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**SECURITY**

Keith R.A. DeCandido



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Chapter

1

**U.S.S. da Vinci  
in transit between Recreation Station Hidalgo  
and Coroticus III**

**ONE WEEK AGO**

The crystalline walls sparkled with reflected light as the brown ball shot out arcs of electricity at the nine Starfleet personnel in EVA suits.

A bizarre structure had entered the Artemis system, and the U.S.S. da Vinci had been sent to investigate this unknown technology. While doing so, they found a known one: the brown ball, an Androssi security device.

One of the Starfleet people, a Tellarite officer, broke cover and headed for one of the faceted wall sections that looked like a series of sparkling icicles. Another bellowed, “Tev, what the hell are you doing?”

Two seconds after Lieutenant Commander Tev broke cover, another followed him, this an enlisted security guard, armed with a phaser rifle, which he shot at the brown ball.

“Computer, freeze program.”

At the command from Lieutenant Commander Domenica Corsi, the tableau stopped moving. Andrew Angelopoulos sighed. Here it comes.

“All right,” the security chief said to the people under her command, gathered in the *theda Vinci*’s hololab for a debrief, “who can tell me what Angelopoulos did wrong there?”

Around him, six other enlisted guards raised their hands. Angelopoulos put his head in his.

Standing before them, Corsi, flanked by her deputy, Chief Vance Hawkins, smiled. “Angelopoulos, do you know what you did wrong?”

Venturing a smile, he said, “Yes, ma’am—I shouldn’t have bothered wasting my energy defending a stupid officer who doesn’t know not to break cover?”

Several chuckles started to form, then died when Corsi’s facial expression managed—somehow—to get darker.

“Most officers—particularly engineers, a type of officer we are overburdened with on this ship—are too stupid to know not to break cover. That’s why we’re here. Now, when Hawkins beamed down with you, Robins, Lauoc, Krotine, and T’Mandra to support Tev, Stevens, and Conlon, you each had a task. Hawkins was in charge, Lauoc and T’Mandra were to secure the perimeter, and what were the rest of you supposed to do, Robins?”

Angelopoulos had opened his mouth to answer, but Corsi had instead posed the question to Madeleine Robins. She had been in security on the *theda Vinci* since the ship was first given over to the S.C.E. six years ago; she even predated “Core-Breach.”

The older woman said, “We were to protect the engineers, ma’am. I had Stevens, Krotine had Conlon, and Angelopoulos had Tev.”

“Right. Krotine, what does protecting the engineers mean, exactly?”

The wiry Boslic woman gave Angelopoulos an apologetic look before saying, “Stick by the engineers at all times—no matter what.”

“No matter what, yes.”

Corsi paced back and forth in the hololab. Angelopoulos wished they would get past this part and move on to their assignments for the upcoming mission—from what Angelopoulos heard from Bennett and Phelps in engineering, they were splitting into three groups. Before that, though, Corsi was taking the opportunity to pick apart their mission to Artemis IX, undertaken before their unexpected rescue of Commander Gomez from Rec Station Hidalgo.

Finally Corsi turned her pitiless blue eyes on Angelopoulos, who, for his part, was trying desperately to sink into the bench. Next to him, Makk Vinx was doing a terrible job of holding in one of his trademark guffaws.

“Angelopoulos,” she said in a slow voice, “does ‘no matter what’ include following officers when they break cover to start playing with their crystals?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Yet you didn’t do that.”

“No, ma’am. Honestly, I wasn’t expecting it.”

“Congratulations, that’s the second wrong answer you’ve given in five minutes. People, we’re security. Our job is to expect the unexpected and to keep the people on this ship safe. You, Angelopoulos, failed in that regard pretty spectacularly on Artemis. Most of you came on after Galvan VI, and that’s because seven good people died protecting this ship. If you can’t handle that, then you can follow Powers out the door. Understood?”

As one, all nine security personnel, even Hawkins, said, “Yes, ma’am.”

Angelopoulos bit his lip in annoyance. Back on Risa, Hawkins had asked Angelopoulos what he thought of Corsi, and he described her then as “brusque.” After that dressing-down, brusque would be a relief.

He also thought that her shot at Frank Powers was unjustified. True, Powers had complained that he signed on to the *theda Vinci* because he figured protecting engineers would be comparatively easy duty, only to find the ship diving into a black hole within a few weeks of his signing on. Then he was badly injured on *Phantas 61*, and when Powers recovered from that, he requested a transfer. But that doesn’t make him bad security, it just makes him...

Angelopoulos didn’t finish the thought. He also noticed that, while Corsi mentioned Powers and the people who died at Galvan VI, she didn’t mention Ken Caitano. He died, not protecting the ship or doing his duty, but from some secret weapon created by a crazy Vorta, one that also claimed his roommate, Ted Deverick, one of the engineers. Corsi had taken those two murders particularly hard for some reason, and Angelopoulos wondered if that meant she was going to be even harder on them.

Like it could get worse.

“All right, we’re en route to Coroticus III—we should be there in three hours. It’s one of two pre-warp planets that the Dominion occupied during the war, the other being *Sachem II*. We’re going to help to set the observation posts back up, and also to examine cultural contamination the Dominion might have engaged in, on both worlds. Prime Directive’s in full force on this one, and there’ll be lots of engineers, including a bunch we picked up at *Hidalgo*, so the away teams will include four security per. Chief Hawkins will have Angelopoulos, Krotine, and Konya on *Sachem*. I’ll be taking T’Mandra, Vinx, and Lauoc to Coroticus.”

Thank God. Angelopoulos let out a long breath. I thought for sure she’d stick me on her team. At least Hawk doesn’t want to kill me. Probably.

“After that, the *theda Vinci* ’ll be headed to Avril Station for an upgrade. Robins, you’ll be it for security, but Commander Ling told me that six of her people will be detached to you to handle security for Commander Gomez and her team.”

Robins simply nodded.

“Powers’s replacement will be reporting to the ship at Avril, also, as will Deverick’s, and the U.S.S. Musashi is supposed to be dropping Lense off—apparently their CMO was up for the same prize. Robins, I expect you to break the new guy in.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Even though he knew full well that the best thing for him would be to keep his mouth shut, Angelopoulos found himself saying: “Uh, ma’am, don’t you mean Caitano’s replacement?”

Now Corsi glared at him, and Angelopoulos was trying to bury himself under the bench. “Of all the people in this room who should be keeping their mouth shut, Angelopoulos, you’re pretty much at the top of the list.”

“Yes, ma’am. Sorry, ma’am.”

“And I said Caitano’s replacement.”

Angelopoulos wisely said nothing. Hawkins was giving Corsi a strange look—she really did say Powers, and that meant something was wrong. But no way was Angelopoulos going to pursue it just at the moment.

“All right.” Corsi looked out at everyone. “Dismissed.”

Stepping over Vinx and T’Mandra, Angelopoulos set a land speed record getting out of the hololab. He wanted to be away from Corsi as fast as possible. He’d been in security for a little over three years, going back to just before the war, and one truth he’d learned was that, if you were in your CO’s doghouse, avoid said CO like the plague.

On his way down the corridor, he almost literally bumped into Lieutenant Commander Tev. “Sorry, sir.”

“Guard,” the Tellarite said dismissively, and started to walk past him.

“Uh, sir?”

Tev turned around and asked impatiently, “Yes?”

“I just wanted to apologize to you, sir.”

“I was unaware of any offense you’d committed. If you had, I’m quite sure I would have reported you for it.”

This is a bad idea, Angelopoulos told himself, but, as with his pointing out Corsi’s misstatement, he found the words coming out of his mouth before his brain could stop them. “Back on Artemis, sir, you broke cover, and I was slow to watch your flank. I didn’t anticipate your move and lagged behind. So—”

“Of course you didn’t anticipate my move.” Tev snorted, which sounded like a pipe bursting. “You couldn’t possibly have worked out how to use the crystalline power systems to overload the Androssi security device as I did—you are simply a security guard. Few on this ship could have anticipated what I would do, and none of them are in security. Therefore, Guard, you have nothing for which to apologize.”

Tev continued down the corridor. “Now if you will excuse me, I have a most onerous duty to perform.”

Well, that didn't make me feel any better.

As Tev continued toward the hololab, Vinx walked up beside Angelopoulos. “When you gonna learn to keep your yap shut, Andy?”

“At this rate? Five minutes after I'm dead.”

“Which'll be five minutes from now if you get too close to the boss.” The Iotian shook his head. “C'mon, I'll buy you a beer. We got three hours, and we ain't on shift till then. See if we can rustle up some grub, too.”

Angelopoulos nodded. “Sounds good. Hey, Makk—what do you think's up with Core-Breach?”

“Nothin's 'up,' Andy. Just 'cause she raked you over the coals don't mean nothin'.”

He waved his hand in front of his face. “No, not that. I deserved to get my aft shields blown off for that one. No, I mean the way she called the new guy Powers's replacement instead of Caitano's. What do you think that is?”

Vinx shrugged as they approached the turbolift that would take them to the mess hall. “I heard tell that she was buds with Caitano's old man, so maybe that has somethin' to do with it. I dunno, I ain't no head-shrinker. 'Sides, the dame's tired—after Artemis, we all are. I'm lookin' forward to a nice easy mission on Coroticus, lemme tell you.”

“Yeah.” They entered the turbolift. “Hey, why's Tev talking about the hololab being an 'onerous duty'? Thought those engineers loved it in there, playing with their techie toys and stuff.”

Vinx leaned in close. “Well, between you, me, and the lamppost, I heard tell that Gomez got Tev takin' some kinda sensitivity trainin'.”

Angelopoulos blinked. “You're kidding.”

“That's what I heard, anyhow. Hey, if any mook needs it, it's him.”

“You said it, brother.” Angelopoulos winced. He liked Vinx, he really did, but there were times where his odd way of talking—common to the natives of Sigma Iotia, who had apparently patterned their entire society after a four-hundred-year-old Earth book about contemporary criminals—rubbed off on him. If I find myself calling Corsi “sweetheart,” I swear, I'm gonna kill him.

Chapter

2

**U.S.S. da Vinci  
in orbit around Avril Station**

**TWO DAYS AGO**

David Gold exited the turbolift. He had been on his way to his quarters to reread the letter from his granddaughter Ruth. Little Rinic David was adjusting to having a baby sister, the baby was doing fine,



and they had finally decided to name her Kiri, after Ruth's husband Rinic's grandmother.

However, before Gold could even make it to his cabin to peruse the letter yet again, he was summoned back to the bridge by a call from the *Musashi*, which he hoped was bringing his chief medical officer back to him. He wasn't sure, as the *Musashi* had to fly through a massive ion storm in order to get here from Station Kel-Artis, where the Bentman Prize had been awarded. Lense had been one of the finalists for the prestigious medical award. So had Dr. Julian Bashir of Deep Space 9, and they had traveled together in one of DS9's runabouts. The *Musashi*, however, had a finalist to pick up in their own chief medical officer, and was then going to Cor Coroli IX. Avril Station was on the way between Kel-Artis and Cor Coroli, so it worked out nicely for everyone.

The replacements for Caitano and Deverick—a young man named Tomozuka Kim and an older woman named Lise Irastorza, respectively—had reported aboard, and the upgrades to Avril were proceeding apace, despite occasional shouting matches between Gomez and Tev.

As he entered the bridge, Gold thought again with sadness about the senseless deaths of Caitano and Deverick. He'd been a captain for a lot of years on a lot of ships, the *Da Vinci* for over six of them, and it never stopped hurting when he lost people under his command.

Gamma shift was on duty: Martina Barre at conn, Alexandre Lambdin at ops, and Winn Mara at tactical. The latter, a tall Bajoran woman, spoke as he sat in his chair. "I have Captain Terapane, sir."

"Good. On screen."

A very concerned-looking face appeared on the viewer, along with a fortyish, balding man with a blue collar on his uniform. "I'm afraid I have some bad news, Captain. Your doctors weren't at the conference."

Gold blinked. "Say again?"

The man in the blue collar spoke up. "Captain, I'm Dr. Dennis Chimelis—I'm the chief medical officer of the *Musashi*. I'm afraid that neither Elizabeth nor Julian made it to the conference. As it happens, they didn't win...er, I did, in fact, but the point is—"

Having no interest in the doctor's point, Gold waved his right hand in front of his face. "What happened to my CMO, Doctor?"

"I honestly have no idea."

Gold whirled around to the tactical station behind him. "Put a call through to DS9, pronto."

Winn nodded. "Aye, sir."

"I'm sorry, if it wasn't for the ion storm—" Terapane started.

"Understandable, Captain. Don't worry, we'll get right on it."

"We need to make time to Cor Coroli IX. Again, sorry about this."

"It's all right. *Da Vinci* out."

As soon as the screen reverted to the view of Avril Station, Winn said, “I’ve got Deep Space 9, sir.”

Gold nodded, and the screen switched, this time to a very familiar Bajoran woman in a Starfleet uniform with a red collar and four pips.

With a wry smile, she said, “David, this is getting to be a habit.”

“Not a good one, I’m afraid, Nerys,” Gold said to Captain Kira in as serious a voice as he could muster. “It seems we’ve both got us a problem.”

Chapter

3

### **U.S.S. da Vinci in orbit of Coroticus III**

**NOW**

Vance Hawkins waited impatiently for Laura Poynter to hurry up and finish operating the transporter. I need to see my woman. Not to mention my CO.

Their mission to Sachem II had been uneventful. The Dominion had done little to change the lives of the natives, mostly because the natives were fairly easygoing people. P8 Blue had supervised the team of engineers who’d be running the “duckblind,” Vance and his people had found no remnants of a Dominion base that might prove problematic—whatever one might say about the Jem’Hadar, they were good at cleaning up after themselves—and Bart Faulwell had found no evidence of cultural contamination. (The linguist also complained that the natives, who called themselves the O-Mor, had the most boring language he’d ever encountered. Vance gamely tried to be sympathetic.)

Now they had to pick up Commander Corsi and her team from Coroticus, which included Carol Abramowitz.

Vance and Carol had been serving on the da Vinci together since the war, but it wasn’t until their mission to Teneb—during which the entire away team, including the two of them, Fabian Stevens, and Commander Gomez, were almost killed—that they really noticed each other. He enjoyed listening to her talk, her sense of humor, her interest in the nuances of how other people lived their lives—and he could even stand to listen to her music for more than five minutes at a time, which put him one up on their two score crewmates.

As Poynter energized the transporter, Vance felt his stomach drop. There had been no vocal communication with the away team to avoid possible Prime Directive issues. They simply sent a signal to Corsi’s combadge indicating that the da Vinci was approaching. So Vance had no idea how the mission went—though the lack of any kind of distress signal from the duckblind on the planet was, he had hoped, a good sign.

When he saw one of the six members of the team beaming up in a horizontal position, he feared the worst. Dammit, we just buried Ken and that Deverick kid, and Lense has gone missing—we’re not losing another one!

I’m not losing Carol.

To Vance's relief, the injured team member wasn't Carol, but Lauoc Soan, and Vance soon saw that he was breathing. That tough little Bajoran had been through hell and back during the war, and Vance was fairly sure that, if he was breathing, he'd be fine.

Corsi—like all of them, dressed in the brightly colored clothing and cloak that the Coroticans favored—barked at Poynter, “Get Lauoc to sickbay.” She tapped her combadge. “Corsi to Lense—Doctor, you've got a patient.”

“Lense isn't back yet,” Vance said quickly. Before he could answer the question that Corsi's responding look posed, he tapped his own combadge. “Hawkins to Wetzel. Incoming wounded.” Even as he spoke, he felt the subtle change in vibration indicating that they were going to warp speed. Lauoc's body disappeared in a shimmer of light.

“Acknowledged,” came Nurse Sandy Wetzel's voice. “He's just materialized. I'll get the EMH on it.”

“What happened to Soan?” Vance asked.

“What happened to Lense?” Corsi asked right back. “And why'd we go to warp so fast?”

Since he was the chief petty officer and she was the lieutenant commander, her questions got answered first. “The Missouri apparently never made it to Kel-Artis. Nobody's heard from Lense or Bashir since they left DS9 right before that Empok Nor disaster. The Defiant's already searching, and we're heading out to do the same now that we've got you guys.”

Shaking her head, Corsi said, “Dammit.”

“Captain wants you and Stevens in a staff meeting as soon as you get changed and, uh, bob your ears.”

Coroticans had tapered ears, so all of the away team—save for T'Mandra, whose Vulcan physiology gave her adequate natural cover—had their ears surgically altered to pass muster. “Screw the ears.” She turned to the others. “Fabe, you're with me. The rest of you, report to sickbay—the EMH can deal with you guys after he fixes up Lauoc. Then report to the security office. The minute my senior staff meeting's over, I'll be briefing you all.”

“You'll want to meet the new guy, too,” Vance said. “Tomozuka Kim. Robins has been showing him the ropes.”

Corsi nodded. “Good.”

With that, she and Stevens left. Vinx and T'Mandra followed behind her.

After he gave Poynter a significant look, she said, “Uh, I think I need to go recalibrate something. Back in a bit.”

The second the door closed behind Poynter's retreating form, Vance leaned down and kissed Carol passionately. It had been a week, after all....

When he came up for air several subjective centuries later, he smiled down at her, their arms still clasped around each other. “You taste kind of peaty.”

She smiled. “That would be when the crazy Vorta dropped me to the ground.”

Vance's eyes widened. "Another crazy Vorta?"

Nodding, Carol proceeded to tell him about the Vorta who had set himself up as one of the local deities. Deciding he liked the taste of godhood, he had stayed behind when the order to retreat came in, massacring his Jem'Hadar, and living on his own as a lunatic in the woods of Coroticus for a year, occasionally mutilating a native.

Shaking his head, Vance said, "First Luaran, now this. Did we install a wacky-Vorta magnet on the ship or something?"

"I wouldn't put it past the engineers to build one." Putting her hand to Vance's cheek, she said, "I really missed you down there. I could've used someone to talk to."

"Yeah, well, I don't see us going on a lot of away teams together from here on in, after—" He cut himself off.

She nodded, understanding. It had been a brutal year for all of them, and the most brutal part was Galvan VI, when Commander Duffy died shortly after proposing to Commander Gomez.

I bet that's why Stevens and Corsi have been dancing around each other for months. Well, that and Corsi's an emotional coward, but try saying that to her face.

Not wanting to gossip about his CO—not even to his girlfriend—he instead said, "Look, I gotta go prep the troops for the meeting."

"And I need to have EMH get rid of these ears." Her hand went to the left one. "They itch like hell."

"Why don't we try to catch up when I'm off-shift—say, the mess hall at 1615 hours?"

She smiled. It was a beautiful smile, and Vance was one of the few who was privileged enough to see it. "It's a date."

They both departed the transporter room. Poynter was standing outside the door.

"What happened to the calibration?" Vance asked pseudo-innocently.

Poynter rolled her eyes. "Yeah, like I need to calibrate things on this ship. Why do you think I requested the transfer here? S.C.E. ships are fine-tuned within an inch of their lives—easiest duty a transporter chief ever had."

Chuckling, Vance gave Carol a quick kiss good-bye, then headed toward the turbolift, while she made a beeline for sickbay.

Chapter

4

**U.S.S. da Vinci  
in transit between Coroticus III  
and Station Kel-Artis**

## NOW

Rennan Konya walked into the security office alongside Makk Vinx. An unfamiliar mind was inside, and when he looked around he pegged it as the very young human male sitting alone on the port side of the room. He recognized the minds sitting on the starboard side: T'Mandra's orderly thought patterns and Andrew Angelopoulos's somewhat more chaotic ones. Rennan wasn't a strong enough telepath to detect a non-Betazoid's actual thoughts, but he was able to get general impressions, and he certainly knew when he was around the people he worked with without ever having to see their faces.

"Looks like we're early," he said to the Iotian.

"That must be the new mug. C'mon, let's roll out the welcome mat."

The "new mug" was sitting ramrod straight, and he seemed eager to please in the way that only recent recruits could be.

Makk walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "You nervous, kid?"

Smiling, he said, "A little, yeah."

"Nothin' here to be scared of. You signed yourself up for the best security detail in the quadrant."

"Oh, I already know that, sir."

Rennan chuckled; Makk winced. "Can the 'sir' hogwash, kid. Ain't no officers in this room—exceptin' the commander, of course, but she's a good broad for an officer, so she don't really count."

Unable to resist, Rennan asked, "Why do I get the feeling you'd never say that to her face?"

Grinning, Makk said, "'Cause I ain't got a death wish is why." He offered his hand to the new recruit. "They call me—"

"Makk Vinx," he said, returning the handshake. "And you're Rennan Konya. I'm Tomozuka Kim."

Rennan frowned. "Funny, you don't look telepathic."

Grinning, Kim said, "I'm not, I just know the crew roster. I've followed Commander Corsi's career pretty thoroughly, and I've kept track of the security personnel on the *Vinci* since she reported."

"Why you got the hots for the commander?" Makk asked with a wink.

"Got the—" Kim seemed confused at first. That was hardly surprising. Since reporting to the *Vinci* on Earth months ago, Rennan had wondered how a non-telepath could possibly understand a single word Makk said, since without his ability to read the Iotian's perspectives, Rennan himself would have found his colleague to be incomprehensible.

When Kim finally did get it, his cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "Oh, nothing like that. God, no, the whole idea's crazy."

"Good thing—she got the hots for Stevens."

Rennan gave a half-smile. “Well, he has the hots for her, anyhow.”

“Yeah, jury’s still out on that one. So what’s the story, kid, why you go around memorizin’ Corsi’s duty rosters?”

“I’m from Izar. My mother’s a peace officer there. A while back, Commander Corsi helped one of our people stop a killer. I was just a kid when it happened—it was ten years ago—”

“You’re still a kid, kid,” Makk said with a wink.

“—but I’ll never forget it. She’s a big hero on Izar. One of my mother’s coworkers, Christine Vale, she quit the force and joined Starfleet.”

Makk frowned. “I know that moniker.”

“Security chief on the Enterprise,” Rennan said. “Remember, Phantas 61?”

Realization spread over Makk’s face. “Oh, yeah. Not a bad-lookin’ broad.”

That, Rennan thought, is a perfect example. How does the word “broad” come to mean a female?

“Anyhow,” Kim said, “when I was old enough, I signed up to join security, too, just like Commander Corsi and Officer—or, uh, Lieutenant Vale. I was hoping for the *Vinci* or the *Enterprise*, but I’d have taken anything. It was just luck that this opening came when it did.”

While he appreciated Kim’s enthusiasm, that last line hit a bit too close to home. In a quiet voice, Rennan said, “I think Ken Caitano might disagree with the notion that luck had anything to do with it.”

Kim’s cheeks flushed again, and Rennan couldn’t help but feel the young man’s embarrassment this time. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“Caitano did his job, kid.” Makk’s voice had hardened, all the friendliness drained from his demeanor, making his eccentric style of speech sound downright scary—though Rennan supposed that he was feeling it more strongly, both telepathically in Makk and within himself, too. Ken was good security, and he deserved better than the senseless death he got.

Makk continued: “He hadn’t been on board for more’n a couple days when he put his keister on the line to save the ship. Turned on one of the engineers’ doohickeys. He hadn’t done that, we’d all be worm food. And then a couple days later, he died from some weapon made by a Vorta who belonged in a rubber room.”

“Our job’s to protect the people on this ship,” Rennan added. “That’s a duty we all take very seriously.”

Makk stood up. “It’d be real swell if you got your head outta the clouds and remembered that every once in a while. Otherwise, we’ll be buryin’ you next to Caitano—or worse, we’ll be buryin’ the guy you let die ’cause you were too busy droolin’ over Corsi to do your job right.”

With that, the Iotian went over to sit on the starboard side of the security office, with T’Mandra and Andrew.

Kim’s regret was washing over Rennan in waves. “I didn’t mean anything by that, honest, I just—”

“I know you didn’t,” Rennan said in as soothing a voice as he could muster, “but you’d better get used to it. Every new assignment in security usually means you’re taking over from someone who died in the line and serving alongside that person’s comrades. This ship’s had it particularly rough this past year, and with only about forty people on board, people tend to get close. And the work is very intense. My first couple of weeks here, we explored a city inside a small ball bearing, helped terraform Venus, stopped a Ferengi time traveler, salvaged an alien ship, and went into a black hole. And that was a slow month. Not everyone can handle it. The person Caitano replaced was named Frank Powers, and he transferred off because he couldn’t deal with it. Now—”

The door to the security office opened, and Corsi came in—still, Rennan noted after a moment, with the pointed ears from the Coroticus mission. Ellec Krotine, Madeleine Robins, and Vance Hawkins walked in behind her.

Indicating Kim, Vance said, “Commander Corsi, this is Tomozuka Kim, our newest recruit.”

Kim stood up at attention. “It’s an honor, ma’am!”

Corsi let out a breath. “At ease, Kim. Why?”

Relaxing hardly at all, Kim asked, “Why what, ma’am?”

“Why is it an honor?”

That seemed to surprise Kim. “The commander probably doesn’t remember me, but we’ve met before—ten years ago on Izar. My mother is Officer Soon-Li Kim.”

If Kim’s earlier embarrassment came in waves, Corsi’s anger and hostility came like a slap to Rennan’s face. It happened as soon as Kim mentioned that he was from Izar. What the hell—?

“Sit down, Kim.”

If only Rennan noticed Corsi’s fury before she spoke, everyone caught it in her voice now.

Baffled, Kim took his seat. “Uh, yes—yes, ma’am.”

Corsi then looked out at the rest of them. “Here’s the drill. The Runabout Missouri, carrying Doctors Elizabeth Lense and Julian Bashir, has gone missing. It hasn’t been seen since departing DS9 two weeks ago. Since the conference they were to attend was to go on for twelve days, no one was the wiser. The Defiant has been dispatched to begin the search, and we’ll be joining them. They’re tracking the runabout’s path from DS9—we’ll be backtracking from Kel-Artis, the station where the conference was held. Everybody’s on alert status until we determine what happened to the Missouri and its passengers. Lauoc’s out of commission for at least a few days, so we’re on beta formation, with Kim in Powers’s—or, rather, Caitano’s spot.”

Rennan blinked. That was the second time since Ken’s death that Corsi had done that. Andrew rather stupidly called her on it then. Nobody seemed willing to brave that particular lion in its den now.

“Kim, since you’re new, the beta form—” the commander started, but Kim interrupted her, proving he had less of a fear of lions.

“I know the formation, ma’am.” Rennan could feel Kim’s pride as he spoke. “It’s the same as the alpha, only with you substituting for the injured crew member. In this case, you’ll be joining Angelopoulos and Krotine on gamma shift, with Chief Hawkins, T’Mandra, and Konya on alpha, and Robins, Vinx, and I on beta.”

Rennan was once again impressed with Kim’s knowledge of the ship’s duty roster. That was a level of preparation most people didn’t bother with. Then again, most people don’t worship the water their new CO walks on...

Corsi’s anger had come back full bore, though Rennan was more prepared for it this time. “Two things you need to know, Kim. One is that the duty roster shifts every few weeks, and the one you just recited was changed a week ago, after our mission to Artemis IX. And as of right now, the duty roster is changing yet again.”

That was a surprise, but only a mild one. Changes didn’t happen that fast regularly, but that didn’t mean they never did.

“Angelopoulos, Kim, and I will take alpha, with Lauoc slotting back in when he’s recovered. Beta is T’Mandra, Vinx, and Robins, with Hawkins, Konya, and Krotine on gamma.”

That threw Rennan for a loop—mostly because he felt the loop that it threw Vance into. Rennan knew that Vance had requested alpha shift the next time the duty roster shifted, so he and Carol Abramowitz would be on duty at the same time. When Vance had mentioned it to Rennan, Andrew, and Makk over dinner one night, he had seemed pretty confident that Corsi would grant it. Since Vance had served with the commander longer than anyone on board save Madeleine, Rennan assumed it to be a sure thing. So why did she stick him on gamma?

“The second thing you need to know,” and now Corsi’s anger was starting to make Rennan’s head hurt, “is that I don’t like to be interrupted. Is that understood?”

In a small voice, Kim said, “Yes, ma’am.”

“Say again, Mr. Kim, I didn’t hear you,” Corsi barked.

More loudly, Kim said, “Yes, ma’am!”

“Good.” She looked out at the rest of them. “Alpha shift will report to the security office. Kim, you’ll be trained on the systems there. Beta and gamma, report to the hololab and run battle drills nine and ten. When beta shift starts, alpha and gamma will continue to do the same, this time integrating Kim into our maneuvers.” She let out a breath. “Bear in mind that we could find Lense and Bashir at any minute, and that may require an extraction. Dismissed.”

Rennan got up. He felt Kim’s disappointment in his first meeting with Corsi, which matched Rennan’s surprise. She hadn’t been like this when Rennan came on board—which was alongside Makk, Andrew, T’Mandra, Soan, Ellec, and the since-departed Frank Powers.

And it all happened when Kim said he was from Izar. Rennan was glad that he’d been put on the same shift as Vance—this was a concern about the security chief that he needed to bring to the deputy chief’s attention posthaste.

Chapter



**U.S.S. da Vinci  
in search operations between Stations Kel-Artis  
and Deep Space 9**

**NOW**

Vance Hawkins entered the mess hall in desperate need of a cup of coffee.

He also needed a short break. Konya and Krotine had things under control in the security office, the da Vinci hadn't actually found the Missouri yet, and Corsi had, miraculously, allowed alpha and beta shift to get some sleep, after running them all through the ringer.

The only other occupant of the mess hall was Fabian Stevens, who had a variety of tiny parts on the table in front of him, along with a cup of coffee that looked like it had long since gone cold.

"What're you doing up?" Hawkins asked as he walked to the replicator. "Coffee, black."

As the steaming drink materialized with a hum in the slot, Stevens looked up and said, "Hm? Oh, uh—couldn't sleep. Commander Gomez, Pattie, Nancy Conlon, and I were up half the night recalibrating the sensors. Nog was kind enough to send over the specs of the Missouri, and we've been fine-tuning so that the sensors will find the runabout's seat cushion, if we have to."

"Nice." Hawkins took a seat perpendicular to Stevens and noticed that several of the small pieces on the table were charred and/or broken. "Hope that's not the sensor array."

Grinning, Stevens said, "Nah, these are the tattered remains of my pet project."

Hawkins nodded. "The mobile emitter that Luaran blew all to hell?"

"Yeah, but at least it worked. Haven't had the time to save it from Humpty Dumpty status." Stevens took a sip of his coffee. "Gah, this tastes almost as bad as you look."

"Thanks a lot," Hawkins said dryly.

"I ain't kiddin', Hawk, you look like the seventh level of hell. What's Dom been doing to you guys?"

"That answer'd be shorter if you asked what she wasn't doing." Hawkins hesitated. He had no more desire to gossip about his boss to Stevens than he had to Carol, but Corsi and Stevens had something going on, and maybe the engineer could provide some insights. So he told Stevens about the meeting, and what Konya had told him afterward, and then discussed the training that went on during beta shift. "Angelopoulos has been in her doghouse since Artemis."

Stevens frowned. "Why?"

"He didn't break cover with Tev right off."

Snorting, Stevens said, "You can't expect a 'mere' guard to keep up with the Great One's thought processes. You know, I think he's gotten worse since the Hyperion. In retrospect, inviting him along to that wasn't one of my brighter moves—after bossing those cadets around for days, he's expecting the

rest of us to act like they did. Commander Gomez didn't come out and say it, but I think she's actually making that jackass take—"

Hawkins held up a hand. "Uh, Fabe? I'm on a break here and I honestly could give a damn about your problems. I'm here to bitch to you about my boss, not listen to you bitch about yours."

Laughing, Stevens got up and headed to the replicator. "Fine, fine, so what's the problem?"

"Well, Andy talked out of turn a bit during the Artemis debrief, so I can see why the commander's crawling up his butt. But all Kim did was show initiative and enthusiasm. I mean, yeah, he was wrong, but it was only because the latest duty rosters haven't made their way to Command's database yet."

Stevens took a fresh cup of coffee out of the replicator. "And she's kicking his ass as much as Andy's?"

"More, actually. Give the kid credit, he's taking everything she's dishing out, but all she does is ride him harder."

Sitting back down, Stevens said, "Well, isn't that what she does?"

"Not like this." Hawkins drank some of his own coffee, the hot beverage clearing the cobwebs from his brain. "She had the off-shift personnel running scenarios in the hololab. When alpha came in, she whipped out battle drill number twenty."

His eyes widening, Stevens asked, "Galorndon Core?"

Hawkins nodded.

"Ouch."

"And she included the random sensor-blind traps that you and Duffy put in last year."

"Why do you think I said 'ouch'?" Stevens shook his head. "When we showed her the gussied-up version of that, she said she was gonna save it for the next war. Seriously, that's intended for ten-year veterans in security, not newbies."

"I know. Hell, Robins was having trouble with it, and it's actually designed for someone like her."

"And you think it's because of something with Kim being from Izar?"

"I don't think that, Rennan does, but I trust his judgment."

Chuckling, Stevens said, "Wasn't he the one you thought wasn't worthy to be on your hallowed security team?"

Hawkins fixed Stevens with a glare. "I expressed a concern when Rennan signed on. I later retracted it."

"Was that before or after he knocked you down?"

"You do realize that I can just kill you and make up a reason why, right?"

Stevens frowned. "Hang on a sec—you said you're on a break? You're on gamma now?"

Unable to help himself, Hawkins chuckled. “Nice of you to catch up to where the conversation was half an hour ago. Yeah, she put me on gamma, after I specifically requested to be put on alpha next go-round.”

“Right, because then you and Carol would have two shifts to go all smoochy-face.”

Hawkins raised an eyebrow. “We donot ‘go all smoochy-face.’ I’m not even sure what that means. Anyhow, something’s gotten the boss’s back up, and I don’t know what it is. I don’t think it was Coroticus.”

Shaking his head, Stevens said, “Not that I noticed, but I wasn’t with her as much.”

“Not that T’Mandra or Vinx noticed, either—their after-action reports are pretty straight-up.”

“On the other hand,” Stevens said while rubbing his chin, “she hasn’t been entirely right with things since Ken died. You know about them, right?”

Hawkins shook his head, unaware that there was any history between Corsi and Caitano.

“Dom tried to keep it under wraps, but—well, Caitano’s dad was her mentor back at the Academy. So when he died—especially likethat —she took it pretty hard.”

Leaning back in the mess hall chair, Hawkins said, “Damn. I didn’t know that. That explains a lot, actually.” Finishing off his coffee in one gulp, Hawkins then rose. “Listen, I need to get back. Do me a favor—I don’t know what exactly you and the commander have going, and I honestly could live a happy life without ever knowing any specifics—”

“This from the man who can’t shut up about how wonderful Carol is.”

Hawkins shot Stevens another look. “That isn’t the point.”

“Easy for you to say—I need to wear polarized goggles just to keep from being blinded by your glow.”

“Are you gonna listen to me, or are you gonna run your mouth off?”

Grinning, Stevens said, “Evidence to date indicates I can do both.”

Hawkins rubbed the bridge of his nose with his right forefinger and thumb. The coffee was doing nothing to alleviate the headache that he’d had since Corsi announced he was on gamma shift. “Can you just talk to her? See if anything’s bothering her? And if it is—I don’t know,do something about it?”

“What do you suggest I do?”

“Didn’t I just get finished telling you I don’t want specifics?”

“That you did, yes.” Stevens sipped from his coffee. “Fine, I’ll do what I can, but I can’t promise it’ll do any good. Believe me, if I had any real impact on the way Dom behaves—well, let’s just say that you wouldn’t be so unclear as to what we have going.”

That brought Hawkins up short. There was a depth of feeling to Stevens’s words that he’d rarely heard

from the usually freewheeling engineer. “You really care about her, don’t you?”

For a second, Stevens’s face remained serious, then broke into his trademark grin, though the jocularity didn’t quite extend to his entire face. “To a degree that scares the hell out of me sometimes.”

Hawkins was about to turn and leave the mess hall, then hesitated. “Carol told me something after we became a couple. She said the thing she got most from both Galvan VI and Teneb was that this is the only life we got, and we don’t know when it’s gonna be taken away, so it’s stupid not to make the most of it.”

“Smart lady, is our Dr. Abramowitz.” Stevens tried to make the comment sound facetious, but failed.

“I’ll talk to you later, okay, Fabe?”

“Definitely.”

Hawkins left, still unsure as to what was wrong with his CO, but also a lot more confident about at least one person’s ability to take a shot at getting it out of her.

Chapter

6

### **U.S.S. da Vinci in search operations between Stations Kel-Artis and Deep Space 9**

**NOW**

Tev sat at an aft station of the bridge of the da Vinci, looking over the recalibrations that Commander Gomez, Chief Engineer Conlon, and Specialists Blue and Stevens had done. The work was excellent, almost as good as Tev himself would have done.

From the tactical station that faced Tev’s console, Ensign Winn said, “We’ve reached the coordinates, sir.”

Standing up, Tev looked toward the conn at the fore of the bridge. “Full stop and commence search pattern.”

“Answering all stop, sir,” Ensign Barre said from conn as she ceased the da Vinci’s forward thrust, and applied the reverse thrusters in the configuration necessary to bring the ship to as close to sitting still as was possible in the depths of space.

From next to Barre at the operations console, Ensign Lambdin said, “Beginning search pattern.”

Gamma shift was almost at a close, and soon Captain Gold would be arriving to relieve Tev of command of the bridge. The captain and Gomez had, he noticed, taken to walking to the bridge together in the mornings. According to Bartholomew Faulwell, it was a habit they’d developed early on in the commander’s tenure as first officer, but one that took some time to redevelop after Tev’s predecessor’s death. Tev thought that was an odd reason for discontinuing a practice that gave the two top-ranking officers on the ship an opportunity to compare notes and discuss command strategies. However, he said nothing, since he apparently could not communicate with Commander Gomez in any way that would not

result in an awkward confrontation.

Awkward primarily from her perspective, of course. The woman was obviously smitten with Tev—not that he could blame her, given his expertise in her chosen field, she would naturally be drawn to like, just as she was to Tev’s predecessor—but could not properly express her passion. Tev sympathized with the poor woman, but it sometimes got in the way of the work. Witness the tiresome arguments at Avril Station. If the commander would have just admitted that Tev’s diagnostic program was more efficient than hers, he would have been spared the distasteful task of going directly to the station administrator.

The worst were those absurd sensitivity lectures he had to endure in the hololab. The program was apparently designed by Vulcans who were supposedly trying to educate people in how to deal with the more emotional species. Tev failed to see how this advice could possibly have been of use to a Tellarite.

Still, he endured them. As Bartholomew had so succinctly put it, it got the commander off his back.

At 0800 hours, the start of alpha shift, the turbolift doors parted to reveal Lieutenants Wong and Shabalala and Ensign Haznedl. They relieved Ensigns Barre, Winn, and Lambdin, respectively. At 0809, the captain and Commander Gomez entered. Tev had long since come to grudgingly accept that engineers who weren’t him had no concept of punctuality, and so did not let his irritation at the fact that his relief was nine minutes late show in his face.

Gomez looked right at him upon entering the bridge. “Tev! Just the Tellarite I want to see.” The commander’s voice sounded a bit tighter than usual. Tev wondered if she was feeling ill. “We need to have a conversation. With your permission, Captain, we’ll be in observation.”

Gold said, “Sure.”

Tev, however, was not particularly in the mood for one of the commander’s flirtations. “I am now off-shift, Commander, could it possibly—”

“You seem to have a certain difficulty with following direct orders, Lieutenant Commander, so let me spell it out for you. Go to the observation lounge or go to the brig.” She smiled. “Your choice.”

If she is going to hide her lust behind rank, then so be it. Snuffling with minor irritation, Tev exited the bridge and entered observation, Gomez right on his heels.

Bartholomew was in the lounge, working on a padd, with several other padds laid out in front of him. Tev didn’t recognize the writing that was scanned into one of the padds, but he assumed it was some arcane tongue that the linguist was working with.

At their entrance, he stood. “Oh, sorry, Commanders. I just needed to spread out a bit for my article.”

Gomez peered at the table. “That’s the Syclarian language, isn’t it?”

Nodding, Bartholomew said, “The Sato Linguistics Institute asked me to do an article for their journal.”

Tev snuffled. “Would they not ask a Syclarian to write one?”

“They did, and got a big no for their troubles. So, since I translated a Syclarian scientist’s journal a while back, they tapped me. Been working on it in what I laughingly refer to as my spare time.”

With a smile that was much more friendly than the one she had given Tev on the bridge, Gomez asked, “Bart, can we have the room, please?”

Something changed in Bartholomew’s face, but Tev wasn’t sure what it was. “Uh, yeah, sure. I could use some coffee anyhow, so I’ll do this in the mess hall.” He gathered up his padds and left via the opposite door, which would take him to the turbolift.

Turning to face Gomez, Tev said, “By the way, Commander, I have been studying the upgrades that you supervised to the sensors. Excellent work.” To show that he was sincere, he added, “Almost as fine as I would have done.”

Gomez said nothing in response to that, but simply walked over to the window that showed the darkness of the interstellar void in which they searched for the elusive runabout. Her back was now to Tev as she spoke. “I just got contacted by Commander Ling. It was a pretty weak signal, because their comm amplifiers were down—along with most of Avril Station’s other systems. They managed to get a signal through to the nearest relay station, but it was tough.”

This surprised Tev. The upgrades they had performed were of the finest quality. “I do not understand.”

“It seems that the diagnostic program that we provided for them crashed the entire system. That really surprised me, since I designed the diagnostic program we provided, and it should’ve been compatible with the station’s hardware.” Now, she turned to face him. “Except, it turns out, they didn’t use the diagnostic program I designed, did they?”

Tev chose his words carefully. “I felt that the best way to—”

Holding up a hand, Gomez said, “Stop right there, Tev. I told you that your diagnostic program would not suit the needs of Avril, yes?”

“I found that conclusion to be faulty, Commander. I should think that with my—”

Gomez walked around the table so that she stood face-to-face with Tev. “The reason why I came to that conclusion is because the computers on Avril were never given the Sitok upgrade because it crashed their system. The upgrade really wasn’t going to do them enough good for it to be worth overhauling all their hardware.”

That surprised Tev. He wasn’t aware of any major Federation computer system that was not given the security and diagnostic upgrade pioneered by the Vulcan computer scientist Sitok two decades ago. Soloman had been handling the computer elements, so Tev had not bothered to familiarize himself with the specifics of their network. “Why did you not tell me that?” he asked, genuinely confused.

“Why didn’t you just trust my judgment?”

“I have always found my own judgment to be—”

Waving her hands in front of her face, Gomez said, “Forget your judgment for a second, Tev. Forget you for a second. Yes, we all know you’re brilliant, and if we’re ever in any danger of forgetting, you’ll be sure to remind us. But the thing that you have continued to not get in all the time you’ve been on this ship is that the rest of us know a few things, too.”

“You’re all quite competent in your fields, it’s true,” Tev said, “but—”

Using a tone that Gomez had never used, not even when she reprimanded him while trying to decipher the pyramid the Koas had placed their planet into, she barked, “I did not give you permission to speak, Lieutenant Commander Tev! I hear one more word out of you without leave, and I will toss you into the brig.”

Tev, wisely, stayed silent.

Gomez waited for several seconds.

Then for several seconds more.

At last, she broke into a grin. “See? That wasn’t so hard. You should try it more often.”

Unable to resist such obvious prompting, Tev asked, “Try what?”

“Following orders. It’s way past time you got comfortable with something, Tev: There are going to be occasions when other people know more than you. And it won’t necessarily be because they’re smarter than you or cleverer than you, but because they have to. I’m a commander, you’re a lieutenant commander; I’m first officer, you’re second officer. Not only does that mean I outrank you, but it also means that sometimes I’m going to be given information that you’re not allowed to have because of your lower rank and position. That is one of about a thousand reasons why it is critical that you trust my judgment—more than I trust yours, because I’m the boss.”

Snuffling with disgust, Tev said, “You mean that you didn’t tell me about Avril as some sort of test?”

Gomez put her head in her hands. “You really don’t get it, do you? I didn’t tell you because I had no reason to tell you. And because you didn’t trust my judgment, you went behind my back to Commander Ling, and caused Avril Station to fall to pieces. Now they’re purging your program and installing mine, and it should work out all right.” She looked straight at him. “That was the last straw, Tev. That was the last time you disobey my orders or flaunt my authority. I’ve gone easy on you up until now, partly because I prefer a more casual command style, but that obviously isn’t going to work with you. A formal and lengthy reprimand is going into your record, and I can promise you that any hopes you may have had of making commander next promotion go-round are pretty much in the waste extractor.”

Tev could not believe what he was hearing. “A reprimand? I have done nothing to deserve this!”

“You’ve done everything to deserve this, Tev. And the fact that you can’t even see it makes it all the more clear that it’s the right decision.”

“This is outrageous.” Tev shook his head. He was willing to concede a certain amount to the commander’s infatuation, but—

“Tev—we’re not going to steal credit for your work.”

That brought Tev up short. He looked over at Gomez, and saw that the anger had left her face, replaced with a kind of sadness—no, that wasn’t right. The expression he saw was pity.

“That is...ridiculous, Commander. I thought we went over this.”

“Yes, after our mission to Kharzh’ulla, you insisted that you didn’t hate Eevraith for stealing your work

twenty years ago, and you didn't have any regrets about the life you were leading in Starfleet. But I have to wonder if that didn't engender a certain fear in you—a worry that someone else might do what Eevraith did. A worry that became so strong that you refuse to work well with anyone else.”

How dare she accuse me of that? So livid was Tev, he was unable to say the words aloud. Plus, while her accusations of his fears were wholly baseless, he did have a legitimate fear that she might take disciplinary action against him. It would be out of character—he learned early on that she had no taste for true leadership—but so was her earlier outburst. She had threatened his career enough for one conversation.

Instead, he simply said, “Is that all, Commander?”

“Think about what I said, Tev. Dismissed.”

He turned on his heel and left the room, intending to do no such thing.

\* \* \*

Domenica Corsi stared at the ax.

She lay on her bunk, feet flat on the bed, knees bent and pointing to the ceiling. The box the ax was in leaned against her raised thighs. After the last session in the hololab—after the fourth straight time that Tomozuka Kim fought hard and got back up off the metaphorical mat no matter how much harder she made it—she realized that she could no longer stand the sight of the young Izarian, and told everyone to get some sleep.

Luckily, nobody gave her that order, as she would have had to disobey it. She had no interest in sleeping, because she knew exactly what would happen: she'd dream about Dar. Bad enough he still invaded her dreams on the anniversary of that miserable day on Izar. Last time, she'd banished it by seducing Fabian Stevens. That's not happening again, she vowed. That's gotten way too messy for my tastes.

She knew she was conveniently ignoring that her relationship with Fabian had been what kept her going these past months, that she really enjoyed his company, and that she desperately wanted to take it to the next level. But Caitano's death and Kim's Izarian face served as regular reminders as to why that was a tragically bad idea.

The ax stared back at her. It had been a family heirloom for three hundred and seventy-five years, and was remarkably well preserved, though the wood of the handle was cracked in spots. She'd taken the ax with her to Starfleet Academy, and it had survived through dozens of missions, from the other-dimensional trip the U.S.S. Soval took when she was assigned there as an ensign to that living ship that almost literally ate the U.S.S. Roosevelt to the Galvan VI disaster here on the *da Vinci*. It had even provided a useful mental nudzh in solving Caitano's murder.

But it provided no answers now. It was just an old tool in an old box.

The door chime rang. Corsi ignored it, not having any great desire for company. Her combadge was on the nightstand, placed there after she tossed her sweaty uniform into the recycler. She had showered and then put on the flannel robe her mother had gotten her when she graduated the Academy and which was still in fairly decent shape.



Again, the door chime rang, this time accompanied by a voice. “Dom, it’s Fabian. I know you’re in there. And I know you’re alone, since we haven’t found Lense yet.”

Fabian. Perfect. She sighed. She couldn’t really use the excuse that she wasn’t properly dressed, considering that Stevens had seen her in much less on more than one occasion.

“Come,” she muttered just loud enough for the computer to hear and allow the door to slide open.

Stevens entered, a look of concern on his pleasant features. His dark hair was mussed, like it usually was after he’d been working all day, as he tended to run his hand through it. That meant he had been up all night, since alpha shift was just starting.

“I hear you’ve been riding the newbie pretty hard.”

Hawkins has a big mouth, Corsi thought. Her deputy chief and Stevens had become close since their shared trauma on Teneb, so it had to be him. Either that or Hawkins talked to Abramowitz and she talked to Stevens. Hell, it could be anyone—Fabe’s always making friends with people. Regardless, it was completely inappropriate. “Are you part of security now?” she asked in a tight voice.

“Of course not, but—”

“Then keep the hell out of security affairs, Mr. Stevens.”

Rolling his eyes, Stevens said, “Oh, come on, Dom, this isn’t a chat between officer and enlisted, this is you and me in your quarters. Forget the ranks for a second—what’s wrong?”

Placing the ax on the deck, Corsi swung her legs around and sat up, facing Stevens. “Nothing’s wrong. Tell Hawkins or Abramowitz or whichever other gossipmonger told you to come talk to me to stay the hell out of my business.”

“Nobody told me to come talk to you, Dom, I came on my own.”

Corsi regarded him angrily.

He relented. “Yeah, okay, Hawk and I had a talk, but that was it. Besides, he’s worried about you, and he figured I had a better chance of finding out what was wrong than he did.”

“Well, he’s wrong. Get out of here.” She stood up and pointed at the door.

Stevens shook his head. “You know, you really should start wearing a sign around your neck.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“So I know which Domenica Corsi I’m talking to. It’s hard to keep track.”

Corsi moved closer, looking Stevens right in the eye. “I am two steps away from ordering you out of my quarters, Mr. Stevens, now—”

“ ‘I just worry that she’s going to completely close herself off.’ ”

Blinking, Corsi stared dumfoundedly at Stevens. He was obviously quoting something. “What the—?”

“You know who said that? You—right after you broke several regulations trying to set Commander Gomez up with Captain Omthon.”

Turning around, Corsi went back to the bed. She needed to sit down. “Yeah, well, that was stupid.”

“No, Dom, it wasn’t.” Stevens sat down on the bed next to her. She wanted more than anything to reprimand him, to remind him that she kicked him out of here, but one look at that goddamned earnest expression on his face, and she couldn’t do it. “You’ve been prickly ever since Ken and Ted died, and it’s gone into overdrive since we got back from Coroticus. Did something happen down there that I missed? Or is it because of Kim and where he’s from?”

That brought Corsi up short again. “What?”

“He’s from Izar. Hawk isn’t the only one concerned—Rennan noticed that you went a little crazy when the new guy said he was from Izar. So I did a little digging, and you’ve been there, when you were deputy security chief on the *Roosevelt*. Solved a big homicide and everything. Kim was the son of one of the peace officers you worked with. What’s-her-name from the *Enterprise*, Vale, she was there, too.” He shook his head. “You know, I remember when Vale and Commander La Forge came on board to help us out with the *Beast*, Vale said you were the reason why she joined Starfleet. La Forge said he asked you what that was about, but you wouldn’t tell him.” He put one of his hands on Corsi’s. “What happened on Izar, Dom?”

Corsi wanted to tell him to get his hands off hers. She wanted to tell him to get the hell out of her quarters and mind his own damn business. She wanted to tell him to stay out of her life.

But then she remembered the conversation from which Stevens had quoted. It was right before they went to the Lokra system, and she had said something else then: “Life is too short to waste it.”

So instead, she told him about Izar.

Chapter

7

## **U.S.S. Roosevelt in orbit of Izar**

### **TEN YEARS AGO**

Lieutenant (j.g.) Domenica Corsi shivered as she entered the security office. The *Roosevelt*’s security chief, Lieutenant Heinrich Waldheim, always kept the office at arctic temperatures. He said it was to keep people sharp, but Corsi was convinced he just did it to annoy everyone.

When Waldheim summoned her, she had been doing her bridge rotation at tactical, keeping an eye on both the planet below them and the massive telescope nearby. Izar’s orbit took it in proximity to the Heyer Array, the largest telescope in this sector, for the next two months. The *Roosevelt* was providing some maintenance on the array, which meant shore leave for those members of the *Roosevelt*’s complement not involved in the Heyer mission.

That shore leave was especially welcome to Corsi. She’d been waiting for this mission for months.

Waldheim was sitting in the security office behind the big desk covered in pads, his massive frame barely fitting into the standard-issue Starfleet chair. His thick arms were folded over his equally thick chest. Corsi had been serving under Waldheim since she graduated the Academy, first as a grunt on the Soval where he was deputy chief, then here, taking her along to be his deputy chief when he was promoted to chief of the Roosevelt. As a result, she knew what his arms being folded meant: he was about to give her a duty she wouldn't want, but for which he—and she—had no choice.

If this means I don't see Dar, Heinrich, I promise, I'll take that outsized head of yours right off with the family ax. Don't think I won't. It had been hell maintaining her long-distance romance with Academy-mate Dar Ableen—everyone told them they were insane to try to keep it going after graduation, that Academy relationships had a shelf life of about six seconds after you got your commission—but they'd done it, through her two shipboard assignments and his three planetary or starbase ones. But this was also their first chance to be together since that trip to Pemberton's Point over a year earlier, and she was not going to let anyone blow it.

The other person in the office probably had something to do with what was going on. A pale, petite woman with long auburn hair, she wore the drab blue one-piece uniform with the flag of Izar emblazoned over the heart that indicated an Izarian peace officer. Charged with maintaining law and order on this human colony-turned-Federation-member world, the flag had a rendering of the red-green planet with fireworks behind it over a white background.

“Lieutenant Domenica Corsi, this is Officer Christine Vale.”

The younger woman offered her hand, and Corsi took it, noticing the stylized D on the cuffs of her uniform. “You're a detective?”

Vale nodded. “Yes, ma'am. We've had a couple of homicides.”

That caught Corsi off guard. Homicides were rare beasts in the Federation, much less multiple ones on the same world—though she had a vague recollection of Dar mentioning something about some murders on Berengaria when he was assigned there. “Really?”

Breaking the handshake, Vale said, “Really. Two women have been killed by a phaser set on burn, one a week ago, the second last night. I think it might be connected to some other cases in the Federation. However, for something that crosses jurisdictions like this, procedure is for the nearest Starfleet ship to coordinate.”

“Okay.” Corsi was familiar with the regulation, but anyone in security could handle this.

Waldheim spoke up then. “You will serve as liaison between Officer Vale and Starfleet for the duration of the investigation, Lieutenant, starting first thing in the morning.”

Corsi opened her mouth to complain, then stopped. She didn't want to air her dirty laundry in front of a stranger.

“Thank you very much, Lieutenant Corsi,” Vale said. “I'm looking forward to working with you.” Turning to Waldheim, she said, “If you'll excuse me, sir, I need to get back to the surface. I'm expecting the full lab report on last night's victim.”

Waldheim unfolded his arms and nodded his head. “Of course, Officer Vale. Please, if you could forward that report to us, it would help us to get started.”

“Sure.” Vale gave Corsi a quick nod and then left.

As soon as the doors closed behind her, Waldheim held up one of his large hands. “I know what you’re going to say, Domenica, and I’m sorry, I didn’t set out to ruin your leave, but—”

“It’s okay.” Corsi had thought about it and her anger had already burned to ashes. “I take it the Izarian authorities are in a tizzy?”

“You bet—and can you blame them? Every time I think we’ve finally achieved paradise, something like this bites us on the ass. It’s like an asymptotic curve—keeps getting closer, but never quite makes it.” He shook his head. “Starfleet Command’s in as big a tizzy, believe me. Captain Van Olden got a fifteen-minute lecture from Admiral Toddman.”

“Right, so obviously this liaison work can’t be handled by anyone less than the deputy chief of security.” She smiled wryly. “So why isn’t it being handled by anyone greater than the deputy chief of security?”

Corsi was, she knew, the only person on the ship besides Captain Van Olden and Commander Znrka-Tul who could get away with snarking Waldheim like that, as proven by his chuckle in response. “Because, Lieutenant, if I handled it, I’d have to put you in charge of the security detail on the Heyer away team in my place. That team is transporting over in forty-five minutes. By giving you liaison duty, it means you don’t have to start until 0830 tomorrow morning—which gives you the entire evening to do whatever your little heart desires.”

Realization dawned on Corsi. It obviously showed on her face, because Waldheim folded his hands on the table in front of him, which he always did when he was about to impart good news. “So as of now, you’re off duty. I’ve already ordered DiGennaro to take the rest of your shift at tactical. Go on, shoo! Have fun with Lieutenant Ableen.”

Backing toward the door—which parted, letting in the blessedly warmer air from the corridor—Corsi said, “Heinrich, thank you. You are a prince. I take back most of the things I’ve said about you.”

He grinned. “Do I get to pick which ones?”

Chuckling, she double-timed it to her quarters, and immediately put a personal call through to the supply office on the Starfleet base outside of Garhtown.

A few minutes later, the beautiful face of Lieutenant Dar Ableen appeared on the small viewer on the desk in her quarters. Dar had sea-blue eyes that matched Corsi’s own, perfect cheekbones, and a hook nose that on anyone else would have looked awful, but worked with his face for some reason. He had no chin to speak of, but he covered that by wearing a Vandyke beard that was as dark as his semi-curly hair. They had first met in a martial arts class; he joked that it was there that he fell for her—over and over again. In fact, he had always had a superb grasp of the martial arts of many different worlds, so much so that many of his instructors—and Corsi, for that matter—encouraged him to focus on security. But Dar had preferred a career in supply, citing it as “less stressful.”

On those occasions when she saw him, she was always drawn first to his eyes. She could just get lost in them.

“Hey, you.”

“Hey. Well, I’ve got good news and bad news....”

Chapter  
8

**Peace Officer Headquarters  
Pibroch City, Izar**

**TEN YEARS AGO**

Officer Christine Vale stared at her reflection and decided she hated her hair.

Oh, this is good. You’re facing the first double homicide in the planet’s history, you’re about to spend the day with the most intimidating woman you’ve ever met, the bosses, the government, and Starfleet Command are all going to be taking up residence in your posterior, and you’re thinking about your hair? Get with it, Christine!

The voice in her head sounded distressingly like her mother, especially since Mom hated when frivolity got in the way of the work.

That, of course, didn’t change the fact that Vale hated her hair. She hated the color and hated the length.

As she exited the cramped one-person bathroom that was apparently the best the government could provide for the main Peace Officer Headquarters in Pibroch City, she wondered what color she could try next. And maybe I’ll cut it shorter.

That thought got pushed to the back of her head when she bumped into Soon-Li Kim. Her fellow detective was practically rolling her eyes. “That Starfleeter’s here.”

Vale blinked and double-checked the chronometer on the wall. “She’s early.”

“You know how they are about promptness.” This time Soon-Li really did roll her eyes. “That one’s pretty typical—probably spits and polishes her socks.”

Snorting, Vale tried to picture the uptight blonde she met yesterday performing that rather absurd action. To her lack of surprise, the image took.

Soon-Li wasn’t finished. “We really should be able to do this on our own—I mean, you start bringing Starfleet into this, and everything becomes a major to-do.”

That prompted another snort. “It already is a major to-do. We’ve got two dead bodies, and not a shred of useful evidence. Besides, this is Starfleet. They deal with crazy stuff that doesn’t make sense on a weekly basis.”

“I guess.” Soon-Li turned and looked back at the detective office where she, Vale, Johannsen, and Malvolia did their work, and where Vale assumed Corsi was waiting. “Still, I don’t like it, I don’t like Starfleet, and I don’t like her.”

“Nobody’s asking you to.” Vale didn’t add that she didn’t like the situation or Corsi much either. She did like Starfleet, had always admired the work they did. There were times when she had thought about going to the Academy instead of following in her mother’s footsteps.

Right, and then have the whole family disown me. That'll happen. Vale knew that her becoming anything other than an Izarian peace officer would devastate her mother. Never mind the fact that Starfleet security looked a lot more challenging...

She went on to the office, while Soon-Li continued to wherever she was going. Probably checking into that missing persons case. Can't have the rest of law enforcement grind to a halt just because two people died.

Expecting the same stick-up-her-ass officer she'd met on the Roosevelt the previous day, Vale was surprised to see a much more pleasant-looking person standing in the stuffy office that she shared with the other three detectives. Where yesterday, Corsi looked like she'd rather be cleaning the waste extractor with her tongue than take on this duty, today she looked—well, happy.

“Lieutenant, good to see you.”

Corsi turned and faced Vale. The lieutenant was a lot taller than the young officer; Vale was used to that, as most people were taller than her. However, this one, she noted, used her height to her advantage. She didn't just stand, she loomed.

“Is it always this hot in here?” Corsi asked.

Vale couldn't help but smile. “Little different from the arctic tundra in your CO's office?”

Corsi smiled right back. “Actually, it's a nice change.”

“Let me show you what we've got.” Vale walked over to her desk and took a seat, indicating the guest seat for Corsi. She called up the records on the two homicides.

Or, rather, tried to. After banging the side of the comm unit, the records actually came up. “Sorry,” she said sheepishly. “This thing hasn't been upgraded since Praxis exploded.”

“Really?” Corsi's eyes widened.

“Well, no,” Vale said quickly. That Klingon moon blew up over seventy years earlier, after all. “This is actually better than what they had in my mother's day, a fact she never tires of reminding me when she wants me to know how good I have it.”

“Your mother was a peace officer, too?”

Vale nodded. “Until she retired last year, yeah. Her father before her was also, as were both his parents before him. Kind of the family business.”

“I know what you mean. My family's got a long line of service of some kind in it. In any case,” Corsi said quickly—Vale assumed she didn't feel comfortable talking about her personal life—“you should have access to the records of all homicides in the last ten years in Federation space, as well as any allied powers that share those types of records with us.”

“Good.” Vale turned to the computer station and started entering in commands. When she banged the side again, the commands took. If I joined Starfleet, I'd get to use up-to-date equipment, probably. “What I'm doing right now is a basic search to see if there are any commonalities to our case.”

“Like what?”

Vale realized that Corsi didn't really know the specifics of her own case, and if she was to be the liaison, she should know. Of course, she could just read the reports, she thought, once again in her mother's voice, but Vale didn't mind repeating the facts again. Sometimes you caught something in the retelling you didn't before.

Once she got the search running, she called up the images of the two dead bodies to her screen and turned it toward Corsi. The images were stacked one over the other, both human women—ninety percent of Izar's population was human—both looking to be in their thirties or forties, both with long darkish hair of about the same length as Vale's own, and both lying on a sidewalk. The one on top was facedown; the one on the bottom was on her back, so on her you could see the circular chest wound.

“The victim on top is Marianne Getreu, a librarian working at the Garthtown Public Library, in the special collections section. She lived alone, and was walking back from a late night working at the library to her house. The murder occurred on a side street about half a kilometer from her home.”

“She walked?” Corsi asked.

Nodding, Vale said, “The weather's pretty nice in Garthtown this time of year. But it was late at night, so there were no witnesses. Cause of death was a phaser shot to the chest that vaporized skin, several ribs, and twenty percent of her heart. Death was probably painful but quick. It was a type-two phaser set on level four.”

“The burn setting,” Corsi said unnecessarily.

“Yeah, hence the ‘painful but quick’ part.” She pointed to the other victim. “That's Kelly Fleet, an actor with a troupe called Mermaid's Revenge. They've been specializing in neoclassical Betazoid theatre.”

“Why is a Betazoid theatrical troupe called that?”

Vale smirked. “Some mysteries even a detective of my skill can't solve. Anyhow, same COD.”

“Same phaser?”

She nodded. “That's the one thing these two do have in common besides being female and having long hair. The resonance pattern is the same for both phasers.”

“Have you scanned for the phaser with that pattern?”

“The scan's been running constantly, both in Garthtown and elsewhere, but Garthtown is a city of six hundred million, plus the rest of the populace of Izar. It's a big planet, and picking out one phaser from all that isn't easy.”

“Starfleet has top-of-the-line sensors. I'll have the Roosevelt scan for the phaser also.”

Vale hadn't thought of that. “Couldn't hurt. I'll send the resonance pattern up there.” She called up the autopsy reports. “Fleet lived with three other members of the troupe in a house in the suburbs of Garthtown. She liked to take walks in a park near their house. She was on her way to the park when she was killed.” She leaned back in her chair. “The thing is—there are no witnesses and no trace evidence in

either case. No DNA residua, nothing left behind at the scene, not a goddamn thing.”

“No commonality between the two women?”

“Nothing we could find.” Vale let out a breath through her teeth. “We’ve checked everything, tried everything. Unless that phaser turns up, we’re stuck. And even if it does, given how clean the scene is, I’m willing to bet there’s nothing on the weapon, either.”

Corsi looked dubious. “C’mon.”

Throwing up her hands, Vale said, “I just call ’em like I see ’em.”

“I can’t believe there isn’t anything .”

Vale couldn’t blame her. She didn’t believe it, either. Before she could say anything, however, the computer beeped. The search came back to the front of her screen. “This is interesting.”

Corsi leaned forward to look at the screen. “What?”

Vale read off the results of her search. “Tarsas III four years ago. Three Vulcan women, all of whom had short brown hair, none of whom had anything else in common, all killed with type-one phasers set on burn. No trace evidence, never solved.

“Berengaria two years ago. Three Bolian women, all of whom had medium-length white hair, also nothing in common besides that and being killed by laser drills. No trace evidence, never solved.

“And Alpha Centauri six months ago. Three Trill women, all of whom had red hair of varying lengths.”

Corsi was also reading. “Killed by type-three phasers set on burn. I’m amazed there was anything left of their chests.”

Vale checked the autopsy reports. “There wasn’t much. And the same lack of evidence.” She leaned back and blew out a breath, running a hand through her hated auburn hair. “This is bad. We’ve got a major serial killer on our hands, one who’s good enough to leave no trace behind at eleven murders.”

Standing up, Corsi said, “I need to call the ship. Starfleet Command needs to be aware of this, and we need to get full information from Berengaria, Tarsas, and Centauri.”

Vale peered at the screen. “I think we’ve got it all, but sure, go ahead.” She looked up and pointed to the doorway out into the large squad room where the regular officers had their desks. “If you go out to the squad room, find Officer Giacoia. He can set you up with a comm link.”

“Thanks.” Corsi moved to the door, then stopped. “Listen, Officer Vale—we’re gonna get this guy. Starfleet’s got your back, and we don’t lose.”

Vale said, “Thank you, Lieutenant.” In her heart, though, she didn’t believe it. Eleven murders. This is insane. How the hell can anyone get away with this?

\* \* \*

Corsi contacted Commander Znrka-Tul and filled her in on the situation. While they were talking, the



commander reported that Vale had sent the resonance frequency along, and they'd start scanning.

Then, since she had a comm unit to herself anyhow—Officer Giacoia had taken her to a small room that had a comm unit and a large viewer—she decided to contact Dar.

“Hey there, gorgeous. Can't get enough of me, huh?”

Corsi smiled. After last night, she never wanted to leave Dar's side. Duty managed to get her away—his and hers, as he was in the midst of a major inventory—but she numbered their time together last night, from the glorious dinner at the Bolian restaurant to dessert at the Italian café to the entire night in his bed to falling asleep in his arms, as one of the best nights of her entire life.

“Maybe not, but I'm afraid I'm gonna have to beg off a repeat performance tonight.” She filled him in on what Vale told her, and what they found on the other three worlds.

Dar looked devastated. “God, I remember what happened on Berengaria—this is connected?”

“Looks like.”

“I thought this kind of thing didn't—” He visibly shuddered.

“Anyhow, I need to stay on here until this guy's caught. Vale's way out of her depth here.”

“I would think anybody would be. This isn't exactly run-of-the-mill.”

Corsi smiled. “I'm security. Not run-of-the-mill is our specialty. We'll catch this bastard, don't you worry. And then—I promise the biggest celebration of your life.”

Dar's beautiful face broke into an incredibly goofy grin. “Sounds like something to look forward to. Hurry up and catch this guy.”

“I'll do my best.” Then she hesitated, and said, “I love you, Dar.”

“Right back at you, Domenica.”

She signed off and leaned back in her chair. For the moment, she didn't think about eleven dead bodies and a killer who'd gone from planet to planet without getting caught.

That prompted a thought. She tried to call up a record, but the comm unit was only a comm unit, not multipurpose like any decent Starfleet station would be. Going back out into the squad room, she sought out Officer Giacoia.

The diminutive officer was nowhere to be found, but she did see the woman who'd greeted her—Kim?—standing with a little kid who bore an obvious resemblance.

These people are taking their children to their work in law enforcement, and we're supposed to trust them to solve this?

“Can I help you, Lieutenant?” the officer asked.

“I need a computer terminal. I just thought of something from Starfleet records that might help.”

“Are you with Starfleet?” the kid asked.

Smiling down at the boy, Corsi said, “Yes, I am.”

“You’re an engineer, right?”

God, what a revolting concept. Corsi hated engineers. “No, I’m with security. We wear the same colors as them.”

“So you’re like my mom?”

No, I’m more professional. But Corsi wasn’t impolitic enough to say that out loud.

The mom in question said, “That’s enough, Tomo.” The boy clammed up, and Kim looked at Corsi. “I apologize for my son, Lieutenant. I’m heading home anyhow, so why don’t you use my terminal? It’s the one across from Christine’s.”

Nodding, Corsi said, “Thanks.”

Leaving mother and son behind, Corsi went back into the detectives’ room. Vale was right where Corsi left her.

“I just thought of something, and I want to check it out. About a hundred years ago, there was this thing called Redjac—”

“I know what you mean,” Vale said without looking up from her reading. Corsi walked over to the younger woman’s desk to see that Vale was reading the reports from Berengaria Enforcement on the second set of murders. “I read up on that right after we found Getreu’s body. The thing is, even if it’s that Redjac thing, we still need to find the person Redjac’s possessing to do these killings,” she looked up, “and did I just casually talk about people being possessed?”

Corsi shrugged. It wasn’t even close to the weirdest thing she’d seen in Starfleet. “We should contact the Roosevelt, see if—”

“I did that as soon as you guys made orbit. I heard back from your operations officer after I left the meeting with you and Lieutenant Waldheim yesterday. She told me that, accounting for a hundred years of drift, Redjac wouldn’t be anywhere near any inhabited planets, and the chances of it encountering a ship in interstellar space are infinitesimal.”

“But it’s still possible that we’re dealing with Redjac.”

It was Vale’s turn to shrug. “Maybe. But it doesn’t really fit the MO—Redjac always used blades. And even if it is him, like I said, it doesn’t really change anything useful, like what we do to find him.”

Corsi had to grudgingly admit that the officer had a point. Still and all, she requested access to the Roosevelt’s computer. She wanted to refamiliarize herself with the Starfleet mission that discovered Redjac on Argelius a century ago.

Chapter

9

**U.S.S. da Vinci**  
**in search operations between Stations Kel-Artis and Deep Space 9**

**NOW**

Tev awoke from his nap, feeling very refreshed. The fact that his bunk was located in a Kharzh'ullan passenger shuttle didn't seem to matter all that much.

"Mr. Tev is expressing a valid concern. Giving me something to think about. A little bluntness is a good way to do that."

A Kharzh'ullan was sitting in the seat opposite Tev's bunk. "How long until we reach the base station?" Tev asked.

The Kharzh'ullan checked the chronometer on his wrist. "I never was good at math. Should be soon. Half an hour, perhaps."

"Good."

"What I'm trying to say, in the nicest possible manner, Tev, is that I'd like to work on this solo."

Something went wrong. Tev realized that the shuttle wasn't decelerating, even though at half an hour from their destination, the slowdown should have commenced. The shuttle was bringing them down the elevator that took one from the massive orbital ring around Kharzh'ulla to the planet's surface. Realizing that his engineering acumen could be of use, he clambered out of his bunk and started down the ladder to the conductor's level.

"You're wasting your time," the Kharzh'ullan said, and only then did Tev realize that his fellow passenger was Eevraith, the one who took credit for Tev's own study of the orbital ring.

Ignoring Eevraith, Tev continued down the ladder.

"Why allow everyone to believe the paper was his and not yours?"

By the time he got to the conductor's level, alarms were blaring. "What's happening?"

The Kharzh'ullan conductor turned around—this was also Eevraith. "Who are you?"

"You know who I am," he said impatiently. "Tell me what's happening, Eevraith."

"The brakes appear to have failed. We're in free fall."

Tev asked, "What of the emergency brakes?"

Eevraith shook his head.

"There must be something we can do," said Tev.

"There is nothing you can do, Mor glasch Tev. You know nothing about the Ring."

“I’d say you were right about everything except about its being unoccupied. There, you’re dead wrong.”

Ignoring Eevraith’s words, Tev said, “I think if we restart the computer system, we might be able to restore the electromagnetic polarity.” He went to the nearest console and began the shutdown sequence.

Then the station went dark. As it did, the shuttle rocked as it bounced off the guide rails, out of control. “Can you restart that console?” he asked Eevraith, who looked ridiculous in the conductor’s uniform.

“Of course, I can. I know everything about the Ring, thanks to my stealing your work.”

“The next time you step out of line with me, I’ll have your ass in front of a court-martial at warp ten.”

“Tev? Tev, I don’t want to die.”

At first, the voice was Eevraith’s. Then Tev realized it was a woman’s voice.

“Mother?”

“That was the last straw, Tev. That was the last time you disobey my orders or flaunt my authority.”

“Tev?” she repeated, but it wasn’t his mother this time.

It was Commander Gomez.

“We’re not going to stop, are we? And that’s because you screwed up. Just like you did on Kharzh’ulla. Just like you did at Avril.”

“She’s right,” Eevraith said. “And now we’re all going to die because of you.”

The shuttle crashed into the surface of the planet.

And Tev awoke with a start, sweat matting down the hair on his body and soaking through the sheets of his bunk.

That dream had been a gift from an ancient species known as the Furies, whom Tev encountered while serving on the Madison . It was years before the dream stopped recurring every night, and he hadn’t had it for months—until the da Vinci ’s mission to Kharzh’ulla and his reunion with Eevraith.

This time, though, was different. Neither Eevraith nor Commander Gomez had ever been part of the dream before.

“Computer, time.”

“The time is 0950 hours.”

Tev snuffled. Not even two hours’ sleep. “Computer, locate Specialist Faulwell.”

“Crewperson Faulwell is in the mess hall.”

Tev got up from his bunk and changed into uniform. Bartholomew is probably still working on his Syclarian article. Tev needed someone to talk to, and Bartholomew was the only person on the ship he’d

even consider a personal conversation with.

A scattering of crew members were in the mess hall when Tev arrived. Several engineers—Hammett, Lankford, Bennett, and Phelps—were drinking coffee along with a woman Tev did not recognize, but whom he presumed to be Lise Irastorza, the replacement for the late Theodore Deverick. The gamma-shift bridge crew were also just getting up to leave after what appeared to be a large post-shift meal.

Tev went straight for Bartholomew, who had a table to himself, his pads spread out as they had been in the observation lounge. “Excuse me, Bartholomew, may I join you?”

The thin linguist looked up and smiled when he saw Tev. “Sure, have a seat.” The smile grew and he added, “I’m afraid I don’t have any apple rancher candies.”

“It is a bit early for those.” Tev found himself returning the smile. He wasn’t sure why he felt so much at ease around Bartholomew. Perhaps it was because he did not seem intimidated by Tev’s brilliance.

“What can I do for you, Tev?”

“I am in need of counsel, and you are the only person on this ship I trust to provide it. I am having—difficulties with Commander Gomez.” He filled Bartholomew in on their recent conversation. “The poor woman is obsessed with me, and now, because I refuse to return her affections, she is sabotaging my career. I cannot go to Captain Gold—he would likely take her side.”

Bartholomew was frowning now, and scratching his chin. “Uh, Tev? I don’t know how to tell you this, but—” He sighed. “You’re wrong. Dead wrong.”

Tev found that impossible to believe. “About what?”

Shaking his head, “I honestly don’t know where to start. But the biggie is Commander Gomez’s alleged affection for you. Trust me—that is all in your head.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. She has gone from indecisive and hesitant to aggressive and hostile. Of course, she—”

“Tev, you’re thinking like a Tellarite.”

Confused, Tev asked, “How else would I think?”

“Well, if you’re gonna psychoanalyze a human, then you should think like one. Humans don’t court each other that way. Hostility isn’t a sign of respect—especially from her.”

“What is it a sign of then?”

“That she’s really really really pissed off, and if you don’t do something about it—and not what you think you should do about it—it’ll be more than your promotion prospects that you’ll have to worry about.” Bartholomew took a quick sip of his coffee. “Tev, you are an incredibly brilliant engineer, but you’re not perfect. And you’re not among Tellarites.”

“You have not said anything of which I wasn’t already aware.” Tev snuffled. This conversation was starting to annoy him. He supposed that Bartholomew’s insights were useful, since he, like the

commander, was human, but still...

“Then you should probably start acting appropriately. You’re third in command, Tev, not first, and not second.”

“I am also aware of that. I suppose you will also tell me that I fear that others will steal my work.”

“Do you fear that?”

Tev snuffled angrily. “Of course not. I can’t imagine why anyone would believe that I would think the crew of this ship to be on a level with Eevraith.”

Bartholomew raised an eyebrow. “This is the same Eevraith who took your definitive work on that orbital ring around Kharzh’ulla and claimed it as his own, a brilliantly written monograph—I read it, remember—that made Eevraith’s entire career. That Eevraith?”

“I do not appreciate your sarcasm, Bartholomew.” Tev snuffled again, and made to get up from his chair. “The life Eevraith now has would not have been for me. I’m better off.”

“Sure, you know that now and feel that way now. But twenty years ago? When Eevraith first stole your work, Romulan puns and all?”

Tev stopped rising and remained seated, remembering that Bartholomew had been the one—at Commander Gomez’s instigation—to read the monograph Eevraith claimed as his own, and recognized the Romulan curses he’d worked in as puns to an audience that knew nothing of the language.

Bartholomew continued. “You were just a young student. The betrayal had to hurt, and I can imagine that you would’ve sworn to yourself—even subconsciously—that you wouldn’t let that happen to you again.”

Tev almost smiled. “You’re thinking like a human.”

“Maybe.” Bartholomew did smile. “That doesn’t necessarily mean I’m wrong.” He dropped the smile. “Look, whether you like it or not, this is a team, and a small one at that. I know you can work with people. You’ve come close more than once. But you’ve got to set aside your ego.”

“And my arrogance, too?”

“No, you need that.” Bartholomew chuckled. “I know Tellarite, remember? I know that the word for arrogance and the word for self are one and the same.”

Tev nodded. He remembered his surprise that the primary human tongue didn’t consider the concepts synonymous.

“But you can’t just barrel through on your own brilliance and hope everyone will catch up. Before you know it, you’re going to fall behind.”

“Senior staff and S.C.E. team, report to the bridge.”

Lieutenant Shabalala’s voice snapped Tev to attention. He stood up, as did Bartholomew.

“Looks like we’re needed,” Bartholomew said.

“Indeed.” Tev turned to the linguist. “Thank you, Bartholomew, you have given me... a great deal to think about.”

Nodding, Bartholomew said, “I just hope that they’re calling us to the bridge because they found Elizabeth and Dr. Bashir.”

“That is my hope as well.” And with that, they departed the mess hall together.

Chapter

10

## **Peace Officer Headquarters Pibroch City, Izar**

### **TEN YEARS AGO**

Lieutenant Corsi was still wiping sleep out of her eyes when she entered Officer Vale’s office. “You called me?”

“Yes, I did.” Vale sounded stiffer and more formal than she had over the past three days of their investigation. She was standing behind her desk, leaning forward, her hands flat on the desk’s surface.

It had been a tiring few days, as Corsi and Vale had spent every waking hour—which outnumbered their sleeping hours by a ratio of twenty-one to three—going over the records of the previous homicides and talking over subspace to everyone involved that they could track down. They also determined that the killer was likely to be humanoid—the wound patterns all indicated that the angle of the killing blast was likely to be from someone of average human height standing about a meter away. Since the majority population on all the planets where the homicides took place was humanoid, this was hardly conclusive of anything, and the lack of any kind of trace evidence made it even less so. It was frustrating that, with sensors that could detect a particular grain of sand on a desert planet, they couldn’t figure out who’d killed eleven people.

Izar itself had been all but locked down, with temporary curfews put in place and regular sensor sweeps looking for the phaser in question. All the previous murders had come in threes, so everyone was waiting for the third in this sequence to be completed. In particular, human women with long dark hair were encouraged to stay in their homes until the person was caught.

Corsi couldn’t help but notice that both Vale and Kim fit the bill.

She had managed to steal a few hours’ sleep with Dar—which meant she had gotten very little sleep at all—until the summons came on her combadge. Dar had barely noticed the call, and she told him that she had to go to work and she’d see him later.

Vale stared at her now with a rather intense expression. Corsi wondered if that meant they’d found something.

“Lieutenant Corsi, after I first briefed you three days ago, did Officer Giacoia give you access to one of our comm terminals so you could contact theRoosevelt?”

Not liking the tone in the officer's voice at all, Corsi asked, "You know I did. You're treating this like an interrogation—why?"

Vale did not answer the question, instead posing another: "After doing so, did you then make an unauthorized call to a Lieutenant Dar Ableen?"

"It wasn't unauthorized," Corsi said tightly. "And if it was—well, I'm sorry, it wasn't my intention to break any regulations. What is this about, Officer?"

"When I summoned you here this morning, did you come from Lieutenant Ableen's quarters at the Starfleet base in Garthtown?"

Putting her hands on her hips, Corsi said, "I'm not answering any more questions until you answer some of mine, Officer."

Finally standing upright, Vale ran her hands through her auburn tresses. "I did a search on equipment that could hide all traces of evidence in a manner that would allow these crimes to take place. I found something in the Starfleet database, something that was only just declassified a month ago, so any of the locals investigating the previous homicides wouldn't even have been allowed to know about it. It's a stealth suit, one that is to be used for anthropological observation of pre-warp civilizations."

"Okay." Corsi had a vague recollection of reading an update about the declassification of that technology. "What does that have to do with this?"

"Only one of the murders had a witness—the second one on Centauri."

Corsi nodded. "Elra Gren." The Trill was a computer programmer who was engaged to be married.

"Right." Vale sighed. "That witness claimed that the phaser blast seemed to come out of nowhere. Since it was dark, the detective in charge assumed that the witness just didn't see the murderer, but what if he couldn't?" Vale turned her screen around so Corsi could see it. "Starfleet has a presence at all four locations—Starbase 74 is in orbit of Tarsas III, there's a base on Berengaria, a supply depot on Alpha Centauri that Starfleet leases, and the base here in Garthtown."

Now Corsi was getting irritated. She didn't even bother to look at the screen. "What of it? I doubt that there's a planet in the Federation that doesn't have some kind of Starfleet presence somewhere. And you can't possibly believe that a Starfleet officer could do this."

Vale snapped. "I can't possibly believe that a sentient being did this, Lieutenant! But the evidence sure as hell indicates that one did."

"You will modify your tone when speaking to me, Officer," Corsi said in a low, dangerous voice. She had had just about enough of this amateur civilian as she was likely to take.

"No, Lieutenant, I don't think I will. You see, I found something interesting when I did a search of Starfleet personnel who were either assigned to or in the vicinity of the four facilities in question, and then cross-checked it with people who'd have access to classified technology. We only got three hits. One of them was Lieutenant Dar Ableen."

Corsi felt her mouth go dry. "What?"



“Lieutenant Ableen was on or near the site of all eleven murders, including working in the supply office of Starbase 74. The stealth suit was developed by a research team on that starbase, and Lieutenant Ableen was assigned to them as their supply officer. Lieutenant Ableen’s height and build also match with the likely height and build of the murderer.”

Corsi could not believe what she was hearing. “This is absurd. Dar would never do anything like this. He can’t possibly—” She shook her head, as if coming out of a daze. “You said there were three hits.”

“I’ve already been in contact with Captain Van Olden, and the other two are also being tracked down. Meantime, I intend to question Lieutenant Ableen.”

Now Corsi was furious. “You went over my head? I ought to—” And then she cut herself off. Of course she went over my head. The evidence makes Dar at least to be a suspect, and she had to eliminate him. Naturally, she’s going to treat me suspiciously. Stop being an idiot. “I apologize, Officer, you’re right. I have a relationship with a suspect in a homicide investigation. It would be—inappropriate for me to remain as the liaison between the Izar Peace Officers and Starfleet.”

Vale let out a long breath, sounding relieved. “Thank you, Lieutenant. Honestly, I don’t believe you have anything to do with this—you’ve been too thorough in digging through the evidence. But I had to be sure.”

“Don’t worry about it. Look, let me call Dar in here. He’ll come in on his own, answer your questions, and everything will be fine. I’ve known Dar since we were first-year cadets. I can’t believe he’d do something like this.”

“Like I said, Lieutenant, I can’t believe anyone would do this—which means that anyone could be responsible. I’m not feeling very trusting right now.”

Corsi smiled at that. “I’m in security—we’re never trusting. It gets in the way of the work.”

Vale returned the smile. “That sounds like something my mother would say.”

Sure enough, Dar was more than happy to beam over from Garthtown. A few minutes later, his lean form beamed directly into Vale’s office.

“Lieutenant Ableen, I’m Officer Christine Vale.” She stepped around her desk and offered her hand—but not, Corsi noted, in a handshake. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you for your weapon.”

Corsi hadn’t even noticed that Dar had his sidearm. Damn, Dar, how dumb can you get? Corsi had her phaser, of course, but she was security—she needed to be armed at all times. There were times when Corsi wondered why they even bothered to issue weapons to supply officers like Dar. Besides, this building had a scattering field that prevented unauthorized weapons from firing—even with that, though, regulations stated that only peace officers could carry any kind of weapon in here. Corsi’s status as a Starfleet liaison let her off the hook—though that was murkier now—but Dar wasn’t allowed to have his, even though it didn’t work at the moment.

Dar gave Vale the melting smile that he had perfected on Domenica by their third year at the Academy. “Be happy to, Officer.” He unholstered the phaser, held it out to Vale—

—then grabbed her wrist with the other hand and yanked Vale toward him in a modified sok-pal grab from the Vulcan V’Shan martial art, at which Dar was at the level of a hahn-was, which was as high as any

human had achieved. Before Corsi had had a chance to register what had happened, he had Vale in a rol-shaya grip. Corsi had been in Dar'srol-shaya before—the officer wasn't moving until Dar let her.

“You know the grip, Domenica,” Dar said. “I make one slight muscle movement with my right forearm, and her neck snaps like a twig. Pity, really.” He smiled again, but this wasn't the melting smile, it was one she'd never seen on his face before. “I'd rather the third kill was like the first two. The rush is so much better that way.”

Corsi shook her head. “So it was you.”

“Of course it was me! How could you even doubt it? Now put your phaser down, Domenica. Let me go with the officer here, so I can kill her properly, like the other two.”

Glancing down, Corsi saw that she had, in fact, drawn her phaser as soon as Dar grabbed Vale. The action hadn't been conscious, but drilled into her after all her years of security training.

The next action she took was completely conscious. Pausing only for a second to aim, she blew Dar Ableen's head off.

Chapter

11

## **U.S.S. da Vinci in search operations between Stations Kel-Artis and Deep Space 9**

**NOW**

Fabian Stevens stared at Domenica Corsi in shock. “My God, Dom, you—” He shook his head, barely able to parse what she'd just told him. “What happened next?”

She shrugged. “It was over. Izar went back to normal. Vale and I both got commendations. I tried to point out that she was the one who did all the leg-work, but she insisted that I was the one who saved the day. She told me—” Domenica hesitated. “She told me that she could never have done what I did—just shoot him like that, especially given our...our relationship.” Chuckling bitterly, she added, “She applied to Starfleet Academy the next week. Said she'd always wanted to, but didn't want to let her family down. But after seeing me in action, she knew that it was the right thing to do. I told her then that she was nuts.”

“Yeah,” Fabian said dryly, “I can see how you'd think that. I mean, she's just security chief on the Enterprise, after all—not like that's a major assignment or anything...”

Harshly, Domenica said, “I didn't mean that she would be bad security, Fabe, I meant that she was nuts to use me as an example. All I did was shoot the man I loved.”

His thoughts still whirling, Fabian asked, “Why did he do it? How—”

“I don't have answers to any of that.” Domenica's voice was a rough whisper now. “He was dead as soon as I shot him. I didn't have a choice—he'd already killed eleven people, and Vale would've been number twelve if I didn't do something. I couldn't afford to hesitate, or try to talk him down. This was someone who'd gotten away with eleven murders, I couldn't—” Her voice broke. She was staring down at the deck. Fabian's hand was still on hers.

Fabian had known Domenica since he signed on to the *Vinci* during the Dominion War. In those two years, he'd never heard her voice break—not even when they went to visit her family at *Fahleena III*, when they both fell apart in front of each other.

Then he did some mental calculations recalling the dates on the reports he'd looked up before coming here. "I just realized something. The night you came to me, right before we helped Nog drive the *Androssi* off *Empok Nor*—" The first time we made love, he didn't say aloud. "—that was the anniversary, wasn't it?"

Domenica nodded.

He cupped her chin with his hand and guided her head up so he could look at her. Tears marred her beautiful blue eyes. In a soft voice, he asked, "Is that what that night was all about?"

Again, she nodded. "Wasn't the first time—usually I tried to spend the anniversary with someone, just to remind myself that I was capable of feeling something. And also... also to distract myself. Most of the time, I don't think about *Izar* or *Dar* or *Vale* at all. It was a little hard when she came on with *La Forge* that time, but I managed. On the anniversary, though..."

Shaking his head, Fabian said, "God, no wonder that new kid set you off. And Ken and Ted's death—must've been *déjà vu* to have another crazy homicide like that."

Domenica wiped her eyes with the back of the hand that Fabian wasn't holding. "Actually, no, it wasn't. Honestly, it didn't occur to me to consider it similar. Like I said, I don't think about it." She let out a snort. "And when I do think about it, I don't consider it a homicide investigation, I think of it as the day I had to kill the man I loved."

Fabian couldn't help but hear bitterness and guilt in her tone. Life in *Starfleet* had given him plenty of firsthand experience with both, and he quickly said, "Dom, this wasn't your fault."

"Right." Domenica yanked her hand out from under Fabian's and stood up. Her flannel robe swished about her legs in a manner Fabian might have found erotic under better circumstances. "Eight years, Fabe. *Dar* and I were lovers for eight years. In all that time, I had no clue that he was psychotic. You mind telling me whose fault it is?"

"His."

That brought Domenica up short. She turned around and faced him with a confused look on her face. "What?"

"It's *Ableen's* fault, Dom. You say you had no clue—how were you supposed to? There've been, what, two documented cases of this kind of homicidal insanity in the Federation in the last hundred years?"

"Something like that," she said quietly.

Getting up from the bed, Fabian put his hands on her broad shoulders. They were about the same height, with Domenica a few centimeters shorter—which had always struck Fabian as odd, since he felt shorter than her—so he could look her right in her tear-streaked eyes when he said, "There was no way you could've known, Dom. The only thing you could have done was what you did."

She looked away. “I wish I could believe that.”

“Well, since it’s actually true, there’s no good reason why you shouldn’t.”

Blinking away more tears, Domenica looked back at him. “Fabe, I—”

“Senior staff and S.C.E. team, report to the bridge.”

Fabian closed his eyes and sighed. “Timing is everything.”

Wiping the tears, Domenica was suddenly “Core-Breach” again. “They must have found Lense and Bashir.” Without any hesitation, she removed her robe and went over to the closet to grab a uniform.

Fabian found himself admiring the view—and was encouraged by her lack of self-consciousness around him. “You want me to meet you there?”

As she started to get dressed, she said, “No, we can go up together.”

That prompted a smile. After that first night, she had formally requested that they never speak of it again, and when they were summoned to the observation lounge, she had gone ahead, not wanting to be seen walking in with him.

After she got her uniform jacket on, she walked up to him and kissed him. Fabian was a bit taken aback, and so it took him a moment to return the kiss. There was a bit of a salty taste from the tears that had streaked down to her mouth, but Fabian found he didn’t mind.

“Thank you,” she whispered after the kiss broke.

“For what?” he whispered back.

“A lot of things. For being there when I needed you on the anniversary. For—” She chuckled. “—for ignoring me when I said that it wasn’t the start of something. And for getting me to talk tonight. Honestly, I think it’s the first time I’ve really talked about Dar and Izar since—well, ever, really.”

They started to walk toward the door. It parted on their approach. “You feel any better about it?” he asked.

“Not sure. But I’m glad I did, and I’m glad you’re the one I told.”

They held hands as they walked to the turbolift. Fabian was stunned—a public display of affection was unheard of in the Domenica Corsi Code of Proper Behavior—but he wasn’t about to say anything. And, in fact, when they passed by Rai Lankford and Rizz walking the other way down the corridor, the human and the Bolian gaped openly.

Domenica didn’t even pay attention as they entered the turbolift doors. However, after the doors closed on Rai and Rizz’s astonished faces, she burst into a giggle.

“Dom, did you just giggle?”

“You know, I think I did. I also think I kinda liked it.”

He grinned. “Me, too.”

However, the new, improved *Domenica Corsi* was only going to last so long. As soon as they arrived at the bridge, she let go of his hand and “*Core-Breach*” was back.

Captain Gold was in his usual seat, of course, with Commander Gomez and Tev standing on either side of him. Soloman, P8 Blue, Carol Abramowitz, and Bart Faulwell were standing or sitting at the aft consoles behind Tony Shabalala at tactical. *Domenica* went to stand next to Tony; Fabian took a seat next to Bart.

Bart whispered, “Coming in together? Isn’t that interesting.”

“Very interesting, yes,” Fabian said completely seriously, which brought Bart—who had only been teasing—up short.

“I assume we’ll talk later.” It wasn’t a question. Bart, Fabian’s roommate, was the only person who had known about Fabian and *Domenica*’s one-night-stand back when it was just a one-night-stand, and he’d been a good sounding board on more than one occasion.

But that was for later. Gomez had turned around and was now addressing the S.C.E. team. “About ten minutes ago, we detected a duranium fragment that matches the information we got from *Nog*—it’s from the *Missouri*. We slowed to impulse, and that’s when we found this.” She turned around. “Put it up, Tony.”

The forward viewer flickered to show an area of space the center of which was—well, Fabian couldn’t say what it was. He found his eye wandering from it, unable to focus directly there.

Immediately, he turned around and activated the sensors from the console at which he was sitting.

“You’re wasting your time, Specialist,” Tev said disdainfully. Fabian turned to see the *Tellarite*’s disapproving glare. “Because the sensors were retuned to detect the *Missouri*, they are unable to extrapolate what this anomaly is.”

Gold spoke for the first time, turning around his center seat to face them, a grave look in his blue eyes. “Whatever that thing is out there, it’s right on the *Missouri*’s flight plan, and there’s a piece of the *Missouri* near it.”

“So we need to retune the sensors back?” Pattie asked.

Gomez shook her head. “Nancy’s on that—she’ll have them back to normal in the next five minutes. When that’s done, I want to know everything there is to know about that—whatever it is—and what it did to our people, and I want to find out yesterday.”

Fabian heard a determination in the commander’s voice that led him to think that, if they didn’t do what she wanted, her response would make *Domenica*’s recent treatment of Tomozuka Kim be a walk in the park by comparison.

Chapter  
12

**U.S.S. da Vinci**

## **in search operations between Stations Kel-Artis and Deep Space 9**

### **NOW**

Sonya Gomez sat in the science lab on deck five of the *Vinci*, staring at the unknown.

This was why she joined Starfleet in the first place: seeking out the new, the unknown, the unexpected. That was why a lot of people joined Starfleet, of course, but because she was an engineer, she also tended to add, and learn what makes it tick.

What kind of year has it been? she thought as she stared at the sensor readings of the bizarre anomaly they found near the distressingly small fragment of the *Missouri*. Has it really been less than a year? She shook her head. Montgomery Scott had come to her after the war and her promotion to full commander with the offer of becoming first officer of the *Vinci*, a duty that included supervising that ship's contingent of S.C.E. personnel. It was a fantastic opportunity, and one she never regretted accepting.

Well, maybe once or twice, she thought with a small smile, grateful that she could smile about the doubts she'd had after Kieran Duffy died.

Thoughts of her dead lover prompted thoughts of his replacement—God, what a terrible association—and she looked over at Tev, hunched over another sensor station, wondering what she would do with him. The S.C.E. team she ran was as good a group of people as she'd ever worked with. And Tev was as good as any of them, truly, but his attitude...

“Commander.”

Sonya looked away from Tev to Soloman, who was at one of the consoles with Fabian Stevens. When she saw the look on his face, she flinched a bit. I didn't know Bynars could look like someone had walked over their grave. “What is it, Soloman?”

“We got a doozy here, Commander,” Fabian said. “The energy readings we're getting keep fluctuating.”

“So does the structure,” Pattie Blue added. “Every time I think I have an idea of this thing's shape, it completely alters.”

“However,” Soloman said, “I recognized one of the energy signatures. It matches the data patterns we found emanating from Empok Nor.”

Now Sonya understood Soloman's apprehension. Only a couple of weeks ago, they'd encountered another universe that was seeking out information in this one, a request that almost destroyed the Bajoran system. Both Soloman's dead bondmate 111 and Kieran Duffy were alive in that universe; it had been a bit of an emotional roller coaster, but especially for Soloman, who had, for the first time, lied to Sonya and the captain in order to get a chance to see 111 again, even an alternate one.

“The pattern's changed again,” Fabian said, “but I'm starting to think that this may be another gateway between universes.”

“Not another one,” Sonya said with a sigh.

Tev suddenly stood up. “Commander, I need to go to engineering.”

Sonya frowned. “Why?”

“I must modify—” Tev cut himself off, took a breath, and then spoke in a much calmer voice. “Request permission to modify one of our class-1 probes to investigate the anomaly. When I was assigned to the Madison, I devised a program—”

Well, that’s a little progress. Aloud, Sonya said, “I’m familiar with the program, Tev—that’s why Nancy’s people are already modifying one of them with a variation on your program. Should be ready in another two minutes or so.”

“Ah.” At first Tev looked deflated, then perked up. “A variation? Of what sort?”

“It’s something we came up with here right after I signed on—a form of sensor compression that triples the amount of information the probe can take in. Solomon and Stevens rewrote your program about six months ago to utilize that angle as well.”

“Why was I not—” Again, Tev stopped himself. “Six months?”

“Yup—we pay attention to what engineers on other ships are doing, too.”

Fabian chuckled. “For example, Lieutenant Rao on the Musgrave makes a mean set of asna dumplings.”

“Conlon to Gomez. It’s done and loaded, Commander.”

Tapping her combadge, Sonya said, “Good work, Nancy. Gomez to bridge—Tony, there’s a modified class-1 in the probe launcher.”

“I’m reading it, Commander.”

“Launch it, please, and have the telemetry sent down here.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Seconds later, the probe’s telemetry started showing up on her screen, fed from Tony Shabalala’s tactical station.

“That’s what I thought,” Pattie said.

Walking over to the specially modified chair the Nasat was sitting in, Sonya asked, “What did you think?”

“I finally figured out this thing’s structure—it’s perfectly spherical.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Tev got up and walked over to Pattie’s station. “The structure has been inconsistent. It is obviously of variable construction, that—”

Pointing at the sensor results with two of her pincers, Pattie said, “No it isn’t, unless that program of yours doesn’t work right. And anyhow, I figured this out five minutes ago—the probe just verified it. What that thing does is change the structure of space around it, at the subquark level, making it look like there’s a structure there, but there isn’t. What is variable is the way and amount of space it changes.”

Tev was now staring at Pattie's screen. "I believe you are right, Specialist. Congratulations."

Fabian shot a look at Sonya. Sonya just smiled and said, "Okay, now we have a better idea of what it does—the question is, can we find out what happened to the runabout?"

"My best hypothesis is that the runabout did not detect the anomaly," Tev said.

"Yeah," Fabian said, "we only saw it at all because we slowed down after finding the fragment. If they weren't looking, the Missouri could've barreled right into it."

Suddenly the lights in the ship dimmed. Half a second later, the red alert klaxon blared.

"I've lost probe telemetry," Pattie said.

"We're moving," Sonya said as she felt the vibration of the deckplates through her boots. "Backing off at one-quarter impulse."

"A wise precaution," Tev said.

"Gold to science lab. Reassure an old man, Gomez, that my ship, it won't get blown to bits."

Sonya walked back to the console she'd been using to verify her readings. "Probe's been destroyed, sir. As far as we've been able to determine, the anomaly is caused by a small spherical object that's altering space around it."

Tapping his combadge while hunched over his own console, Fabian said, "Sir, I've just verified that every time it changes the fabric of space, not only does the size of the area it alters vary, but each time it does, the space has a different quantum signature."

"In English, Stevens."

Sonya and Tev both verified what Fabian just said. "Confirmed," Tev said. "This device is a gateway to parallel universes, akin to the one we communed with on Empok Nor."

"The current configuration," Fabian said, "is a diameter of about two hundred meters." He looked up. "If it was this big, there'd be no way the Missouri could miss it."

"What are you saying, Stevens?" Gold asked.

Sonya gritted her teeth. "It means that the effect of this device is expanding."

A tinkling noise was followed by: "I found something!"

Dashing back over to where Pattie sat, Sonya asked. "What is it?"

"I was going over what we got from the probe. Take a look." With three of her pincers, she pointed at the screen.

Sonya saw what she did—they had detected another fragment of duranium, one that matched that of the material that made up the Missouri.



\* \* \*

As David Gold sat down in the observation lounge, he said without preamble, “Tell me we have some way of getting Lense and Bashir out of that mess.”

“Working on it, sir,” Gomez said as she took her seat to Gold’s right. Tev sat on his left, with Soloman next to him. Stevens took his seat next to Gomez, Corsi next to him. Gold noted that Corsi and Stevens came in together and sat together naturally, moving almost as one. Blue was at her specially modified seat at the other end.

“Talk to me. We’ve lost too many people off this ship already, I’m not standing for it happening again.”

“Sir,” Tev said, “I feel constrained to point out that we have no empirical proof that either of the passengers aboard the runabout are still alive, nor that the runabout is still intact.”

Quickly, Gomez added, “Having said that, at least we now have a working theory about what happened.”

Gold nodded. Over the past year, he’d learned to trust Sonya Gomez’s working theories a lot better than most people’s facts.

Touching a control in front of her caused the viewer on the wall to light up with a sensor scan. In red was a spherical object. Random shapes appeared around it, one yellow, then replaced with a differently shaped blue, with a third shape in green, and so on.

“The sphere in the middle is the device that’s causing all this. It’s opening up a gateway between quantum realities.”

“Before it was destroyed by the device’s expanding field,” Tev said, “the probe was able to scan the surface of the device, but not penetrate its interior workings. The technology is unfamiliar.”

Stevens put in, “But it probably opens up quantum fissures somehow. Back when he was in Starfleet, Ambassador Worf encountered a natural fissure that sent him on a joyride through about a dozen quantum realities. This thing probably does artificially what that fissure did naturally.”

Although he was listening, Gold was also watching the colors change. “There’s a pattern to it.”

Smiling in the way a professor smiled at a student who got a right answer, Gomez said, “That’s it exactly, sir. The device is currently cycling through six different quantum realities. In addition, the field keeps expanding, which is why we got shook up—the *Vinci* was right at the event horizon of the fissure. If we’d been even ten meters closer, we’d have been dragged into the fissure and into another quantum reality.”

“Which,” Tev said, “is what we hypothesize happened to the *Missouri* .”

Blue added, “We were able to detect debris from the runabout in one of the quantum realities.”

“Sir, there’s something else.” Gomez hesitated.

“I can take it, Gomez—spill.”

“Based on the rate of expansion, we think that the device was activated a little over two weeks ago—about when Empok Nor started endangering the Bajoran system. We think that whatever the Bynars did in that other quantum reality, it also set this thing off.”

“Gevalt,” Gold muttered. Unable to help himself, he glanced at Soloman, who looked a bit guilty.

“I am sorry for what happened, Captain Gold,” the Bynar said.

“Stopshvitzing, Soloman,” Gold said, although Bynars did not, as far as he could determine, sweat, “it wasn’t your fault, it’s the fault of whoever it was in that universe who thought probing ours was such a hot idea.” He leaned back in his chair. “All right, looks like we have two things to accomplish; get our two doctors back, and shut this thing down.”

“Something else this device does,” Gomez said, “is alter the quantum signature of whatever passes through it. The debris that Pattie detected is a molecular match for the Missouri, but its quantum signature matches that of the universe it’s in. Which means,” she added quickly, probably noting the expression on Gold’s face, “we can go in after the Missouri. But when we do, we’ll only have seven minutes and twenty-two seconds to find the runabout, rescue Elizabeth and Dr. Bashir, and come back.”

Gold sighed. “I know you can’t answer this, but I’m gonna ask anyhow. What happens if we take longer than seven minutes and twenty-two seconds?”

“We wait for the thirty-six minutes and fifty seconds it’ll take to cycle through the other five quantum realities and hope for the best.”

Blue said, “The good news, sir, is that we continue to detect the Missouri in the quantum reality in question. That means we’ll have that thirty-seven minutes.”

Testily, Tev said, “Thirty-six minutes, Specialist, and fifty seconds.”

Making a tinkling noise of annoyance, Blue said, “I was rounding up.”

Before his engineers could devolve into an argument, Gold said, “What about the other part?”

“That part’s pretty straightforward,” Stevens said. “According to Worf’s report, the fissure was closed by using a broad-spectrum warp field to collapse it.”

“Creating that will not be a problem.” Tev spoke with his usual confidence/arrogance. “It will require only twenty minutes—less, if I am not forced to make tiresome explanations.”

And here I was about to compliment Tev on how well he seemed to be getting along with others. Gold sighed. “Good.”

“Sir, there’s only one problem,” Corsi said. Everyone turned and looked expectantly at her. She didn’t usually contribute to an engineering discussion, but Gold figured she had a security concern. “That solution worked on a natural quantum whozits. But this is an artificial one.”

“I fail to see what difference that makes,” Tev said.

Staring daggers at the second officer, Corsi said, “If I was building something like that, the first thing I’d

program into it is a failsafe against something that could stop it prematurely.”

Stevens was nodding. “You’re saying they may have built in a countermeasure to the warp field.”

“Like I said, it’s what I’d do.”

Gomez folded her arms in front of her. “All right, Pattie, Fabian, start working on a Plan B in case the warp field doesn’t work. Soloman, your job is to get the sensors and transporters and engines to talk to each other. We’ll only have a few minutes, and we need to set it all on automatic: find either Elizabeth’s or Dr. Bashir’s combadges, or their lifesigns, beam them up, and get us back through the fissure before it cycles.”

“Yes, Commander.” Soloman bobbed his bald head.

“Tev, you and I will recalibrate the warp field.”

The Tellarite started to say something, then stopped. “Of course, Commander.”

Maybe he is getting better, Gold thought with a smile. It’s just a work in progress.

“Sir,” Corsi said, “if we don’t find them in the seven minutes we have, then we have to come back.” She didn’t phrase it as a question.

“Yes,” Gomez said, “but then we can take another shot half an hour later. We’ll find them, one way or another.”

“That’s what I want to hear,” Gold said before Corsi could do her wet-blanket impersonation again. “Let’s find our people. Dismissed.” As everyone rose from their chairs, Gold said, “Corsi, stay a minute, would you please?”

“Of course.” Corsi gave Stevens a look, followed by a smile. It was a pleasant smile, and one Gold had never seen on his security chief’s face while on duty before—and damn rarely off duty, either.

Once they had the room to themselves, Gold said, “I hear tell you ran the new recruit through the Galorndon Core scenario.”

Corsi’s face clouded over. “Sir, I was under the impression that security was my responsibility.”

“It is—and the da Vinci’s my responsibility. I just want to make sure that you aren’t pushing your people too hard.”

Stiffly, Corsi said, “I’m not pushing them any harder than reality will push them, sir.”

“I only signed off on that scenario even being installed because it came with a notation that it would only be used for ten-year veterans. Kim’s service record indicates that he hasn’t been in the service for ten years.”

“No, sir.” Corsi shook her head, and smiled once again. “I actually met him ten years ago, on Izar, and he was just a kid. Sir, I had some—some concerns about Kim when he signed on. That’s why I ran him a bit rough. Those concerns have been addressed, however, and it won’t be happening again.”

“Good.” Gold looked at the door through which Stevens had walked a few minutes before. “So, is there anything else going on I need to know about? Say between you and Stevens?”

She stiffened up again. “Nothing that will affect my duty, sir.”

“That wasn’t what I asked, Corsi. Humor an old man, will you?”

Again, she relaxed; again, she smiled. “You asked if there was anything you need to know about, sir.”

Gold laughed. “Fair enough. I trust both your judgments. Just be careful, Corsi. I don’t think anybody on this ship needs to be reminded—”

“No, sir, I don’t—in fact, I need that reminder less than anyone else, quite frankly.” She stiffened yet again. Gold thought she was going to strip her treads, switching gears so often like that. Then she relaxed yet again. “But I’ll be careful, sir—we both will.”

“Good. Dismissed.”

Nodding, Corsi departed the observation lounge. Smiling, Gold headed for the bridge. His people were on the case, and he had every confidence in their ability to do their jobs.

\* \* \*

Corsi stood in the transporter room, Angelopoulos and Kim by her side, with Poynter, Gomez, and Tev all standing at the transporter station. Corsi thought that was overkill, especially since the transporter was on automatic—all they could do was monitor what was happening, and Poynter could do that just as easily—but she understood why Gomez and Tev would want to be present when the doctors were rescued.

If they were rescued.

It was, of course, as likely as not that the Missouri didn’t survive the encounter with the alien device, that the debris that Pattie found was all that was left of it, and of the two doctors.

Corsi had insisted on a team’s being present, and since it was alpha shift, that meant her, Kim, and Angelopoulos. She regarded the two younger men; they both were in full at-attention mode, hands hovering close to their sidearms.

Taking a breath, she made a decision.

“While I’ve got a minute,” she said quietly to the two of them, “I just wanted to say something. Kim, I know I’ve been a little hard on you. I’m not going to apologize for it—I don’t apologize for anything. This isn’t a pleasure cruise, and this isn’t an opportunity for you to relive the glory of your youth, or indulge in hero-worship, or whatever reason you had for joining.”

“Sir, I—” Kim started, but then Angelopoulos spoke.

“Hey, don’t interrupt the commander. Apologies, sir—please continue.”

Inwardly, Corsi smiled. Angelopoulos had been a model guard since he made an ass of himself during the Artemis debrief. That didn’t mean he was out of her doghouse yet, just that she knew his being there

was doing some good. “Thanks, Angelopoulos. My point is, Kim, that—as hard as I’m driving you—reality will drive you harder. This isn’t an easy road you’ve chosen, and it’s one that can get you killed if you’re not careful. Sometimes, it’ll get you killed if you are careful. I need people I can count on to protect this ship. Period.”

“You can count on me, Commander,” Kim said. “I didn’t join so I could serve with you—or with Lieutenant Vale. I mean, I’m glad that I am serving with you, but that doesn’t change my desire to serve.” He hesitated. “I’ll do my best to live up to Caitano’s example, sir.”

Tev had moved off to an auxiliary station that was tied into the bridge. “Approaching event horizon.”

Corsi turned back to face the transporter. “That’s a tall order, Kim.”

Although she wasn’t facing him, Corsi could hear the cheeky grin in Kim’s voice. “If the orders weren’t tall, ma’am, they wouldn’t need security.”

She could also hear the wince in Angelopoulos’s. “God, you got trained by Pelecanos, too?”

“Best teacher I ever had,” Kim said.

Agosto Caitano was the best I ever had. And I let his son die. Corsi shook her head. No, that’s wrong. His death, and Deverick’s, led us to a weapon that would’ve killed millions. Maybe it wasn’t the standard way, but he died doing what security’s supposed to do.

And when I shot Dar, I was doing what security’s supposed to do. For the first time in ten years, she realized that that was what Christine Vale—and Tomozuka Kim—saw on that day on Izar ten years ago. Maybe it’s time I gave both of them credit for it.

“Now entering new quantum reality. Sensors indicate our quantum signatures have been altered.”

For some reason, Corsi had expected some kind of fanfare. But if there was any transition that the *da Vinci* experienced by going from one universe to another, it wasn’t felt in the transporter room. She found that vaguely disappointing.

Poynter said, “Soloman’s program’s running—sensors have found a planet. Checking for combat damage and human life signs. They—got it!”

“That was fast,” Gomez muttered. “Oh, no.”

Corsi didn’t like the sound of that. “What is it?”

“We’ve got Elizabeth’s combat damage and two human life signs—plenty of other life signs, but these are the only two human ones. But one of them’s in bad shape—near death. And we’re reading projectile weapons fire!”

Shooting Gomez a glance, Corsi saw the look of horror on her face. She, along with Hawkins, Abramowitz, and Stevens, had been on the receiving end of more than their share of projectile weapons fire on *Teneb*, and all four of them were nearly killed.

Tev said, “We are about to achieve a standard orbit of the planet.”

“Transporter’s activating,” Poynter said.

Gomez tapped her combadge. “Medical team to transporter room, incoming wounded.”

The transporter hummed to life, and two figures appeared. Corsi barely recognized the one who was crouching as Elizabeth Lense, who was shouting something that sounded like “finish” as she materialized. The naked, scarred, prone figure was hardly at all recognizable as Julian Bashir.

“Leaving orbit,” Tev said, “two minutes remaining.”

Lense jumped up. “No, dammit, you’ve got to send me back!”

“Elizabeth, we detected gunfire,” Gomez said quietly. “Besides, if we don’t leave now, we risk never getting back home again. I’m sorry.”

Wetzel and Falcão came in with two gurneys. Lense refused to get on one, but helped Bashir onto the other one. “I could’ve saved her, dammit.”

Corsi wasn’t sure what that meant. Did she have a Dar of her own on that planet? Or had her Dar succeeded in harming her Vale?

Tev’s voice snapped her out of it. “Crossing the event horizon back into our quantum reality. Quantum signatures reverting to normal.”

Lense led the team out into the corridor without another word.

“Well,” Gomez said after a moment. “I’m betting there’s a story there.”

“Mhm,” Corsi said with a nod.

Chapter

13

## **U.S.S. da Vinci en route to rendezvous with U.S.S. Defiant**

**NOW**

“So then we hit the thing with a broad-spectrum warp field, and it worked the first time. The fissure collapsed, the alien device shut down, and we’re no longer poking into other universes. I was stunned.”

Corsi smiled at Stevens’s words. “Why?”

“Because that was Plan A. Plan A never works.”

“First time for everything, I guess.” She smiled as she sipped herraktajino. She had just come off-shift, but was letting Lense have their quarters to herself for the time being. Whatever she and Bashir went through in that other quantum reality—an ordeal that apparently, on that side, took a lot longer than the two weeks she was gone on this side of it—had a huge impact on her. Corsi assumed that Lense would talk about it when she was good and ready—which, if past history is any guide, will be approximately never. So she and Stevens were sitting in the mess hall, sharing a couple of fraktajino s. She added, “I

guess whoever built that device wasn't as smart as me.”

Stevens deadpanned, “Or it was just one of those engineers who always have their heads in the clouds so they don't think about the real world.”

“Gee, do we know anybody like that?” she asked with a cheeky grin.

“One or two—but we're working on 'em.” He winked. Then he checked his chronometer. “Crap, I need to get to the hololab. Tev called a staff meeting. Apparently, his royal highness has some ‘ideas’ about how to streamline our procedures.” He gulped down the rest of hisraktajino and stood up. “On the other hand, he actually was playing well with others when we were searching for the runabout, so maybe he's improving. God knows, he couldn't get any worse. I'll see you later?”

She also rose. “Count on it.”

Then she grabbed him and kissed him.

To her amazement, part of what she enjoyed about the kiss was that she was doing it right there in front of everyone in the mess hall—including Hawkins, Krotine, and Lauoc, who had just entered. Lauoc was just released from sickbay that morning—Lense's second official act upon reporting back for duty, following saving Bashir's life—and was already back in uniform, even though he wouldn't be back on duty until alpha shift the next day.

Grinning ear to ear, Stevens departed the mess hall. He and Hawkins exchanged some quick words, accompanied by laughter, then he departed.

The trio then went to the replicator—Hawkins got a synthale, Lauoc a tarkalian tea, and Krotine a firmlike—and then approached Corsi's table. “Mind if we join you, boss?” Hawkins asked.

Indicating the other chairs at the table, Corsi said, “Have a seat. Lauoc, good to see you up and around.”

“Ready for duty, Commander,” Lauoc said, sounding no worse for the wear despite the horrid beating he took from the mad Vorta on Coroticus.

“You're not on duty until 0800 tomorrow.”

“That's just a technicality. With the commander's permission, I'd like to run some scenarios—maybe with the new guy.”

And Kim thought I was rough—wait'll Lauoc gets through with him. “Knock yourself out, Lauoc. But you'll either have to do it in the next hour or wait until 2100. Tev has the hololab until then.”

Krotine asked, “Is Commander Gomez really making him take sensitivity training?”

“I wouldn't presume to know why Commander Tev is using the hololab,” Corsi said seriously. Then she chuckled. “But, as it happens, there may have been something about that in a conversation with Commander Gomez a while back.”

“Couldn't happen to a nicer guy,” Hawkins said emphatically, holding up his ale in a mock toast.

"I'll drink to that," Krotine said, then gulped down some of herfrimlike . After placing the mug down on the table, she turned to Corsi. "Uh, Commander—what was that with you and Mr. Stevens?"

"I was wondering that, myself," Hawkins said with a wide grin.

Corsi let out a long breath. "I guess I should tell you all that Mr. Stevens and I are a couple."

Still grinning, Hawkins asked, "With all due respect, boss, was that supposed to be a secret?"

Corsi laughed, and the others did the same—except Lauoc, who didn't really laugh so much as smile enigmatically. "Yeah," she said, "it was a secret—from me."

\* \* \*

A little while later, Corsi went back to her cabin, having determined that Lense was in sickbay. She had spent the better part of an hour just talking with her people, and she found it to be quite pleasant. Hawkins was a good deputy, and she had herself a security team that was as good as any she'd served with.

Eventually, though, she excused herself. There was something she needed to do.

She entered her cabin, went to the replicator and asked for a glass of water, then sat at her desk. With a shiver, she recalled that Caitano had asked the replicator for a glass of water before he dropped dead in his cabin. Stop being an idiot , she admonished herself.

Entering several commands into the comm station, she opened a channel to theEnterprise .

A few minutes later, the deceptively innocent-looking face of Christine Vale appeared. She had cut her hair and changed its color since that day on Izar—it was currently brown and in a pixie cut, as opposed to the long auburn it was then—but she still looked very much like the detective Corsi had naïvely assumed to be incompetent ten years ago.

"Commander Corsi!" Vale seemed stunned. "Is something wrong?"

"No, Lieutenant, nothing's wrong at all, I just—" She hesitated. "I just wanted to tell you something, Christine, something I should've told you a long time ago. You should be proud of what you've accomplished. I know I am—proud, that is, to be in the service with you."

Now Vale looked even more stunned. "Uh, thanks, Co—ah, Domenica. Thank you very much. I—I can't begin to tell you—" She took a breath. "I owe it all to you, you know."

"Like hell. You don't owe anything to me, Christine—youwere the one who figured out that it was Dar. It took you less than a day to see something that I managed to miss for eight years. All I did—" Her voice caught. Until yesterday, she hadn't talked, hadn'tthought , about this, and it still was like rubbing an open wound. "All I did was shoot him. Anybody could've done that."

"That's good of you to say, Domenica, but—I don't think I could've done what you did."

"Sure you could've—because you're good security. We deal with the unexpected and keep people safe. And that doesn't come from outside." She smiled. "I just hope that Picard and the rest of those guys know what they have there."



Returning the smile, Vale said, “Well, if they ever forget, I’ll be sure to send them to you.”

“You do that. Take care of yourself, Christine—and take care of your ship.”

“You do the same, Domenica. And thanks.”

Corsi closed the connection, then got up and headed to the door, thence to the security office. True, she wasn’t on duty, but like Lauoc said, that was just a technicality. She had a ship to protect.

#### About the Author

**KEITH R.A. DeCANDIDO** is the co-developer of the S.C.E. series, and has also written or co-written eight previous eBooks in the series. His other Star Trek fiction includes almost a dozen novels (most recently *Articles of the Federation*, a look at the politics of the Federation, *Enemy Territory*, the third book in the I.K.S. Gorkon series, and *A Time for War, a Time for Peace*, a USA Today best-seller), novellas (*Ferenginar: Satisfaction Is Not Guaranteed* in *Worlds of Star Trek: Deep Space Nine Volume 3* and *Horn and Ivory* in *Gateways: What Lay Beyond*), short stories (most recently “loDnI’pu’ vavpu’ je” in *Tales from the Captain’s Table* and the forthcoming “Letting Go” in the tenth-anniversary Star Trek: Voyager anthology *Distant Shores*), and comic books (the *Perchance to Dream* miniseries). Keith has also written novels, novelizations, short stories, and nonfiction in the universes of Gene Roddenberry’s *Andromeda*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Farscape*, *Resident Evil*, *Marvel Comics*, *Xena*, *Magic: the Gathering*, and much more. His original novel, *Dragon Precinct*, a high-fantasy police procedural, was published in 2004. His upcoming work includes the novelization of the film *Serenity*, a Spider-Man novel entitled *Down These Mean Streets* (both in September 2005), and a *Warcraft* novel (coming in early 2006). Keith lives in New York City with his girlfriend and the world’s two goofiest cats. Find out more exaggerations about Keith at his Web site at [Decandido.net](http://Decandido.net), or just send him obnoxious e-mails at [keith@decandido.net](mailto:keith@decandido.net).

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