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LOST TIME

Ilsa J. Bick



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“Lost time is never found again.”

—BENJAMINFRANKLIN

Chapter

1

“Here comes the second front, here it comes!” yelled a Bajoran lieutenant. The woman was new and was at the science station. Captain Kira Nerys didn’t remember her name and now wished she could because the woman looked good and scared. Her blond hair was matted to her forehead, and her skin had an oily sheen of perspiration that slicked her cheeks and the underside of her jaw. She was sweating so much she looked basted. “Captain, it’s—it’s bigger, this one’s much—!”

Deep Space 9 jerked, quick and sharp and with a violence that reminded Kira of the way a very large, very strong Talmuna swordfish fought a line, yanking and snapping back and forth, trying to shake itself free. Something shorted in a shower of sparks, and Kira caught the odor of ozone and seared metal. There was a loud metallic groan as the station bucked, and in the next instant, the ululating shrill of an alarm klaxon spiked its way into Kira’s brain.

“Someone shut that thing off! You’d have to be brain-dead not to know we’re in trouble!” Another jolt threw her off balance, and she stumbled, flailed, searched for a handhold, her nails scrabbling against smooth transparent aluminum. She missed, her right temple smacked solid plasticine, and she went down, hard, right on the point of her chin, snapping her head back, driving her teeth into her tongue. Pain exploded in her mouth and jagged into the space behind her right eye, scorching a path through her brain. Hot bile crowded into the back of her throat, mixed with the blood filling her mouth with a taste like wet rust, and Kira gagged, coughed out a crimson spray, fought back the urge to vomit.

She felt a hand on her right shoulder and then someone was hauling her up, bracing her as she swayed, tried to pass out but, mercifully, failed.

“You still with us?” Commander Elias Vaughn: voice pinching with anxiety, hazel eyes searching her face. When he gently pressed the edge of his left thumb to the corner of her mouth, it came away smeared with black blood. “My God. Nerys?”

“I’m fine,” Kira lied. She was woozy and hurt, but she thought the fact that her tongue still worked was a good thing. Something thick and sticky dribbled over her eyebrow. She put a shaky hand to her

forehead, felt the wet. Smelled the copper edge of her blood.

Got to hang on. . . . Impatient now, she pulled herself up, squared her shoulders and shrugged her way out of Vaughn's grip. He looked hesitant but then nodded and moved back to rerouting traffic away from the station. Kira turned to Ezri Dax, monitoring internal systems. "How's everyone else? What about the station?"

Dax said something about Ro's security people confining folks to their quarters, and the infirmary getting swamped and Bashir sure picking a hell of a time to be off-station. Someone else rattled off a series of damage reports (all of them bad) and while Kira registered this and digested the information, her mind snagged on a staccato, slightly nasal chant. The chant was more pure sound than song: a spiked line that, nevertheless, flowed straight and true like the principal root of a complicated fugue.

The sound came from the Bynar, Soloman, communing with DS9's main computer. Kira had heard someone say that he'd found the sound soothing, but it set Kira's teeth on edge.

Kira snapped her head around to Vaughn—too fast, as it happened, because she was rewarded with another wave of vertigo. She blinked back from the edge of unconsciousness. Come on, don't lose it now, Nerys. "Vaughn, is the da Vinci away?"

"Just in time." Vaughn spared a glance from his systems' boards. "I've locked down all the docking pylons and issued a general warning to reroute out of the system. There are a few freighters—empty, thank God—willing to help evacuate the station."

"If we have to. Give them our thanks, then tell them to stand by—or to bow out if they have to. It's no crime to stay alive." She looked over at the Bajoran lieutenant. "Time to next distortion wave."

"Impossible to predict, Captain." The lieutenant input data, squinted at her screen, then shook her head. "It's just. . . random. The only thing I can tell for certain is that the shock waves are getting stronger."

"Uh-hunh," said Kira. She glanced back at Vaughn. "What about Bajor?"

"Not good." Green-yellow light emanating from Vaughn's console played over the high planes of his bearded cheekbones and made black hollows of his eyes. His lips were so thin his mouth was a dark gash. "Ground-based stations report increased tectonic activity along the Tilar and Musilla plates. They're trying to evacuate the coastal areas, but with so little warning. . . ." Vaughn didn't finish but then again, he didn't have to.

With so little warning, they'll be lucky if only a third of the coastal population drowns. And that doesn't count the mudslides, earthquakes, and Kendra Valley's lousy with fault lines. . . . Benjamin and Cassidy, Jake and Korena, the baby, they'll be right in the middle. Running out of time. . . .

Her thoughts were cut by a hail and then a leisurely baritone fuzzed at the edges with static. "Captain Kira, this is Gold. What's your status?"

She had to smile. "I was just going to ask you the same question, Captain."

The channel fizzed, and then Kira caught the babble of background noise, a buzz of conversation and the blats of a computer spitting out information. Gold said something—Koomel? Toomel?—and then came back. "Not one of Wong's more graceful uncouplings. A couple bumps and bruises, but this old bucket's seen a lot worse. I'll hold together —oh, wait, you were asking about the ship." Despite herself, Kira

appreciated the levity. “Well, the da Vinci’s fine. We’re stringing baling wire right now. What about my people?”

“Still in one piece, Captain.” This from Sonya Gomez, who staffed a long-range sensor with Nog. An impromptu powwow: When the da Vinci had docked at the station following its sojourn in the Gamma Quadrant, Dr. Lense received word that she was one of five finalists for the prestigious Bentman Prize. What Lense clearly hadn’t planned on was heading off in a runabout with Bashir at the helm because—surprise, surprise—Bashir was a finalist, too. (Personally, Kira thought Lense looked like she was being knifed when she got that little bit of news.)

The da Vinci had been set to get under way—they’d had two crew fatalities and needed to head to Earth for the memorial services—when the first distortion waves came rippling through Bajoran space. Gomez had beamed directly to ops from the da Vinci. Nog had appeared a second later on the lift, so impatient to get to his duty station he’d practically vaulted the railing. Sometime in all of this, Gomez had pinned back her shock of curly sable-colored hair, but that last jolt had loosed a thick shank that now grazed her left cheek. Gomez backhanded the hair with an impatient gesture. “And I think we’ve got something here.”

“Go,” said Kira. She took the distance to the sensor station in two strides. “What the hell’s going on?”

“I don’t know exactly,” said the Ferengi, his words rocketing out in spurts as if they’d piled up behind his teeth, anxious as all hell to get out already. It was something Kira noticed Nog did, not when he was nervous, but good and pissed off. Nog’s fingers danced over his console. “The distortion waves—they’re not sequenced or periodic in any way. They’re much more random—like someone’s flipping a switch on and off, only at irregular intervals. All I can tell is that, what these sensors say, it shouldn’t be happening.”

Moments like these, Kira almost wished she was Vulcan. But it’s happening, so your point? Instead, she settled for something in between. “Except?”

“Except it is, and it’s coming from Empok Nor.”

“What?” Crowding in between Nog and Gomez, she double-checked their readings and then wished she hadn’t. “Will someone please explain this? Never mind that we’ve got Empok Nor’s lower core.” She planted her fists into her hips and pinned Nog with a hard stare. “You said you guys tore that station apart looking for any little presents the Androssi left behind. So how did you manage to overlook something powerful enough to start cracking into space-time?”

It came out harsher than she liked, and Nog’s lobes flushed purple. Abashed, Nog shook his head and Gomez opened her mouth, but it was the tiny slip of a Bynar directly across the bowl of ops and next to Vaughn who answered. “I believe I’ve pinpointed the problem, Captain.”

“Thank the Prophets.” Kira turned on her heel, ignoring the headache that was trying to leak out of her ears, and the blood-taste in her mouth. They got out of this, she’d toss back a few painkillers and take a nice long nap. “What is it?”

“I can’t say for sure what it is.” The Bynar’s eyes glittered, a bright cerulean blue. “But what I can say is that the reason it was overlooked was because the Androssi did what they always do. The problem was never, technically, there.”

There was a beat. Then, Kira said, “Say what?”

“Well, I’mverklempt.” Theda Vinci captain sounded about as confused as Kira felt. “But it’d be just like Biron. They used interdimensional rifts?”

Soloman’s bald head bobbed in an emphatic nod. “Yes, sir. It’s a virus, or a code, that hasn’t just been encrypted, it’s been hidden within a quantum singularity. To all outward appearances, the data has been generated by it.”

“There’s precedent, Captain,” said Gomez. “The Romulans’ quantum singularity drive, for example.”

Vaughn frowned. “That uses a gravity well to generate power by fusing subatomic particles. They can’t hide anything in it.”

“But, in theory, you could,” said Soloman. “No one has ever done it because you can’t time or predict when the code will reemerge. Similarly, retrieval is very difficult. We’re accustomed to thinking of information becoming lost once this information, whether it exists as matter or energy, crosses an event horizon. Clearly, if the Romulans harness power, then information is never truly lost, it merely changes in form. Similarly, a code or command—or virus—may be stored beyond an event horizon. Either the originators of this information intended to retrieve it, or understood when it would resurface at a later time to carry out its specified functions.”

Gold, on his channel: “But there’s a third possibility, right? That if the Androssi put it there, the putzes couldn’t get it out either.”

“That is also possible.”

Gomez spoke up. “The problem is the quantum foam.”

Kira blinked. “The what?”

“It’s not the kind of foam you’re thinking of, Captain. Quantum foam is a region composed of quantum particles and micro-black holes that pop in and out of existence. The more closely you look at the fabric of space-time, the more chaotic that fabric becomes. What looks solid—a chair, a rock—becomes a morass of energy states and vibrating particles when viewed at the subatomic level. Similarly, the smaller a black hole, the greater space-time is distorted around the hole in proportion to the hole’s size.”

Kira pinched the ridged part of her nose between a thumb and forefinger. Her headache throbbed in time with her pulse. “Okay. But how does this explain what’s going on here?”

“This quantum foam hasn’t destroyed the information. Somehow the foam’s interacted with the singularity in which the information was hidden. The question is, what activated the code?”

“It’s impossible to answer that for certain at the moment.” Soloman’s smooth forehead crinkled in a frown. “To follow upon the quantum analogy, it could be coming from any of an infinite number of universes. The information—in this case, energy—is streaming as an encoded quantum datastream.”

“Okay,” said Kira. “So this signal, or code, or virus, or program—whatever is potentially coming from a computer in a different universe, only you can’t nail down exactly what it’s saying because the data represents all possibilities at once. Or the other way around: Something here is talking to someone out there.” Kira looked back at Soloman. “And now because of this connection, this… foam’s getting more agitated and the micro-black holes are expanding so that its effects are more pronounced on a

macroscopic level?”

“Intermittently, yes. That’s what is causing these temporal-spatial distortion waves.”

“Can you shut it down?”

Soloman shook his head. “Not from DS9. I don’t even know if you could properly call the datastream here in the first place. The datastream is within a contained system continually fluctuating between temporal dimensions.”

Kira sighed. “Why do I have the feeling that this isn’t the worst part?”

“Because it isn’t, Captain.” Nog was more grim than angry now. “The more information passes through that region, the more unstable it’s making the surrounding space-time. Space is literally cracking. What we’ve felt now isn’t half as bad as it’s going to get.”

“Ten to one, those temporal-spatial ripples are triggering Bajor’s tectonic shifts,” said Vaughn. “Only a matter of time before Bajor comes apart at the seams, literally. Lord knows where it will stop.”

“What about the wormhole?”

“I don’t see how its horizon can remain coherent,” said Gomez.

“Meaning it breaks apart, too.” And, maybe, the Prophets die. “Soloman, is there any way to stop this?”

“I would have to proceed via inference,” said Soloman. “If I can’t interact with the datastreams directly, I might be able to infer their content by interfacing with one of Empok Nor’s nonessential systems. Something innocuous, like the turbolifts. If I can determine the ways in which the virus is encrypted, I’ll likely be permitted to understand what’s being said between the two systems and then effect change.”

“A self-authorizing language,” said Nog. “If we’re smart enough to figure out how to read it, we’ll be admitted into the system.”

“Exactly. Once I’m in, then I can deactivate one system, or both.”

“But if that’s the wrong thing to do? You’ll be choosing, Soloman,” said Gomez. “You’ll pick one path out of infinite possibilities. For that matter, if you squeeze yourself into a system even as an observer, that will collapse superpositions, right? It’s that old paradigm, Schrödinger’s Cat. So long as you don’t look the cat’s both alive and dead.”

Gold asked, “Are you saying we shouldn’t do it, Gomez?”

“No, I just want everyone to know the risks. The events in this other universe may actually favor the opposite, or something we can’t, or don’t, want to imagine.” She let out a breath. “But it beats doing nothing. I’m going with Soloman’s recommendation, Captain—Captains,” she added with a look at Kira. “We need to get to Empok Nor.”

* * *

After Gomez, Nog, and Soloman transported over to the *da Vinci*, Ezri Dax said, “All this talk about possibilities and universes... awfully interesting timing.”

“Why?” asked Kira.

“Soloman.” Pensive, Dax folded her arms across her chest. “Earlier, he asked if he could access the Orb of Time.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. It seems he’s been studying the Orbs and concluded that the way an Orb emits energy is very much like a computer program. I think he also sees them as devices that access information available on the quantum level, like the Androssi use dimensional shifts. He said he wondered how the wormhole aliens manage to harness and direct the energy you need to create a time shift. I told him those were all good questions, but—”

“He didn’t know about the Vedek Assembly’s new restrictions on the Orbs?”

Dax shook her head. “And I tried to tell him what it was like the first time Jadzia tried studying an Orb. Not exactly a spiritual experience—but, maybe, the Dax symbiont’s not receptive to spirituality. I don’t know.”

Now it was Kira’s turn to look thoughtful. “I’ve never thought about spirituality like that. Spirituality is justme. I wasn’t aware that a Bynar could get religion.”

“Maybe communing with a computer is about as spiritual as a Bynar gets. Or maybe it’s just the way a Bynar’s brain is wired. You can never really know whether a god exists, or if you search for a god and construct a religion because that’s the way your brain works. If you buy into that, then spirituality’s as innate and natural as breathing—and not mystical at all.”

“Can’t disprove that one way or the other and maybe that’s a good thing. Maybe we need to hope that...” Kira tried finding the right word but couldn’t. “Maybe we just need to hope.”

They looked at each other. Then Dax said, “In the end, maybe hope is all we have.”

Chapter 2

From space, looking at Empok Nor, Gomez’s first thought was:haunted house. In her EVA suit now with the rasp of her breathing very loud in her ears, Gomez glanced right, left. There was something about the way Cardassian design emphasized the slash of shadows and the arch of bulkheads that made the absolute black of the abandoned station seem like a carcass. Kind of the way a bug looked flipped on its back, legs stiff, deader than a doornail. Pattie might not have appreciated the analogy, but there it was—though knowing the Nasat’s sense of humor, maybe she would.

The station was a derelict with just enough auxiliary power to keep it in orbit, a rudimentary deflector system to prevent the random meteor strike—and not a drop more.

Keep expecting a couple eyes to pop out of nowhere and go booga-booga...

Suspended in midair, Gomez turned in a slow pirouette. The light of her wristlamp slid over bulkheads

and empty computer wall panels and open-mesh grids—there and then just as quickly gone again as she spun around. A stable pocket of normal space enveloped this part of the station, including the now-empty fusion core, two-thirds of the habitat ring, and one set of docking pylons above and below, the latter onto which Vance Hawkins had eased the Kwolek. The other third of Empok Nor slipped in and out of temporal-spatial fissures.

Theda Vinci had shadowed them the whole way—not just for evac if needed, but because Theda Vinci's cargo hold was crammed with two emergency generators beamed in series from DS9. When they were ready, Hawkins would activate the Kwolek's transporters at the same time as Transporter Chief Poynter powered up Theda Vinci's transporter, snag the generators' transporter patterns and do a linked transport right into the lower core. Easy, right?

Wrong-o. Gomez came out of her spin and pulled herself to another handhold. Nothing about this is going to be easy. Nothing ever is.

They rolled and tucked and pushed off in a straggly single file, like beads on a very loose string, down a pitch-black service corridor tacking toward the base of the station's midsection and the control room for the lower core: Hawkins in front with a phaser rifle, Conlon's tiny figure bobbing just ahead, and Gomez bringing up the rear. (Corsi had reluctantly remained behind at DS9. If things got dicey on the station and they had to start evacuations, Ro Laren would need all the security expertise she could find. Besides which, Gomez wasn't sure that a dangerous mission like this was such a good idea so soon after Caitano and Deverick's deaths.)

Hooking the fingers of her right hand around the metal rim of a bulkhead, Gomez pulled her body along, tucked her knees, planted her feet, and pushed. Normally, Gomez got a kick out of weightlessness. Not this time. Gomez hadn't been on the mission to retrieve Empok Nor's fusion core; she'd been on Sarindar and Kieran had taken her place and he'd said that Nog was a helluva good engineer. . . .

As always when she thought about Kieran Duffy, a wave of sadness curled and broke over her mind and body. The wave was small, this time. As she got farther and farther away from Galvan VI, the crushing grief got less debilitating. She'd been able to go hours without thinking about him. She'd even gone and set a date for a vacation with Wayne Omthon on Hidalgo Station in a few days.

To some degree, that scared her. If she stopped thinking about Duffy, ceased missing him so much that the ache was physical. . . well, then, what was left?

Can't think about that now. She shoved thoughts of Duffy into a mental black box and slammed down the lid. Later, maybe, when she was alone. . . .

A click in her helmet just as they reached the access hatch to the control room: "Okay, we're in ops." Nog. "It's like the rest of the station. Everything's off except for the computer system. Soloman's going for access in a couple seconds."

"Roger that. I don't suppose there's any way that Soloman would like to access this hatch down here and pop it for me."

"It's gonna be no. He won't want to interfere with things too much."

"Ask anyway."

A pause while Nog said something then came back. "No."

“Figures,” said Conlon. The petite engineer made a face. “It’s never easy.”

“Our motto,” said Gomez. “Well, one of them, anyhow. If it’s easy, they don’t call us. Okay, Nog, thanks. Holler soonest.” Then, activating her magnetic boots, Gomez planted herself onto the deck. She unholstered her tool kit, pried open an access panel and isolated the hatch’s primary circuits. Fitting a portable battery pack to her patch, Gomez flicked a switch, was rewarded with a flash of orange light, and then the hatch slid to one side.

Okay. Gomez secured the battery pack to a bulkhead just in case and walked inside. Her wristlamp punched a hole through the darkness, the light sliding over the contours of reactor panels and computer banks and then, just beyond, the silver gleam of a railing lining the drop-off: a void now, a hole in Empok Nor’s heart where the core would’ve been. She stepped forward, poking her lamp here and there until she found the main computer console. Without knowing why, she smeared dust off the console with the flat of her left hand, then played the light over her glove and the rim of gray fringe held by electrostatic charge.

“Commander.” It was Conlon at her right elbow, and Gomez turned, looked down, read understanding in her dark eyes. “We’ve got work to do.”

“Right.” Slapping dust from her glove, Gomez turned aside and nodded at Hawkins. “Contact the da Vinci. Let’s get to work and then?” She huffed out a breath. “We get the hell out of here.”

* * *

Nog stabbed his tricorder harder than absolutely necessary. That little dressing-down in front of the da Vinci crew was all kinds of fun and thank you, Captain Kira. The captain’s displeasure had been like a smack right on a lobe. He’d gotten dressed down before. That wasn’t it. But to have it happen in front of a crew that Nog had worked hard to prove he could do whatever engineering job they could, and light-years better? That was worse.

And talk about worse. Last time he’d set foot on Empok Nor he’d nearly gotten fried by a computerized Androssi security sentry device: a brown ball that shot arcs of electricity like a Van de Graaff generator on hormones. Time before that, the Jem’Hadar kidnapped his grandmother. Time before that, Garak had taken potshots. Vic told him once: Kid, relax, third time’s the charm. Except it hadn’t been a charm at all, although he had convinced the da Vinci crew to tow the station back and yes, he had saved DS9’s butt.

Still, given all this? Nog figured he was within his rights to expect all kinds of bad stuff.

Furious, he jabbed at his tricorder, forcing his mind to concentrate on his readings and Soloman. The Bynar wasn’t as hesitant as he’d been the last time. Probably more time being alone had done that for him, made him autonomous.

Yeah, and Nog still hated being alone. Nodrad music this time, though, and the Bynar was oblivious. The blue computer glow gave the Bynar an eerie, otherworldly quality, and if Nog looked closely enough, he’d probably be able to see the whiz of computer code mirrored in Soloman’s eyes. Soloman was completely silent, not chittering away the way he’d done with DS9’s computer but just still, staring. Intent. Something spooky was going on in the distance; Soloman was watching, and Nog wasn’t a part of anything, really.

Out of the loop again. What was it he'd thought about the last time as he hung in the Rio Grande? Right before the da Vinci had shown up in the Trivas system? Yeah, he'd thought about AR-558, and about how he'd been humiliated. He'd thought about loneliness, too, and here he was, full circle, as if he were on some weird carnival ride that stopped in just exactly the same place every single time.

"Face it," he muttered, though he probably could've shouted in the Bynar's ear, Soloman looked that out of it. "Nog, you're a bad-luck magnet."

As if to prove him right, his tricorder picked that moment to sound an alarm—and Soloman screamed.

* * *

For Soloman it was glorious, but in a way that was as much about pain as pleasure. He was doing nothing, really, other than watching the stream of numbers racing across his monitor. He disengaged himself as much as he could, what a human might call free-floating attention, trying not to focus on any one parameter but merely to hover and allow the impression and the form of the datastream wash over him like cool water.

Unbidden, his thoughts tugged him to the last time he'd been privy to the same blaze of information crossing between systems: the Bynars 1011 and 1110 on Ishtar Station. Communing with the other Bynars had activated memories Soloman had suppressed. He hadn't told Lense about it. He hadn't told anyone. He'd felt it as envy and knew it now as... a void. Being self-contained was an asset and a curse. Communing with DS9's computer, or the da Vinci's, or any of a host of other computers was like trying to snuggle up to a ghost for warmth. But there was Empok Nor's unseen twin matching move for move, like a perfectly mirrored counterpart. Like he'd been for 111...

What? Soloman's mind lurched. A tiny prickle of something close to alarm touched his mind. He'd seen something, he'd... Unconscious that he was doing so, Soloman leaned forward, as if to bring the numbers into better focus. A synchronization signature whizzed by, and before he knew what he was doing, because it was second nature, Soloman honed in, focused, and...

There! Soloman's breath caught. No, it can't be, it can't... His head throbbed and his heart ballooned with joy and pain; without realizing he had, he snagged the signature....

Stop...

...meshed, and then his thoughts...

Stop...

...whirled like leaves caught in a fast-flowing stream, swirling and hurtling out of control and...

Stopstopstop...

* * *

"Stop, stop, stop!"

Not something Soloman had said: The word, the voice was from outside, not the datastream, and Soloman pushed back, hard, forcing his mind to stay with the synchronization signature.

"STOP!"

The word tore the veil of his communion, and Soloman was jarred free with a violence that was physical. He was thrown back; even weightless, he hit hard, rebounded off the deck before getting slammed down and pinned into place. His head bounced against his helmet like a bean rattling in a tin can. His concentration blanked; the communion blacked out, and his mind was hurled, brutally, into his body, his consciousness snapping back like a stretched, elastic cord snipped in two.

Soloman stopped screaming. His throat was raw and his ears rang. When he opened his eyes, he was staring into Nog's faceplate.

"Are you okay?" Nog shouted even though it was perfectly silent now. "What happened? Are you all right? What the hell happened?"

Soloman cleared his throat. "I am fine, Lieutenant. If you would not mind getting off, please?"

"Oh." Nog rolled off, then extended a hand and helped Soloman, who'd activated his boots, clamber to his feet. "Sorry. It's just that my tricorder registered a spike in your chip, and then you started screaming and I..."

"I apologize," said Soloman, embarrassed that he'd been so public with something so very private. "It is only...this datastream is a search program and I found a synchronization signature. A Bynar signature."

"What? A Bynar?" Nog was goggle-eyed. "Who?"

"One-one-zero," said Soloman. "The person on the other end of this datastream is...it...it is I."

Chapter 3

"Give that to me again, Soloman." Gold's voice was measured and Soloman did not detect that his captain thought he had gone insane. "A search program in a parallel timeline?"

"Yes, Captain." Soloman and Nog were still in Empok Nor's ops. "We can agree that parallel universes and worlds within worlds contain all possible arrangements of matter, yes?"

"I got that."

"Time is just a concept, a way of ordering matter in a sequence our minds can handle. There is no time. There are events that occur in a multiverse upon which we impose order."

"That's a relief," said Hawkins, who'd come running as soon as Nog called for help. "There are a couple of dates I'd like to —"

"Stow it," said Gold. An audible sigh. "Soloman, what are you talking about here? Time travel?"

"No, what I am saying is that the multiverse is fixed. The fact that I accessed my own synchronization signature, even for an instant, implies that I have tapped into another point in the timeline of a parallel universe. I have found myself somewhere and somewhen else. Therefore, I can commune with this 110 at another point in his universe and determine what it is that 110 is searching for."

“For all you know, son, that is precisely what the Androssi want you—and us—to believe. Remember, the Androssi programmed their sentry security systems to respond to our combadge codes. Anyone smart enough to design this code or whatever it is whereda Vinci has been before had to bet we’d be back when things went haywire.”

That stopped Soloman for a moment. “That is a possibility I had not considered.”

“You’d better. You’re proposing that you commune with... well, with an alien. We won’t even call 110 a mirror—you. He’s his own person. He represents forks in the roads you did not take and some you can’t imagine.”

“For that matter,” Nog said, “how do we know that the Bynars there even call themselves Bynars, or think the same way? Maybe they’re the quantum computers: all things at once.” The Ferengi had recovered from his initial panic and was busily collating the information he’d stored from Soloman’s foray into Empok Nor’s computer. “There may not even be a Federation. He—if it is a he—won’t know what we’re talking about. We’ve had some experience on DS9 with mirror universes—from the reports I’ve read, we shouldn’t assume anything.”

“That may be true, Lieutenant, but we must try,” said Soloman. “That 110 bears some trace of who I am, or else I would not have recognized myself, correct? This is our best option.”

“Or a booby trap.” This, from Gomez down at the fusion core where she and Conlon were halfway through rigging up the generators. “Soloman, you’ll be making a choice. Once you do this, we’re locked in because everything will change around what you do. How do you know this is the right way?”

“I do not. But it is a choice.”

“So is not taking it.”

Gold said, “There’s something else. If you’ve reached, well, you and this 110 is still Bynar enough that you recognize you—he’s probably bonded, right? To his own 111? And if he is, wouldn’t you also have picked up her synchronization signature?”

It was the question he had been waiting for, and he knew what he would say. There were, in fact, two questions. But Soloman knew that Captain Gold did not have enough information to ask one of them. Indeed, it would never occur to Captain Gold to ask because the Bynars of his universe did not possess the ability. (The ability was there: alien and utterly surreal in its intimacy.) Soloman wondered if he would feel differently about himself afterward, and decided that this was a risk he was willing to take. So, he took it.

“No,” Soloman lied. “I did not.”

Chapter

4

On red alert, the light crimson as blood, their alarm klaxons screaming, they slammed to port and let gravity work for them. The ship spun so quickly that Bajor flashed by in a swirl of blue ocean and white clouds, and then they were roaring past the station, picking up speed, hammering on full impulse, trying to get enough distance to go to warp. A risky thing and some kind of crappy odds, pushing the Gettysburg

nose-first toward Bajor and then angling off, using gravity as a slingshot to hurl them out of high orbit and past the station, but the ship was getting pretty banged up, and Captain David Gold was outnumbered: a Keldon -class warship and two Hideki -29 class ships on their tail. But if he was lucky, Bajor's gravity well would snatch at those bursts of disruptor fire, and they might just pull off this cockamamie heist.

But then McAllan shouted a warning and Gold spun in his command chair; saw the Keldon -class warship coming for them on an intercept course, right between the eyes. His stomach bottomed out. "Helm, evasive maneuvers! Keep our aft shields to them!"

"Trying, Captain!" Wong's teeth were set, and the cords of his neck bulged as if he could move the stubborn ship by wishing it so. "That last disruptor hit tagged our starboard maneuvering thrusters; they're really slow, and she's sluggish on the turn, I can't—"

Gold cut him off with a savage cut of his hand. "McAllan, what about my torpedoes?"

"Torpedoes still offline, sir!" At tactical, immediately behind Gold's command chair, McAllan's square features were set in intense concentration, his fingers flying over his weapons console. "Working to restore, but I've got phasers back!"

"Then what the hell are you waiting for, an invitation? Fire phasers!" Gold bellowed. He turned back just in time to see an emerald-green glitter, and then he was out of his chair. "Wong! Hard to port, hard—"

A series of disruptor salvos burst over the ship's hull. The impacts were like being punched broadside in rapid fire. The Gettysburg bucked, shimmied; Gold felt the deck jitter, and he would've fallen if his XO hadn't snagged him.

"Damage report, Lieutenant McAllan," said his XO.

"Hull breach on decks twenty through twenty-five, Commander. Starboard shields are forty percent and our inertial dampers will not survive another salvo."

"Starboard maneuvering thrusters are out, Captain," said Wong.

A hail sliced the air. "Captain, this is Gomez. We've got a plasma leak. I'm going to have to vent her if you want to get out of here in one piece. But you've got to move us to a more stable region of space. All that weapons fire out there, it'll touch off that plasma like—"

"Incoming message," McAllan broke in. "Terok Nor, Captain."

"Let him cool his thrusters," said Gold. "Gomez, prepare to vent on my mark, you got that?" Then, to McAllan: "When I give the word, you touch off phasers."

"Phasers, sir? But with the plasma..." Then McAllan's face brightened. "Roger that, sir."

"Attaboy." Gold looked at Wong. "You clear?"

Wong was already busy inputting coordinates. "Crystal. Just give the word."

"Count on it." Gold nodded, tugged on his uniform shirt, and turned toward the viewscreen. "Onscreen."

The viewscreen shimmered; a face blurred, then coalesced into features Gold recognized. "What do you

want, Garak?”

“Why, Captain Gold.” Gul Garak’s oily tenor undulated from the speakers. “You astound me. Isn’t it obvious? You stole something, naughty you, and now I’d like it back. You do that and I’d be ecstatic to order my ships to stand down.”

“So generous. Let me guess: In exchange for your magnanimity, I presume I’ll be your guest and will be...convinced, in the most subtle ways you can devise, to hand over the precise location of all of Starfleet’s forces in this sector, right?”

“Not only a brave captain but a mind reader, as well. Ah, Gold, you are a treasure. You never fail to astound me. Not as cultured as Picard by any means, may he rest in peace, but still very charming in your way.”

“I notice that your high esteem for Picard didn’t exactly translate into any unwillingness to execute him.”

“You wound me.” Garak placed both hands over his left breast. “When it was over, I was stricken for at least an hour. Picard was such an interesting conversation-alist, too. So bookish. Not nearly the boor Dukat was —and, oh my, such language! That man did have a mouth. Assassinating Dukat was a matter of self-preservation, I assure you.”

“No doubt. I hear Dukat was pretty well off, too.”

“Yes, indeed. You may rest easy that his fortune was divided fairly among his various friends. And his command, well, let us just say that I feel the weight of my responsibilities here on Terok Nor. Fortunately, Dukat’s very own, very special comfort woman is quite...well...honestly, I blush.”

“Spare me the details. I can’t imagine the Bajorans being anything but hospitable and oh-so-comforting to their paid thugs.”

“Captain, you cut me to the quick. You know very well that we are here at the invitation of the Bajorans. It is you who trespass. But, oh, bother the details. Let’s bury the hatchet, shall we? Why don’t you stand down and beam on over to Terok Nor? We’ll chat over a nice snifter of Lakatian brandy: an excellent vintage, astounding nose, and the finish! To die for.”

“In the words of an exceedingly bright engineer...up your shaft, Garak.”

“Such a consummate wit. Captain Gold, I shall very much regret killing you. It will pain me, truly.”

“Not half as much as this will,” said Gold. He turned to McAllan. “Now.”

On cue, McAllan cut the channel; Garak’s face winked out; and Gold whirled on his heel. “Wong, show these bastards our sweet pinkasses! McAllan, aft shields; give them all you’ve got! Gomez!”

“On it, sir! Venting now...done!”

“Fire phasers! Wong, warp three, now!”

Suddenly, the space around the Keldon flashed as McAllan touched off phasers into a swirl of vented plasma. The plasma pillowed into a mushrooming orange-red cloud; the Keldon and Hideki’s disappeared in the fiery slurry of ignited plasma and gas, and the glare was so bright Gold blinked, looked away. In

the same instant, Wong whirled the ship to starboard and the Gettysburg shot into warp.

* * *

“Are they away?” From his office in Terok Nor, Gul Elim Garak watched space ignite. His predominant emotion was a grudging sort of admiration. “Zotat, are they away?”

“They’re gone.” Zotat’s reply sputtered amid pops of ionization static. “Shall we give chase?”

“No, no.” Garak raised a finger in admonishment. “Let the brave captain and his crew go. We’ll be meeting them again, very soon. Take up your stations at your prearranged coordinates and signal the other vessels to do likewise. I will notify you when it is time. Garak out.”

In the silence that followed, Garak raised a snifter of very old, very fine Lakatian brandy to his visitor in the chair opposite. “A toast.”

“Indeed.” The Androssi overseer was male and slim with a skin tone that was more gray than yellow. Unlike many of his kind, his face was clean-shaven, but his hair was a lush mane that stretched beyond his waist in a darkly amber cascade that he wore loose—again, not like others of his kind. His right and left nostrils bristled with an array of five nose rings that bespoke his position. “Isn’t celebration a bit premature?”

“What, you doubt the abilities of the Bynars?”

“What I doubt is that the Bynars have the necessary skills to utilize the device to our advantage. That would be...unfortunate.”

“But not irreparable. And if the Bynars succeed!” Garak flashed a grin that was all teeth. “Think of what we shall deliver to the Bajoran Assembly in a mere twenty hours. A treaty and their gods: Not even the religious caste can argue with that. I drink to your health, Overseer—and to David Gold, noble captain, patron saint of lost causes.”

Garak tipped his snifter to his mouth. The nut-flavored liquor was smooth and warmed a track to his belly. Garak released a sigh of pure contentment. “Who says religion and politics don’t mix?”

* * *

Still blinking away stars, Gold thumbed a tear from his left cheek. His eyes stung. “Pursuit?”

McAllan studied his boards, then shook his head. “They’re not after us.”

“Good. Stand down from red alert. Tell Gomez to get on that plasma leak. Wong, how long to rendezvous?”

“Three hours, forty-seven minutes, sir.”

“Very well.” Gold nodded at his communications officer. “Haznedl, get a message to Kira. Tell her we’ll be at the rendezvous point in four hours.”

“That ruse will only work once, Captain,” said Gold’s XO. He was about as nonplussed as Gold had ever seen him: sweating so much that the man’s black hair gleamed like a skullcap. “Garak will not make the same mistake again.”

“I’m kinda amazed he made it the first time. Garak doesn’t make mistakes.”

He was cut off by the shrill of a hail. “Bridge, this is sickbay.” An eerie, high-pitched wail on the channel, and then the sound suddenly grew distanced and muffled, as if the person had been moved into another room. “You’ve got to get down here right now.”

“Sickbay?” Gold’s XO arched an eyebrow, his left. “How many casualties, Dr. Kane?”

A snort. “Enough to keep me busy, that’s for sure. But that’s not why I’m calling. Captain Gold, it’s the Bynars.”

Gold groaned. “Oh, no.” Damn, that would be perfect; just perfect. We go through all this and then the damn Bynars can’t even commune with the thing... “Are they hurt?”

“We don’t know.” Another voice: female, taut with urgency. “The Bynars were communing with that device...and now 110’s unresponsive.”

“Unresponsive?”

“Like in a coma, sir,” said Kane.

“What?” Gold and his XO exchanged glances. “Dax, what happened?” asked Gold.

“I don’t know,” said Dax. “But we’ve got to figure this out, and fast. The Bynars are the key to finding the wormhole, I’m sure of it. Only...”

“What?”

“Well, 111 says there was somebody there, in the datastream. Captain, she’s totally hysterical. She says the Bynar’s a singleton, and he’s got a name.”

“Not a designation?” said the XO.

“No, a name; 111 said he was very specific. Only she’s so upset, I can’t make sense of what she’s saying. But without the Bynars, Captain...it’s over.”

This was true. There was dead silence as Gold and his XO looked at one another. Then Commander Salek said, “Actually, I believe the expression is...we’re reshtuped.”

Chapter 5

He drifted the way one did in the cold vacuum of space. Soloman’s first EVA had been over Byanus, and he remembered the moment he and 111 stepped from the lip of the ship. Everyone said that the first time, they expected to fall. But 110 and 111 did not; 110 recalled that the sight of their world—steel-gray oceans and dusky landmasses glimmering with yellow lozenges of light—made their heads balloon. They were at once very small and quite huge, and the feeling was so expansive they could describe it as nothing short of ecstasy.

And yet there was this now, this second chance, and it was almost more than Soloman could bear. There was no describing it, really, but it reminded him a bit of the moment immediately after stepping out into space, expecting to fall and yet not. He hovered, watching the blaze of information passing between the two Bynars—and yes, it was 110, and there, his own heart. And he studied what they were able to do with each other that went far beyond anything Bynars of his universe knew—but how perfect; a logical extension of our abilities—and then, he found his opportunity and dropped into the datastream.

In an instant, he was submerged. The sensation was like leaping into a whirlpool, only the water was made of light above, around, below: a cocoon of sensation that was at once totally alien and utterly familiar. He sensed two things at once: 110's instinctive flinch at his intrusion, and 111's hesitation. A slight stutter to her datastream, as if her mind had tripped.

He longed to touch her mind but first things first. He folded himself into 110, seamlessly, not unlike an anomalous bit of code that instantly mutates. And then, he reached for her with thoughts both eager and tentative....

Do not be afraid. It is I. I am 110 and yet my own person. I am...

But he was not fast enough. Maybe it was that he was, truly, alien. She was terrified and even as he soothed, cajoled, pleaded, she kicked back, pushed, tore away so violently that 110's mind shrieked in agony—because it was not just a datastream from which he was being ejected; it was more complicated than that; and it hurt so much, their minds bled, and they were flailing now, the way drowning men snatch at a passing twig just before they go over the falls; she was gone, winging away, leaving chaos in her wake, and he/they left behind in a strong current that pulled him/them under...

Do not be afraid. Come back. Please...

...into the blackness...into an empty...

* * *

Gomez squatted next to the Bynar. Swathed in the cocoon of his suit, Soloman sat, perfectly rigid. His gray-white skin was still as a waxen statue. He didn't blink. His breathing was so slow and shallow Gomez checked his suit's readings just to make sure he was still alive. She moved her gloved hand up and down in his line of sight. Soloman didn't twitch, didn't blink, didn't move. The readings scrolling on the computer panel were reflected on his faceplate and mirrored in the blue, still pool of his irises. The embedded chip on his right temple winked in a rapid staccato. "How long has he been like this?"

"About twenty minutes now." Nog nibbled the left corner of his lower lip as he studied his tricorder. "Started about three minutes into it. Like he tripped into something, or got sucked in."

"Has his buffer failed?"

"No. His neuropeptides are sky-high, like his brain is overloaded, or multitasking: serotonin, GABA, VBC, psilosynine. I wish I knew if all that's good or bad."

"If he's not responding, I'd say that's bad." Gold's voice, attenuated through the intercom in ops. Gomez and Conlon had gotten life support working in this room at least, so they had removed their helmets. (Soloman's was still on, though; Gomez thought it best not to disturb him.) In the background, Gomez heard Tev barking orders to reinforced a Vinci's stabilizers. Shields were up, so there was no way to

beam Soloman off Empok Nor—or even know if she should. The interval between distortion waves was shorter, and Nog’s readings confirmed what Gomez feared: that Soloman’s interface was the trigger.

Like he’s opened a gateway he can’t close...

“It’s getting pretty rough up here,” said Gold. “Tell me what you do know, and let’s go from there.”

“It’s like he’s frozen, sir. He’s still receiving input,” said Nog.

“To what? This twin? Himself?”

“Yes, sir, a quantum twin,” said Gomez. She was about to say more when she took a second to really think about what she’d just said. A quantum twin... and if this twin is Soloman before he became unbonded, then... “Oh, my God.”

“What?”

She said, very carefully, “Maybe, sir, it’s that he can’t terminate the connection, or maybe... he doesn’t want to. Or both.”

A fizz of static. Then, Gold said, “Come again?”

* * *

“A coma?” Gold frowned across 110’s body at Dax and Kane. The Bynar had been moved to a biobed, and 111 had been sedated. “What do you mean acoma?”

Dr. Tori Kane was a small woman, a strawberry blonde with freckles and green-gray eyes, and a head shorter than Gomez. She gave Gold a fierce, moderately contemptuous look: an expression that screamed *nu, what, I’m speaking Swahili?* “I mean,” she said with the type of enunciation a teacher might use on an exceptionally slow student, “that 110 is unresponsive. His autonomic functions—blood pressure, pulse, respiration, temperature control—they’re fine. But he won’t come out of it. Or, maybe, he can’t.”

Salek stood at Gold’s left elbow. “Do we know why, Doctor?”

“It’s his chip. He’s... latched on to something the Bynars found when they communed with that device you brought on board.” Her head jerked left to a cylindrical object made of shiny metal and bristling with nasty-looking quills. “I still say this is one cockeyed plan.”

To Kane’s right, Dax stiffened. “It’s necessary.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Kane waved Dax’s comment away. “And I’m just the hired help.”

“Kane,” Gold warned.

“Fine, okay.” Kane gave a noisy exhale. “Captain, for all you know the Androssi hid something inside, like a computer virus.”

“Then why wasn’t 111 affected?”

“Beats me. Maybe the plan was to knock out one of them. Just as effective; neither one can function without the other.”

“Then why don’t we just shut it down?” asked Gold.

“Because I don’t know what that would do to 110, and if I understand the mission right, you need the Bynars.”

This was, unfortunately, true. Gold said, “But another Bynar? In the datastream? How? I didn’t think Bynars could exist as singletons.”

“What I don’t understand is how a singleton could interface with this device at all,” said Dax. Her long, dark brown hair was pulled into the ponytail she habitually sported, but errant strands straggled here and there, giving her a frayed look. Backhanding hair from her forehead, she sighed, and the cuffed earring in her right lobe jingled. “For that matter, where is he?”

“Perhaps,” said Salek, “this device is contaminated with something that can mimic a Bynar’s neural patterns. We know that the Androssi are exceptionally skilled at developing booby traps. Although one fails to understand how sabotage equates to the capture of an unintelligent bird.”

Dax ignored the Vulcan. Her eyes were that color of intense, concentrated brown that bordered on black, and now she drilled Gold with a look. “This is our last chance. The Bajor Assembly formalizes its treaty with Cardassia in less than a day. We have to find the wormhole before then. If we can’t access this device with the Bynars, then we have to go back to Terok Nor and find another way.”

Gold shook his head. “Not on your life, or mine for that matter. Treaties can be broken. You find this wormhole, and the religious faction is as big as you say? Then Bajor’ll come around. Now either the Bynars can access these...these Prophets with this device, or they can’t. That’d be tough from your end, but that doesn’t mean we can’t adapt the technology for ourselves. You’ll find another way.”

“But too late to be of any practical benefit.” Dax pulled herself to her full height and looked down at Gold, who was shorter by half a head. “Once that treaty is formalized, then the Cardassians have every excuse to round up the religious sect, herd them into camps and out of public view. Then the Cardassians wait. Enough time passes, people forget, and then the Cardassians get rid of the religion because they won’t want dissension. It will be genocide, Captain. You can’t allow that to happen.”

“The galaxy’s full of nasty people and bad things happen all the time. Once the Bajorans formalize that treaty, Starfleet won’t want to interfere in a civil dispute.”

“And pray tell, what is this?” Dax swept a hand around to include the ship, the stolen device. “What, this is just us passing through? Or is it perfectly all right for the Federation to interfere before the treaty’s finalized?”

Gold shrugged. “You make your opportunities. One of those diplomacy things.”

“Don’t you mean that the Federation sees an opportunity to develop Bajor as a resource? Uridium brings in a lot of money. Surely, I wasn’t mistaken in my impressions about the Federation being strapped for resources?”

It was an open secret that the majority of the Federation’s seventy member systems were resource-poor. The Federation had to expand if it was going to survive, and they’d poured much of their

available resources into a fleet of starships: window-dressing and a show of force since there weren't replacements to back them up. The whole thing reminded Gold of mid-twentieth-century Earth with the A-bomb. Drop two and pretend you have a bunch more. On the other hand, the fleet would, at the very least, have a fighting chance at grabbing what planets it could. With its uridium ore and the peculiarities of a loosely worded agreement, Bajor was prime real estate: a jewel in the Cardassian crown that the Federation wouldn't mind stealing.

"Yeah, there's that. But I can imagine a universe without the Cardassians, that's for damn sure. I'd be tickled pink if the Androssi crawled back under whatever rock they came from. Hell, for that matter, I'd like to get paid more." Gold planted his fists on his hips. "Starfleet's in this because we're allies with Kira. Personally, I don't care what religion the Bajorans get; they can believe in the Tooth Fairy, for all I care. All we want is Bajor..." He stopped, realizing that last remark had been a mistake.

Dax's eyes slitted. "The only reason Kira's allied with the Federation is that your record of tolerance for others is better than the Cardassians'. You actually seem to care about civil liberties. As long as we're allowed to devote ourselves to the Prophets..."

"You? Dax, you're a Trill. These aren't your people."

"That's irrelevant. I'm the only one who's ever communed with an Orb—something you cannot know or understand—and the Prophets have spoken to me. The wormhole is in Bajoran space, somewhere, perhaps in a subspace pocket, and once opened, it will remain stable. All we have to do is find it. Now whether you like it or not, the organized resistance on Bajor is a religious one. It's that simple. If Kira hadn't vouched for the Federation, you'd be out of the equation. You need me."

"I'd say the need is pretty damn mutual."

"Yes and no. Bajor requires what I can bring them. You want a slice of Bajor's wealth, and we want the right to worship as we please. We want the wormhole, and the wormhole is prophecy, Captain. The truth is in prophecy."

Gold barked a nasty laugh. "Yeah? Well, I prophesize that we're gonna end up as a big plasma smear if we go back anywhere near Terok Nor right now without confirmation of where this wormhole really is. Now I'm glad you've gotten religion. I'm ecstatic that you've gotten the word that your Prophet buddies are waiting on you to break them out. But get this straight: We take a breather. We make repairs; we meet up with Kira. We hope that 110 there wakes up. Then we'll see."

"You mean that you'll see if furthering the Bajoran resistance's goals and those of Starfleet are the same."

"Yeah, I think I just said that."

"Look," said Kane, "I hate to interrupt this little lovefest, but we've still got a problem here. Either we figure a way to get 110 back in working order, or we can kiss this mission good-bye."

"What do you suggest?"

"You ask me, 111's got to be talked into establishing a link with her bondmate, that's what. Can't Bynars, I dunno, repair each other? I mean, they're essentially computers, right? So, they worry about getting infected, but they've also got to have some repair mechanisms. Maybe 111 can reboot him, or something."

“But if you observe, Doctor, 110 is in active communication with someone else. His chip,” Salek nodded at the Bynar’s chip that flashed and winked, “indicates intense activity. He appears to have interfaced with someone, or some other system.”

“It’s a Prophet,” said Dax.

“Will you give it a rest?” said Gold. “The only person who can tell us who or what is 111. We—”

His combadge beeped. “Bridge to Gold.”

He patted the channel open. “Gold.”

“Incoming message from Captain Kira on the Li, sir.”

“I’ll take that in my ready room,” said Gold. He nodded at Kane, turned on his heel and left, Salek a step behind.

Kane waited until the doors to sickbay hissed shut. Then she turned to Dax. “You want to talk to 111, or shall I?”

“I’ll do it.” Jadzia Dax’s features hardened, the skin drawn tight across her mouth. “They will make contact with the Prophets—and then we’ll go back to Terok Nor, and Bajor.”

“Gee,” said Kane. “Swell.”

Chapter 6

“Quantum twins?” Gold repeated. “Gomez, are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“Yes, sir,” said Gomez, wishing the truth was otherwise. “I think that Soloman’s not only found himself. He’s found 111. That’s why he was so eager to reestablish contact.”

“But eager enough to lie? Soloman’s never lied.”

“That we know of. Maybe he didn’t have something worth lying about before.”

“Well, this is a hell of a thing. What do we do now? We can’t just wait around. Ever since he initiated this last link, those wavefronts have increased.”

“That follows. The channel’s open now, permanently, unless we can get Soloman to break off contact.”

“Can we do that for Soloman without harming him?”

“I doubt it. But since we haven’t found anything here, we have to assume that whatever device has initiated, or is potentiating this effect, it’s got to be somewhere else.”

“In this other universe?”

“I’d say that’s likely, sir.”

“What about getting them a message? Ask them to disengage. Can we do that?”

“Maybe they don’t want to either,” said Gomez. She sighed. “Remember, this is a search program. They’re looking for something. So we’re in the dark until we can figure a way to contact it, or them.”

“Well,” Nog scratched a lobe, “I might be able to piggyback a signal. Heck, I might be able to slip in the same way Soloman did.”

“A self-authorizing language?” asked Gomez.

“Worth a try.”

Gold said, “What about destroying Empok Nor’s computer?”

“That’s kind of drastic. If I can get in, maybe I can shut them both down without hurting Soloman.”

“If they’re even willing to lis—” And that’s as far as Gold got.

Suddenly, there was the squall of a red alert—and then a hugeboom that was so loud Gomez clapped her hands against her ears. Stunned, ears ringing, Gomez fumbled with her tricorder to see where the problem was on Empok Nor.

Only the problem wasn’t on Empok Nor. Not that they could see. And when they tried to reestablish contact withda Vinci to find out what was going on, they couldn’t.

Because da Vinci was gone.

Chapter 7

“Your Bynar’swhat?” On Gold’s vidscreen, Kira Nerys’s image flopped back in her seat, fingered her ridges and sighed. “Well, that’s just terrific. What did Jadzia say?”

He was alone in his ready room; Salek was on the bridge. They were on a secured channel, so he could say what he thought. Kira was good that way; hell of a woman. She was the only Bajoran Gold hadn’t felt like throttling. The other religious types were so . . . pie in the sky, he wanted to punch in their teeth. “Dax thinks that the Bynars were getting messages from these Prophets or something equally absurd. If you want my opinion, I think the Bynars tripped into an Androssi snare. But try getting Dax to face up to it. She’s being totally unreasonable. Demands we go back to Terok Nor.”

“That could be a problem.”

“You’re telling me. You didn’t get shot at. Do you think you can talk sense into her?”

“Probably not.” Kira took a sip from a tall mug of something piping hot; Gold saw curls of steam. Probably Reman coffee. Wretched drink; the stuff smelled like sweaty feet. “You’ve got to remember that

Jadzia did find that Orb, and she does appear to have accessed it before it went dark. But the stories go that only a select few are allowed to commune with the Prophets. So maybe Jadzia's the Emissary."

"Do you believe that?"

"Anything's possible, David."

"Yeah," said Gold, rubbing the knuckles of his left hand with his right. "And maybe she needs her medication upped. Maybe she's lying."

"She got evaluated, remember? All the psychiatrists say otherwise. The Betazoids swear she's telling the truth. Anyway, why would she lie? She's a xenoarchaeologist; she's Trill. Why should she care about Bajor? There was nothing in her record to suggest she was looking for an Orb, and it was only dumb luck that she stumbled on that Cardassian derelict."

"Doesn't it bother you a little bit that a non-Bajoran is the only person who's talked to these Prophets? If they even exist, I mean."

"I could say that the Prophets move in mysterious ways."

"If you want to watch me get sick," said Gold, "yeah, you could."

Kira's mouth twitched into a grin. "Might be worth seeing. Of course, it bothers me, more than a little. Makes me wonder what we Bajorans are doing wrong. Maybe our faith doesn't run deeply enough, or it could be that we just like money too much. What about you?"

"What about me? You mean faith?" Gold's eyebrows arched for his hairline. "I'm a die-hard pragmatist and card-carrying cynic. I'm just following orders. Starfleet says jump; I say how high."

"Oh, right," Kira drawled. "That's why you volunteered for this. I think you like rooting for the underdog."

"Excuse me, but we're the underdogs, remember? This is a long shot at best. It's something to which Starfleet could commit a limited number of ships—namely, the *Gettysburg*. It's a big galaxy, Kira. Easier fights than this one."

"So why aren't you off somewhere else fighting the good fight?"

It was a good question. Because he hated injustice? There was plenty of that to go around. Didn't have to go to Bajor for that, although he couldn't exactly call the Cardassians unjust. More like benevolent dictators.

For the Federation, then? No, that wasn't it either. Gold looked at Kira and saw her passion, the set of her jaw and the fire in her eyes; and he thought back to Dax who royally pissed him off—and made him envious as all hell.

Because I want to believe in something strongly enough that I'd be willing to die for it. His gaze dropped to the gold circlet of a wedding band he still wore, and his throat balled as he thought about a girl with a mane of chestnut hair. Because I'd like to care about something again as much as I loved you. . . .

Kira must have read his struggle because she came to his rescue and said, "Whatever your reasons, I'm

grateful you're here, David. The Assembly won't be able to pull together a government to ratify the Cardassian treaty if we can give Bajor a reason not to. Nothing like a little miracle or two to get folks lining up on the right side in a hurry."

"That's all you need?" Gold managed a smile. "I got a miracle lying around somewhere, right up my sleeve. Piece of cake."

They fell silent for a moment. Then Kira said, "I've got some bad news. Word's out that the Klingons'll throw in with the Cardassians."

"Damn."

"Yup. They do that, all bets are off. The Remans are too busy putting down the Romulans to care, and even with the Vulcans on your side, I don't think the Federation can help but watch its influence shrink. Then? Maybe we're all going to start getting used to taspar eggs."

"Maybe. What will your people do?"

"If Starfleet pulls out? I don't know. I still can't fathom that the Cardassians might get away with religious genocide. Boggles the mind that other Bajorans would stand by and let it happen just because the religious sect is a minority."

"It happens," said Gold. "Study Earth. It happens. Why not get off Bajor?"

"Bajor's our home. We have a right to worship as we please. No, we have to take the battle right to the Cardassians."

"With what? Harsh language? You have maybe ten ships? Fifteen? You know, I hate to be the one to break this to you, but most Bajorans don't care. They're not waiting around for you to rescue them. The Cardassians aren't oppressing you. There are no Bajoran slaves. Your government's in bed with the Cardassians, and no one gives a damn because life is good. There's money, there's food; everybody's happy. So you'll get yourself killed for nothing." He rubbed his face with his hands, then scrubbed his hair. His wife used to complain about how he never really learned to use a comb. What would Rachel have said about all this Prophet nonsense?

Gold wasn't aware that Kira had spoken until there was an expectant pause. "Sorry. You said?"

"I said maybe not for nothing. We're willing to die for our right to worship as we please."

"What...are you...are you serious? You're serious. What, kill yourself to make a statement?"

"Not just me." Kira's voice was hard-edged and sharp as a knife. "We take a couple hundred Cardassians with us, then that's a statement."

"I'm supposed to stand by and let you?"

"I don't see how you can stop me. Look, I think we can all agree that the wormhole is our primary objective in terms of yielding maximum dividend. If the Bajoran legends are correct, once the wormhole is open, it's stable—and whoever opens the wormhole is the One, the Emissary the religious Bajorans must follow. Think about it this way, David: What would happen if your Messiah suddenly appeared? You don't think your people would notice? I don't see how Bajor is any different. Believe me, if we get

the wormhole open, give something tangible for Bajorans, they'll think twice about the Cardassians. Even if all we give to my people is a martyr or two that calls attention to our cause. We win either way."

"I'm not sure dying's a win-win proposition. You'll get people's attention with a nice, big explosion and a couple dead Cardassians, yeah. But there's nothing noble in that, Nerys. . .and don't even start with that these-are-desperate-times crap. What you don't like is the suppression of your religion. That's your beef. You think you're going to get people to wake up by slaughtering Cardassians? Killing yourself in the process?"

"There are some things worth dying for."

"Precious few."

"You have a better idea?"

"Beyond living to fight another day? Not at the moment, no." Gold sighed. "Just—hold on. Let us try working with the Bynars."

Kira stared at him for a long moment. "All right, we'll wait. As soon as I get there, I'll have my chief engineer beam over. That ought to speed up your repairs."

"Thanks. He's a good man."

"Yes, he is. David, we have to give Bajor something to believe in other than money and science. Deep down a person wants to believe in something greater, whether those are prophets, gods, heaven, hell; angels and demons and everything else in between. Life doesn't make any sense, does it?"

"No." Gold's gaze flicked to his ring, and he felt the prick of an old pain in his heart. "But you forgot one thing that's even more important than being a martyr to a sometime god."

"And what's that?"

"Love," said Gold, looking up from his memories of a girl who blew a kiss twenty years ago as she boarded a shuttle—and then disappeared without a trace, taking everything that was best with her. "You forgot about love."

Chapter 8

Nog and Gomez and Hawkins looked at each other. "That didn't sound good," said Nog.

"You're telling me." Gomez wasted a few seconds trying to reestablish contact. "Hell." Then she felt something; no, correction: she didn't feel anything. Well, not as much anyway. "The rumblings. . .the station's not moving as much." Gomez opened a channel. "Conlon, how you doing?"

"Deflectors are up and running. I've just got to work on this manifold relay circuit and get it to settle down, but I've managed to stabilize a portion of the station around the central core and habitat ring. I wouldn't be so sure about those pylons, though. Anything we feel here is about eighty times worse out there."

“That is not what I wanted to hear,” said Gomez. “We just lost contact with the *Vinci*.”

“What?”

“Relax, it’s probably nothing,” Gomez lied. She frowned over her readings. Her tricorder had enough range to confirm that the temporal-spatial displacement waves were now propagating in all directions, reaching out far enough to wash over the *Kwlek*. “I don’t think it’s lost -lost. Probably just moved out of communicator range.”

“Without telling us?” Then, after Gomez told her about their last communication with the *Vinci*, Conlon said, “That doesn’t sound good.”

“Yeah, that’s what Nog said. Look, I’m going to secure the shuttle on one of the runabout launch pads. Beam-out will be faster than walking and now that we’ve got the deflector going, probably safe. I’ll check for the *Vinci* with the *Kwlek*’s sensors. They have better range.” She looked over at the Ferengi. “You okay here, Nog?”

“Sure,” said Nog, though he didn’t seem too happy about it. “I got stuff to do, and Soloman’s not going anywhere.”

“I can go to the shuttle,” said Hawkins.

“Negative that. You’re security, remember? So, you and your nice, shiny phaser rifle watch Nog’s backside. I’ll be right back.”

Snapping her tricorder shut, Gomez slung the strap over her shoulder and tapped her combadge to contact the shuttle’s computer for a beam-out. An instant later, she heard the familiar whine. Her skin tingled as the annular confinement beam caught and read her pattern while the transporter’s phase transition coils simultaneously disassembled her body into a phased matter-energy stream.

But after that initial second of dematerialization, when her mind invariably froze for the span of a heartbeat, she saw something. In the stream. With her. Stasis or not, Gomez could still think, and her brain digested the suggestion of a face—yes, a face, because this wasn’t something. The pattern was someone, and she registered that one’s eyes widen in shock—just as the realization of who that was smacked her in the face as solidly as a good, hard slap.

No. It can’t...

* * *

Sonya Gomez was fit to be tied. The *Gettysburg*’s matter/antimatter reaction chambers were acting up, and she was still struggling with that pesky intermix.... She exhaled, blew hair away from her face because she was flat on her back, futzing with the damn valve, her hands smudged with grime.

Her combadge trilled. “Gomez.”

“Commander, we’ve made it to the rendezvous site. The *Li*’s chief engineer’s standing by. Thought you might need the extra hands.”

A surge of relief flooded her veins. Oh, thank God... She scrambled to her feet, tugged on her soiled

uniform to smooth it into place. “Well, don’t just stand there, Feliciano, energize the crap out of him.”

Feliciano laughed. “Hold your horses, lady. Energizing. . .”

A scintillating column appeared three meters away, and Gomez watched as the sparkles resolved into an outline, coalesced—then stuttered. Gomez’s heart leapt into her mouth. God, no, not a transporter malfunction, not now . . . But then the pattern stabilized and the glitter resolved, coalesced, and became a man. The sight of him thrilled her to her toes.

“Whoa, that was pretty freaky,” said Kieran Duffy, looking befuddled. “Déjà vu all over again.”

“Whatever the hell that means. But, God,” she said as she flew into his arms. “God, how I’ve missed you.”

* * *

. . . be.

The transporter beam let her go, and Gomez exhaled. Then she stood, rigid, her heart hammering against her ribs. A distortion wave rolled past; she felt the shuttle jiggle on the docking pylon. But she couldn’t move for a second, was afraid to.

It can’t be.

Numb, she tapped on her tricorder. Nothing but residual normal for a standard beam-in. But I’m not going crazy; I saw. . . She hadn’t blacked out. This wasn’t a dream. She’d been conscious the whole time; everyone was unless you overrode the system and programmed in a stasis loop the way Scotty had.

So. Transporter psychosis? No way. Multiplex pattern buffers virtually eliminated transporter psychosis. The distortion waves weren’t anything like interphase, so she could discount interphase-induced delusions.

Okay. What if. They’d already seen that Soloman had made contact with a quantum twin. So. What if the holes between universes also allowed for a phased matter transfer—as in a transporter beam?

Then he could be alive. No, strike that. Duffy was alive in some universe somewhere, maybe even the one where Soloman was now. Then she had another thought: The Duffy she’d seen hadn’t been wearing an environmental suit.

“God, I hope he didn’t materialize on the wrong part of Empok Nor.” She didn’t know if such a thing was even possible, although she knew DS9 had experienced its share of visitors from a mirror universe. Those people appeared to have the technology to go back and forth. Maybe that Duffy had been from that mirror universe?

No. Her nose crinkled. Didn’t feel right. Most humans in that universe were slaves. In fact. . .

She blinked back to attention as the deck jerked beneath her feet. The Kwilek’s onboard computer blatted a warning, and she hurried to the pilot’s chair. First things first: Look for the *Theda Vinci*. Secure the shuttle. Then, think about how she wanted to talk to Gold about this.

When she brought up sensors, she didn’t see the *Theda Vinci*, or anything that looked like debris.

“Oh, crap,” she said. “This isn’t good.”

Chapter 9

“Give that to me again, Kane.” Gold crossed his arms over his chest. “You think what?”

They were in sickbay: Gold, Salek, Kane, Dax, and 111. Haggard and paler than usual, the Bynar looked like a refugee from a month-long siege.

“I said that 110 looks to be in communication with another computer system,” said Kane. “I can’t nail it down precisely; that is, I know there’s a code flowing back and forth but whenever I try to tap into it, it changes. I can’t get a precise lock. Don’t even know where or when it’s coming from.”

Gold blinked. “What do you mean, when?”

“Exactly what I said. There’s something very...odd about this thing. I’m no computer whiz by any stretch. Bynar physiology is tough; half the time, you got to look at them more like sick computers than humanoids.” Catching herself, Kane cringed. “Sorry,” she said to 111.

“It...is...all right,” said 111, and Gold almost winced. Listening to the Bynar was like revving up an old digital recording from centuries back on a machine that skipped and lurched from one section to the next.

If I think it’s tough to listen to, imagine what it must be like for 111.

“You’re not considering the obvious, you know. What if it’s not another computer?” Jazzia gave an adamant toss of her head that set her earring flashing in the light. “What if 110’s in contact with a Prophet? We’ve always hypothesized this possibility, that the Prophets are coherent energy. The Androssi specialize in using quantum dimensional shifts. But who’s to say that their tinkering didn’t open up a rift that connects us with the Prophets?”

“That is a logical hypothesis,” said Salek.

“Yeah, but with only one way to prove it,” said Kane. She looked at 111 who shrank back perceptibly and in a way that Gold suddenly felt, keenly, how much they were using the Bynars to their advantage: not as partners but tools. “111 has to be willing to try communing with him.”

“What...perhaps...” The Bynar quailed. “This might...be...infection. Not...a Prophet.”

Kane made an impatient sound, and Jazzia opened her mouth but Gold silenced her with a look. Hunkering down on his haunches, he brought his face level with 111’s. “It might be an infection. You’re right to be frightened. No one blames you for that. Hell, it shows good sense. But 110’s not coming out of it. Kane can’t help him. We humans value love. I don’t know about Bynaus, and I can’t know your heart. But what price are you willing to pay to help your bondmate?”

So was that a cheap shot, or what? Gold, you hypocrite. He watched 111’s struggle, hating himself more with every passing second. He was very conscious of the ring squeezing his finger. Or do I really mean that; if I had a second chance, would I —?

He was saved from finishing the thought. His throat moved in a hard, convulsive swallow. "I wish...I will...I will try."

"All right." Gold nodded. He didn't think that what he felt was relief. More like...dread. No, more than that even: Finality.

Because one way or the other, I've just got this feeling. This will end. Soon.

* * *

Gomez said, "I'm not imagining things."

A pause, and then Conlon said, "I didn't say that." She didn't sound convinced, though.

Nog said, "Neither did I." He didn't sound convinced either.

"Don't look at me," said Hawkins. "I'm just a dumb jock."

Gomez ignored him. "Yeah. But? And?"

"And," Conlon tapped her tricorder, "there's no evidence anywhere that there was another phased matter stream. All I've got is you."

Nog said, "I checked after you called from the Kwolek, and I've checked again, just now, when you beamed back." He held up his tricorder, screen out, so Gomez could see the readings. "See for yourself, you don't believe me."

"I believe you," said Gomez. She had no choice; her tricorder showed the same readings. "It's still a possibility. Let's just think a sec. Besides biofilters and phase transition coils, what else does a transporter have that nothing else on board the ship does?"

"A Heisenberg Compensator," Conlon said, promptly. "So?"

"So, what's the compensator for?" She answered her own question. "It's designed to make up for changes you make on a quantum level whenever you use a transporter. The Heisenberg uncertainty principle says that you can't know everything about a particle at once, not with any accuracy."

"Yeah, yeah," said Conlon. She looked faintly annoyed, too. Like Gomez was a teacher trying to catch her out for not studying. "The principle stipulates that you can measure either position or angular momentum but not both. The more you measure one aspect of a particle state, the less you know about another. The compensator is designed to override the inevitable informational drift. Doesn't tell you anything; just gives you information in a general sense and compares what it reads to what's stored in the buffer. Otherwise, I re-materialize with my arm hanging out of my ear."

"Wait a minute," said Nog, and Gomez heard the ah-hah in his voice. "Commander, you think your transporter beam snagged some information in a datastream and then compared it to what's already there. In the Kwolek. And..."

"And the transporter came up with Duffy," said Gomez. Hearing it again, out loud, set off this little electric jolt zipping through her heart. "Not the Kieran Duffy that we knew, obviously, but another

Kieran. As the temporal distortions here increase, the temporal signatures of the universes must be momentarily synchronized, allowing for vacant time-space to be briefly occupied by reassimilated energy.”

“In other words, that Commander Duffy filled a vacant space in this universe.” Conlon’s eyes held that faraway look she always got when she was thinking really hard about something. “And the da Vinci? You think that when I activated the deflectors, we pushed the da Vinci into a time-space bubble, or into the other universe altogether?”

“I think so. We won’t know until we bring down the deflectors.”

Hawkins said, “Wait a sec. If you snagged hold of Duffy and we’ve got everyone’s patterns on file, can we, I dunno, put the transporter on a continuous receptive mode? You know, catch pieces of them in a datastream and then have them rematerialize here?”

Gomez shook her head. “I thought of that. There are two problems: Casual directionality is one. If Duffy was a book, then his life has been written up to this point. Bringing that Duffy here—even if we could do it—is like bringing in another chapter by another author and plunking it right smack dab into the middle of a book. It won’t make any sense to him, and he sure as heck won’t make any sense here.”

“And there’s conservation of matter and energy to think about,” said Conlon. “The only reason Duffy almost materialized here is because we’ve wrapped space-time around us. Eventually, we’ll have to take down the deflectors, and the hole will collapse. But if we bring energy into this system that we can’t release or get rid of, then, theoretically, there’s this big ka-boom. Think of it the same way you do when matter and antimatter collide. Kind of defeats the purpose.”

“But that does imply there’s an energy imbalance somewhere,” said Gomez. “Maybe on both sides of the equation. It’s like we’re trading information to make up for gaps, and they’ve activated a search program that’s trying to compensate. The problem is to figure out what’s missing from there that they could possibly want here.”

Nog held up his tricorder. “Why don’t we just ask them?”

* * *

“You’re a million kilometers away.” Gomez frowned over at Duffy. They were recalibrating the plasma injectors. “Something on your mind?”

“Me?” Duffy grinned, shook his head. “Just... thinking.”

“About what happened during transport?” Duffy had told her about catching a glimpse of her in an EVA suit but she figured stress, had to be. On the run all the time, people shooting at you. Bound to have an effect. So she’d dismissed it. “That still bothering you?”

“A little. It was weird, Sonnie, like a vision of the future, or something. I dunno.”

“Wishful thinking, you ask my opinion. You saw me on a Cardassian station. Well, isn’t that exactly what we’re trying to accomplish here?” Then she scrutinized him more closely. “You’re really bothered by this.”

“Yeah. Ever since coming aboard I have this bad feeling. Something’s going to go wrong.”

Gomez put her arms about his waist. “Nothing’s going to go wrong. We’ve been shot at a lot. We’re still here.”

“For now.” Duffy nuzzled her hair, and inhaled the aroma of jasmine and musk. Tightened his grip. “You smell good. And, God, you feel wonderful.”

Gomez sighed, burrowed. “Feeling’s mutual.”

A pause. Then: “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Come on,” Duffy said with mock severity. He pulled back and squinted down his nose. “You know what.”

“Yeah?” Her eyes flicked down to his right trouser pocket. The fabric tented over something square. “Is that a box in your pocket, or are you just glad to see me?”

“Cretin. What, I’m supposed to get on my kne—?”

A hail shrilled, and Gomez threw her head back, closed her eyes. “I don’t believe it.”

“Believe what?” It was Gold.

She rolled her eyes at Duffy who smothered a giggle. “Nothing, sir. Commander Duffy and I are nearly done here. If you’ll—”

“Let your team finish up. I want you and Duffy in sickbay, pronto.”

“Aye, sir. Gomez, out.” She waited a split second to make sure the channel had closed then said, “Damn.”

Grinning, Duffy planted a kiss on her lips. “It’ll keep. Maybe I’ll reconsider.”

“You reconsider,” Gomez said as they started off, “and I’ll take out your tonsils.”

* * *

All three stared at Nog. “You figured out the code?” asked Gomez.

“I will in a sec,” said Nog. His fingers played over his tricorder.

“How?”

“It’s what you said about Duffy.” Nog gave a ferociously triumphant smile, all zigzag Ferengi teeth. “The Kwolek’s got patterns of Soloman when he wasn’t Soloman, right? So if I access them now, compare the two and whittle down...”

Gomez saw it. “You get rid of the twin effect. Whatever remains will be the interaction between Soloman and that universe’s 111.”

“Yup. And that means I can talk to her. So,” Nog gave his tricorder a final jab, “what do you want me to say?”

“How about,” said Gomez, “what the hell do you want?”

* * *

For Soloman, it was like sitting at the bottom of an infinitely deep pool. He was aware of light shimmering overhead and a world beyond this hermetic seal. But that life was far away and strangely muffled, and he had no strength to reach for it, or the desire. At a rudimentary level akin to instinct, he understood what he had done: caught 110 in a paradox, a recursive algorithm that could not be resolved.

Then the quality of the light above changed, and the surface seemed to split, and Soloman knew that they—someone—had come after him.

* * *

“Beneath the surface,” said 111. The chip on her left temple winked furiously, and the buffer on her belt hummed. Her lips quivered, and her blue eyes were wide and liquid. “It’s another line of code. Not thought.”

“Afourth Bynar?” said Gold. “Are you sure? How do you know that the Androssi haven’t planted a virus designed to simulate a Bynar’s cerebral patterns?”

“No, no...” 111 shook her head in the exaggerated way of a little girl trying to make a point to an adult who just did not speak the same language. But her hesitancy was gone, and her speech had acquired the high singsong Gold associated with the Bynars. “This is no virus. This is not 110 either, and it is not 110’s doppelgänger. Both are unchanged. This one says that the doppelgänger is Soloman, a Bynar existing outside in another temporal realm.”

“It’s a Prophet,” Dax blurted. “Look, the reason we stole the device in the first place is because the ancient Hebitians built it, and the Cardassians can’t access it. The pictographs on those Hebitian tombs on Cardassia strongly favor the view that the Hebitians were telepaths—”

“That’s only legend,” said Gomez.

Salek said, “Legends usually have a basis in fact. We know that there are no Cardassian telepaths. Yet the Hebitians leave behind a device that relies on the ability to access information on a digital level when combined with telepathy. The Bynars are the only species capable of both.”

Dax looked triumphant. “What’s happening now is precisely what’s been prophesized: that the One will reach out and then His Temple will be reborn. Well, now we’ve got a window, a quantum fracture into a realm of space through which energy and information can be transferred. Think about it a second. We know that Bynars always come in pairs. Always. But now 110 has found his match, a twin. How is that possible? Singletons are incapable of meshing. They’re unfit to do so. But this energy signature can, and he calls himself Solo-Man.” She paused, her darkly brown eyes clicking over their faces. “Don’t you understand? Solo-Man. One Man. The One.”

“No, no,” said 111. “There is Soloman, and then there is this other. He is a,” she cocked her head an instant, chittered in dataspeak and said, “Ferengi.”

“What are those?” asked Gold.

Another pause. “He says it would take too long to explain. There are, it seems, many rules applying to acquisition. He says that we must shut down this device; that the search program has activated the computer on their side of the datastream on their...” 111’s eyes were huge. “On Empok Nor. He says that temporal-distortion waves are destroying the fabric of space-time.”

“What?” said Kane. “EmpokNor?”

“Are you sure it isn’t Terok Nor?” said Jadzia. She dropped to her haunches now, laid her hands on the Bynar’s shoulders. “Ask the Prophet if this Empok Nor is anywhere near—”

“It is not a Prophet,” said 111. She raised her bright blue eyes to Gold. “This Soloman—the Ferengi says he lost his bondmate.” Her voice quavered. Broke. “He says I died there.”

Gold took the Bynar’s left hand. Her fingers were cold, and they trembled. “111, does this—this Ferengi say why Soloman is there in the first place?”

“No. But I sense Soloman—waits.”

“For what?”

“I do not believe he knows, but there is a void in him.” She pressed a bunched fist to her chest. “But I cannot fill it. Much as I wish to help, I have my bondmate here.” The look she gave Gold was full of anguish. “I want 110 back, whole, and yet I feel such sorrow for this other. I do not know how he has managed to live.”

“I suppose he just went on.” Gold had to pause, clear his throat. “People do that.”

“Perhaps. But when love is gone,” 111 said as a tear inched down either cheek, “there is always emptiness because the heart knows what has been lost.”

“Yes,” said Gold. His eyes burned. “Yes, it does.”

* * *

“Well?” asked Gomez.

Nog shook his head. “I know I got the message through; 111’s code changed to assimilate it.”

“And Soloman?”

“He’s there, but it’s like he’s...locked in tight somehow. And I...” Nog trailed off, squinted at his data.

Gomez waited an anxious few seconds. “What?”

Nog began toggling in data. “I am so stupid. I know why Soloman can’t break free. You know how Betazoids have a paracortex that enhances their telepathic capabilities, and how Betazoid women have elevated levels of neurochemicals that further augment these abilities? Look at Soloman’s psilosynine level. It’s through the roof. That’s what’s happening with Soloman. The Bynars in that universe? They’re telepaths.”

Gomez gaped. "You're kidding."

"Nope. It's a logical extension, you ask me. What do the Bynars do? They interconnect with computer code. It all comes down to discharges along the electromagnetic spectrum. The brain works the same way. All neurons rely upon electrical potentials, whether neurochemically or electrically mediated. So it's not so unbelievable that the Bynars of that universe also possess some form of telepathy and that some machines only respond to telepaths."

"Okay," said Gomez. "So what are they looking for?"

* * *

There was astonishment on Dax's face, and Gold saw Gomez and Duffy glance at each other.

Then Gomez said, "Do we tell them?" She seemed unaware that she'd sidled closer to Duffy. "Maybe they can help."

Gold gave 111's hand a squeeze, then pushed to his feet. "I'm not sure if I'm relieved it's not a Prophet. Anotherus? What makes them think they can help? We have no way of knowing if our two universes are compatible in any way."

"Well, sir," Duffy interrupted. He glanced at Sonya and then back at Gold. "Now that you mention it..."

* * *

"I just thought of something, a way to get Soloman out of there," said Gomez. "You just said that Betazoids and other telepaths have high levels of psilosynine in their brains, right?"

"Yeah," said Nog. "So?"

"So why not give Soloman a broad-range neural suppressant? Just...take him offline that way."

"But that will make him incapable of communing with Empok Nor's computer. Then we'll be stuck," said Nog.

"We're stuck either way," said Conlon. "Right now, we can talk to them but that's all. We can't control what's happening here or there, and Soloman either can't or won't deactivate the system. Probably it's the latter because they're the ones who are looking for something, not us. Either they find it, or they don't. Unless they shut down on their end, it won't matter."

It was her decision; Gomez knew it. "We give them a couple more minutes. Let's see what they say."

* * *

When Duffy finished, Gold looked from Duffy to Gomez, who'd gone very white. To Jadzia. Salek returned his stare then said, "That would seem to answer the question."

"Yes, it does. And it means they're probably telling the truth. That machine's ripping their universe apart." Gold tapped his combadge. "Feliciano, contact Captain Kira. Beam her directly to sickbay. Tell her I'll explain when she's aboard."

Then Gold put a gentle hand on 111's shoulder. "When Captain Kira gets here, this is what I want you

to ask.”

* * *

“The Prophets? The wormhole?” asked Gomez. “That’s what this is about?”

“That’s what they say,” said Nog. “Seems they don’t have one, and they thought this device would help them find it.”

“It has, in a weird sort of way,” Gomez mused. “I mean, it reached out and found this version of Bajoran space. Maybe we’re the only universe with a wormhole.”

“Well, I’m not sure we should tell them,” said Conlon.

“What harm would it do?” asked Hawkins.

“You ever hear of the Prime Directive?”

Gomez raised a hand. “Wait a sec, let’s think this through. This whole thing started when they activated that device—I’ll say that they think the Hebitians left it as a beacon of some sort. Whoever can access it supposedly can use it to find the wormhole. Well, what if they’re right? First, you access micro-black holes; you establish a coherent datastream to a parallel realm, or you find the region of space most vulnerable to gravimetric inversion.”

“In theory,” said Conlon. “Okay. But if we give them the coordinates and then we, I dunno, disconnect Soloman, how do we know we’ve picked the right side?”

“You ever hear of Pandora’s box?” asked Gomez. “Well, it’s open. They know we’re here. We know what they’re looking for. From what it sounds like, they’re running out of time. What incentive do they have to turn the thing off?”

“None.”

“Right. If they don’t stop, things don’t get better here. Seems pretty cut and dried to me.” Gomez looked at them all in turn. “We tell them.”

“Once you tell them, you can’t take it back,” said Conlon.

“I know that.” Gomez looked over at Nog. “Do it.”

* * *

“The Denorios Belt?” Kira frowned. “No one goes there. It’s a mess: high-energy plasma, neutrino storms, tachyon bursts. I’ve always assumed a wormhole would have to be in a stable, less kinetically energetic region of space. Best place for that is a black hole.”

“Well, guess again,” said Kane.

“But maybe that’s the point, Captain,” said Gomez. “The Denorios Belt we know about is pretty hot, right? Think about it. The Remans use a quantum singularity for their warp drive. To do that, they fuse material and create energy. In theory, you concentrate enough mass and energy you create the conditions for a wormhole by deforming space-time sufficiently to open it. Think of it as breaking down a gated

door. The wormhole is there but closed off.”

“You mean, input enough energy to bind all that plasma together, or maybe just a sizable chunk?” Duffy stroked the side of his chin with his thumb. “Well, theoretically, we could do it.”

“How?” asked Gold and Kira at the same time.

“We generate a massive pulse of combined anti-chroniton and tetryon particles, then follow with a spread of photon torpedoes. The release of that much energy ought to be siphoned off by the denser tetryons, resulting in a collapse of matter into a highly compressed, dense mass and concomitant release of SEM gamma rays.”

Kane rolled her eyes. “What the hell did that mean?”

“It means we can do it,” said Gold. “Except there are only a couple problems.” He ticked them off on his fingers. “One, all that plasma, we’ll be lucky we don’t go up with it. Second, we don’t know if this isn’t what the Androssi want us to do.”

“Why would they allow us to steal a device that would tell us the location of a wormhole and not keep it for themselves?” asked Dax. She looked to be spoiling for another fight. “Clearly—”

“Clearly, because they don’t want to get themselves blown to smithereens for no good reason,” said Gold. “Ever think of that? We sure as hell know that the Cardassians aren’t telepathic, and maybe the Androssi aren’t either. So they needed us—specifically, they needed the Bynars—to find it for them.” He looked at Kira. “I told you: Taking this thing was too easy.”

Kira searched his face. “You think they’re waiting to ambush us.”

“They’ll want all the glory. That’s what this is about. They know that if the religious sect delivers the wormhole, the treaty has no chance of being ratified. But if the Cardassians find the wormhole, then the religious sect drops their objections. So how I think it goes down is like this. We find the wormhole; we open it, or we start to—or maybe the Cardassians and Androssi have their own plans for how to open it, I don’t know—and then we get blown into subatomic particles. The Cardassians won’t want anyone slipping away, or getting a transmission out to contradict their story.”

“There’s another problem, Captain,” said Gomez. The color had drained from her face; her skin was white as bone china. “Even if we survive the initial explosion, the shock waves might rip the ship apart.”

“And if we somehow managed to live through that, there’s going to be a lot of gamma radiation out there, enough to penetrate shields in a matter of minutes,” said Duffy. “No matter how you cut it, it’s a suicide mission.”

“Some things are worth dying for,” said Dax.

“Yeah,” said Gold, and his eyes slid to Kira in a side-long glance. “There’s a lot of that going around.”

Kira returned the look. “The Denorios Belt is far enough from Bajor and Terok Nor that it would take the Cardassians or the Androssi several minutes to reach us.”

“Assuming they aren’t waiting for us. Assuming there aren’t patrols.”

“Okay, then,” Kira said. “We wouldn’t have much time. One of us would have to discharge the pulse while the other fends off whoever comes after us. But it can be done.”

“Care to lay odds on that?”

“No.”

“Me neither.” Gold planted his fists on his hips. He sighed. “Man, oh, man, this just keeps getting better and better.”

“In truth, we’d need another ship to have a real shot at this,” said Kira. “But there’s no one close enough.”

“Well,” said Gold. “That’s not entirely accurate.”

* * *

“Will they do it?” asked Conlon.

“I don’t know,” said Nog.

“They have the information they wanted. They’ll have to decide how to use it, but that’s not our fight. My guess, though, is they’re committed now,” said Gomez. She palmed a small hypospray in her right hand, knelt, pressed the tip to Soloman’s suit along his forearm, thumbed the hypospray to life and then settled back on her haunches to wait. “And so are we.”

* * *

They’d forgotten all about the Bynar, and so it was a shock when 111 raised her voice in a keening wail.

It was Gold who reacted first. Kneeling beside the Bynar, he covered her tiny hands with one of his. The sight of her tears touched his heart with pain and an ancient grief that was somehow always fresh, like a wound that never healed. “111?” he asked, gently.

“He is gone, Captain,” she said. Then she turned, buried her face in Gold’s chest and wept like a small child. “He is gone.”

Gold didn’t have to look for 110’s life-signs on the biobed monitors because he knew, instinctively, which “he” she meant. “Is he dead?”

“No, but he is...one again. They have chosen for him. But how will he live, Captain?” 111 said. “How can he?”

Gold swallowed against the lump in his throat, and then he motioned for Kane to deactivate the ancient device. They had what they needed—and he knew what he, and only he, must do.

They have chosen for him.

“Because he will,” Gold said. “He’ll just have to.”

Chapter

10

Tugging on the tails of his lavishly embroidered tunic, Gul Garak activated his holomirror and twisted this way and that, admiring the view. The cut of the tunic was exquisite; the fabric shot through with latinum thread and encrusted with living gemstones: a little-known treasure found in ancient Hebitian tombs. As he watched, the gemstones splayed delicate, lacy fingers, bleeding color along the fabric the way a spider spins a web.

“I’m happy,” Garak said, and he was exceedingly pleased when the gemstones responded and colored to amber. Then he imagined his Bajoran comfort woman slowly unfastening her sheer, gauzy tunic at its right shoulder and the look of the tunic slithering over the points of her breasts to the swell of her hips...and watched as the gemstones shaded to a deep blood-red so vibrant it seemed to pulsate.

So that is the color of arousal. Very nice. But I wonder what shade they will turn when that treaty is signed?He glanced at a chronometer. Well, only a few hours left until I find out.

His intercom clamored for his attention. “Yes, Lieutenant?”

“Zotat has reported in, Gul Garak.”

“And?”

“There are two vessels headed for the Denorios Belt—and, sir, one is theGettysburg.”

“Very well. Tell Zotat to contact me the moment that he either determines the coordinates of the wormhole, or the wormhole has opened and been secured.” Then Garak thought of something. “And, Lieutenant, relay this: Zotat may do as he wishes with the other vessel. It is of no consequence. But tell him that I want theGettysburg.” Garak looked into his mirror, and his reflection gave him a dark and malevolent grin. “Yes, tell Zotat: I want Gold.”

Clicking off, Garak then stepped back to admire his reflection—and the color of victory.

* * *

“There it is,” said Wong. If he was anxious, his voice didn’t betray it. “Six thousand meters dead ahead. The Denorios Belt, sir.”

“Slow to one-quarter impulse. McAllan, Cardassians?”

“None detected, sir.”

“What about Androssi?” Privately, Gold didn’t believe that Garak would let the Androssi in on the kill. The Cardassians would want all the credit. The Androssi were simply their go-tos.

McAllan took another second to double-check, then said, “Negative. It would seem the belt is unguarded, Captain.”

“Like Kira said, it’s a lot of space. But they’re going to come running in a hurry.” Gold balanced on the balls of his feet, too keyed up to sit in his command chair. “Salek, what’s your status up there?”

“All nonessential personnel have moved from the outer hull, Captain. Escape pods are prepped.

Shuttlecraft Templaris standing by. We are ready to proceed at your command.”

“Good. Haznedl, raise the Li.”

“On audio, sir.”

“Kira, this is Gold. You ready?”

Her voice was steady and betrayed nothing.

“Ready as we’re ever going to be. This is one risky plan, David.”

“I could say something apropos like risk is our business.”

“Please, don’t. What about my chief engineer?”

“We’ll get him back to you.”

“Then, as they say on Earth, bring it on.”

“You’re going to wish you hadn’t said that.” Gold gave a short nod then tapped his combadge.

“Engineering, Gomez. How are you and Duffy doing?”

“We’re just about there, Captain. We’ve had to reroute power from the backup phaser generators through the deflector grid. I’ve tied in an emergency relay from the shields just in case.”

“Our shields? You’re telling me that it might come down to a choice between that deflector, and shields?”

“No choice, sir. We’re talking one big pulse.”

“How much time to charge the deflector?”

“Once we’re in position, about sixty seconds.”

“A lot can happen in sixty seconds.”

“Best we can do, Captain. We’ve got another problem, though. Our last run-in damaged our torpedo launchers. I had to reroute the launch assist generators, but it’s jury-rigged. It won’t hold up for long.”

“They may not have to. Do what you can. Haznedl, signal the Li. Feliciano, when Duffy’s ready, beam him back aboard the Li.” Gold pulled in a breath. “All right, people, this is it.”

* * *

“Almost there,” said Duffy. His hair was mussed; he was covered in grime and there were crescents of dirt under his nails; and he was sweating so much his tunic was glued to his back. They’d been working at breakneck speed and barely had time to exchange two paragraphs that didn’t contain the words containment field, magnetic oscillation, and anti-chronitonic stream.

Duffy thought back to the moments after Kane had deactivated that... whatever it was. Hebitian,

Cardassian, Bajoran, or something else altogether: He didn't know, and wondered if now they ever would. 110 had awakened, finally; 111 had calmed, but there was a haunted look in her eyes: as if she'd been privy to a vision of a world Duffy couldn't begin to imagine.

Yet what he hadn't imagined was the look on Captain Kira's face after she and Salek and Jadzia Dax had emerged from Gold's ready room. Why the Trill had been included, Duffy hadn't a clue, but there was a preternatural glitter to her eyes that Duffy didn't like. Nor did he know what had transpired, but whatever it was had clearly left Kira shaken and her lips so thinned they cut a horizontal gash above her chin. True to form, Salek was a cipher. But when Gold finally emerged, he had the thunderous look of a black, brooding storm.

Yeah, and I can guess why: because we're all going to get ourselves killed chasing after some Trill's hallucinations.

Duffy hadn't spent much time around Dax, not enough to really understand everything about this religion she was so hot about. There had been rumors, of course; Kira's ship was a standard Bajoran assault vessel, with a crew complement that was barely a tenth of the *Gettysburg*. Word traveled fast. Duffy was one of four officers on loan from Starfleet. His shipmates were Bajorans, not all religious but none with any love for the Cardassians. Duffy listened to their gripes in the mess; his roommate was an agnostic, but even he saw no utility to allying themselves to a power that would, in effect, shackle them with latinum chains. They saw the Federation as more benevolent in its way.

So we leave them to manage their wealth and affairs as they see fit, but one hand washes the other. We get rid of the Cardassians and give them their gods, and the Federation gets resources it needs to push the Cardassians back.

Yet for all the unknowns, it was Dax who scared him the most. She was so...intense, so certain that hers was the correct path and there could be no other. Perhaps part was this Orb thing; Duffy guessed if he'd been in touch with something calling itself the Almighty, maybe he'd be a bit intense himself.

Looking down, he said, suddenly, "Do you believe in fate?"

"What?" Sprawled at his feet, Sonya Gomez was cantilevered on her side, a spanner in one hand, a warp calibration meter in the other. Her hair had frizzed from perspiration and there was a smear of something suspiciously like Heplart grease on her right cheek. She had never looked more beautiful. "What do you mean?"

"Do you believe in fate?"

"Why are you asking?"

"I'm curious."

"Well," she said, turning back to her work, "I think that some things are fated to happen no matter what you do about it. Sun going nova, that kind of thing. There are certain fundamentals to the universe I can't change because, you know, the universe doesn't care. It'll kill you a thousand ways to Sunday, you give it half a chance."

"Well, we are cheery."

"You asked. Given what we're about to do, it's kind of appropriate, don't you think?"

“Yeah. Goes almost without saying. But I meant people—do you think that our lives are scripted somehow so that no matter what, you can’t change your destiny?”

She sat up now. Her dark eyes searched his face. “111 really got you spooked.”

“Yeah. It’s weird. Knowing there are an infinite number of Kieran Duffys just as there are a million Sonya Gomezes. But I can’t imagine loving anyone but you, right here, right at this moment, in this reality.”

“Then that’s what you’ll have to hang on to.”

“But if I knew what was going to happen, would whatever I did be worth the cost? Is this?” He gestured with a hand to include the warp core, engineering, the ship. “Is a religion I don’t practice, people I really don’t know...are any of these things worth dying for?”

Gomez carefully put her spanner in a nearby tool kit and squared her warp recalibration meter alongside. Then she pushed to her feet, brushed grit from her hands and slipped her arms around his waist. “I don’t think we can judge the value of an individual mission. We have no idea what will happen to Bajor or the Federation if we succeed. But we do know that the Federation’s not getting any stronger, and the Cardassians are. I don’t know about you, but I care about my freedom, and real freedom means you choose. I choose the Federation, and the rest will have to work itself out. I remember when I was a kid. I read Milton: not all that ruling in hell part but the idea behind it. About the freedom to choose. If you really read it carefully, Satan had a choice, and he chose to rule rather than serve. Everyone always assumes that meant he made the wrong choice. But he didn’t. He made the best choice for him. The one thing Milton never confused was choice and happiness. So just because you have freedom of choice doesn’t mean that you’re fated to live happily ever after.”

“So how do we know this is the right choice?”

“We don’t. It’s just the best one for now.”

“Yeah, but—” Duffy was interrupted by a hail. “Duffy, here.”

“Feliciano, Commander. You’re needed aboard the Li.”

“Just a sec.” Suddenly, he was filled with an overwhelming flood of panic that made his mouth go dry. There were so many things he wanted to say; he was full to bursting of things he’d never said and thought that, probably, were way too many to start now. “Okay, look, Sonnie—you got to watch that antimatter mix when you initiate the magnetic field to channel the tetryon particles.”

She quirked an eyebrow at his sudden shift. “I’ll watch it.”

“And the anti-chronitons, you got to remember that the field’s got to oscillate to contain—”

She put her fingers to his mouth. “I’m on it, Kieran. It’ll be okay.”

“God.” Duffy took her hand in both of his and pressed it to his lips in a kiss. He thumbed grease from her face then cupped her cheek. “What I really mean is—why do I keep having this feeling that I’m never going to see you again?”

Gomez tried a smile, but it came out crooked. “Because you’re a cockeyed optimist?”

“Yeah,” said Duffy. He gave a breathy laugh and squeezed her in a bear hug. Amazingly, her hair still felt like silk against his face and he breathed her in, stamping her scent and the feel of her body, warm and alive, into his brain. “I’m scared for you.”

He felt her nod against his chest. “I’m scared for us both,” she said, her voice muffled. Then she looked up, and her dark eyes glistened. “But I love you, Kieran Duffy, and I...” She took his face and gave him a ferocious kiss that left him breathless. “And you want to know about fate? Well, this is ours: Yes.”

“Yes. Yes...what?” Then, as he understood: “Yes?Did you say...?”

“Yes,” she said, with a smile that broke his heart. Then she patted his combadge and stepped out of the circle of his arms. “Feliciano, beam Commander Duffy back to theLi.”

She saw Duffy reach for his pocket. “Wait, I have to gi—” Duffy began, but then there was a swirl of light; Duffy’s form broke apart; and he was gone.

“Save it for the next time I see you,” whispered Sonya Gomez. The tears she’d held back rolled down her cheeks. She didn’t bother brushing them away. “Because, yes, I will see you, my love. Yes.”

* * *

“Lireports Commander Duffy aboard,” said Susan Haznedl from ops.

Gold nodded. “Very well. Salek, initiate saucer separation.”

“Acknowledged.”

Gold felt a perceptible jolt and then a tremor shimmy through the deckplates of the battle bridge as the eighteen docking latches and umbilical blocks tethering theGettysburg’s saucer to the battle section detached. On the main viewscreen, a green etched schematic showed the ellipse of the saucer lifting away and forward from the battle section. “And now, Captain Kira, there are three,” Gold murmured.

“Saucer separation complete,” said McAllan. “Automatic path termination seals to the turbolift shafts are locked.”

“Good. Raise shields. Red alert.” Klaxons shrilled. The light in the battle bridge section was always darker than in the saucer’s bridge, and now, going to red alert, the shadows lengthened into rust-colored slashes. Like drying blood. “Weapons status.”

“Phasers charged and ready. Photon torpedoes are online. Commander Salek reports that shuttlecraft Templar is standing by, sir.”

“Thank you, McAllan,” said Gold. “Let’s make sure we give the Cardassians something infinitely more interesting to look at. Wong, give me visual of where we’re headed.”

The schematic of the separated vessels winked out to be replaced by a swath of space that was smeary with the purple and deep fuchsia contrails of ion storms and superheated plasma. Sizzling bolts of white-hot energy arced into streamers of cobalt and cerulean blue that, somehow, miraculously stood out against the darker background of space. There were no stars visible at all in the densest region of the Belt where they were headed and it was as if a child had upended a pot of paints over a black canvas,

splaying colors in a bright, pulsating, riotous Medusa's halo. The sight nearly took his breath away.

"My God, it's beautiful," said Wong, his voice barely audible. "Like something out of a dream."

"You have some pretty interesting dreams," said McAllan. "Captain, the area's lousy with radiation. If our shields so much as burp for more than a couple minutes, we're gonna fry."

"Well, you'll just have to make sure they don't. Believe me, if our shields don't hold when we detonate all that stuff out there, frying's going to be the least of your worries. Wong, course three-three-zero, mark one-five. Take us right into the heart of it; three-quarters impulse."

"Aye, sir."

"McAllan, how long before we reach minimum safe distance to discharge the deflector array?" They'd debated that one around and around, settling finally for the option that would lower their chances of a miss.

"Estimate we'll reach the specified coordinates in ten point seven minutes, sir."

"All right. Once we discharge the deflector array keep those shields steady. What about the Li and the saucer section?"

"Taking flanking positions, Captain, covering our tails and..."

Gold was instantly attuned to the hitch in McAllan's voice. "Lieutenant?"

In the bloody half-light, McAllan's skin had gone dead white. "Cardassian vessels, Captain, on an intercept course. TwoKeldon, oneHideki. Their shields are up; I read that they have energized their weapons and—Sir, Salek and the Li are moving to cover! The Cardassians are firing!"

* * *

"Hard about! Return fire!" Kira was up and out of her seat. Another disruptor slammed against the Li on the port side, and an inertial damper stuttered offline for an instant because Kira was thrown back and crashed to the deck against a weapons console. There was a blinding flash as a circuit shorted, and then someone was screaming to her right. Kira caught the acrid odor of burning metal, scorched hair and singed flesh. She twisted around in time to see the communications officer's uniform erupt in a ball of flame.

"Get a medic up here!" Charging, Kira flung herself at the woman. They crashed to the deck, and Kira went spread-eagled, smothering the flames as the screeching woman writhed beneath her. Starbursts of pain seared Kira's palms and chest, and flames licked the underside of her neck, but she held on, praying her own hair wouldn't ignite. "Return fire! Take out their disruptors!"

"Can't!" Her tactical officer's face was smeary with fresh blood and soot. He turned aside and spat out a goblet of rust-colored saliva. A rivulet of blood tracked down his chin. "Our weapons are offline! Shields at fifty percent!"

"Engineering!" A medic came charging onto the bridge, and as Kira rolled away, another disruptor pulse battered their hull. Kira clawed her way back to her command chair. She banged open a channel with her fist, ignoring the scream of pain that lanced her scorched hand and forearm. "Duffy! We need

weapons!”

“Trying, Captain!” Duffy’s voice was frayed with static, and Kira heard the background gabble of voices. “It’s all I can do right now to keep your engines and shields online. I can steal power from life support.”

“Do it!” Kira jerked her head to her helmsman. “Initiate evasive maneuvers, best speed, Kira-Three!”

The stars on her viewscreen wheeled as the Li rocketed nearly perpendicular to an imaginary horizon in a steep, swirling, spiral climb. In an atmosphere, there would have been the howl of air screaming over a canopy, and anyone on the ground would have seen the assault vessel twirling on its long axis, presenting as little surface area as possible to the enemy. But the Li was sluggish; Kira felt it and saw how the stars cartwheeled in a giddy slow motion.

Not fast enough, we can’t get up the speed; they’ll take us out with the next couple of salvos unless...
“Where’s the saucer?”

“She managed to slip in between that lead Keldon and the Gettysburg, but she’s angling off and dropping back, Captain. She’s got a hull rupture somewhere. I read vented atmosphere and debris.”

“What’s her speed?”

“One-half impulse...now one-quarter. Slewing back our way...they must have lost control, Captain. She’s a sitting duck!”

Kira’s heart banged against her ribs. “Is the Hideki still in pursuit of the saucer?”

“Negative, breaking away. Turning now. Captain, they’re coming after us.”

A surge of elation roared through her veins, and her mouth filled with the metallic edge of adrenaline. That’s right, there are bigger fish to fry than that old, banged-up saucer, so come on! “What about the Gettysburg?” Kira’s voice was suddenly thinning to a wheeze. The air on the bridge was getting thick and tasted of oily soot, and wasn’t going to get any better if Duffy had rerouted power for environmental controls to the engines. Her eyes began to burn. “Where is she? Is she in position?”

“Estimate seven minutes, fifty-seven seconds.” Her tactical officer arched blood and sweat from his eyes. The air was thick enough that his eyes were streaming. “That second warship’s come about, right on the Gettysburg’s tail, accelerating.” Looking at the console, he added, “Incoming message, Captain—it’s the Gettysburg!”

“On speaker.” The bridge was suddenly awash in the electric sizzle of interference, a sound like butter sputtering on a hot grill. Kira strained to catch what Gold was shouting, then decided there wasn’t time to worry about it. She hailed engineering. “Duffy?”

Duffy’s voice was clogged, and he was hacking. “Sorry, Captain, but you’ve got a choice. It’s either speed or more shields.”

“I need weapons.”

“No can do.”

This is it. We knew it would come to this, now I’ve just got to trust that—“Then give me speed, Duffy.

Give me all you've got." She clicked off. "Helm, come about. Course zero-nine-zero, mark four-five, z minus thirty." Her helmsman's back stiffened, and he half-turned. "You heard me," she snapped. "Bring us about."

Her helmsman's throat moved in a hard swallow. "Aye, Captain. Course laid in."

"Engage."

* * *

"Lower your shields!" Gold bellowed in frustration. "Kira, do you hear me, lower—"

"She's coming about, Captain," McAllan said. "The Li's jumped to full impulse—ramming speed. Their shields are at twenty percent; they're dodging, taking evasive maneuvers—she's going to hit them broadside in fourteen point eight seconds."

"Can we help her?"

"Negative, sir, not unless we come about, and the other Keldon's too close, they'll take us out for sure."

"Kira!" Gold whirled on his heel. "Haznedl, get me Salek."

"You've got him, sir."

"Salek, now, jettison escape pods!"

"Acknowledged, Captain." Even in the heat of battle, the Vulcan's voice was a study of calm certitude. "Pods jettisoned. The Templaris away."

"Haznedl, can you raise the Li?"

"Still trying, Captain and—got her, sir."

"Kira!" Gold roared. "Now, for the love of God, now!"

* * *

"Captain!" Kira's tactical officer whipped around in his chair. "The saucer's jettisoned escape pods, and their shields are down. Time to impact Keldon warship—nine seconds."

"What about the Templar?"

"She's away. No pursuit."

Because she's not worth worrying about, is she? Oh boy, have you bastards got another thing coming. "Give me visual." Kira saw the tiny speck that was the Templar accelerating out of the Denorios Belt; the Gettysburg's escape pods tumbling wildly through space, like a child's building blocks knocked askew; the pods dispersing in a wide arc the way waves expand after a rock's ruptured the surface of water. And then the screen shimmered and there was the sickly brown hull of a Keldon warship rushing to meet them. "Drop shields!"

"Captain," her tactical officer shouted, "the Keldon's firing."

Kira winced at a sudden flash; theLi's bridge exploded in white-hot light; there was the flicker of a sensation more than the image of a fireball and then there was a swirl as the bridge dissolved, disintegrated before Kira's eyes....

And went black.

* * *

McAllan cried, "She's going to hit!"

"Salek," Gold said, feeling the cords of his forearms knot and bulge as his hands fisted, "do it now."

And then time slowed and stretched like a broad elastic ribbon, and Gold saw it all, felt everything: the bite of his nails into his palms; the stutter of his heart as theKeldon spewed a salvo of glittering green death; and then there was theLi dodging, evading, weaving—and then theGettysburg's pods erupting one right after the other in rapid-fire sequence as the explosives packed inside detonated. The detonations pillowed, balled, grew, fed on themselves and the hot plasma streamers swirling around the Keldon andHideki. Hit from behind, theHideki lost control, tumbling end over end, and then Gold saw that theKeldon had one final choice: kill theLi, or blow the much-largerHideki out of space. The warship chose theHideki ...

And then time snapped back; the world sped up; and to Gold's horror, as theKeldon touched off its disruptors, theLi hit.

* * *

"Status." The skin of Zotat's face was a deep jade with rage. "Are they—?"

"Destroyed." Zotat's tactical officer was ashen. "TheKeldon and its escort, and the Bajoran. The enemy saucer is moving off to flank its mother ship, but they must be damaged, sir. Their shields went down."

"Do they have shields now?"

"Yes, sir. But we have superior weapons and are more maneuverable. Shall we finish them?"

"No," said Zotat. His hands twitched with the urge to break something, and then, remembering his orders, he sucked in a deep breath. "They won't go far. Have you extrapolated a course for the Gettysburg?"

"Yes, sir—into the densest part of the Belt, a concentration of superheated plasma and tachyon eddies."

"How long?"

"Estimate they will arrive in one minute, twenty-two seconds."

"Do they have weapons?"

"Reading full weapons capabilities."

"And yet they haven't used them." Zotat's eyes slitted. "And I think I know why. Helm, close on the Gettysburg. Tactical, you will fire at my command."

“Yes, sir,” said the tactical officer. “Disruptors at half power as per Gul Garak’s instructions. You wish for me to disable the engines?”

Zotat spun on his heel. “Did I order disruptors at half?”

“Well, no.” The tactical officer looked perplexed. “No, sir, but Gul Garak—”

“Gul Garak is not here. Gul Garak has not witnessed two of his ships being blown to bits. I am captain here and I will tell you what to do and when to do it. Understood?”

The bridge was very still. The tactical officer’s eyes rolled left and right and then settled on a spot just above Zotat’s head. “Of course, sir. Perfectly.”

“I am so glad. Now,” said Zotat. Turning, he pointed a finger that trembled with rage. “Run...him...down.”

* * *

“Can you raise Salek?”

“Sorry, Captain.” Haznedl shook her head. “With all that debris and radiation, I can’t pierce the interference.”

“What about the Templar?”

Haznedl said, “If she got away, sir, I can’t tell. Commander Salek’s off to port, standing by and—”

“Cardassian warship accelerating, Captain,” McAllan broke in. “Disruptor cannon at full power. They’re opening fire.”

“Shields at maximum,” Gold said with a snarl. “Target their engines, return fire. Wong, see if you—”

The battery of disruptor cannon bammed against the hull plating of the drive section. Gold staggered as the ship lurched, and the air filled with a loud, metallic squall. “Wong!”

“Sorry, sir.” Wong had been thrown from his chair. He clawed his way back. His forehead was crimson, and he raised a shaking hand to swipe blood from his eyes. “I’ve lost port maneuvering thrusters. Trying to compensate now.”

“Stay on course. McAllan, damage report.”

“Shields down to seventy percent. Phasers still online and—oh my God.”

“What?”

McAllan sagged. “The photon torpedoes, the launch assist generators, they’re offline.”

Gold fisted open a channel to engineering. “Gomez, I need those torpedoes.”

“I’m sorry, sir, I can’t. Not without robbing power from the shields.”

Then that's it. We've run out of options. "Forget the torpedoes. Charge up the deflector."

"Aye, sir."

"But, Captain," said McAllan, "what's the good of the deflector if we can't detonate our torpedoes?"

"You let me worry about that," Gold snapped. "Now hold those bastards off with phasers; just hold them off a few more seconds." The lights dimmed as phasers discharged, and Gold watched the blasts sting the Keldon warship at its nose. He didn't need McAllan to tell him the phasers had done little damage. Gold crowded in behind Wong. "How much longer?"

"One minute." Wong gulped and then Gold got a good look and saw that Wong had clapped a hand to his forehead to try and stanch the blood that leaked through his splayed fingers. "One min...one..." Wong's eyes rolled up in his head, and then he went limp.

Gold snagged the unconscious helmsman as he slid left, and lowered him to the deck. "Haznedl," said Gold, taking up Wong's position at the helm, "see if you can raise Salek. Tell hi—" He lurched forward as the next disruptor battery scored a hit aft, and his forehead cracked Wong's console. Gold blacked out for a second and then came to, his vision blurred with a shower of white lights scintillating at the margins. But he could see well enough—and all the feeling drained out of his body like water rushing through a sieve.

Because their impulse engines were gone.

* * *

"They're dead in the water," said Robin Rusconi. She staffed the helm where Wong usually sat and now she looked back at the command chair. "That last disruptor salvo took out the impulse engines. They haven't got torpedoes either."

"We have to do something," said Kira, who stood to Salek's left. She was still having trouble catching her breath and her eyebrows and eyelashes were singed off, but she'd bullied her way out of sickbay after Salek had beamed her crew aboard. "They're still too far away. If they discharge the deflector now, the concentration of particles won't be enough to open the wormhole without the torpedoes."

"I am aware of the situation and the logistics involved," said Salek, and his reply was so maddeningly calm, Kira wanted to scratch out his eyes. "Lieutenant Shabalala, can you raise the captain?"

"Negative, sir."

"But we can't just stand here." This from Duffy, his voice full of anguish. He stood off Kira's left shoulder. "Can't we draw that Keldon's fire?"

"We must maintain this distance, Commander. Else all this will have been for naught." Salek's black gaze dropped to Kira, and she felt the sting of tears prick her eyelids. "And you know that I will do what must be done, when the time is right."

"Message coming in, sir," Shabalala said, and then he gasped. "It's the captain, it's..." His voice trailed off.

“Lieutenant?”

“Automatic distress, sir.” Shabalala’s forehead wrinkled in a deep frown. “He’s activated the automatic distress beacon.”

“Very well.” Salek nodded. “Transporter room. Chief Feliciano, stand ready. Helm, plot a reverse course to take us out of the belt, full impulse.”

“Reverse course?” Rusconi gaped. “But that’s a distress signal, sir, the captain—”

“No, Ensign,” said Salek. “It is only a signal. Carry out my orders.”

A second passed, then another. Then Rusconi said, “Sir, the captain’s lowered his shields and... Sir, they’re activating warp engines.”

“Lower shields,” Salek said. “Mr. Feliciano, activate transporters. Helm, hard about, go to full impulse.”

* * *

“Sir!” McAllan’s eyes bulged. “The shields! Captain, what are you doing?”

Gomez, on speaker: “No, Captain, you can’t!”

“But I can,” said Gold, and he was amazed at how calm he was, now that the moment was upon him. He heard the high-pitched whine, looked toward tactical, saw McAllan’s face break apart in the transporter beam. Knew without looking that the same thing was happening to Wong, to Gomez, to Haznedl, to the remainder of his skeleton crew left aboard.

“Because it’s my choice,” said Gold to an empty ship. “And I’ve chosen for you.”

* * *

“No,” someone said. Duffy didn’t know who, didn’t care because his gaze was riveted to the main viewscreen: to the Keldon warship still so intent on its prize that its captain likely wouldn’t realize what was happening until it was far too late as, indeed, it already was—and to the fiery, brilliant whorls of plasma and gas so dense they obscured the stars that were, even now, dimming as the Gettysburg’s saucer sped away, in the opposite direction, running for and toward its life.

Then he felt someone at his elbow and knew who it was before he turned because she brought with her the scent he associated with love and all that was best in his life. He pressed Gomez to his side, unable to speak or tear his eyes away.

“Oh, God,” she said, her voice watery. “Oh, God.”

As if from a dream, Duffy heard Shabalala’s voice, far away. “Commander Salek, sickbay reports the Bynars—they’re not aboard. They didn’t report when the saucer—they didn’t get off, they’re—” He broke off.

No one spoke. There was nothing more to say.

As much as he didn’t want to look, Duffy made the choice to look because he knew this was a moment he must remember for the rest of his life.

Because memory is life, and I choose life.

The Belt truly was beautiful in all its lethal, glorious power. But what took his breath away was not the sight of the Keldon warship caught like a helpless, thrashing fly in the web of the Gettysburg's expanding warp bubble, or the luminous deflector beam spearing through space into a whirlpool of colors brighter than the heart of a molten sun.

No. What captured Duffy and held him tight was the Gettysburg, hurtling toward destiny and pulling a rainbow behind: an arrow flying true for a fiery heart.

* * *

Time nearly stopped. As it should, the dilation effect of the warp bubble combining with all that gas, debris, and plasma. One part of Gold's objective mind knew that he had, at most, thirty seconds before the autodestruct blew the Gettysburg apart. But it was enough, and so he watched as the deflector poured its energy, its life into the belt. . . .

And the light at its center: white as bone and as pure as revelation.

Gold heard the lift doors sigh and before he could register what that meant 111's voice came from his left: "We are here."

"Oh, no," said Gold. He'd prepared himself for this moment, knowing it might come, believing that his life alone was forfeit because he had chosen for Kira and her people, and for his crew. But now . . . "What are you doing?" Then he saw what wasn't there. "Where's your combadge? Why?"

"Captain," said 111. She laid her hand on his, and her fingers were cool. "We are telepaths—"

"—or had you forgotten?" 110, to his right. "It is better—"

"—that one not die alone," said 111. "We are here."

"And so is she; she is—"

"—here," said 111, and she pressed her hand to his heart. "Where she has always been."

"Because where there is memory—"

"—there is life," said 111.

The pain and joy in his heart were so intense it was as if he'd been touched by an angel. "Rachel," said Gold—and now he turned his face to the light. "Rachel. . ."

There was a flare of white light. A starburst of color.

But, most of all, there was light.

Chapter 11

“How do you feel?”

“Badly,” said Soloman. They sat in Gold’s ready room; the da Vinci had appeared as soon as Gomez powered down the deflectors—and their counterparts had deactivated their device. What they had encountered was, in Gold’s words, “a whole other story.” Soloman had been checked out by Dr. Tarses on DS9 and pronounced fit. “I chose very poorly.”

“Yes, you did. And in the end, Commander Gomez chose for you.”

“Yes. And because of her and Nog, DS9 and Bajor are safe.”

“No, they didn’t do it on their own. Nog and Gomez gave them information. Then they had a choice: trust us and shut down the device, or go it on their own even knowing they’d destroy us. They chose life for us, and for you. Let’s hope they chose the same for themselves.” Gold eyed him closely. “You have something else you want to say?”

“Yes.” Soloman felt an uncharacteristic rush of heat up his neck and into his face. He forced himself not to look away. “I lied. I have never lied, and for that I am truly sorry. You would be within your rights to transfer me off your vessel, or insist upon my return to Bynaus.”

“Yes, I would.” Gold frowned. “Don’t think I haven’t considered it. But you’re far more valuable to me, and yourself, if you stay. On one condition, however: You go to counseling either on a starbase, say for a few months, or perhaps with me, or Dr. Lense, since you seem comfortable with her. We’ll have to ask her if she feels the same when she comes back. Anyway—” Gold’s face softened. “—we have time.”

“Yes,” said Soloman. “There is that.”

* * *

Kira saw Sonya Gomez well before Gomez spotted her. Gomez was standing in profile, looking out at the stars and the wormhole winking into view with its myriad rainbow colors. Then Kira noticed that Gomez had chosen to watch from just outside the chapel where they’d kept the Orb of Prophecy and Change before that Orb had been returned to take its rightful place on Bajor with all the others. Some irony there, probably. Kira had read Gomez’s report and talked with Captain Gold. So she knew about Kieran Duffy: a hard thing to have someone about whom you cared so much be close enough to touch—and lose him again.

Like seeing that mirror universe version of Bareil after my Bareil died in my arms. Like Odo... I know what this is like.

“Captain,” said Gomez, reflexively coming to attention, then relaxing as Kira waved her down. “I was just watching the wormhole before we ship out. We need to get back to Earth, return Caitano’s and Deverick’s bodies to their families. I just wanted a moment, and this—this a good place.”

“Yes, it is,” said Kira. “Sometimes I take it for granted. Then I think back to the time all the Orbs went dark and it went away, and then I remember to be thankful.” She hesitated, then said, “I read your report. I talked to Captain Gold.”

Gomez nodded. She returned her gaze to the wormhole and the stars beyond. “Weird to think about that other universe. Somewhere, out there, people I’ve cared about are alive.” Gomez looked at her.

“Do you ever wish you could go back? Do things over?”

“You mean, do I wish I’d never let the genie out of the box, never released the Ohalu book, never joined the Resistance?” Never fallen in love with a man I may never see again? “No. I think it’s normal to wish you could redo the past. But then it wouldn’t be my past. I’m afraid I don’t have enough imagination to consider choices I’d never have made in the first place.” Kira paused, then said, “What about you? Do you have regrets?”

Gomez turned, and Kira would remember the look on her face—full of remorse and pain and regret—for a very long while to come.

“All the time,” said Gomez. “All the time.”

It was time. A clear sky and bright sun splashing goutts of warmth. A good day. One of his finest hours.

Gul Elim Garak stood on a podium, watching as members of the Bajor Assembly and those of his own government finished with the reading of the treaty. (These officials included Legate Rugal, a ruthless politician not above assassinating a Bajoran or two to clear his way. Garak was quite fond of the man, and they both shared a passion forrokassa juice—calmed the nerves.) The Assembly members were dressed in finely colored robes, each color reflecting their caste, and Garak could not help but notice that while the religious caste’s members were few their robes were so bright they looked to be of spun gold. He let his eyes roam over the upturned faces of the crowds gathered for the signing, and his satisfaction was reflected in the clear aquamarine of his tunic’s living gemstones.

And yet—Garak nibbled on the inside of his right cheek—only one tiny fly in the proverbial ointment. He cast a quick glance at the sky. No wormhole, and no Zotat, either. Well, maybe the legends were wrong about the wormhole being visible from Bajor. But, for there to be no word from Zotat...

Garak’s thoughts were interrupted by the Bajoran High Magistrate as he stood, scroll in one hand, a rose-red lavanian crystal pen in the other. “In the tradition of our people,” the Magistrate began, “I call upon any and all who believe that this treaty should not be enacted to speak and bring proof why—”

“I will speak.” This from the back of the crowd: a woman’s voice, proud and strong. “And I bring proof.”

The High Magistrate was struck dumb as was the remainder of the Assembly. The Cardassians shot quick, questioning glances; Legate Rugal looked murderous. Startled, Garak tried to see who the woman was but could not. Yet she was coming; that much was clear because the sea of Bajorans parted, and then Garak saw a Trill he didn’t recognize. She carried a glittering casket in her arms, and as if drawn by a magnet, the religious fell in behind so that as she approached, she pulled a vein of the purest gold in her wake. She ascended the dais, and when she cast her gaze about the ministers and magistrates and legates, they looked away. But when her eyes met his, Garak had a premonition that, for him, there were dark days ahead.

She turned aside and addressed the crowd. “Bajorans, I bring you hope. I bring you back your Prophets, and I bring you proof.”

And then she opened the casket, and the crowd cried out because what blazed forth was so white, so strong, so perfect it hurt Garak’s eyes. Gasping, he turned aside and then he saw that his tunic had gone

as completely and utterly black as a starless night.

Because now...there was light.

About the Author

ILSA J. BICK is a child, adolescent, and forensic psychiatrist, and a latecomer to fiction. Still, she's done okay. Her other Star Trek work includes "A Ribbon for Rosie" in Strange New Worlds II, "Shadows, in the Dark" in Strange New Worlds IV, "Alice, on the Edge of Night" in New Frontier: No Limits, and the Lost Era novel Well of Souls, focusing on Captain Rachel Garrett and the U.S.S. Enterprise -C. Her short fiction has also been published in Writers of the Future Volume XVI, SCIFICTION on SciFi.com, Challenging Destiny, Talebones, and Beyond the Last Star, and also in the Classic BattleTech universe. Her MechWarrior: Dark Age novel, Daughter of the Dragon is forthcoming from Roc in June 2005. She will be returning to the S.C.E. in a few months with the two-parter Wounds, which will follow the exploits of Drs. Lense and Bashir following Lost Time. She lives in Wisconsin with her husband, two children, three cats, and other assorted vermin.

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