickly dismissed it.

It wasn't their style.

Why do I have a feeling Fabe's got something to do with this?

"Sorry, Dom," Fabian Stevens's contrite voice said from behind her. "It kind of got away from me there."

I like him, but I swear I'm going to have to kill him.

She holstered her phaser. "Kind of?" Brushing back a strand of blond hair, she turned on him, fully prepared to read him the riot act for losing a dangerous device on her ship. He, of all people, should have known better.

She stopped cold at the sight of an elaborate contraption sitting on top of his head. Black goggles rested on his forehead, with red, yellow, and blue leads running back to oddly shaped earpieces. Tiny red lights at the edges of the goggles' faceplate suggested that the device was still working. The only thing missing was a laser, but she was sure he probably had one in there somewhere. To her, it looked more like a truly unfortunate attempt at a Borg disguise than anything else. Corsi gestured at the contraption. "Whatis on your head?"

A Cheshire-cat smile spread across Fabian Stevens's face, and a mischievous glint she knew all too well lit his brown eyes.

Why do I suddenly get the feeling I'm going to regret asking that?

"A little idea I had," he said, gesturing with gloves that were covered in the same red, yellow, and blue leads. "I was reading over some of the reports from ProjectVoyager. Do you know they've got a mobile emitter for their EMH? Then I remembered this report about an experimental control interface that Commander La Forge tried out a few years ago. It plugged right into the implants for this VISOR unit that the commander used to have. Ended up acting almost like an old-fashioned virtual reality unit, but this actually allowed him to control an experimental probe. He was able to guide it through the upper levels of a gas giant with this interface and directly interpret the data. Okay, yeah, the research was abandoned when the war broke out, but it's still a useful concept. Of course, I had to completely redesign it to work on someone that had no sensory implants, but it occurred to me that if we could combine those two ideas, we'd have—"

"Something with some very interesting possible uses," Corsi interjected. Her mind began to work over the various potential options, and liked what it saw.

Stevens nodded, his voice taking on that tone that she had long since learned to associate with engineers when they were on a roll. "Took me a while to figure out how the mobile emitter worked, and I'm still not sure I managed to get everything. I mean, come on, reverse-engineering technology from the future? I love a challenge, but according to their reports, this thing's got twenty-ninth-century technology built into it, andVoyager's engineer has a very weird way of keeping her notes. It wasn't easy, but I finally figured it out. Adding antigrav circuitry would make it too bulky to be practical. Wait a minute." The look in his eyes told her he'd had an idea. He walked back into the mess hall, placing the headset goggles on the table beside him and taking off a pair of gloves as he sat and began working on a padd. Surprisingly, his short dark hair wasn't mussed from the headgear. Neat trick.

"Fabe? Why aren't you working on this in the hololab?"

"Had to eat sometime," he said with a shrug, as though there were any other answer.

She turned back toward the flying yellow ball, which was still staring at her with that inane, childlike grin. The idea certainly had a lot of potential, she couldn't deny that. A mobile hologram that they could control from the bridge of the *Vinci*—that could look like anything or anyone—was nothing short of tactical genius. Holograms as distractions were easy, child's play, even, but a hologram that could take an active offensive stance was something else.

Then there were the intelligence-gathering possibilities. The old saying "If I could only be a fly on the wall for that meeting" would take on a whole new meaning. It would almost be like having a Dominion shape-shifter working on their side. Starfleet Intelligence would probably love to get their hands on something like this.

"Can this thing project something that can carry a weapon, too?"

The only answer Corsi got was the chirp of her combadge. "Commander Corsi?" She'd never heard fear in quite that manner; it filled Ken Caitano's voice.

"Caitano? What is it?"

Silence answered.

"Caitano?"

A rock began to form in the pit of her stomach. Caitano was third-generation Starfleet, with commendations for valor during the Dominion War. It had only been two days ago that he'd saved the ship during the fight with the *Silgov*. The idea that something had struck him with that level of fear didn't set well. "Computer, location of Crewman Caitano."

"Crewman Caitano is in his quarters."

Unable to dismiss the sense of urgency that was crawling up her spine, she hit her combadge, "Corsi to Hawkins. Something's wrong. Meet me at Caitano and Deverick's quarters."

Closing that connection, she then said, "Corsi to Poynter, emergency site-to-site transport. Deck four, section nine."

She materialized a few meters down the corridor from the room, taking off at a sprint toward the door. When she got there, she buzzed the door. There was no answer.

"Computer, security override. Priority one. Access code Corsi Gamma Three Two Two."

The door slid aside to a brightly lit room. "Caitano?" she called.

She heard the turbolift doors slide open down the hall. Vance Hawkins, Lauoc Soan, and Rennan Konya walked toward her, concern in Hawkins's dark features.

"No answer at the door," she said. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Hand on her phaser, Corsi followed Hawkins through the door and into the quarters' small sitting room. Caitano and Deverick had somehow managed to luck into one of the two-room quarters that had been added during the ship's refit, so it wasn't until she reached the bedroom that she saw it. Caitano lay

facedown on the floor, a trail of dark blood working its way from his ear down the left side of his face. She reached down and checked his neck for a pulse.

Nothing.

No.

Her fingertips registered one very faint beat.

She hit her combadge hard enough that it was sure to leave a bruise. “Corsi to sickbay, incoming wounded. Medical emergency. Poynter, beam Caitano directly to sickbay and then don’t let anyone use it without letting me know.” She’d have to get permission to lock the transporters down, but that would do for the moment. “Konya, go down there, too. If he so much as breathes a word, I want to know about it. Use the security channel.”

Laura Poynter was nothing if not prompt. Before Corsi could finish talking, the shimmer of the transporter formed around Caitano’s body and he disappeared, leaving behind a tiny patch of blood-soaked carpet. The Betazoid Konya was already out the door.

“Lauoc, set up in the corridor. Not even Captain Gold gets in here without my permission, understood?”

“Yes, sir,” the diminutive Bajoran replied.

While Hawkins worked on getting a set of holographic pictures of the scene, she walked back to the archway and stood between the bedroom and the small sitting room. What she needed at that moment was a single visual sweep.

The layout of the place was typical of the general redesign for two-person crew quarters that the ship had received after its near-destruction at Galvan VI—sure, she’d seen smaller apartments on Earth, but this was still more livable than some of the ships Corsi had been on in her day. The bedroom had two beds that had been fixed into opposite corners from the archway. Caitano’s was to her right, against the room’s exterior wall. Deverick’s bed sat in much the same position, but against the interior wall. Each bed had an accompanying nightstand, and a narrow shelf for personal effects ran down the length of both the interior and exterior walls. The shelf near Deverick’s bed held two small starship models. In what space he had between the shelf and the room’s window, Caitano had placed scattered pictures, a couple of padds, knickknacks, and something else. “Is that what I think it is?” she asked, pointing toward the shelf.

Hawkins followed her finger, getting an image of the shelf while he was at it. Both black eyebrows raised. “Looks like a bar of gold-pressed latinum,” he said. “Wonder how he got that?”

“He has a weird fascination for the Ferengi markets,” Corsi said. “Wong was talking to him about it the other day in the mess hall. One of his stocks probably did well. What I wonder is what the hell he thinks putting it on display like that is going to get him.”

“Maybe we should ask Deverick?”

Corsi made a mental note to do just that while she inspected the rest of the shelf’s contents. She recognized the friendly eyes, long face, and aquiline nose of Caitano’s father in three framed pictures that were perched near the head of the bed. One looked like a snapshot from the younger man’s graduation. His father’s arm was wrapped around his shoulder, and both generations looked as though it were the

happiest day of their lives. An older woman with features similar to, but more robust than, the younger Caitano's—Corsi automatically presumed she was his mother, although she'd only ever met the professor and his son—was on his other side. She hoped Dr. Lense could work one of her miracles and keep Caitano alive. She didn't like the idea of having to inform his parents.

Forcing her attention back to where the body had fallen, something struck her as odd. "How'd he call for help?"

"Huh?"

She turned toward Hawkins. "He called me for help. Something scared him."

"Intruder?"

Corsi shook her head and gestured toward the overturned glass about ten centimeters from where Caitano's head had been. "Do you see any sign of a struggle? The glass isn't even broken." She ran her tricorder over it. "And according to these readings, all that was in it was water."

Her immediate suspicion was that he might have stumbled and fallen on something, but when she looked around the foot of the bed, there was nothing that could have served as such an impediment. No slippers of any sort were in the room. When they checked the closets near the bathroom, they found that his shoes were arranged in an orderly manner on the floor. The sheet and blanket were folded back on the bed in a nice, almost too-neat manner. Two other pads sat on the bed, apparently put aside when he'd gotten up to get the glass of water. She couldn't see anything that he might have tripped over. She even knelt down and checked under the bed. It, too, was empty. He couldn't have tripped over his own two feet, could he? It still doesn't explain what scared him like that.

"What do you think, boss?" Hawkins asked from the other room.

Corsi shook her head as she stood. "It looks like he was reading, got up to get a glass of water, and then collapsed when he came back to bed. I don't think he was close enough to the table to hit his head." She leaned down, taking a closer look at the bed stand. Running her tricorder over it just to be sure, she said, "I don't see blood or signs of impact. If it wasn't a fall, what was it? What scared him?"

Could he have had an aneurysm? Could an aneurysm actually bleed out through the ear like that? Something's not right here.

Corsi stood and pulled out her tricorder. "Have Konya pull all the footage from the security cameras in this area. I'm going to need your help pulling a DNA trace off of everything."

Hawkins nodded. "Got it."

She tapped her combadge, not wanting to give the news she was about to give, and wishing she had more to explain it than instinct. Protocols were protocols, however. "Computer, access security channel one. Security to the bridge."

Commander Sonya Gomez, the *Vinci*'s first officer and head of the S.C.E. contingent stationed on the ship, responded. "Yes, Commander?"

"I'd like to put a lockdown on the transporters, Commander."

She could hear the confusion in Gomez's voice. "Why?"

"Caitano has been taken to sickbay. I have reason to believe he might have been attacked."

"Attacked? What makes you say that?"

Corsi's lips pursed. "I don't see anything that makes me think it was a suicide attempt, and there are no signs of an accident. He called me for help. Unless the doctor tells me a medical condition could have done this, I don't see any another option."

After a long pause, Gomez said, "Transporters are disabled. Any suspects?"

"None yet, but we're really just getting started down here."

"I'll let the captain know. Any word on recovery?"

Before she could open her mouth to say that she didn't know, Hawkins stuck his head through the bedroom archway. His dark skin had an ashen tone, and dread was in his eyes. "Dr. Lense just said he was DOA. She's starting the autopsy now."

Corsi's head fell forward. She swallowed hard, trying to force the emotion out of her voice. "Yes, Commander. I was just informed that he was dead on arrival."

After a long pause, Gomez said, "I'm sorry, Domenica."

Corsi's voice hardened. "I'm going to start an equivocal reconstruction, Commander. Until I see evidence to convince me it isn't, we're treating this as a homicide."

Chapter

2

Corsi reached back and pulled her blond hair into a tighter chignon. Professional, must keep it professional. It doesn't matter that your old mentor's son died on your ship.

Keep telling yourself that, Core-Breach, and you might believe it.

"Connection established. Channel secured."

The sharp eyes of Professor Agosto Caitano stared at her from the viewscreen. There were a few more lines in his face, and there was more salt in his salt-and-pepper hair, but he still looked as distinguished as she remembered. "Domenica? Is something wrong?" he asked, his usually convivial voice taking a more cautious tone. "They pulled me out of a class."

"I'm sorry, Professor," she began, schooling her features to be as emotionless as she could manage. "There's been an incident here that concerns Ken."

A grim smile crossed the elder Caitano's face. "You sound like some of his teachers in grade school. What happened?"

Corsi licked her lips. No words came to her that would make this any easier. “Professor, sir, I’m not sure how to tell you this other than to just tell you. I’m very sorry to have to say this, but Ken has died.”

The professor’s face fell. He took a few deep breaths. Finally, in a shaky voice, he said, “What happened?”

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that right now. The investigation is still at the classified stage.”

He slowly nodded. “I—I understand. If someone did this to him, you’ll find him. I know you will.”

I hope so, sir. Somehow, she managed to say, “I’ll do my best,” instead. “Professor, I hate to say it, but while I’ve got you on the comm, I’d like to ask you a couple of questions, if I may.”

“Anything I can do to help.”

“We don’t have any concrete proof that he was attacked, but I have to investigate that possibility all the same.” She took a deep breath of her own. “Is there anything that’s happened recently that might have made someone want to get back at you or Ken for any reason? Someone who might have killed him as revenge?”

His eyes went distant for a few seconds, and then snapped back. “I don’t know of anyone, Domenica. The last few months have been nothing but classes and remodeling our house. It has all gone smoothly. I’ll talk to Angelina. If she knows anything that might help—”

“Thank you, Professor. As soon as I can tell you what happened, I will.”

* * *

“Computer, initiate program Corsi Twenty-two.”

“Program initiated. You may enter when ready.”

The hololab doors slid open on Caitano and Deverick’s quarters, precisely as they’d been when Hawkins had taken the crime scene images just a day before.

Okay, Corsi, time to figure out what you missed.

“Now, access all log files from the crew quarters. Go back twenty-four hours. Replicator logs, personal logs, entry/exit logs, medical logs, whatever is available. Correlate those and extrapolate a re-creation of the events that transpired in this cabin. Begin with Caitano returning from his duty shift yesterday.”

“Accessing.”

While it worked, she took the time to further inspect the scene. As there was no actual evidence to contaminate, she picked up the bar of gold-pressed latinum and turned it over in her hands. As latinum was a liquid in its natural state, it was usually encased in gold whenever it was used in commerce. Her eye went over every curve, every recess of the ornately sculpted gold casing, looking for the maker’s mark—that one signature that would tell her where the bar was manufactured.

Where is it?

That alone was suspicious. No maker's mark usually meant one of two things: either it had been stolen, and the mark filed off to keep it from being traced, or it was counterfeit.

And counterfeit bars of gold-pressed latinum were few and far between. How could Caitano have come across it?

"Corsi to Hawkins," she said, tapping her combadge.

"Yes, Commander?"

"I want some more scans done on the bar of latinum. I've got reason to believe it might be counterfeit."

"Will do. Anything else?"

"Not yet, Corsi out."

What's taking the computer so long to correlate that information?

As though it had read her mind, the computer finally said, "Extrapolated sequence of events is not comprehensive."

She looked around the room once again. It was time to test a theory. "That's okay. Computer, run program."

The room's virtual doors slid aside, and Caitano walked through. There were no signs of a holographic representation of Deverick. Not surprising, considering that he had been on his way to his duty shift at the time.

Caitano walked over to the replicator and put in his request for dinner, instructing the machine to wait thirty minutes before executing. He then proceeded to walk toward the small doorway to the bathroom. It slid closed behind him. After a few moments of silence, the sonic shower began running.

Okay, we checked the sonic shower for malfunction. Nothing. The autopsy report said there was indication of brain tissue in the blood. Lense thought something ruptured his eardrums, and then vibrated his brain to the point of resonance. If it wasn't the sonic shower, what was it?

"Computer, speed up re-creation to twice normal speed."

"Working."

The shower stopped, and the holographic Caitano walked at an almost comical pace out of the bathroom and over to the replicator. He ate dinner, then went into the bedroom and changed into the bedclothes he'd been found wearing. The computer must have used the autopsy report and figured he pulled out the bedclothes when he opened the drawer.

He reached over, grabbed a padd from his shelf, and began thumbing through the contents. That looks like the one that had the Ferengi business journals on it.

But, if it's coming up in the log, that means the padd accessed the computer for an update at one point.

He put that padd down and grabbed a second, putting a pillow between his back and the wall as he

settled in to read. She watched as his eyes scanned each page, until he finally began rubbing his right temple.

That one looks like the padd that had the novel on it.

“Computer, resume normal speed,” she said, watching like a hawk for any indication of what might have caused the vibration in his brain. She couldn’t hear or see anything unusual.

That was when he put the padd down, folded the covers back and got out of bed. He walked into the living room, and went right to the replicator. “Two aspirins and water,” he said. Strain was obvious in his voice.

Aspirin? Why not just get something from sickbay?

He gulped down the pills, and lifted the glass to his lips. Slowly, he walked back toward the bed. When he was even with the foot of the bed, he fell to his knees. The glass slipped from his hand.

“Need help,” he whispered. His voice was growing weak as he said, “Commander Corsi?”

How did the computer know he was trying to reach me and not thinking out loud?

She heard her own voice saying, “Caitano? What is it?”

He fell to the floor. From her vantage point at the foot of Deverick’s bed, she could see a faint trickle of blood begin to form at his ear.

“Caitano?”

Knowing that he’d lost the battle had been one thing, but the thought that he might have lost it while she was talking to him tore at her insides. She hadn’t seen or heard anything out of the ordinary before Caitano got up to get the aspirin. Corsi tried to force that feeling into a corner to deal with later, realizing that even being able to see it happen, she still wasn’t sure what caused the death.

Chapter 3

“How’s it going, boss?” Vance Hawkins said as he walked into the security office.

Corsi barely looked up from the readouts on her viewscreen. “Not good. The re-creation gave me a couple of leads, but nothing that looks like it could have caused the vibrations that Lense thinks happened.”

Hawkins slid into the chair opposite Corsi’s narrow desk. “You’re kidding.”

Shaking her head, she said, “He had a headache, got up, ordered aspirin from the replicator, and collapsed on the way back to his bed. It’s like something that nobody could hear or see caused his brain to start shaking and then burst about a thousand blood vessels at the same time. Our illustrious CMO has never even heard of something like that happening before, let alone seen it. Please tell me you had better luck.”

Hawkins's dark fingers ran over the padd in his hand. "You were right. The latinum was a counterfeit, but the scans of the two padds on the bed show thatt they're both standard-issue. As for the DNA traces, both padds had traces we couldn't localize."

That was unusual. There were only two ways that a DNA trace wouldn't be identifiable. One would be if it were from a species that they hadn't catalogued yet. The other would be if the creature that left them had been wearing something that hampered its ability to leave traces, like wearing gloves to keep from leaving fingerprints had been in the days before it was discovered that some alien races didn't have fingerprints to leave behind. "What about the counterfeit latinum?"

"Besides human, there were traces of Ferengi, Cardassian, and Bajoran DNA. There were also three other traces that we couldn't match."

Corsi raised a blond eyebrow. "Three others?" Pressing the control to get a secure channel, she said, "Corsi to Lense."

"Yes, Domenica?"

"I'm sending Hawkins down to you with three pieces that we need examined. We've got DNA traces that aren't coming up in the database. I need to know if they're for new species, or if someone's trying to mask traces."

"Understood."

"Um, hi," a tentative voice said from behind Hawkins. "You wanted to see me, Commander?"

Signing off with Lense, Corsi saw Ted Deverick standing in her office doorway, his eyes riveted to the floor in front of his feet. His short, sandy blond hair was ruffled, as though he'd just gotten out of bed. He shifted his weight from one spindly leg to the other. She'd only seen him a couple of times since he'd come on board, but he'd looked better. "How're you doing, Deverick?" she asked, genuine concern in her voice. "Settling in to the new quarters?"

A bitter smile tried to work its way onto his face. "About as good as can be expected, I guess. Thank you for moving me."

"When was the last time you slept?" Hawkins asked. Corsi couldn't help but wonder if he'd also noticed the exhaustion in the young crewman's eyes.

"Night before last. I keep wondering if what got Ken was really meant for me."

That piqued Corsi's interest. She gestured for him to sit down. "Do either of you have any enemies who might try something like this?"

Deverick sank into the other chair that faced Corsi's desk. "Not that I know of," he said. "I mean, I knew Ken pretty well from theMusgrave, but we'd both only been there about a year when we got transferred."

"What about before the transfer? Did he take any vacations?"

Deverick shook his head. "Are you kidding? He was saving everything he could to retire on Risa. He

didn't leave the ship that often. I think the last time either one of us left before the transfer was an away mission near the Badlands. They actually found the Manning floating dead near a massive tachyon eddy. We got sent in on salvage."

Corsi and Hawkins exchanged a look. She remembered something in her history class about that being one of the first ships lost in the Badlands almost fifty years ago. Starfleet had always assumed that all hands had gone down with the ship. A derelict, however, brought in a whole new level of possible causes, up to and including possible influence by the aliens that lived in the Bajoran wormhole. "Nothing strange happened while you were in the Badlands? Did you see any signs that he might have been sick?"

"No, ma'am. Nothing," Deverick replied. "He was always making sure he was healthy. He went in for a checkup every six months, whether he needed to or not. He was in the gym every day. He always made sure he ate right. I bet he was probably in better shape than Captain Dayrit."

Corsi's lips pursed. That certainly jibed with what she'd learned from the files sent over from the Musgrave.

"Did he ever talk about anyone being mad at him? Someone who might have had a vendetta against him?"

Deverick shook his head.

Corsi cursed to herself. If there were no known enemies, and no foreign objects to point to, what was it?

Hawkins leaned forward. "Ted, did you ever touch his padds, or maybe his bar of latinum?"

The younger man's expression turned even graver. "He almost broke one of my ships once. After that, we agreed that he wouldn't touch anything of mine, and I wouldn't touch anything of his."

"Those ships mean a lot to you?" Corsi asked.

Deverick nodded. "I'm an engineer, Commander. Building and fixing ships is what I do. There's a model of the Constitution -class Defiant at home that I built when I was twelve. I built both the Grayson and the Commonwealth."

"The which?" Hawkins asked.

The young man turned sharp eyes on her deputy. "The two models in my quarters. They're old pre-Federation explorer ships." With a halfheartedly proud smile, he added, "My great-great-grandfather helped design the Grayson."

"You don't happen to know why he kept the bar of latinum on his shelf, do you?"

Deverick shook his head. "No, ma'am."

Corsi leaned back in her chair, sure this discussion was going nowhere. Deverick's file was about as empty as deep space—no reprimands, no warnings, nothing. She didn't even see a note for his and Caitano's bickering over the models. If it didn't get out of hand when his precious models were nearly broken, could Caitano have actually provoked him to an attack? Could he have done a time-delay attack so he might look innocent?

Ultimately, all she could do was sigh. Too many questions, and too few answers. “Hawkins, get the evidence down to Lense. And see what she has on the glass, okay?”

Chapter

4

As Corsi keyed the lock to her quarters, she was beginning to give a modicum of credence to the notion of a vast conspiracy by the universe in general to keep her from finding the murder weapon. She had finally settled on the three possible candidates, but no idea how it could have been done. None of the tests that had been run on either of the padds or the latinum showed any signs of something that could have caused vibrations in Caitano’s brain or a rupture in his eardrums.

As the door slid closed behind her, the corner of the wooden box that contained her family’s heirloom fire axe caught Corsi’s eye as it peeked out from beneath the bed. She couldn’t help but think it was almost taunting her, sticking its tongue out like a spoiled child.

She tried to look away from it, but it would only be a few seconds before it filled her vision once again. Taking a deep breath, she reached down and dragged the case from its usual home, sitting it on the foot of the bed so it could stare at her properly.

What would her father think? The last time she’d seen Aldo Corsi, they’d made some sort of peace, but she still wondered how stable that peace was in reality.

“Domenica? You okay?” Lense’s voice asked.

Corsi turned to find her roommate standing in the doorway, a level of concern in the doctor’s expression that she couldn’t recall seeing outside of sickbay.

“Yeah,” she said, her eyes going back to the axe. “I just need to know—”

“What killed Caitano?”

Corsi shook her head. “No. Well, yeah, eventually, but that’s not it.”

She heard Lense sit down, judging by the distance, on her own bed. “Then what is it?”

Corsi opened her mouth to speak, but for a few moments no words came. How could she explain it to Lense when she couldn’t even explain it to herself? Finally, she said, “I don’t know.”

“You need to know something, but you don’t know what that something is?”

Corsi pinched the bridge of her nose between her right index finger and thumb. “I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Try me,” Lense said. “I’m not a counselor, but...”

“I’d be dead about five times over now if you were,” Corsi said, an edge of sarcasm in her voice. She didn’t want to think about the way things might have gone over the years if theda Vinci had had a lesser

CMO. Elizabeth Lense had saved her life, as well as the lives of her staff, on more than one occasion. Corsi had long ago discovered that having such an accomplished medic on the ship made doing her own job that much easier. She didn't worry about bumps and bruises when she was on a mission, because she knew that Lense could fix just about any problem she might be able to come back with, so long as that problem wasn't someone being dead.

Lense sighed. "Okay, direct questions it is. How about telling me why you're staring at that axe like it's going to do a trick?"

"I'm getting tired of dead ends," Corsi reluctantly said. "I don't know any more about how he died than I did when I walked into his quarters. Well, I do, but it's not useful."

She could have sworn she heard the doctor laugh. She moved her eyes from the axe long enough to see a wry smile on her roommate's features. "What's so funny?"

"Domenica, in all of the time I've known you, I've never seen you run out of options."

Corsi raised an eyebrow. "Who said I'm out of options? I just tested every one I thought of already and have no likely scenarios. There wasn't any evidence that he tripped on anything. He didn't have a medical condition that would cause him to suddenly collapse. There weren't any incurable blood disorders involved. So why? How could he still have enough of his wits about him to clearly call for help before he died if his brain was coming apart?"

Lense shrugged. "Trust me, I'm just as frustrated as you are. His blood chemistry was otherwise perfectly normal."

"So, if he wasn't drugged, there wasn't a struggle, and he didn't trip, then what?" Corsi's stare returned to the ax.

Lense sighed, and then said, "What we need is a change of subject. Sometimes that helps me think. You know, you never did tell me what's so important about this thing."

"Huh?"

"What's so important about an axe? It seems pretty impersonal to be a family heirloom."

Corsi leaned back in her chair, reluctantly thankful for the change in subject. She had to admit, the doctor had a point. She'd only met two or three other people over the years who carried heirlooms with them, and those pieces had been things like ancient jewelry or quilts that had been made by their great-great-grandmothers back wherever home was.

"You're right," Corsi said, rubbing a hand over her face in an attempt to clear the mental cobwebs. "It was an ancestor of my father's. He was a firefighter back in New York at the start of the twenty-first century. He got killed in the line of duty during a terrorist attack on the city. Remember when the Breen attacked San Francisco during the war? From what I've read, it was like that."

A cloud crossed Lense's features.

Corsi winced. "Sorry. I forgot you've got family there."

"It's okay. Thankfully, I didn't lose anyone. Go on. What happened?"

“He was responding to the site of the attack when the building he was in came down around him. All that was left of him was what they could find back at his firehouse. They used to give a firefighter’s badge to next of kin, but his was never found. Yeah, it may not be the most personal family heirloom, but it’s all they could do at the time.”

The corners of Elizabeth Lense’s eyes pinched. After everything they’d been through in recent years, far more close calls than even Corsi cared to remember, she could only guess that the doctor was imagining the same thing she had from time to time—what Starfleet would give their next-of-kin.

“The terrorists used things people saw every day against them, so what their victims thought nothing of became weapons.”

They hid things inside everyday items...so standard security measures wouldn’t see them. Wait a minute. What if there’s something inside one of the padds? We would have spotted it on the scans, wouldn’t we?

Not if it had a masking signal.

Corsi’s eyes shot open. She was about to slap her combadge and contact Commander Gomez when a comm came through. “Hawkins to Corsi. We’ve got another body.”

Chapter 5

Corsi was really getting sick of the harsh, sharp smell of death forcing its way into her life. Deverick’s body stared up accusingly. She cursed to herself, convinced that she should have been able to stop this one. They had the padds in custody. How could one of them have gotten out?

Maybe it isn’t the padds after all?

The evidence, what little there was of it, was just as inconclusive as it had been for Caitano. No fibers out of place. No unusual dusts. Nothing remotely of use. The only major difference with the body seemed to be that this time, he’d ended up on his back instead of facedown. Corsi took little time pointing out a trail of blood that led from the victim’s ears. “From what you said you found in Caitano’s autopsy, looks like the same thing.”

“That would be a logical assumption,” Lense said from beside her. The doctor had followed her from their quarters the second the call from Hawkins had come in.

Lense pulled out her own tricorder and began scanning the body. “Creatine kinase levels are normal. Save for blood type, these readings are virtually identical to what I found on Caitano. It’s even picking up the same percentage of brain tissue in the blood.”

Corsi couldn’t believe her ears. “Identical? That shouldn’t be possible. There are too many variables involved for it to come out identical.”

Lense held out the tricorder, and Corsi immediately inspected the readings. The tricorder was only able to do a few of the exams, but a bare-bones toxicology reading, pathology scans, even scans of the blood trails from his ears, scan after scan, it was all the same. “At least now we’ve got a signature on the

murder weapon,” was all she could manage.

Corsi visually scanned the area around the body. It looked remarkably like the scenario she’d found Caitano in, only transposed to the new quarters’ sitting room: body on the floor near the sofa, glass of a clear liquid on the table near his head—she presumed it was water, but aimed her tricorder at it, just to be safe.

It was precisely as it appeared—water.

Damn. With the glass Caitano had, that’s about the only other consistency between the crime scenes.

She checked the closets and dressers, but came up empty. The replicators showed that he’d requested a homeopathic headache remedy. She called up the chemical composition that had been programmed into the replicator. Both the pattern on that and the one on the aspirin Caitano had called for checked out as having nothing added.

One detail jumped out at her, though. “Where’s the padd?”

“Padd?” Lense asked.

“Yeah. The padd. If what I was thinking before is right, it might be the key here.” As soon as Hawkins had scans of the room for the official record, Corsi began going over the room. Between a pillow and blanket on the sofa, she found the object of her search. “Here it is. Hawkins?”

“Yeah, Chief?”

“Get this to Commander Gomez. Run a DNA trace while you’re at it. I want to know what the difference is between this one and the ones we’ve got in custody.”

Hawkins nodded, and gingerly took the padd. “Anything else?”

That was when it struck her. “Yeah. Take a DNA trace on the glass. Compare it to the one from Caitano’s murder and standard replicator settings. Have the chemical compositions double-checked on both glasses. I want to make sure the replicators aren’t lying to us.”

“You got it,” Hawkins said.

“What are you thinking?” Lense asked.

Corsi tried to figure out an appropriate way to phrase the thoughts in her head. She gestured for Lense to follow her into the corridor. “Remember how I was saying that the terrorists used everyday things as weapons?”

The doctor nodded. A glimmer of understanding quickly followed. “You think whoever did this used something we wouldn’t notice?”

“That’s exactly what I think.”

“But, what is ‘it’? Domenica, I don’t know of anything that could do this kind of damage that isn’t something we could easily pick up on a simple scan. Whatever this is, it’s something new. The only drug I found in Caitano’s body was the aspirin, and so far I don’t see any difference here, either. I don’t think

whatever did this was delivered in the glass.”

Corsi slowly shook her head. “I’m not so sure, either. I’ve got a feeling it’s got something to do with the padds. So far, it’s the only other connection between the two deaths. We need to examine that padd.” Tapping her combadge, she said, “Corsi to Gomez.”

“Yes, Commander?”

“Has Mr. Hawkins reported to you yet?”

“He just got here. What’s up?”

She took a deep breath. “Doctor Lense and I need your help. Could you meet us in the hololab as soon as you have a chance?”

Chapter 6

The look on Sonya Gomez’s face couldn’t have been more incredulous. “Thepadd?”

Corsi sat the two padds recovered from Caitano’s bed, as well as the padd she’d found at Deverick’s crime scene, on the workbench between them. “Whoever did this is using our own equipment against us.”

“Our own equipment?”

Corsi tried to keep the frustration out of her voice. You’re the only one who’s taken counterterrorism training. Don’t forget that. “It’s an old terrorist ploy. If they use things that we take for granted, they can plant the bomb in the center of town and nobody will give it a second look.” She pointed at one of Caitano’s padds. “Commander, Hawkins scanned this one three times and found nothing unusual about it. I even scanned it once, myself, but it was the same reading. If I’m right, somebody wants it that way.”

Gomez picked up the device and began giving it a closer inspection. She retrieved a sonic screwdriver from the nearest tool kit. Grabbing the unit that had the novel Caitano had been reading, she got to work. Her eyes widened when she cracked the padd’s case open on two bits of electronics that obviously hadn’t been part of the padd’s original design. “How’d the scanners miss this much tampering? That’s got to be the smallest emitter array I’ve ever seen. That looks almost like an acoustic amplifier. Bounce the acoustic signal off of this, and you can focus it like a phaser beam. You know, I’ll bet that’s designed to fool any scanner into thinking the padd’s just a plain, off-the-shelf unit,” Gomez said in the same tone that Corsi had heard from Stevens—she was rolling, and nobody with any sense should interrupt. “I wonder what the other thing’s for.” Her voice trailed off as she resumed staring down into the guts of the altered padd. She stared intently at the small piece of obsidian circuitry that sat beside the emitter. “Have you told Captain Gold yet?” she muttered.

Corsi shook her head. “There was nothing new to report until now. How long before you think you’ll know what the other emitter does?”

Gomez shrugged. “Don’t know. A day, maybe? Caitano got this on Deep Space 9, right?”

Corsi nodded. “Best we can tell. I’m already working on the message for Captain Kira and Lieutenant Ro. If my hunch is right—”

* * *

“Yeah, a padd with that novel on it came through Quark’s place last month,” Ro Laren said, her brow furrowing into ridges that matched those on the bridge of her Bajoran nose. “He told me it was some bestseller in the Gamma Quadrant.”

“That’s their cover story,” Corsi replied. “The crew here believes it was designed to pass scanner detection, because we’d never think to look at a padd. Who’d tamper with that?”

Ro shook her head. “I know it’s probably not worth much, Commander, but we should have thought to look at it more closely. At least half of the grandfathered militia members were in the resistance. The odds are good somebody tried a stunt like this once.”

Corsi leaned back in her office chair, staring at Deep Space 9’s security chief. Dark eyes that had seemed pretty happy when they’d begun the conversation now looked haunted—the eyes of someone who was going to be feeling some serious guilt when the conversation ended. Corsi couldn’t say as she blamed her, really. In her shoes, she probably would have felt the same. If she didn’t figure out who used the padds to kill Caitano and Deverick, she was pretty damned sure she’d feel the same.

“Do you know if he has a paper trail on the device?” Corsi asked.

Ro shook her head again. “No, but I will by the time you arrive. I suppose you’ll want to talk to Quark about it?”

Corsi thought about that for a moment. She would definitely have to question the Ferengi on the transaction, but something as simple as Bajor’s recently finalized Federation membership would throw more than just a spanner into the works. Quark’s Bar had become the Ferengi embassy. She realized with a depressing turn of her stomach that this would require questioning an ambassador, possibly even in his own embassy where he could pretty much call all of the shots.

Her lips pursed. She didn’t like that one bit.

“We may want to get him out of the bar to do it,” Corsi said. “Questioning him inside the embassy could raise all kinds of diplomatic problems.”

Ro’s eyes rolled. “Especially since he also happens to be the brother of the Grand Nagus. What a time for fatherhood to make Rom grow a spine.”

Corsi shook her head. “From what Nog said, he’s always been protective of Quark.”

The ends of Ro’s lips turned up. “That protection works both ways. Those two have been to hell and back together. He held the guns on a couple of Jem’Hadar guards to get Rom out of jail during the Dominion occupation. Who knows what Rom might do in return? Although, I just don’t see Rom going ballistic.”

A thin smile spread across Corsi’s face as she thought of something. “On second thought, a little ‘interview’ in the bar might prove handy. He won’t want to cause a scene in front of the customers.”

“True,” Ro replied, one dark eyebrow raised. “Bad for business.”

“Let me work on a strategy here,” Corsi said. “We’ll be there in about another day.”

Chapter

7

“Commander Corsi, do you have a moment?”

Corsi looked up from Gomez’s latest report on the padds with weary eyes. Standing in the doorway to her office was P8 Blue, the ship’s pill-bug-shaped Nasat structural engineer. “Pattie,” as she had come to be known, held out a padd in one clawed hand. “Captain Gold said that you are looking at the padds that had been owned by or come in contact with Caitano or Deverick?”

“Yeah, why do you ask?”

Pattie reached forward, placing the padd on the desk. “Caitano donated a copy of a novel to the ship’s library and then checked it out to my padd. He thought I might enjoy it.”

“Did you?”

Pattie held out her arms. If she’d had visible shoulders, Corsi suspected Pattie would have shrugged. “The translation from its native language was rough at best. I am sure if the translation had not been required, it might have worked better. It isn’t a bad story, kind of fun, actually. But as it is, I don’t believe it would be nearly as successful in the Alpha Quadrant as Caitano thought.”

Wait a minute. Corsi’s overworked brain stopped in its tracks. If he uploaded it before he read it, he wouldn’t have known something was up. “Computer, pull up the contents of the ship’s fiction library, sort by date of donation. Route the results to my viewscreen.”

“Working.”

Her screen flickered, and was quickly filled with a listing of most of the major fiction works the Alpha Quadrant’s authors had to offer. The most recent donation, however, was from Caitano. The same title had been on the padd they’d recovered from the sofa when Deverick died, and the padd that Caitano had been reading when he died. “Computer, give me the details on the book titled Tafock Navar Relal.”

“Donated by Crewman Kenneth Caitano. Author: Unknown. Genre: Suspense fiction.”

“Author unknown? If it was a Gamma Quadrant bestseller, why didn’t he know who the author was?” Corsi looked up at Pattie. “Did you really read this?”

“Yes,” the Nasat replied, concern edging her voice. “Is that a problem, Commander?”

“Well,” Corsi said dryly, “you’re still alive.”

A tinkling that Corsi had come to know as nervous laughter came from Pattie. “Very funny, Commander.”

“I’m serious. I don’t know why I didn’t see it before now, but both Caitano and Deverick had this file on the padds that were near them when they died. Computer, did anyone else check this file out besides P8 Blue?”

“Crewman Theodore Deverick.”

Corsi let out a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding. “Computer, this file is a security risk. Put it under Security Quarantine Alpha. Access only to myself, Chief Petty Officer Hawkins, Commander Gomez, and Captain Gold.”

As soon as the computer confirmed the quarantine, she pressed the comm button on her desk. “Corsi to Gomez.”

“Yes, Commander?”

“Are you still in the hololab? We’ve got a new lead.”

Chapter 8

“How’re we doing?” Captain David Gold said as he strode through the doors into the hololab. He made his way around the two unused workbenches and over to the one where Gomez had more small tools than Corsi had ever seen scattered across the surface. Even though he only came up to Corsi’s nose, Corsi knew better than to dodge anything with him. She’d trust the man with her life if it came down to it, and on occasion it had. It wasn’t anything she’d ever admit to anyone, but there were times when she hoped to have that sharp a mind when she was old enough to have great-grandchildren.

Provided I survive this and live long enough to have children. I didn’t just have that thought.

Shaking it off, she said, “We believe we may finally have the murder weapon, and it’s a mean one.”

That seemed to pique Gold’s interest. One gray eyebrow rose. “Really? What have you got?”

“The padd,” Gomez said, pulling herself out of the hunched position she’d been in for the last several minutes. “There’s an emitter array that lets the thing pass scanner detection. We’d have had to crack the thing open to know it had been altered.”

“So, what does it do when it passes detection?”

Gomez brushed a strand of black hair out of her face, using the needlelike probe in her hand to point at the complex bit of circuitry that sat beside the emitter array. “See this? It’s designed to learn the species of whoever is holding the padd. We’re still trying to figure out exactly how it interacts, but we know it works with something else in the padd’s programming. To the best I’ve been able to determine, it’s set to generate different results for each species. I’ve got a feeling that those results modulate the frequency of the sound that it produces, but I haven’t been able to prove it yet. This piece here allows it to be focused.”

“A focused beam of sound?” Gold asked. “I thought those were weapons that were left behind centuries ago?”

Corsi shook her head. “They were developed about four hundred years ago, sir, but they’re still no less effective than a sword or a knife.”

Gomez pressed a touchpad, and the monitor to her left flickered to life. Line after line of text scrolled by. “Wow.”

“What?” Gold and Corsi asked in unison.

Gomez held up one long finger. “Give me a second.” She reached over and pressed a control that slowed the scrolling. “Those results that the other array generates? It looks like they do control another program on the padd.”

Corsi leaned over Gomez’s shoulder, trying to read the lines of gibberish that were scrolling by on the monitor. “How can you tell?”

Gomez pointed at a line on the screen. “I can’t read the exact language, but these look like very basic ‘if-then’ subroutine structures. Look at this—” The engineer’s fingers ran over several lines of programming, all of which held an identical character structure.

“You’re right,” Corsi said. “That line’s in each subroutine. Should we call Faulwell to see what the characters mean?” As the resident linguist, Bart Faulwell loved alien languages. Corsi wasn’t sure she wanted to unleash this particular one on him, though. Anthony would kill me if Faulwell ended up dead.

“What about Soloman?” she asked. It wasn’t out of the question that the Bynar computer specialist might find something they couldn’t.

“That may not be a good idea, either,” Gomez said. “If he plugs into this programming, I’m not sure what it could do to him.”

“We already know what it does to humans,” Corsi said.

Gold wagged a finger at Corsi. “She’s got a point, Gomez. The last thing I need right now is to break in another first officer.”

Corsi shuddered at the thought of Mor glasch Tev as first officer, hoping the reaction had gone unnoticed. While she had no doubt that he hadn’t been involved in this—she was certain that he was arrogant enough to brag about how he’d developed the technology if he’d been even remotely involved—the thought of the irritating Tellarite being in a position of greater authority made her begin to seriously consider a transfer. In an effort to cover her reaction, she said, “But if it’s the extra equipment that actually does the damage, wouldn’t the array give it the pitch modulation?”

Gomez stared at the now-stagnant lines of programming on the monitor. After a few seconds, she dropped the small probe onto the table. “You may be right. I’m guessing the program only triggers the equipment. The problem is, all I really can do is guess.” Sonya reached up to tap her combadge, but Corsi stopped her.

“Wait a minute. Before we do this, we should open the other padds. If it needed this additional equipment to kill Caitano, how’d it kill Deverick? Both he and Pattie had copies of the file downloaded to their padds. Those came directly from Starfleet, not the Gamma Quadrant. How’d it kill Deverick if it didn’t have the extra equipment? For that matter, why is Pattie still alive?”

Gomez reached over and grabbed the padd that had been found on Deverick's sofa. "Let's find out." Once she cracked the case, Corsi was beginning to wish she hadn't. The same set of equipment stared at them from the inside of the case of Deverick's padd.

There's only one way I know of that that could work.

Gomez opened Pattie's padd.

Corsi stared, speechless, at the third padd. While she watched, a third tiny device was forming inside the padd's case.

"Nanites," Gomez whispered. "The original brought nanites with it so it can replicate. Pattie's probably alive because she finished the novel before the nanites finished the emitter in her padd." Her eyes widened as a thought struck. "Wait a minute. He uploaded it to the library? Computer, call up the cross section on computer core processor one-seven-six. I want to see element zero-one-hundred to zero-two-hundred. Route it to the monitor at this workbench."

The monitor in question flickered, and the image of what looked to Corsi to be a wounded circuit appeared. Tiny dots flickered over the damage like an infestation of ants.

"Is that what I think it is, Gomez?" Gold asked.

"Yes, sir. They're in the system," Gomez said, her tone hardening. "Captain, we had nanites infest the computer core when I was on the Enterprise. Problem was that then, they were sentient, so it tied our hands on how to deal with them. If we can prove that these nanites aren't sentient, it's a simple matter of using the gamma pulse generators on the computer core. Whoever programmed these things probably gave them a single-minded goal."

"Agreed," Corsi said, "it's not a good idea to let the creatures making your weapon work think for themselves. If they figured out what they were doing, they might not do their jobs."

Gold pulled a stool over from a nearby workbench. "So, if we start at the beginning, we need to figure out if they're intelligent. Can their programming tell us that?"

Gomez nodded. "To an extent. We can at least find out if there's any adaptability written into it." Grabbing a pair of microtweezers, she reached into Pattie's padd, and after a few seconds of poking around, lifted the closed tweezers out of the unit. "Computer, please place a microscanner on the table behind me."

The unit in question appeared on the workbench. Gomez turned around, placed the tweezer's contents on a watch glass and slipped it under the viewer. "Good, I got a few of them. Computer, can you extract the programming from the nanites on the slide and route it to my monitor?"

"Accessing."

The monitor that had held the image of the computer core flickered again, and then showed a stream of ones and zeroes. Gomez leaned forward. "Computer, translate the coding."

Midstream, the numbers became letters. Corsi shook her head. "I don't know what we're looking for here. Is it programmed to adapt, or not?"

After a few moments' silence, Gomez said, "No. It looks single-minded. From what I can see here, it looks like it's programmed to activate when it's first called, then seek out the power source and build its equipment off of that." She quickly took a small, sealable container and slipped the slide into it.

A bad thought picked that moment to appear at the back of Corsi's mind. "We should warn engineering, if these things decide to go for the warp core..."

Gomez did just that, and then went back to the monitor. "It looks like they're programmed to shut themselves down."

"So they're acting like computers executing their programs," Gold said with a shake of his head. "What about consciousness? Self-awareness?"

"If they were self-aware," Gomez began, "wouldn't they stay active when their job was done? If they've evolved outside their programming, then should a shutdown subroutine even engage?"

"Good question," Gold said. "If the programming tells it to die, and it listens to that programming, can it be self-aware?"

Gomez reached with the microtweezers into Caitano's padd and picked up something. She placed it onto another slide and stuck it on the microscanner. After a few seconds of observing them, she said, "These are inert. They've shut down."

Gold's expression grew serious. "Gomez, Corsi, do whatever you need to do to get these things off my ship."

"Yes, sir," Gomez and Corsi replied in unison.

"Gomez to Conlon, flood the computer core. Use the gamma pulse generators."

"Aye, Commander."

Closing that connection, she then tapped her combadge and said, "Gomez to Soloman."

"Yes, Commander?" the Bynar's typically flat voice asked.

"Could you join us in the hololab, please? We have a problem that could use your expertise."

"Of course, Commander. I'll be right there."

Before the captain could suggest it, Corsi quickly called sickbay to get a medic to the lab. An instinct she had long since learned to trust was screaming that something was going to go wrong.

"You said it generates different results for different species. Any idea on what triggers it?" Gold asked.

Corsi leaned against the workbench. "That's the big question."

The hololab doors slid aside with a soft whoosh, and the tiny Bynar walked in. He bowed his slightly oversized head toward Captain Gold. "Captain. You requested my assistance, Commander?"

“Yes, Soloman,” Gomez replied, a weary smile working its way onto her features. “What we know is that we’ve got a program in this padd looks like it’s calling on something else. We have an idea of what file it’s calling on, but we need your help to find out precisely what this thing’s designed to do.”

Soloman stepped over to the workbench. “Of course,” he said.

Gomez put a hand over the opened padd. “Be careful,” she said. “We’ve got evidence that this program is designed to be a weapon. There are nanites involved.”

The Bynar took a step back from the workbench. He turned wide eyes on Corsi. “Nanites? Do you believe this is what killed Caitano and Deverick?”

Corsi sighed. “We can’t guarantee it won’t do anything to you, too,” she said. “There’s a medical team coming. You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.”

Soloman’s eyes bounced between Corsi and Gomez for a long time. Finally, he took a long look at Captain Gold and nodded. “I’ll do it.”

“Well,” the captain began, “I’ll get out of your way. Let me know what you find out.”

“Will do, sir,” Gomez replied.

Almost as though on cue, the hololab doors opened for Elizabeth Lense. She quickly nodded to the captain as their paths crossed. Once the doors were closed behind him, she asked, “What’s up?” Her eyes went to Soloman. “Why do I have a feeling you’re about to do something stupid, and you’ve called me down for the inevitable moment when it all goes to hell?”

Corsi half-smiled. “Because you’ve been on this ship long enough to figure out how things always go?”

Gomez shot Corsi a look. “Because Soloman has agreed to help us figure out something that relates to the software on the padd.”

Placing a medkit on the table, Lense pulled out her tricorder and pointed it at the Bynar. “If he so much as twitches the wrong way, I’m putting a stop to this.”

Corsi watched carefully as Gomez turned the padd over to Soloman.

“This is the file we’re looking at,” Sonya said, using the probe to point to the right line on the monitor. “I can tell it’s calling something else in the file structure, but I can’t tell what it’s meant to do beyond that.”

Soloman nodded once. “I will determine that, Commander.”

Before any of the three women could get another word out, the high-pitched chatter of a Bynar communicating with a computer began. The lines on the monitor scrolled by faster than Corsi could keep up. Soloman’s reedlike fingers worked over the opened padd, moving with a speed that she wouldn’t have thought possible if she hadn’t seen it herself.

What felt like a few minutes later, the Bynar noticeably swayed. Lense and Gomez simultaneously reached forward, steadying his tiny body. Both his hands and the computer chatter stopped simultaneously.

“Thank you, Commander. I can tell you that it is designed to affect the display of a particular electronic file. I believe that file is entitled Tafock Navar Relal. It takes the readings from the padd’s added sensors and uses that to produce a focused ultraso—”

Soloman collapsed to the floor in a heap. Gomez looked down in shock as her hands held nothing but air. “Soloman?”

Lense’s tricorder kept running as she checked him over. Relief filled her voice as she said, “He’s okay. Looks like it overloaded part of his short-term memory. He’s going to have a pounding headache when he wakes up, but that I can treat.”

Corsi allowed herself to pay attention to what was on the monitor on the workbench. “He was in the middle of saying it generated something when he collapsed.

“I didn’t hear anything during the—“Ultrasonics?”

Gomez looked as though the light had gone off in her head at about the same time. “Sonic bullets. So hyperfocused that you don’t hear anything unless you’re the target, and if you’re the target. . .”

“It all depends on what result they want,” Corsi finished. “They can either give you a migraine, or turn your internal organs to goo. That works for humans; what about other species?”

“Different races react differently to different things,” Lense replied, looking up from her perch over Soloman’s still-prone body. “Whoever dreamed this thing up probably knew that. If it’s lethal to humans, I really don’t want to expose anyone else to it if I don’t have to.”

Gomez slid off her stool and walked over to a less-cluttered area of the lab. “Computer,” she said. “Access the medical database and prepare to generate test representations of the auditory and neural pathways of every Federation species.”

“Working.”

A small, featureless, roughly humanoid shape appeared in the corner. It was gray, and its surface was smooth, but Corsi could make out attempts at two arms, two legs, and a head. “What’s that?”

Gomez folded her arms across her chest. “It’s the base pattern that the computer is working from. I intend to test this thing to see every possible output.”

Chapter 9

Corsi strode into the dissonant cacophony that was Quark’s Bar both anticipating and dreading what she had to do. It looked just like she remembered it: bar full of people of many different species, dabo tables in full spin, drinks and food free-flowing—for a reasonable price, of course. The enormous yellow and orange Cardassian glasswork that she’d learned had always stood in the rear of the bar still glowed, lending its odd shading to the various complexions that filled the bar.

The crowd was just what she wanted. There was no way Quark would risk making a scene in front of so many customers. She’d never actually interrogated an ambassador before, but she had interrogated

Ferengi. Getting the slippery businessmen to divulge anything they didn't want to without offering monetary gain was usually just as difficult as it sounded.

No sooner was she through the door than a tall, lithe Orion female almost clothed in a diaphanous white dress whose hem barely passed her hips greeted her. An aroma of cinnamon followed, strong enough to plow its way through the general smell of the mass of people, as well as their respective dinners and drinks. Her flaming red hair was pulled up on her head, ornately braided strands dangling around her slender green neck. "Welcome to Quark's," she said, her voice perfectly balanced between loud enough to be heard over the gambling patrons and not loud enough to be yelling.

"Hello, Treir," Corsi said, matching her for volume. Judging by the woman's reaction, she hadn't expected the newcomer to know who she was. Corsi smiled. "One Hundred Ninety-fourth Rule of Acquisition. It's always good business to know your customers before they walk in the door."

The Orion frowned. "Let me guess. You're here to see Quark."

"Got it in one. If the ambassador isn't available, let him know he's interfering in a Starfleet investigation. His government might not like that too much."

Was that a snort of derision, or did one of the dabo tables give out? "That would require the ambassador liking his government. I take it you haven't heard—"

"About the problems he's had with the Grand Nagus? Or about the fact that the Grand Nagus's first clerk owes him a favor? Or are you talking about the fake Grisellan icons?"

One red eyebrow rose. "You're well-informed," she said, having the decency to sound surprised.

"Just knowing my customer."

Before Treir could say another word, the nearly slaving Ferengi ambassador appeared behind her. "Welcome to Quark's," he said, the tone in his voice far more of a "Can I show you my collection of Risean art?" than a real welcome. "It's always nice to have our Starfleet friends pay us a visit. Treir, has our guest asked for anything to drink?"

"No," the Orion said.

"Well, the couple at table three have. Could you take the order to them?"

Treir glared at the Ferengi before walking off.

"I'm here on business, Ambassador," Corsi said as she pulled Caitano's altered padd out of her shoulder bag. "Does this look familiar?"

The Ferengi's oversized lobes perked. "Business, you say? Well..."

She didn't like the way his voice had trailed off. "Look, we can do this the easy way, or we can do it the long, obnoxious, diplomatic red-tape way. Either way, it doesn't change the fact that I've got two dead bodies on my ship because of this thing."

Quark turned a shade of green that Corsi couldn't recall ever seeing in nature. "Two dead bodies?" he asked, his eyes widening.

Corsi forced herself not to smile. Quark's reputation preceded him by several parsecs, and he knew it. Fortunately, she knew that he knew it. If Ro Laren was right, the fact that Quark essentially acted as a fence in the trade of an illegal weapon would be enough to throw diplomatic relations between Ferenginar and the Federation into a tizzy. Add the deaths of two Federation citizens as a result of that trade, and Corsi didn't even want to think of the kind of problems Federation President Zite would give Grand Nagus Rom. Diplomatic immunity only extended so far.

Still, trafficking in weapons was something that Quark should have known better than to attempt. He already had one charge on his record, and Corsi figured there were probably far more instances that never made it to the filing stage.

A glimmer of dread seeped into the Ferengi's features. Corsi didn't have to turn around to figure out who must have been standing behind her. Everything was going precisely as they'd planned. "How are we doing, Quark?" The congeniality in Captain Kira's voice sounded forced. "I trust you're not giving our guest any trouble?"

"Captain," Quark said, his smooth tone firmly in place and accompanied by what Corsi suspected was an all-too-usual grin. "Of course not. As a representative of the Ferengi government, it would be—"

"Keep your lies consistent. Rule of Acquisition Number Sixty," Corsi said, raising one blond eyebrow. "I wouldn't expect anything less from the Ferengi ambassador."

"You know the Rules?" Kira asked, stepping up beside her. The Bajoran had her arms crossed over her chest, and her chin-length red hair blended with the command-track red on the neck of her uniform.

"It's a hobby," Corsi said with a shrug. "The ambassador was about to tell me where he obtained this particular piece of technology that he sold to one of my staff."

"That's a padd," Kira said, her voice flat. "Quark, what are you doing selling Federation technology?"

The Ferengi pointed one finger at them. "Ah, but that's a specially-modified reader, Captain, enhanced to allow all of the nuances and sensory input from a very special book to be experienced. It's extremely popular in the Gamma Quadrant. Aren't the modifications the property of the person who designed them?"

Corsi tried to resist the urge to slug him. Instead, she held out her clenched fist and opened it over the bar, showing him the sensors and emitters Gomez had removed from the device. "You want to give the designer of this thing back his property, then? You're telling me that you knew this thing had been modified; yet you sold it anyway? Did you bother to check to see what these little trinkets do? They're specifically designed to kill people." She took great pains to enunciate the last two words as though she were talking to a two-year-old. "We tested it. Whoever designed this thing doesn't care what species you are. It adjusts itself for every known species. You're playing right into the hands of whoever let this thing loose."

She could have sworn a bead of sweat formed on the Ferengi's oversized forehead. In the corner of her eye, she caught sight of a smile on Captain Kira's features.

Ro had mentioned that there was a certain amount of history between the captain and the bartender-turned-ambassador, but from the look on Kira's face, "history" didn't seem to quite cover it.

She was enjoying watching Quark squirm. “Where’d it come from, Quark?” Kira asked. “Don’t make me have to start an interstellar incident. You linked this thing to the station’s computers. Nog found nanites in the computer core. That makes it a danger to the station.”

Corsi could recognize a cue when she heard one. “A representative of the Ferengi government fencing weapons disguised as Federation technology? You’re in big trouble, Quark. Tell us who sold it to you, and maybe we’ll believe you didn’t know what you were doing when you resold it.”

The Ferengi’s eyes bounced back and forth between her and Kira. “I—I—I want to talk to Ro,” he said, furtively wringing his hands.

Corsi somehow managed not to roll her eyes. Of course he does.

Kira, however, took a step forward. In a tone that broached no question, she said, “Ro can’t help you on this one, Quark. Any investigation she does will be immediately suspect. She couldn’t possibly clear you without being accused of conspiracy. Two people have died because of what you sold. How many more, Quark?”

The Ferengi composed himself, staring her in the eyes. “Those people didn’t die from reading a book.”

“I’ve got a chief medical officer who would disagree with you on that,” Corsi said. “Where’d it come from?”

Quark’s eyes anxiously shot back and forth between Corsi and Kira.

“Quark... Ambassador,” Corsi began, “tell us where it came from, and the report the Federation Council reads will tell them you didn’t know what you were doing when you sold it.” She wasn’t sure if she could even make such a deal, but if it got the Ferengi to cooperate, he never needed to know that. “You can tell me who it is, or we can go through your records and find out ourselves.”

After a long moment in which Corsi began to believe he might make them get a warrant, Quark said, “It was a Wadi. That trader that came through here a couple of weeks ago. Tellow. He’s the one that sold it to me.”

Corsi smiled. Well, confirms the paper trail. Ro’s suspicion that this one wasn’t forged was right.

“They went back through the wormhole,” Kira said. “We should have their flight plan on file.”

“Wouldn’t happen to have a DNA sample, would you?” Corsi asked.

“I’ll check with Dr. Bashir. If we have anything, it’s yours.”

Chapter 10

“We’ll have a high-security cell ready when you get back. Are you sure you don’t want the Defiant’s backup, Captain?” Kira asked from the *Vinci*’s main viewscreen. “You’re not exactly a fighting vessel, and the *Defiant*’s got far more Gamma Quadrant experience.”

David Gold leaned back in his chair. “Thanks, Captain, but if what the ambassador told us is true, that would be like taking a howitzer into Casablanca. If you could keep her on standby in case I’m wrong, though...”

Corsi could see the confusion in Captain Kira’s eyes. The Bajoran opened her mouth to ask, but seemed to think better of it. “You’ve got it, Captain. I’ll have Commander Vaughn take care of it.”

Gold gave her a curt nod. “Thanks. We’ll see you when we get back.”

“Course laid in, sir,” Songmin Wong said, turning from his seat at conn.

The viewscreen image changed to the slowly receding docking ring of Deep Space 9. “Wong,” Gold began, “take us in.”

The ship sailed around the station, and made a bank toward an empty area of space. While Corsi watched, the swirling maelstrom of blue and white energy bursts that comprised the wormhole’s mouth flashed into existence, and the ship was dragged inside.

Corded strands of blue-white energy filled the viewscreen, slowly oscillating in time with the shaking the ship was experiencing. I don’t even want to think about a ride like this in Dad’s ship. The cargo would be liquefied by the time he got to the other side.

When the wormhole finally deposited them in the Gamma Quadrant, she allowed her hands to let go of the railing beside the tactical console. “How long before we reach the Kar-telos System?” she asked.

“Couple of days, Commander,” Wong replied.

Gold turned his chair toward Corsi. “Did the captain send us the Wadi DNA sample?”

Corsi nodded. “Lense is trying to see how it compares to the other trace she couldn’t identify.”

“Keep on it.”

* * *

Elizabeth Lense didn’t look happy. That could only have meant one thing.

“What did you find?” Corsi asked, fighting the urge to yawn. It had been twenty-eight hours since the discovery that enhanced sonic bullets had killed Caitano and Deverick, and Corsi hadn’t had a wink of sleep. It was as though her body’s clock had turned somersaults. When she was off duty, her brain wouldn’t shut down. It would keep trying to go over every little nuance of the evidence, flailing to see the answer to one question: Why? When Lense had contacted her in the security office, Corsi had been dangerously close to falling asleep at her desk.

“Well,” Lense began, pointing toward a display in her lab, “the Wadi DNA came up positive. It wasn’t the same person that gave the sample, but it was consistent. I’ve also managed to figure out what species the other DNA trace on Caitano’s padd might be from.”

Corsi closed her eyes, a well of dread forming in her stomach. “What?”

“Whoever did this masked themselves very well. I only got a partial trace, but there were chromosomes

present consistent with Vorta DNA.”

That was a word Corsi had hoped never to hear again. “Vorta?”

Lense nodded. “I can’t tell you which Vorta it is, but there are a couple of specific nucleotide sequences that we’ve only found in their DNA.”

“Okay,” Corsi began, “there aren’t any Vorta in the Alpha Quadrant that we can’t account for. Since the file that the nanites were attached to is supposedly a Gamma Quadrant bestseller, then could it be from anywhere else?”

Lense shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“Then where is the little Vorta hiding, and does he have any Jem’Hadar still loyal to him?” Corsi hit her combadge. “Computer, secure channel. Corsi to Captain Gold.”

After a few moments’ silence, presumably while he got to a private location to take the comm, Gold replied, “Yes, Commander?”

Corsi’s mind scrambled to try to think of a good way to put what she had to say. “Captain, we have a lead.”

“Good work, Corsi,” Gold replied. “Who?”

“Not quite, sir,” Lense said. “More like a ‘which species.’ I found masked traces of Vorta DNA on the padd.”

“Vorta?” Gold’s voice tightened. “I’ll inform Starfleet Command. If this is the first wave of a new Dominion attack—”

“Captain,” Lense said, “please make sure they’re aware that every species in the Federation is vulnerable. All this thing needs is a bodily orifice to allow the waves to enter. The Strata might be safe, but I’m not sure anyone else will be.”

Chapter 11

When they beamed down outside the seedy little bar that the Wadi trader reportedly had been headed to from Deep Space 9, Corsi immediately wanted a shower. The place looked as though it had been carved out of the asteroid, and now the asteroid was seriously considering reclamation. A thin layer of reddish-brown dust seemed to coat everything in the area, including her nostrils. If it hadn’t been for the aroma of dirt and grime, the mixture of sweat and sickly-sweet perfumes that assaulted her senses as she and Hawkins walked through the door might have sickened her.

She counted nine small tables scattered through the bar, but only two had patrons. At the table nearest her sat a large bipedal creature with an elongated snout, stubby claws in place of fingers, and tiny ears at the top of its black-furred head. It bore more of a resemblance to a two-meter-tall wombat than any other humanoid she’d ever seen. A bowl of something wriggling sat before it. Corsi wasn’t sure she wanted to know precisely what it was, but what little she saw as the creature scooped the contents into

its mouth immediately sent her appetite packing.

In the back of the bar, behind two scantily clad red-haired Bajoran females, sat a heavyset male with long black hair pulled back from his face. A large, ornate pattern was either tattooed or painted—at that distance, she couldn't quite tell—in dark blue on his forehead. The two Bajoran women were pawing his gold-accented blue tunic. From the descriptions Captain Kira had sent along with the flight plan, she figured this was Tellow.

Hawkins followed her into the bar, a look of distaste on his features. “Sure we’ve got the right place, boss?”

“Go home, Starfleeter,” the bartender—a tall, muscular humanoid with rust-red skin, a dark pewter-toned bodysuit that came up in a hood over his forehead, and metallic face paint on his cheeks—said. “Get back through the anomaly where you belong. You got no power here.”

Dosi, Corsi thought. Bad attitude toward the Federation, and no problem with forwarding a Dominion agenda. Think we’ve got the right place.

“Not until I talk to Tellow.”

The Dosi’s bright orange lip curled up in a sneer. “What do you want with Tellow?”

Before she could answer, the two Bajoran women came up and began pawing over Hawkins. One purred into his ear, while the other curled around him like a snake. The conflicted look on her deputy’s face said he couldn’t figure out whether to enjoy the attention, or shoo the women away.

Considering that he and Carol Abramowitz had been seeing each other since Teneb, Corsi immediately began wondering how much this might be worth on the blackmail market. That thought was short-lived as she realized the situation for what it was—a distraction. She immediately turned to the heavyset man who had been in the company of the two women. He was sliding his way out from behind the table and toward a back door. Why do they always run?

“Hawkins,” Corsi said, fighting the urge to laugh at the man’s pained expression, “keep an eye on your new friends, will you? I’m going to go have a little chat.”

She slipped easily between the tables, getting through the back door and into what appeared to be the empty—but just as grimy—kitchen a few seconds after the Wadi. A clattering sounded from her right as a tray full of metal plates fell to the floor.

“Don’t bother, Tellow!” she yelled. “I’ve got people covering the landing bays. You won’t get anywhere.”

A growl emanated from the other side of the kitchen. Finally, Tellow rose from his hiding place behind a pantry. On any other humanoid, the unpleasant twist to his lips would have been far more disquieting. “What do you want, Starfleet?” he asked, his deep, raspy voice nearly a snarl.

“You know, it doesn’t look good when you run.”

Corsi took a step closer to the Wadi. A flash of light near his wrist caught her attention. She quickly drew her phaser. “Drop the weapon.” When he did nothing more than stare at her, she made a show of adjusting a setting. “You can be put in the brig quietly, or I can shoot you and drag you there. Your

choice.”

Tellow reached toward his wrist, pulling out a small blade. It fell to the floor with a clatter. “What do you want?”

The phaser didn’t waver. “All of it.”

The Wadi reached under his tunic, pulling out a small pistol.

Corsi raised an eyebrow questioningly. She really didn’t like the idea of patting the sweating behemoth down, but when Tellow didn’t reach for any other weapons, she didn’t see any other choice. “Hands up,” she said, gesturing with the phaser. The Wadi finally succumbed. When she was satisfied that he was, in fact, unarmed, she grabbed his gun from the floor. Securing his right arm behind his back, she led him out into the bar...

...where she was faced with a sight that sucked the wind right out of her sails. Hawkins had both of his Bajoran “assailants” sitting in chairs in one corner, his phaser warily trained on them. Damn. The blackmail potential on that was priceless.

Corsi leaned on Tellow’s arm, pushing him forward. “Now, why run like that? I just want to ask you a few questions. Running like that might make me think you had something to hide.”

Tellow’s dark head shook. “No. I don’t deal with Starfleeters.”

A thin smile spread across Corsi’s lips. She pushed the Wadi against the nearest wall, allowing him to turn around. When he could see her face, and his own pistol pointed directly at his chest, she put on her best predatory expression. “No, but you do deal with Ferengi.”

Something resembling a growl came from Tellow’s throat.

Unabated, she continued, “And that Ferengi, he deals with Starfleeters. One of the things he traded was a weapon—a weapon he says you sold to him, and a weapon we found traces of Wadi DNA on.”

“I don’t know anything about a weapon or a Ferengi.”

“Do you know anything about Betazoids?” she asked, a thin smile spreading on her features.

Tellow’s eyes widened. “Federation law—”

“That weapon you sold was directly responsible for the deaths of two of my crew,” she said. “Do you think I have any problems with stretching Federation law until you can read through it to get whoever’s responsible?”

“Commander,” Hawkins said, “are you sure about this? The captain—”

“I don’t care what the captain thinks!” she shot back. The look in her deputy’s eyes said he’d picked up on what she was doing. Good cop, bad cop, Hawkins. Good cop, bad cop. “We’re dealing with a threat to Federation security here. We do whatever it takes. If that requires getting our resident Betazoid to pull the name of the guy that created the device out of this worthless bum’s head, that’s what it takes.”

She hoped Hawkins wouldn’t blow it by mentioning that Rennan Konya was too low-level a telepath for

such a thing, and he didn't disappoint. He looked appropriately chastised as he quickly nodded. "Okay, boss. Sure you don't want me to talk to him?"

It was tempting to let him loose, as the sharp briny smell coming from the Wadi was getting worse. When was the last time this guy had a bath? Those two women must have had their senses of smell removed. Finally, she shook her head. "Now," she began, "are we going to play nice, or do I get to shoot you?"

Tellow's eyes bounced back and forth between Hawkins and Corsi for a few moments.

"Or," she said, intentionally sounding as though she'd just gotten the idea, "my friend here could do something to your lovely ladies that might make them, shall we say, a little less profitable?"

When she glanced over at Hawkins, she was pleased to see something bordering on a menacing expression on his features.

"Nothing life threatening, of course," she added. "Just enough to cut into your profit margin."

The Wadi's eyes narrowed, sizing her up. "You would not. Starfleeters—"

"Give it up," she flatly said. "I have no qualms about killing you and getting the information out of your ship's computer. Matter of fact, I'm beginning to like the idea. It would save me some time. I've got a job to do here, Tellow, and you're only in my way. Now, let's dump the formalities and get down to business." Resisting the urge to find a vat of soap and douse the Wadi, she leaned in closer. "Are you going to tell me what I want to know?"

Chapter 12

"We're looking for a Vorta named Luaran," Corsi said as she walked into the conference room and slid into her usual chair. "She set up shop in the Dominion's old subspace relay station at Callinon VII. Reportedly, the Dominion abandoned it after the retreat, and she's taken over. It was described as 'lightly secured' in the reports. Something tells me that's changed."

Seated to her left, Fabian Stevens blanched. "Luaran?"

"Yes."

Stevens leaned forward, turning his gaze to the man seated at the head of the table. "Captain, recommend calling in the Defiant to meet us there."

Gold perched his elbows on the armrests, steepling his fingers at his chin. "I'll consider it, Stevens. How is she operating outside of Dominion space?"

"Not sure yet, sir," Corsi replied. "I'm looking into the possibility that we may have a defective clone."

One gray eyebrow rose. "Defective?" Gold asked. "The Dominion's primary goal was to take over the Alpha Quadrant. Getting rid of the indigenous species only helps that cause. How does that make her defective?"

“According to our new friend down in the brig, she’s working entirely without Jem’Hadar. If I add to that the fact that she’s working in a facility the Dominion abandoned, then I come up with the theory that she’s operating independently. Vorta aren’t capable of doing that on a long-term basis, and she’d have to have been at this for a while to get the padd perfected.”

“Or gotten damned lucky,” Gold said.

“Sir,” Stevens began, “if we’ve got another Luaran on our hands, she could prove even more dangerous than the Weyouns. The last Luaran clone that we know about led the occupation of Betazed.”

“I’m aware of that, Stevens.” Turning to Sonya Gomez—seated just to his right—Gold said, “Make sure Starfleet Command knows this may be isolated. I’ve got a feeling Corsi’s right, and this is a defective clone. The Dominion may not know this Luaran is out there.”

Elizabeth Lense shifted positions in her chair. “I did get traces of Vorta DNA off the padd Caitano was reading when he died, but I didn’t get a hit. Then again, I only searched for living Vorta…”

Before they could get any further, Songmin Wong’s voice came over the comm. “Bridge to Captain Gold. We’ve arrived at the Callinon System.”

* * *

Corsi stared at the viewscreen. As gas giants went, Callinon VII was pretty run-of-the-mill—swirling oranges, purples, and reds mixed with some white for effect. It looks almost like Jupiter, but without the spot. She studied the readouts as they approached. It was a small system, but it was apparent that some cataclysm had caused at least two of Callinon VII’s moons to either collide or self-destruct, as a small band of asteroids formed a string of pearls around the gas giant’s equator. No sooner did that thought cross her mind than a tiny speck floated in front of one of the planet’s white bands. There you are. “Captain, bearing zero-zero-one mark five.” Checking a readout, Corsi added, “Looks like it’s in a geostationary orbit over the planet.” She hit the control that sent the coordinates to the conn station.

“Take us in, Wong,” Gold said. “Slow and easy. Haznedl, scan for booby traps. Corsi, Stevens, keep an eye on it.”

Ensign Susan Haznedl’s hands worked the ops controls. “Aye, sir. No sign at this—”

Bolts of phaser fire began to streak across the viewscreen. The ship shook as one struck home.

“Phaser cannon, sir,” Lieutenant Anthony Shabalala said. “Localizing it now.”

“Evasive maneuvers, Wong. Damage report.”

“Minimal hull damage decks seven through ten. No reports of injury,” Haznedl said. “Sir, incoming fire is originating on two asteroids in geostationary orbit approximately one hundred kilometers away from our target.”

The ship banked to starboard as a portion of the shields began to glow brightly. The phaser cannons were doing a fine job of draining their shields. At the rate they were being hit, Corsi didn’t think they’d last much longer.

“Phaser source localized, Captain. Two sources. One bearing three-three-zero mark one-five. The other

at bearing three-nine mark five,” Haznedl said. “Routing coordinates to tactical now.”

Gold leaned back in his chair. “Take them out, Shabalala.”

One nick-of-the-time evasive maneuver from Wong later, the ship’s targeting sensors got a lock. “Photon torpedoes away,” Shabalala said.

They watched as the two torpedoes streaked away from the ship, finding their targets with relative efficiency. “Targets destroyed, sir,” Haznedl said. “Shields at eighty-five percent and holding.”

“Keep an eye out for more,” Gold said, his eyes on the viewscreen. “Something tells me these aren’t the only upgrades Luaran’s made to this place. Wong, take us back in, but this time, come in from above. I want to see if her defensive capabilities were thought out in three dimensions.”

“Aye, sir,” Wong said.

The two defensive stations had been buried in the asteroid belt, and it wasn’t outside the realm of possibility that there were more such stations. Corsi had to admit, though, it was a good approach. Coming in on the Z-axis might throw anyone—or anything—at those stations off their game.

Wong executed an almost perfect vertical approach. Corsi grabbed the railing once again, expecting another round of phaser fire as they neared the station. What they got, however, was something different.

“Captain,” Shabalala said, “we’ve got incoming. Two photon torpedoes. Scratch that. Picking up two quantum torpedoes.”

“Shoot them down, Shabalala.”

“I’m trying, sir. Something’s keeping the phasers from getting a lock. Going to visual.”

Corsi’s eyes went to the viewscreen. The gap between the ship and torpedoes was closing alarmingly fast.

Before Gold could get another warning out, phaser fire flew toward the torpedoes, destroying them on the first shot. As the explosions cleared on the viewscreen, Corsi allowed herself to breathe again.

They continued on toward the array. When they were within ten thousand kilometers, tiny flickers of light began coming from the facility’s communication dishes. “Shabalala—” Gold began, a warning tone to his voice.

“Already on it, sir. It appears to be light reflecting off the arrays, but I’m not sure where it’s coming from,” he replied. “No sign of any more incoming fire.”

Could it be this easy?

Corsi scanned the readings herself. There really was no sign of more incoming fire. Either this Luaran is the luckiest Vorta still alive, or the most shortsighted. Something occurred to her. “Sir, she’s got phaser cannons protecting the logical approach vector, and saved the quantum torpedoes for the Z-axis vector. If she doesn’t have Dominion backing, she can’t have a lot of either one. With the geostationary orbit, she’s got the planet pretty much covering the rear approach. That covers most of the possible incoming trajectories. Thing is, what happens if they get past the phaser cannons and torpedoes? What’s the

close-range line of defense?”

That was the point where something started to hit the shields like rainfall. What the—?

“Small-missile fire, sir,” Shabalala called out from tactical. “The shields are now at eighty percent.”

The ship banked hard to port as Wong began more evasive maneuvers.

“Divert power to the shields,” Gold said.

“In process, Captain. Ventral shielding now at one hundred five percent,” Shabalala reported. “Count twenty-five incoming projectiles.”

“Can you get a lock, Shabalala?”

“Working on it, sir.”

The display on the main viewer was shimmering like a diamond as the impacts began to register. The missiles were mostly concentrating on the ventral portion of the ship, but as she watched, one seemed to be heading directly for them. Intellectually, she knew she wasn't at risk. It was aiming for a tiny camera mounted somewhere on the hull, not the bridge. Still, that didn't stop Corsi from flinching when the viewscreen lit up like a Roman candle as the missile impacted.

“We're down to a dozen incoming, sir,” Lieutenant Shabalala said. “Phasers locking on now.”

In the most rapid-fire succession of shots Corsi had ever seen outside of handheld phasers, Shabalala took out each of the dozen remaining missiles. A deep scan revealed there were no more incoming projectiles behind them.

“Guess that answers my question,” Corsi mused aloud. On the viewscreen, the Y-shaped, disc-covered “wings” of the array, meeting at its circular hub, greeted them. The hub bore a slight resemblance to the operations center of Deep Space 9, approximately three or four floors of what she guessed were computer routers, transmitters, transceivers, and other equipment. She was already trying to look into the windows to see what was there. For a station that was reportedly unmanned, there were a lot of interior lights. The lights are on, but is anybody home?

“Captain, should I put an away team together?”

“Not until we get a good look around down there, Corsi,” Gold replied. “Is there any sign of shielding in place?”

“Nothing we can't interfere with, Captain,” Shabalala said, confidence in his voice.

A wide smile spread across Corsi's lips. “Then I have just the man for the job, sir.”

Chapter 13

Fabian Stevens carried a small device into the conference room. On his head was the same control

headpiece she'd seen on him a few days before. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

Gold, Corsi, and Gomez all looked up from their positions at the conference table. Gold was the first to stand. "Excellent, Stevens. Corsi here thinks she might have a use for your new toy."

Stevens raised one dark eyebrow. "She does?"

"Yup," Corsi said, pulling herself out of her chair. "This is the perfect situation to test your advance scout, Fabe."

His eyes bounced among her, Gomez, and the captain. "Well, I'm not sure it's ready for a field test yet, but if you want it, she's yours, Captain. Where should I go to control it?"

Gold's eyes dropped to the unit in Stevens's hands. "That's where we have a problem."

* * *

Corsi slipped on the headpiece, adjusting it so the earpieces and goggles fit. She slipped the gloves on each hand, feeling the wires that ran down her arms and to each sensory conduit. Commander La Forge must have had it easy if all they had to do was plug into his sensory inputs.

"How're you doing, Dom?" Stevens's voice sounded in her ear. She knew he was irritated about the captain wanting her to pilot the thing on its maiden voyage, but she couldn't deny the validity of his statement that if she were to lead the away team, it made the most sense for her to pilot the virtual reality scout. It certainly would save her time if they had to get to a safe location in a hurry.

"Okay," Corsi replied, sounding a lot more confident than she felt. "Get in position and hook me up."

She heard the muffled sounds of activity, then Fabian's voice returned in her ear.

"The mobile emitter is in position. Activating the remote sensors," Stevens said. "Initiating interface now. Feeding sensory inputs to the control system now."

A dusky blur filled her vision, slowly sharpening into a visual of a small, well-lit room. She was surprised when a slight burst of air hit her nose. There was a sharp cleanliness to it that suggested the recirculators had been recently replaced. Consoles lined the walls, each appearing to have a different function. Tiny beeps and other electronic sounds were soft in her ears. She only knew a little bit of the written Dominion language, but it looked like there was a console for the airlock right near the emitter's location. Just beyond that console was a window, where she could see one of the array's three wings. A few kilometers off the end of the wing sat the *Vinci* in a parking orbit.

"Do you see anything?" Fabian's voice asked in her ear.

"Yeah. There are consoles all over the place. The monitors are displaying what looks like Dominion text. I think the one next to me controls the airlock."

Her entire visual field lowered, until she felt as though she were lying on the floor of the room. "Fabe? What's going on?"

"I've adjusted the holo-configuration. You're now configured for a small gecko."

“Agecko? What are you, nuts?”

“Yes, Dom. A gecko. They have something that’ll help the emitter hide that doesn’t require antigrav circuits to work. The setae on their hands and feet will let them walk on the walls. Hopefully, the small size of the projection will keep it hidden longer.”

It took her a couple of seconds to get acclimated to maneuvering the device, but she managed to get it positioned high up on the wall near the airlock door. There was enough space between the ceiling and the top of the window to use it as a temporary resting place. She moved around the upper edges of the walls, navigating the corridors with relative ease. There were a few gaps in the consoles that looked big enough for a humanoid to hide behind in a firefight, if necessary.

“Fabe,” she said, “are we getting a map of this?”

“Yes. Just keep going, Dom.”

When she reached what appeared to be a central command structure, she stopped. A ring of consoles surrounded one workstation, each more complex than anything Corsi had seen in the other corridors. There was a Vorta standing by the central workstation, studying displays. There didn’t appear to be any alarm bells going off, which both mystified and encouraged Corsi. The Vorta reached a long, slender hand over the controls, an arch expression on her features. Her eyes were rimmed in kohl, and her short black hair only served to make her look paler. The purple of her lips blended with the purple trim on her otherwise green jumpsuit.

“Luaran,” Corsi whispered.

“She’s there with you?” Stevens asked.

“Yes. I don’t think she—”

Before she could finish, the Vorta pulled out a plasma rifle and aimed it straight at the emitter.

“Fabe, she’s got a gun.”

“Take the gear off, Dom. If she—”

Before he could finish, Luaran fired. The last thing Corsi saw in the goggles was the mobile emitter exploding.

Chapter 14

Corsi’s eyeshurt, and the glare from the penlight for Sonya Gomez’s headset camera wasn’t making it any better.

“Watch that thing, Gomez. The last thing we need is one of us with retina burn.”

The commander adjusted the tiny penlight perched over her right ear. “Sorry, Domenica. Didn’t realize it was that bright. Last check. Can you get this, Bart? Okay? Good. I’m shutting down for transport.”

Corsi, Hawkins, and Rennan Konya formed a circle around Sonya Gomez as they prepared to beam down to the array, phasers at the ready. There was no doubt in her mind that Luaran not only knew they were out there to get her, but that they were coming in. Just to be safe, she slid a second phaser into the waistband of her uniform pants, placing it at the small of her back under her jacket. Much to her approval, Konya and Hawkins both did the same.

No sooner did they beam down than alarms went off. How'd they miss the mobile emitter? She fought the urge to put her hands to her ears. It sounded almost as though the alarms were going off inside her skull.

A device that looked distressingly like a larger version of one of the pieces Gomez had found in Caitano's padd was mounted in one corner of the ceiling. One phaser blast later, the ringing in her skull subsided. When she was able to actually think again, Corsi quickly pinpointed their location. "Come on," she said, pointing down the corridor to her right. "The central control room is this way. Hawkins, take point."

They got three meters before he ran headfirst into a security field.

"I got it," Gomez said, flipping the switch at her waist. The penlight once again shone like a beacon, illuminating the console that Gomez was studying. "Bart, can you see anything?"

Corsi heard an occasional sound of acknowledgment come from the first officer, as well as the sounds of her tools at work, and gestured for Konya and Hawkins to take defensive positions around the engineer while she worked. "I didn't see any guards before," Corsi said, staring back down the corridor they'd come from, "but that doesn't mean there aren't any here. Keep your eyes open."

At that point, a phaser blast grazed her arm. She lowered to her knee, mostly to protect Commander Gomez, but also to hopefully get the shooter to damage the array's own equipment. Konya had found one of the gaps on the other side of the corridor, his phaser at the ready as he ducked behind the console. For a low-level telepath, at least he can read people. Let's hope that extends to Jem'Hadar.

Corsi looked up, hoping there might be some indication of what was coming toward them. A lone Jem'Hadar came down the corridor, a snarl like she hadn't seen since the war curling his scaly lips.

Corsi adjusted her phaser to its highest setting, narrowed the beam, and took aim. She caught the Jem'Hadar once in the chest, but not before he got off another shot. That shot impacted the ceiling, taking out a row of lights.

Everything dimmed, until finally a dull light mixed with the smoke of the exploding circuits all around them. The beam of Gomez's lamp shone in the corner of her eye, and the lights from the central command center radiated a glow that she could see all around. Still, the shadow of the Jem'Hadar grew larger.

Corsi and Konya exchanged glances in the dirty light, and then both stood and began firing at the Jem'Hadar. They each got three shots off before the sound of the security field falling made it to Corsi's ears.

A fourth shot from Konya finally felled the Jem'Hadar.

"Command—"

Hawkins's alarm call was interrupted by the sound of a plasma rifle firing, and Gomez shouting in surprise.

Corsi and Konya turned to find Hawkins facedown across Gomez's outstretched legs, a burn from the plasma rifle visible over half of his thigh as he tried to push himself back up...

...and Luaran standing on the other side of the opening, the plasma rifle in her long-fingered hands and aimed at Gomez. "Drop the weapons," she said, her voice arch.

Hawkins pushed himself off of Gomez's legs, shaking his head slowly. Corsi was surprised to see that Gomez had already flipped off the camera's overly bright penlight.

Luaran lowered the rifle and took aim. "I can shoot the other leg, human." Raising her eyes to Corsi and Konya, she said, "Drop the weapons."

Corsi slowly bent down and put the phaser on the floor, gesturing for Konya to do the same. Wait until the time's right, Rennan. Wait until the time's right. Konya followed suit, and had enough sense to not draw his backup weapon. Hawkins was already disarmed of his primary weapon. From her angle, Corsi couldn't see his backup. Gomez slid slowly out from under the console, her eyes warily on the Vorta as she stood up.

"Can I help my deputy stand up?" Corsi asked. "Otherwise he's just going to lie here and bleed on your floor."

Just turn around, Luaran. Just turn around.

"No," the Vorta said, disdain filling her voice. "Let him die. He can be the first casualty of the new war."

Great, Corsi thought. We've got a nut job Vorta who wants to restart the war. I really hate being right sometimes.

She glanced down at Hawkins, giving him a quick "sit tight" look.

"This way," Luaran said, gesturing toward central control. "After you."

Konya took the lead, followed by Gomez and then Corsi. She hated the feeling of the plasma rifle at her back. "New war, huh?" Corsi said. "Hoping to lead the battle with your little acoustic weapon?"

"Ah, so it's been used, has it? That would explain why there's a Federation starship sitting outside."

"Yes," Gomez said, beginning to turn her head to the left. "Where'd you get the nanites?"

"That would be for me to know and you to...not know, human."

"Really?" Before she could take another step, Gomez finished the turn and flipped the switch on her belt that controlled the camera's light. Corsi ducked, just in time for the beam to hit Luaran full in the eyes. In the time it took her to stand up, backup phaser in hand, it was already over. The Vorta crumpled to the ground in a heap, a phaser burn still smoking on her back.

Gomez turned the light off, and when her eyes adjusted, Corsi saw Hawkins propped up on his right

elbow, his backup phaser in his left hand. Tapping her combadge, she said, “Corsi toda Vinci. Beam Hawkins to sickbay and send over some backup. We’ve eliminated the Vorta threat and need to secure the facility.” Before Laura Poynter could execute the command, Corsi said, “Nice work, Hawkins. Nice work.”

As soon as he was gone, she turned to Gomez. “Let’s hope she only had the one Jem’Hadar. Commander, is that link still working? We need to figure out what those consoles in there do.”

Chapter 15

“What’s the word on the computers, Gomez?” Captain Gold asked.

Sonya Gomez looked up from the console, keeping the penlight aimed at the ceiling. “Working on it, Captain,” she replied. “We’re downloading the data and should have them ready to go in about an hour.”

Corsi checked the security sensors one last time. Looks like they were calibrated to only pick up intruders with enough mass to be a threat. Might even have been able to have the hologram do a human projection and it wouldn’t have picked it up.

That reminds me.

She began visually scanning the upper edges of the central command chamber, looking for signs of the charring from the plasma rifle. She finally found it, directly over the subspace relay controls. A smattering of charred parts were scattered over the top of the unit. Corsi gathered them up in one hand, and shoved them into a small shoulder bag she’d had sent over from the Vinci.

“What’s that, Commander?” Gomez asked, looking up so her light hit the scorched spot on the wall.

“Parts of Fabe’s little toy,” Corsi replied. “It would have worked if Luaran hadn’t shot it. Figured I should bring it back for a fitting burial in space.”

Gomez chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” Corsi asked.

“Bart. He says now Fabian may finally shut up about you co-opting his experiment.”

Corsi glowered at the camera over Gomez’s right ear. “Yeah, right. Faulwell, tell Stevens he can kiss my entire ass. No, he might actually enjoy that. Never mind. I’ll be happy to pay him back for that when I get back to the ship. Have you figured out whether or not she’s got more of those things out there?”

Gomez looked back down at the consoles that surrounded her. She reached toward one with her left hand, working a few controls. “I can’t find any more references to it in the database. Looks like the one that we got was the prototype. Tellow’s ship didn’t show any sign of any copies being made.”

Corsi looked around the small control chamber. “All of this, just to create one stealth weapon? What about test subjects? She couldn’t have sent that thing out without testing it on someone first.”

“With the gravitational field of a gas giant to work with? I’m guessing that she’s dumped all of the bodies into the planet’s atmosphere.”

Clambering down from the console, Corsi said, “What about the nanites?”

Gomez smiled. “Already got it covered. I’ve shunted them all into one portion of the computers’ drive. There should be enough for them to chew on in there to last a week or two. That’s enough time to take care of them.”

“So, what do we do with nonsentient nanites that are programmed to build weapons?”

Gomez shrugged. “We’ll think of something.” Something on the display seemed to catch her attention.

“What?” Corsi asked.

“She did get lucky, didn’t she?”

That only served to confuse her more. “What? How?”

“The book.”

Corsi walked around to look at the console. “Just looks like a bunch of cryptic symbols to me. What’s Faulwell say?”

“He says it’s a development log. Apparently Luaran spent months looking for something she could attach the weapon to, and wasn’t able to move forward until Tafock Navar Relal became popular and traffic started coming back into the Gamma Quadrant through the wormhole.”

Corsi stared at the display. “We got all of them; DS9 is purging the nanites from its system, and they have no record of the program being downloaded to anyone. The Wadi ship and the Musgrave both came up clean. We’ve purged it from our system. The three pads that actually contained the thing are in custody. I think we’ve got all of them.”

Gomez raised her head, a wide smile on her face. “Nice work.”

Epilogue

“In nomine Patris et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti,” the priest intoned.

In unison, everyone around her said, “Amen.”

Domenica Corsi stood by the open grave, her head bowed as the casket was lowered. Rest in peace, Ken. Wherever you are.

Once the gathered crowd started to break up, she turned and walked slowly toward the well-worn terra-cotta cobblestones that formed a path through the ancient Sienese cemetery. Captain Gold took up step beside her, a somber expression on his features, highlighted by the all white of his dress uniform. She didn’t want to consider what the gray-and-white version she wore was doing for her appearance.

“Do you hate these things as much as I do, Captain?” she asked.

The exhaustion was evident in his voice. “Maybe more.” After everything that had happened on Deep Space 9 after stopping Luaran, two funerals on top of it was almost too taxing.

“Domenica!”

Corsi turned to find Angelina Caitano ambling toward her, a sad smile on her tear-streaked, robust features. “Domenica,” she began, lifting the black mourning veil that covered her face. “You and your captain will eat with us tonight, yes?”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Caitano,” she began, “I wish we could have brought him back sooner, but we got caught up in a crisis on Deep Space 9. We really should get back to the ship. We still need to—”

“Bah!” the elder woman said, throwing her chubby hands toward the sky. “That can wait until tomorrow. My Agosto says good things about you. You found the person who killed our Kenny. You both are family now. So, you come home with us and you eat. Those Starfleet meals cannot be as good as our family’s marinara.” Angelina’s sad smile was suddenly filled with pride. “A recipe that has been passed down for six centuries must have something right, yes?”

Corsi felt a lump begin to form in her throat. “How can you—? I mean, your son—?”

“Died?” Mrs. Caitano asked. “Yes. This is true. The world, however, it continues. We must move on.” She stepped delicately over the cobblestones, trying to avoid the gaps with the slender heels of her shoes. “The funeral—that is where we mourn the death. After that, we find ways to continue with life. Family is the best tradition. We gather. We eat. We talk. We celebrate the life.”

Corsi swallowed hard. “Good tradition.”

Angelina smoothed the full skirt of her black dress down with her hands. “I have thought so, too.”

After the dire histrionics of the Deverick family on the loss of their only child, Corsi was almost grateful for the approach the Caitano family took. She could remember a time when the family on the *Vinci* had taken a similar approach to their losses at Galvan VI, and a similar celebration of life in a backyard in New York. A glance at Captain Gold revealed a small, melancholy smile on the captain’s face. She couldn’t help but wonder if he was remembering that same gathering. “Mrs. Caitano?”

“Yes, Domenica?”

“May I ask you something about Ken? There was something we found in his quarters that didn’t make sense to me, but ended up not being related to what happened. It’s still bugging me, though.”

Angelina folded her hands over her ample belly. “Of course, my dear. What is it you want to know?”

“There was a counterfeit bar of gold-pressed latinum in his quarters. We never did figure out where it came from.”

“He still brings that with him?” Angelina began to laugh.

Corsi and Gold exchanged a look. “Yes,” she replied. “It was on a shelf in his quarters when he died. We weren’t sure if it was connected to his death. There was nothing about it in his official file.”

Professor Agosto Caitano chose that moment to walk up. He wrapped an arm around his wife's shoulders and pulled her close. "That's because he got it when he was thirteen years old. He helped one of the local policemen figure out something for an investigation, and the officer gave that to him as a reward."

"Some reward," Corsi dryly said.

"Yes," Agosto replied with a solemn expression. "I wish we could have done more to help you find Ken's killer, Domenica." He reached out with his free hand, placing it on her arm. "I do want you to know that we're very grateful for what you've done. I am proud that one of my students stopped such an insidious terrorist weapon. If my son had to lay down his life, it is good that it helped to stop that Vorta."

Corsi's stomach twisted. She would have preferred the gratitude for keeping Caitano from ever getting the padd in the first place. However, she forced a sad smile onto her face. If it would help them get some closure, she'd play along.

Ken, wherever you are, I promise. This won't happen again. You opened our eyes, and we're going to keep watching.

"Now," Agosto said, releasing her arm long enough to gently pat it. "We go eat."

About the Author

TERRI OSBORNE has been a sound designer, para-legal, administrative assistant, notary public, and award-winning costumer. Through all of that, however, she has also been a writer. She made her professional fiction writing debut in 2003 with the critically acclaimed "Three Sides to Every Story," the Jake Sisko and Tora Ziyal story in the *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* tenth-anniversary anthology *Prophecy and Change*. Other short fiction includes "Q'uandary," the Selar story in the *Star Trek: New Frontier* anthology *No Limits*, and "Eighteen Minutes," a story featuring the Doctor in the upcoming *Star Trek: Voyager* tenth-anniversary anthology *Distant Shores*. Currently, she is hard at work at more fiction, both in and out of the *Star Trek* universe, including an original dark fantasy novel. Find out more about Terri at her website: www.terriosborne.com.

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