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WOUNDS

Book 1

Ilsa J. Bick



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Historian's Note

Woundstake's place between *Ferenginar: Satisfaction Is Not Guaranteed* and *The Dominion: Olympus Descending*, the two short novels in *Worlds of Star Trek: Deep Space Nine Volume 3*.

Chapter

1

So, contestants, today's puzzler. Given the choice between a very long trip with Julian Bashir in a cramped little runabout, with nothing to do except stare at the same paragraph over and over until her eyes merged to the center of her forehead, would Elizabeth Lense rather:

a) have Tev torture her with Klingon painstiks for seven hours;

b) be reincarnated as Tev's personal Orion sex slave;

c) play footsie with Tev in the mudbaths on Shiralea VI;

d) just forget Tev, and stick pins in her eyes;

e) What, are you insane? Stop wasting my time. Just phaser Bashir, then pilot her own shuttle, thanks, and she'd be as happy as a Ferengi in—

* * *

“Elizabeth, have I done something to offend you?”

Let's go with e. “No, why do you ask?” Lying her head off.

Bashir's brows tented in a frown. “Because ever since we got the news about the Bentman Prize, you've been, well, positively frosty.”

“Frosty? Honestly, I wasn't aware.” Just shut up and leave me alone, because you really, really don't want to go there.

“That's not true,” he said, like he'd read her mind, and then she started to get mad. Bashir cocked his head a little as if she were a species of fascinating bacteria. “Is there something you want to talk about?”

The way he said it, those words. . . She felt like she was sixteen again. She felt as if they were back at Sherman's Planet and it was Gold sitting there and not Bashir. Lense felt as if she'd been having this conversation in one form or another for most of her life. All kinds of people—her parents, her captain, not to mention several doctors—asking if there was something she wanted to talk about. Like talking ever made a damn whit of difference. “No.”

He gave a quizzical half-smile. “I don't think that's true.”

“I'd. . . I don't want to get into it.”

“Why not?”

“Because it doesn't matter,” she said, knowing that no, really, it did.

“Anything that's upset you matters, especially if it's something I've done.”

That clinched it. He asked, right? “Okay. Honestly?” She reeled in a deep breath and said, “I don't think someone like you should be eligible for the Bentman Prize.”

It was weird watching the way his smile deflated bit by bit, like his face was painted on some big balloon with a slow leak. “Someone like me.” He said it slowly, as if each word was a land mine he had to mince around. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, come on.” Squaring her padd on her console, she swiveled her seat until she faced him head-on. “You want me to spell it out? Someone who's been enhanced. Someone who's had his DNA rearranged so he's some kind of mental superman. That's what I mean.”

Color flooded his cheeks. “I don't know that I understand. What's my. . . enhancement got to do with

anything?"

"Oh, don't play dumb. Nobody's keeping score; nobody's watching. Don't play dumb."

He gaped. "Dumb? What are you talking about?"

"You. You're such a fake. You were a fake back in medical school, and you're a fake now. Take that final exam thing... you threw it, didn't you? I mean, come on; the question was a gimme. But you missed it."

"Medical school?" Bashir looked genuinely astonished. "Elizabeth, you're still thinking about that?"

She clenched her jaw hard enough to make her teeth hurt. "Yes, I'm still thinking about that. I've always wondered why... no, how you could miss something a blind first-year medical student would've seen with a cane. The difference between a preganglionic fiber and postganglionic nerve... who're you kidding? It's a snap. But knowing what I know now? My guess is someone was looking at you maybe a little too closely. So, you figured, do something dumb, they wouldn't wonder anymore. Worked, too. You played people just right and it seemed like it kept on working until Zimmerman showed up and started asking questions. Thing is, I felt sorry for you when I heard about that. Thought, God, just leave the poor guy alone. Not his fault his parents broke the law. But then Commander Selden came after me, and now? I don't feel sorry for you anymore."

Then everything came boiling out, stuff she'd stoppered up a good long time: about how she had lost a month of her life staring at the four walls of a dingy little room on Starbase 314 where she got to twiddle her thumbs while they poked and prodded and questioned and sampled her stem to stern. Came up with a big fat zero, too, because—gee, look at that—she was a pretty sharp cookie, and she hadn't had a single base pair on any DNA strand tweaked anywhere, thanks. And, oh, by the way, while she was sitting around most emphatically not doing her job? A whole bunch of people, including the Lexington's Captain Eberling, got killed, and for what? Because Commander Selden was a righteous pain in the ass. Because Selden made hunting down people like Bashir something of a mission, and no worries if people died because Lense wasn't there to put on the save. Gosh, what's a few dozen Starfleet so long as Selden got rid of Bashir and anyone else who—

"All right, all right." Bashir held up both hands, palms out. "Enough. I get the picture. I don't suppose it matters that I didn't know about any of this; that it happened in the context of a greater paranoia about the shape-shifters; and that I'm not responsible for Selden or that paranoia. But I hear you, Elizabeth, I—"

"Don't call me that," she snapped. "'Elizabeth.' Like we're friends. We're not friends. You don't even know me, Bashir."

"My God." He looked as if she'd slapped him in the face. "So now I'm your enemy? Elizabeth, that's irrational, that's—"

"What, crazy?" Oh, that just burned her. Gold, Bashir, people, her whole life... everyone treating her like someone who needed care, so much understanding. Poor Elizabeth; she's so fragile. Like she was some crazy woman ready to crack an airlock without a helmet. "I came by my degree honestly. I came by my brain honestly."

"God, I can't believe we're having this conversation. First Trill, now this; I can't fathom this run of bad..." Sighing, Bashir pinched the bridge of his nose between his right thumb and index finger as if he

were very weary. Like she was just one more thing in a series of spectacularly bad things heaped on at once. “Look, I was six bloody years old. Everything that happened when I was a child was utterly out of my control, and, enhanced or not, I still have to work hard. And I fail, I make mistakes, I bollix things up more than you can imagine, and a good deal more often than just in medicine. We both must. We have to because we’re only human. I’m just a person, Elizabeth. Whether I’m theoretically better, what’s the difference? What counts is what we do with what we’ve got.”

“Yeah, right. Except we’re going for the same prize. I’d like to see a level playing field myself. Gee, what’s it like to succeed all the time? Must be kind of nice.”

“Oh, completely. But, you know, people are so very uncooperative; they’re so fallible. They insist on dying before you can do a damned thing, or their feelings for you change and then—” He broke off and stared at his fingers knotted in his lap. When he looked up, his eyes were bright. “Would you like me to withdraw? Oh, wait, no, I can’t now, of course, can I? What was I thinking? Because then you’ll blame me for making it all too easy. I’m really in one of those no-win scenarios, aren’t I? I do nothing, you hate me. I do something, same result. Or you blame me, and that comes out to the same thing. I don’t suppose it’s occurred to you that there’s absolutely no guarantee that things on the Lexington would have worked out differently even if you’d been there. Maybe you’d have been killed.”

“Unlikely. Sickbay’s a pretty secure area.” A lie. That first shot blasted a chunk out of the Lexington’s sickbay and took out virtually her entire staff, and she was wondering just what the hell was wrong with Starfleet engineering specs, that they couldn’t reinforce sickbay better than that.

“But not impossible.” He paused. “Since we’re being so very honest, then I’d point out that you’re making me out as some sort of monster: your personal scapegoat for all the failures you’ve had, real or imagined.”

She wasn’t expecting that. “What? I haven’t failed. I’ve never failed,” she said, knowing she was lying again. (What, after all, was her paper about? Not one of her more shining moments, that was for sure. And why had she written about Dobrah? Was it because Dobrah was unfinished business? Because thinking about him was like a claw ripping her heart, making it bleed?) “This isn’t about me. Let’s just stay on point, okay?”

“No, let’s not. What, did you think I’m your personal punching bag? Not on your life. You give me far too much psychological importance.”

“So you’re my counselor now?”

“Stop that,” Bashir said. “You may be narcissistic and more than a little grandiose—”

“And you’re not? Fancy that, the great Julian Bashir, Frontier Doctor—”

“But you’re not a stupid woman,” he said as if she hadn’t spoken. “So don’t act like one. You want to hang something on me, go right ahead. But this isn’t about my competency, or even my enhancements. This is about you. This is about your competency.”

“My competency’s not the issue here.”

“The hell it isn’t. Now maybe without my enhancements, I’d have been a big zero. Just a nit. But it takes more than intelligence to make a person. No amount of enhancement can change fate, Elizabeth. You can’t control everything. The universe will do what the universe will do.”

She knew it was cruel and wrong, but she said it anyway. “Gee, I wouldn’t know about the universe, not being perfect and all.”

His face seemed to crumple. He looked away. She stared at him, every muscle quivering, her brain screaming that she was being unfair, that she was narcissistic, and Bashir was right.

No, that’s wrong. You’re a doctor, you can’t have doubts. In an emergency, you act first, have second thoughts later. You have to believe in the rightness of your constructions, or else everything falls apart.

Bashir let go of a long sigh. “You’re wrong, Elizabeth. Perfection, real or imaginary, has nothing to do with fate, and I’m not perfect. Never have been, and never will be. I’m not a freak, not a monster. I make mistakes all the time. I’m human, and I have feelings to hurt.”

She never had a chance to reply. Later on, she wondered what she’d have said and thought. It would probably have been something just as cruel because she didn’t want to cut him a break. Couldn’t afford to because being kind meant taking a good, hard look at herself and she sure as heck wasn’t going to do that. But, right then, she never got the chance.

Because in the next instant, the computer screamed, and everything went to hell.

Chapter

2

It was like being whacked in the face with a club. Something broke over the runabout. Or the Missouri simply plowed through something, shattering space the way an icebreaker smashes through a thick shelf of solid ice. Her neck whipped back and forth, like a heavy flower on a slender stem. Her console rushed for her face, and she shouted, twisting to one side, throwing her arms out. But she wasn’t fast enough, and her left temple cracked against plasticine hard enough that her vision blurred with pain.

Dazed, she heard Bashir hit: a solidsmack as his face connected with the forward viewing port. Crying out, he fell back into his seat, and a fount of bright red blood gushed from his nose. More spurting from a rip in his scalp.

“Oh, my God.” She half-stood, and then the Missouri spun in a drunken, counterclockwise whirl. There was a sputter of circuitry followed by the ozone stink of fried relays. The runabout porpoised and bucked and then their gravitational unit must have stuttered because the impact caught Lense like a punch to the midsection. Her feet left the deckplates and she smashed against a science console aft. The duranium hull groaned and the deckplates shuddered so much the vibrations rattled into her teeth.

The waves kept coming. They were so fast, the runabout’s inertial dampeners couldn’t keep up. Lense gasped for breath as centrifugal force palmed her back, pinning her to the deck like a bug to cardboard. Her muscles quivered as she pushed up. She made it to all fours but another hit sent her pitching forward. The point of her chin banged off the deckplates the way a billiard ball ricochets against a bumper. Gagging, she coughed a spray of bright red blood.

“What is it?” Choking, she backhanded blood from her mouth. “What the hell is it?”

“Some kind of distortion waves!” Bashir was at the helm, battling for control. “All around! Like rips in space! Can’t pinpoint the origin! Are you all right?” He spared her a quick glance over his shoulder, and her gut iced. An oily slick of blood coated his face like a mask, staining his teeth orange. The ooze was

turning his uniform from blue to purple.

Then his eyes widened: black rimmed with white outlined in blood. “Oh, dear God. Elizabeth, fire, there’s a fire; the transporter —!”

She smelled it then: the astringent odor of molten plasticine. Balls of black smoke boiled from the ceiling-mounted transporter assembly, and her throat seized against the smoke’s acrid sting. Then there was a brilliant yellow flash that left her dazzled as a shower of sparks arced to the deck, and tongues of red-orange flame licked along a bulkhead.

Get up get up get up! Rolling, Lense snagged the edge of a seat, hauled herself to her feet, then staggered to an emergency locker. Dragging out an extinguisher, she clicked it to life. White fire suppressant spewed in a white cloud, and she aimed up, but then the ship yawed to port and flipped so violently she lost her balance, her boots skidding like she’d slipped on sheer ice. She lost the extinguisher; the back of her head cracked against the deck, and then she saw the extinguisher spinning high as a baton before arcing down, straight for her face.

“No!” Tucking her head to her knees, she rolled. But she was too slow. The extinguisher glanced off her spine with a solid, brutal thwack, and she screamed.

“Elizabeth!” Bashir, frantic. “Elizabeth!”

“I’m all right!” Through a haze of pain, she saw Bashir’s back; the drizzle of his blood; the way his shoulders hunched as he fought with the ship.

Got to get to him...he’s losing too much blood...got to put out the fire...

Somehow she made it to her knees and then she was crawling on all fours, grappling for a handhold on the science console just aft of Bashir’s seat. Only everything was blurry and she was breathing hard, and sour bile burned the back of her throat.

Head hurts...can’t breathe...where’s the control for...can’t black out, not now...

She was shaking and it took all her focus and concentration to get her fingers to obey. But they did, and in the next moment, there was the faint electric blue shimmer aft. She huffed out in relief as black smoke and flames flattened against the force field. Then she did the only thing she could think of: shut off life support from the field aft and evacuated all the air.

No air; fire will suffocate. Her head was fuzzy and she shook it clear, hard to do when the ship was still jittering so badly it was a wonder they hadn’t already broken apart at the seams. Bashir’s bleeding; have to get to him; we’ve got to call for help...

“Bashir,” she began—and then her voice died in her throat.

Because all of space gathered, knitted into a tight ball, a single point, and the stars winked out.

Chapter

3

The rainbow blur of stars and black space peeled back, and they shot into a vast stretch of absolutely nothing the way a toboggan hurtles into a long, dark tunnel. There was a pause, a sensation of jumping

from one place to another. And then, faster than thought, the Missouri rocketed through, and then there was space and there were stars. The turbulence was gone, and things should have been better.

But they weren't. They were speeding up, not slowing down; she could tell by the heavy drag of gravity's fingers pulling at her skin. Then she looked forward and saw why: a murky, soot-stained ball of a planet, dead ahead, filling the viewing port and looming closer by the second.

"Bashir! Bashir, we're in a gravity well; you've got to pull up, pull up!"

"I can't!" Bashir arched blood from his eyes. "The plasma injectors shut down. All I've got are maneuvering thrusters, and our shields..."

"I see them," she said, her voice grim. Shields were at thirty percent, plus the runabout had taken major structural damage along the starboard hull. If Bashir couldn't correct their approach angle or get into a stable orbit somehow, the runabout would simply split open and spit them out in a rush of sudden depressurization. Or they might just burn up. Or, more likely, both. "Can you ditch us?"

"I can try. What about the planet?"

She brought up sensors, thanking whatever deity was watching over them that they still worked. "M-class, high levels of atmospheric contaminants, pollution, silicates and copper arsenicals, lots of radioactive decay. Partial pressure of carbon dioxide's higher than Earth."

"Can we breathe it?"

"Not very well, but we don't have a lot of alternatives. Sensors reading three continents: two north, and an island continent, about the size of Australia, to the south with a big inland sea or lake. Low salinity, no aquatic life there; mountains north, stretches of desert, and some kind of big industrial complex south."

"All right, I'll try for the water. Jettison a distress buoy. Then break out the suits just in case, a medical kit, whatever supplies you can."

"I'm on it." She was already moving but with aching slowness, the gravity sucking at her legs like thick mud. A wash of harsh yellow light fanned in, bright enough to throw shadows. Startled, she glanced over her shoulder and saw fire sheeting over the front viewing port, the friction of their passage through the atmosphere igniting a ball of flame like a meteor. The Missouri was burning up.

No time! We'll never make it down in the ship! Got to evacuate now, now! The runabout was jittering again, and there was a guttural roar so loud that she gritted her teeth as the sound pummeled her brain. Just focus, get the suits; get Bashir into his suit; then we blow the hatch, use the suits' thrusters to get us down and pray like hell our force fields don't cut out before we hit or...

The equipment locker was aft of the force field she had thrown up against the smoke, but the transporter fire was out. She stabbed the controls, bleeding in air to equalize pressure before bringing the field down. Then she dragged two suits and helmets from the equipment locker. Even as she tugged one on, her mind was already skipping ahead.

Job one's to get him into his suit. She jammed her right leg into her own, and then her left before cinching it up around her waist. She shrugged into the arms, toggled the clasps. Need to slap on a fast-clot pressure bandage then bring up his suit's force field, program his thrusters to correct for speed and distance, tether us together so I can control his descent if he passes out; he'll pass out; he's got to, he's

losing way too much blood; patch him up as soon as we get down. Got to hope to hell the impact doesn't kill us.

"Bashir, come on!" She fumbled out a medical kit, clicked it open, pawed through for a pressure bandage. Got to be quick, quick... "Come on, it's no use! Leave it! Let's go!"

"Just a few more seconds!" The runabout was thrashing like a roped steer, and he was straight-arming his console, working fast while his blood puddled on the deck. "We're still too high! If I blow the hatch now, the depressurization will suck us out; we won't have any control!"

He was right. She knew he was right. But what made her furious was that she was getting suited up, and he wasn't.

This is nuts; he has to get back here now! Jamming her helmet down over her ears, she thumbed the catch, heard the click and hiss as the helmet sealed and the suit pressurized. She banged open her external mike. "Bashir, now!"

"Almost there!" His voice was a little tinny and sounded small and very far away through her internal speakers. But he did turn, and she tossed his suit forward, then his helmet. He fumbled for the suit, nearly lost it because his hands were slick. But then he had it, shook it open, shoved in one foot, then the other. Tugging the suit past his waist, he wriggled in one arm, then the other. But then, to her dismay, he turned back to his controls.

"I'll try to level us!" he shouted over the staccato sputter of maneuvering thrusters. "That way when I blow the hatch—!"

"Forget that! We can blow it from here! Now you've got exactly three seconds to get your ass back here, or I'm going to drag you out by your thumbs!"

"No, Elizabeth, stay where you are!" And then Bashir stiffened and he turned. Their eyes met and for one brief instant, it was as if time stopped. Everything fell away, and she would remember the look on Bashir's face for the rest of her life: his horror and his regret, and all that blood.

Then time began again. The runabout streaked toward its death; the alarm shrilled its ululating cry; then there was a weird, wrenching metallic scream and Bashir was shouting, wildly, "Elizabeth, she's breaking up, she's breaking up, she's breaking—!"

"Julian!" she shrieked. She lunged for him, one gloved hand hooked to a bulkhead, the other outstretched and they were so close she could nearly touch him, she was almost there, she could save him, she had to! "Julian, for God's sake, give me your hand, give me your hand!"

Maybe he started for her. Maybe not. But she'd never know because the next thing she heard was an enormouska-bang. Flames sheeted through the runabout, and the air roared. Her right hand closed reflexively but her fingers clutched air, and then she was screaming because suddenly there was no deck, no bulkhead. No Julian.

The entire starboard hull erupted like someone had touched off a bomb.

Lense was swept away in a hail of debris. She smashed through murky clouds, tumbling head over heels so she saw dun-colored land and then an orange sun and then a vast gray-green smudge that undulated like oil. And then she was on her back, looking straight up, and she saw a bright fiery ball: the runabout,

or rather what was left of it, arcing south and away from the water, shedding bits and pieces in its passage, streaming a jet of superheated plasma behind and breaking apart like some sort of angel fallen from grace.

Then clouds swallowed her up and she couldn't see the runabout anymore. There was only the sound of her guttural sobs, the wet of tears upon her skin, a swirl of vertigo. Her vision dimmed as she accelerated, and she went by feel, the force hammering her body, squeezing her until she could barely take a breath. Her fingers crawled over her suit's controls as she activated a force field to cushion her impact and programmed reverse thrusters.

Her last coherent thought was that she would never survive. The impact would kill her. She was going to die, and only a fool would think otherwise.

The very last thing she heard was the full-throated bellow of the wind.

Then there was silence, and her mind slid into darkness. But that was a mercy.

Chapter

4

Another primate had died during the night, the third in six weeks. Dr. Idit Kahayn knew because of the smell. The primate lay in a pool of vomit and feces: black eyes glassy as a doll's, purple tongue lolling from a mouth stretched in a rictus of death.

Death and more death. That was her life now. Death for breakfast, death for dinner. Death in her dreams: the image of soldiers and rifles and Janel's face exploding into a mist of blood spray and bone, and her screaming a warning, too late. That same dream every night, like her mind was stuck in an endless, recursive loop. No way off; no way out.

The remaining primates tracked her as she passed through the animal room to fetch gloves, a gown, her safety glasses. But she paused, staring them down. "It's not my fault. I didn't mean for this to happen. But I don't have a choice."

The primates didn't answer. They just looked at her with their grave, liquid brown eyes, and she could sense the room getting thick and electric and icy.

"It's not my fault," she said again. Then she went to the isolation room, pulled the body from its cage, bagged it, and lugged it to the lab, leaving the animals to throw their thoughts back and forth in the air above her head.

The lab was chilly and smelled of antiseptic and old death. The counters were metal, the walls were white ceramic tile, and the floor was scuffed gray linoleum. A metal autopsy table stood on rolling casters in the center of the lab. The table was fitted with gutters all around to funnel away blood and other fluids. She unbagged the body and placed the primate on the table where she hosed it down, sluicing away vomit and filth, grateful that the water was triple-filtered at least so its color wasn't black but a shade of watery ash. Then she braced the primate's neck on a block so the head hung back and those blind eyes fixed on a point somewhere far away.

She used a scalpel for the skin along the crown and from ear to ear, incising through tough, calloused scalp and stringy muscle all the way to bone. Then she pulled the front flap down over the primate's face and tugged the back flap to the base of its skull just above the spine. She took up a rotary bone saw,

thumbed it to life. The saw whined, then dropped in pitch as the blade bit bone. As she cut, watery wine-colored blood dribbled into the gutters. She buzzed the circumference of the skull, notching the bone at the occiput. If the skull slid off when she bagged a dead animal for cremation, it made a mess.

When she'd cut through, she lifted the calvarium from the brain. The skull and tissues made a hollow sucking sound, like picking up an overturned bowl of thick gelatin. The primate's brain was so edematous that once the cap of bone was removed, gray matter (though it was never really gray but a dirty pinkish purple like thin jelly) lipped the edges of the cranium like an underdone soufflé. The dura mater clung to the underside of the skull cap, so she got a good look at the brain in situ. The gyri were plump and choked with fluid, and she saw the bruise at once: a purplish-black splotch fanning around the implant like a squashed bug. She nudged away brain until she spied a clear bulb that was the proximal end of the implant: a thin, nearly filamentous metal cylinder bristling with synthetic dendrites.

Inflammation and swelling; probably a reaction to the separation. But how to beat that? After an easy dozen primate deaths in the past twelve months, she still wasn't sure. Either way, the animal's brain had swelled with fluid. Intracranial pressure had built up and the brain—really nothing more than a gelatinous mass of tissue and fluid held together by the thin bag of the meninges—had nowhere to go except the spinal canal. There would have been pain. The animal would've lost the use of its arms and legs, then bowel and bladder control. It would have been frightened. A horrible way to die but, then again, Kahayn didn't know too many ways that were terrific either.

After separating the brain from the spinal cord and the tentorium, the dural connections between cerebrum and cerebellum, she scooped out the brain with both gloved hands. The cooling brain was tepid against her right hand but cold in her left.

She suspended the brain with a string in a formalin solution. She'd leave the brain in the preservative for the next ten days or so while the tissue firmed enough for her to section and see where she'd gone wrong—again.

By six-thirty in the morning, she was done, and then it was time for a stim and the OR. She wasn't hungry. As she passed through the primate room, she didn't look at the animals but she could feel their eyes on her back and their thoughts chasing her down the hall and out of the research wing.

Late afternoon now, and on her fourth procedure of the day: a rail-thin man with lung rot. Her pager shrilled as she was wrist-deep in a small, plum-colored lake of blood that smelled like an old clot. She had a fistful of rotted left lung and the tip of her left pinky plugged an arterial rip. There was so much blood, she'd gone by feel, tweezing through stiff, filamentous lung until she felt the rhythmic pulse of a tiny gusher a third of the way down the aorta. The blood was warm, but the tip of her pinky was cold and she needed her right hand free to do the fine work.

Her pager nagged again. "Someone get that, please? I'm a little tied up here."

A surgery tech patted at Kahayn's left hip, found the pager, killed it, glanced at the display, then hip-butted his way out of the suite. Kahayn jerked her head at the lieutenant standing opposite: a new girl who was all round blue eyes set in pale blue skin above a white-edged blue mask. "C'mon, c'mon," said Kahayn, "get some suction going so I can see what I'm doing here."

The lieutenant jumped to, stabbing the patient's pleural cavity with the suction tip.

"Easy, go easy," said Kahayn, grabbing the lieutenant's gloved wrist with her free hand. Grape-colored beads of blood pattered onto green surgical drape. "Not so hard; you're going to give him another

bleeder you keep that up.”

“Sorry.” But the lieutenant slowed down, working with exaggerated care. Blood gurgled through tube, and the blood lake receded until Kahayn saw first the knuckles of her gloved left hand and then the spot where she’d plugged the artery. The rip was, thankfully, small, and the artery not yet so brittle that she couldn’t simply suture it shut. But rot had eaten into the left lung, and the normally spongy blue tissue had morphed into tough, stringy, prune-colored filaments that had insinuated through pleura and into the patient’s rib the way ivy suckers clung to old brick.

“Okay,” she said to the chief OR nurse, who stood with anesthesia behind a green drape at the head of the surgical table. “We’re going to need a left lung here.”

“I think we only have nine lefties on hand,” said the nurse. She was a major, and a perennial hard-ass. “Besides, this casualty hasn’t built up enough credits for a lung and if people get wind that he got one without...”

Kahayn drilled the nurse with a look. “Maybe you didn’t hear me. I said, get the lung, Major.”

“Colonel, I am just following protocol—”

“I don’t care. Now either get the lung, or get out.”

“Colonel, there are established procedures for—”

“That’s it.” Kahayn cut her off with a jerk of her head. “You’re out. Breynar,” she called over to the circulating nurse, “I need a left lung.”

The nurse, a first lieutenant, shot a hesitant glance at the major, then nodded and scurried out, his booties whispering against linoleum. The major’s eyes narrowed over her mask before she did a quick pivot with the precision of a drill instructor. She hipped the door. “I’ll be reporting this,” she said and pushed out through the scrub room. The doors had hinged flaps and fwap-banged.

No one said anything, so the suction gurgle was very loud in the silence. Then the anesthesiologist said, “You got to go easy, Colonel. She has a point.”

“Don’t start,” said Kahayn.

“I’m not. But you think we’re busy now, all they got to do is riot out there and then you’ll be getting up before you go to sleep.”

“Yeah, yeah, and eating gravel for breakfast. Look, this guy needs a lung. So you have a better idea? Like I’m supposed to go to all this trouble to stitch up an artery but let him suffocate?”

“I’m just saying. She’s doing her job.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Kahayn said again, exasperated. She blew out. Her blue surgical mask puffed then crinkled back in a papery rustle of accordion folds across her nose and mouth. He was right, of course, not that it mattered much because the patients just kept on coming. The medical complex was short-staffed, nothing new about that either because they were always short-staffed, the casualties streaming in for replacements, and there was never enough to go around. Kahayn felt like one of those rats on a little wire wheel, running and running and running nowhere really fast.

Nothing was getting better either. The air was bad and getting worse, and there were a lot of people with lungs so sooty they looked more like bloody bags of pulverized charcoal. Cancers in the bone, the liver, the gut; eating people alive a piece at a time. The whole thing was so damned futile.

Don't think. Kahayn stared down at that ruin of a chest, what was left of a man's lung. Nothing you can do. Just work and keep on working but don't think.

So she worked steadily like an automaton and was a suture away from finishing with the artery when the surgical tech banged back in, doorwhap -flapping in his wake. "That was the ER. They want you down there."

"Uh-huh, well, I'm kind of busy now. Major Arin's on; he can handle it."

"It was the major who called."

"Did he say what it was about?" Kahayn held her hand out again, palm up, and the nurse slapped a needle holder into her gloved palm. Kahayn poked the wire-thin tip of the curved needle into arterial wall, rotated her right wrist counterclockwise until the needle appeared, and then tied off a friction knot in a double-wrap throw followed by a single. She nodded. "Okay, that'll do it for the artery. Now all we got to do is wait for that lung. We're just damned lucky he didn't need a new hose. Arguing with the major about that would've been fun." She looked over at the tech. "Well? What did Arin say?"

"Major Arin didn't say, exactly."

"Meaning?"

"Just...he said it was some sort of casualty brought in under heavy guard."

"So it's a Jabari? Or some other freak? Whatever it is, Arin's going to have to harvest this one on his own. But let me know if there's a good lung. I could use it up here."

"No, this one's still alive. Major Arin said he wants you to break scrub; he needs another opinion. He sent Captain Storn up to scrub in for you." A pause. "Major Arin also wanted you to know that Colonel Blate's on his way."

"Okay," said Kahayn, though it wasn't. If Security Director Blate was involved, things never worked out well. She'd had a lot of experience with that. With Janel...

Can't think about that now. Just go do the job.

She peeled off her smeary gloves, then said to the lieutenant, "Wait for Storn, and don't touch anything."

On her way down to the ER, she passed Breynar hustling back with a lumpy polystyrene sac full of the lung she'd wanted. He looked a question, but she hooked a thumb over her shoulder and he skedaddled. As she turned right to take the stairs, she happened to glance left down the long hall. She spotted the major marching hard-ass-style and double-quick at the head of a phalanx of administrative types, and as they did a hard left for the OR and disappeared, Kahayn figured she'd just done a whole bunch of really good work for nothing.

Death for breakfast. Death for dinner. She banged open the door to the stairwell. Yeah. Typical day.

Bashir was screaming; there was blood everywhere, and there were flames. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get to him; he wouldn't take her hand, damn him, and then it was too late because she was swept away by black water that was infinitely deep. So she hung there now, alone, just like a diver so far down the world above was a memory, or maybe a nightmare, a very bad dream...

Lense's eyes jammed open in panic. Her head hurt; there was blood in her mouth; her face was wet. And she couldn't see. There was nothing. No light. No stars. No clouds. Nothing.

Oh, God! God, no! I can't be blind, I can't!

She thrashed and the blackness gave, and that's when she realized that she was floating facedown and that this was water, or maybe oil because the stuff was dense and viscous and sucked at her limbs. Something was still screaming. But it wasn't Bashir. It was her suit nagging that she'd better get a move on because her air was nearly gone.

I made it. She remembered Bashir's bloody face. She remembered churning clouds and a flash as the runabout blew apart and then her stabbing at controls, programming in a descent. Reverse thrusters must have engaged before I passed out. Must have landed in that water. She rolled, and then she was on her back and staring through gooey rivulets more like molten tar than water.

Somehow she made it to shore. The sea was rimmed with brown sand hemmed by gray bluffs of bare rock. She was gasping by the time she pulled herself from the muck, every breath feeling as if she were sipping air through a straw. Then she cracked her helmet, twisted it, dragged it off and hoped like hell her sensors hadn't been completely whacky. (But, really, she didn't have much of a choice and there was no way she was suffocating in that suit, no damn way.) She sprawled, gasping like a hooked fish on a dock.

Eventually, she pushed up to a sit. She didn't exactly feel better, just less horrible. The air stank like rotten eggs, and tasted worse, like something had crawled into her mouth, defecated, and died. She worked her mouth, spat out a gob of rust-brown saliva. The air was loaded with sulfur dioxide; she remembered that from her sensor readings. What else? She tried to think past the roar in her head. Nuclear waste but not lethal in the short term. (Give it a year, two, then she was in trouble. But she sure as heck wasn't going to be here by then.) Methane, copper arsenicals, crystalline silica, and ozone: all bad. Sensors had said there were mountains north of the sea, so she must've beached there. A lot of land around but mottled, almost moth-eaten. A patchwork of parched, dusty brown tracts alternating with barren stands of twisted, shriveled trunks. What looked like a broad, red-brown desert valley; brown and yellow-banded mesa west and east sprouting from the desert like flat-topped mushrooms.

But there was a city to the south. She remembered that, too. An image flashed in her brain: crashing through clouds, rolling away from the fireball of the Missouri and looking south. Spying a dense carpet of metal, glass, and odd jumbles of remnants that had to be buildings. But they were haphazard and set at weird angles, like the blocks of a toy city kicked over by a kid sick of playing games. She remembered that there was one, very big structure, a central hub with four spokes that fed to a large outer ring. Maybe she could get there, blend in, figure what she was dealing with...

Because I'm marooned here. The thought hit like a phaser blast in the chest: an explosion of pain and heat, and her innards scooped out all rolled into one. Her stomach lurched, and her forehead filmed with clammy sweat.

They're never going to find me. They won't even know where to look. It could be days before they figure out we're missing and now I'm never getting out of here, I'm stuck, and I'm never getting out, I've got to get out, get out, get me out, let me out...!

"Shut up." She squeezed her eyes tight. "Shut up, shut up! Don't panic. Nothing's for sure. They might find you; they're probably looking right now, so just shut up, nothing's certain, absolutely nothing." But she knew she was lying because there was, of course, one thing of which she was very certain.

Julian Bashir was dead.

Chapter

6

Kahayn smelled the ER before she saw it: a sick, gassy odor of wet gangrene mingling with the full, ripe stink of feces, old blood, and fresh vomit. Stronger than usual today, and when she turned the corner down the last hall, she saw a double line of gurneys wedged head to toe along the left and right walls; a patient cocooned under a sheet, a ream of paperwork on a clipboard, triaging each casualty by diagnosis and urgency. (They were all sick, and they were all urgent. Again, typical.)

A lanky man with pewter-gray hair stepped into the corridor. Arin wore blue scrubs that blood had dyed black and a dingy white coat that never seemed to come clean no matter what. Spotting her, he stumped down the hall, favoring that gimp knee of his.

"You took long enough," he said, jabbing a finger at the bridge of a pair of owlish, steel-rimmed specs that had slid to the tip of his nose.

"Bleeder," she said as they headed for the triage suite. "Lung rot. The usual. So, what's all the fuss about?"

Arin blew out, stabbed his glasses back into place again. "All kinds of craziness." Older by almost two decades, Arin wore glasses because he was a tad old-fashioned. Said he'd keep the eyes, until they fell out on their own; no marbles for him just yet, thanks. She envied him the eyes. They were so...natural. Pupils worked very smoothly; you could see the iris muscles contract or lengthen like some sort of miracle, and the tracking from side to side was phenomenal. So efficient. No glitches at all. "Some casualty that slipped past the guards at the perimeter," he said.

"Hunh." She was impressed. "That takes some doing. Guards found him?"

"On patrol, yeah."

"How'd he get in?"

Arin shrugged. His limp was worse today, and his knee squealed. "They don't know. One look, though, and they brought it here. Figured they sure weren't going to get stuck without getting some kind of clearance."

"So clear him. Shouldn't be that difficult."

"It's really not that simple," said Arin. "Trust me on this."

“Why do I feel like the worst is yet to come?”

He eyed her over his glasses and didn't smile. “Because it is.”

They pushed into the ER, past a knot of nurses and one physician working frenetically over one patient who Kahayn could tell by the blood spatter wasn't going to make it. The ER was arranged in a long rectangle, with curtained bays lining each wall and a triage station centered at the head. Behind the triage station were two critical-care bays. (A joke: You made it to the ER, you were critical. The staff was so overwhelmed that, anything less, and they just laughed in your face.) Kahayn spotted a quartet of uniforms, three with their rifles at the ready. That was bad. She didn't like rifles anywhere near the ER.

But it was the man who wore the fourth uniform that told her, instantly, whoever this patient was, he wasn't run of the mill. The uniform was a bullish man with a neck so thick and short his head seemed glued to his shoulders, and a pair of goggle, walleyes that always unsettled her.

“Oh, hell,” she muttered. “How'd he get here so fast?”

Arin grunted. “Like I said, it's not that simple. Blate's people told him about the intruder, and then he showed up just as I was getting started. Since then, they haven't let me near it. Been making all kinds of noise about taking the patient over to detention. I wouldn't let them, not unless you ordered me to. Even threatened to call Nerrit over at High Command, and then they kind of backed down. Barely, but enough to buy me enough time to get you down here.”

“This must be some patient.”

“You have this really annoying habit of reiterating the obvious.” An exasperated sigh. Arin flexed his left knee, and his prosthetic clicked and whirred. “Sorry. Dragging you in was the only way I could think of to keep them from taking it out of here.”

“No, you did right,” she said, only belatedly registering that Arin kept saying it. But then she was within earshot of the security director and attempted what she hoped was something bordering on a neutral expression. “Director Blate.”

“Colonel.” Blate's left eye was especially bad and wandered, giving him a walleyed stare that Kahayn always found disturbing because she was never sure which artificial eye to focus on. She suspected that this was precisely what the security director wanted. Blate said, “I hope Major Arin didn't pull you from anything important.”

No, no, just a little chest bleed, lung replacement, nothing big. “As I understand it, you've kept Dr. Arin from examining his patient.”

“Indeed.” Blate's right eye zeroed in. “This is not your ordinary casualty.”

“Gee, you can tell all that without an exam?” She nodded beyond the guards at a back bay curtained from view by a gauzy yellow, nearly full-length drape. There was a gap between the floor and the bottom of the curtain, and Kahayn saw the gurney's black rubber-wheeled castors and the disembodied off-white flats of a nurse crossing left to right. “And I thought that's what you needed doctors for. If you're so good, Blate, why the hell do you need us then?”

“Idit,” Arin murmured.

“I didn’t require your assistance,” said Blate. “I still don’t. I ordered Major Arin to stand down. He became belligerent and threatened to call High Command, and then he insisted that you had to authorize release of the casualty to our custody.”

“Damn straight,” said Kahayn. “Now, as I get it, your people brought the patient here. I hate to point this out, but we’re doctors. Yeah, sure, we’re all military, but this is a hospital. We see casualties, only we call them patients. We even treat them. So since this is a patient and we’re on my turf, I have command authority, not you. The only person who can override my authority is the base commander, or Nerrit. You’re welcome to call the CO, but I suspect he’ll side with me. So the faster you let me clear this guy, the sooner your people can get at him. What say you get out of my way?”

Blate raised a hand, his right, the one that clicked when the fingers moved. “It’s not that simple. We need to—”

“Anyone says something’s not simple one more time, I’ll gonna rip out his tonsils.” Kahayn pushed past and yanked at the curtain. There was a rasp of metal; the curtain scrolled to one side. “Now, what...” she began—and stopped dead in her tracks.

Two nurses and a tech hovered uncertainly around a gurney. On the gurney was a biped, lying prone. The fact that the patient was bipedal and had two arms to boot was a relief because, with all that radioactive sludge out there, she didn’t take anything for granted. But she couldn’t tell about the head because the patient wore some sort of soot-stained, off-white suit with a bulbous helmet of a design she’d never seen in her life. There were patches of something rust-red and black smeared on the suit. Red and yellow lights winked on some sort of control panel mounted like a bracelet on the left wrist. There were more red than yellow lights, and that was usually a bad sign. But she didn’t have a clue about what the lights meant, nor could she figure the power source. The helmet probably had some kind of polymer faceplate but whether it was clear or not, she didn’t know because the helmet was seared and sooty as an old filter of an air repurifier that hadn’t been changed in three weeks.

But one thing she did understand. The patient was writhing, restless, pumping his legs in slow motion and getting nowhere fast. She knew pain when she saw it. She knew trouble.

“As I said, Colonel,” said Blate. He stumped between her and the gurney; his right eye tracked in with a tiny whirr. “Things are really not that simple.”

Chapter

7

There was this big joke about S.C.E. Those engineer guys show up, and everything goes terribly wrong. Some kind of cosmic curse thing going. Lense figured she had the S.C.E. curse but good because everything that could go wrong had, and in a really big way. Like now, for instance: stranded God-knew-where with nothing but the clothes on her back, and a bulky EVA suit whose only useful item included an emergency locator beacon. Otherwise, no emergency rations, no tools, no water. No Julian. No nothing.

Tacky with sweat, Lense battled through a thicket of prickles, her arms full of spiky boughs sticky with sap and stinking of resin. She’d stripped to her black tee, and her arms were crisscrossed with scratches. The branches were from some sort of stunted, indigenous conifer with a gnarly black trunk. Only thing growing besides these damn prickles and a heck of a lot of scrub grass and chaparral. She was headed downhill toward a natural depression she’d discovered near a slow creek slicked with scum northwest of the inland sea.

She was huffing like she was making an ascent. Her dark curls were plastered to her scalp, and sweat trickled down the back of her neck. Maybe it would get cooler when that weird orange sun went down. Then she eyed that sky and figured no way. Maybe four degrees C cooler, and that'd be it. Too many clouds trapping way too much heat, leaving the air hot and turgid as sludge. Her chest was tight, as if a metal band were twisted around it. Her head roared with a headache so bad, she thought her brain was going to dribble right out of her ears. Her gut was doing flips, pushing bile into the back of her throat.

The air was death by slow poison. She had symptoms like making altitude too fast the way pikers did with Everest on Earth, or Vulcan's Mount Seleya, not acclimating first to make up for the lower partial pressure of oxygen at altitude. Probably she'd get better in a couple of days. But she didn't want to be anywhere on this rock in a couple of days and so hoped she wasn't going to find out.

And she was thirsty. Grit crunched between her teeth and her tongue felt glued to the roof of her mouth. Dying of thirst was really unpleasant, but she didn't dare drink water she hadn't boiled. For one thing, the water didn't look that inviting and there was nothing living in it so far as she could tell, except for some scummy kind of sea grass. But she wasn't ready to die because of desperation either. Not that she thought boiling would do a whole hell of a lot. That water was loaded with contaminants. Residual radioactive ash, polychlorinated phenols, industrial waste. Probably she could boil away the more volatile phenols and other organic carcinogens. Still no guarantee, though, and there was nothing to do about the ash. Maybe filter it through her uniform top? No, that'd take a long time and the uniform was a tight weave, not very porous. Probably more would evaporate away than drip through. So that was a nonstarter.

She'd thought about scrounging for water from some of the native plants, but she hadn't spotted any water-trapping plants like bamboo, or adun cacti like they had on Vulcan. Maybe she could rig a solar still, but she didn't have anything clear to drape over the pit upon which water could condense. But she had to get water. More than food, water's what would keep her alive and...

Whoa, slow down; panic over one thing at a time.

The tricky thing had been what to do with her suit. That old Prime Directive thing cropping up—and wouldn't Gold have a field day with that one. But the real issue was her suit had an emergency transponder-locator beacon, sort of important if she wanted off this rock. Once she'd beached, there was no way she could lug it along. So she'd stayed in the suit, hiking northwest and away from the inland sea.

Eventually, she'd found the stream and a good place to construct a shelter. There were tumblers of boulders humped and jumbled here and there, and she found a wide ridge with a sixty degree incline and a cave of sorts that led back for about fifty meters. Thumbing on her emergency transponder, she wedged her helmet and suit into a fissure but pocketed her combadge. The opening to the cave was wide enough for her to squirm into, if needed. Of course, this might also mean that an animal could do the same thing, but she hadn't seen any animals so far. There were birds here and there, black specks silhouetted like cinders against smoke-yellow clouds. A heck of a lot of bugs, though, especially those nearly-invisible no-see-ums swarming in an undulating ball around her head.

The bugs made sense. In the aftermath of a nuclear catastrophe, insects would likely adapt and survive. That was bad because she wasn't exactly sure what there was for food, and she wasn't eager to go grubbing for, well, grubs. If she had a chance to spy out a few of the local inhabitants, that would help because if they were similar physiologically (and she'd just have to take a guess since she was pretty near blind without a tricorder), she'd likely be able to tolerate the food.

Thinking about getting food and water, she wasn't watching where she was going. Her toe hooked on an exposed root, and she stumbled, went down, wood spilling out of her arms. Her right ankle complained. She cursed. Starfleet regulation uniform boots were made for civilized life on a civilized ship, not hiking.

She picked herself up, dusted off, retrieved her wood. Food and water, they were just two problems out of a gazillion. She hadn't exactly aced survival training but remembered that Starfleet's version was predicated upon a few givens. For example, Starfleet pretty much figured you had access to tools or some kind of gear: phaser, a tricorder. Something. Another was that if you ditched, well, you had the shuttle for shelter and you could stay pretty cozy, break into your survival stores and wait to get rescued.

Rescue. That was the key. Starfleet kind of drummed that into you. Your people were going to be looking for you even if you were just a plasma smear or a slew of subatomic particles. You were important; your absence was felt, and someone somewhere would worry. So she figured they were worrying: Gold, Gomez, even Tev. Not to mention the folks on DS9 who probably missed Bashir. She counted on that much.

But the problem was surviving until they found her. If they found her. She didn't have tools. She didn't have the runabout. She'd debated about trying to find what was left of the Missouri, maybe scavenging bits and pieces but mostly sticking close because that's where her people would look first. But the shuttle had gone far south toward that city and was too far away for her to get there in anything like a reasonable amount of time. From what she'd seen, there wasn't much left of the Missouri anyway—and, to be honest, she wasn't really sure she was ready to face what might be left. Of the runabout. Of Julian, mainly, if he was still in there. Maybe she should be stronger. Right now, she wasn't.

Worse than having nothing (if there was such a thing as something worse in a situation verging on the totally catastrophic), she didn't really think they'd ended up anywhere close to where they'd been going. In the few seconds she'd had at the sensors, she'd drawn a blank: no Starfleet buoys to ping, no recognizable stars. No nothing. Of course, the sensors could've been damaged. On the other hand, they'd been good enough to read this planet. So a whole lot of nothing meant they'd ended up far, far away. That was pretty bad.

So make a plan, you idiot. You'll feel better if you're doing something, if you've got a plan.

It was a psychological game. She knew that. Helplessness made people panic. You panicked, you were as good as dead. So, okay, in the morning, she'd head toward that city; keep the sea on her right and the mountains behind her and go south until she found someone.

"And what you got to think about now is what you're going to eat and drink." Her voice sounded weird and a little small because everything was so still. But talking to herself made her feel better. She dodged a tumble of boulders and angled in left toward the hollow she'd opted on for the night. "Because face it, sweetheart. You are going to be here for a nice, long time. You're on your own and..." She looked up and froze.

There were three of them: a woman and two men. They each had a rifle and their rifles were pointed straight at Lense.

No one spoke for a very long moment. Then the woman—with dusky, plum-colored skin, no nose, only the right half of her jaw that made her face look dented, and a zigzag scar slicing along her collarbone from left to right—said, "You were saying? About being on your own."

“That’s your story?” Their leader, a lanky and well-muscled man with a square chin and brown hair that spilled in ringlets around massive shoulders, eyed her skeptically. He wore a coarse, beige linen shirt that was open to his throat, a pair of olive-drab trousers, and cracked black leather combat boots streaked with deep seams of red-ocher grit. A pistol was holstered high on his right hip. But, unlike the woman and the other man, this man was unmarked. No scars, no missing limbs. His only similarity to the other two was the color of his skin: a dusky purple like an underripe Damson plum but with more blue.

Not Bolian, and Andorians are more sky-blue. This is something old; on the tip of my tongue, something about hemoglobin. . .

“Why don’t I believe you?” he said.

Lense gave a halfhearted shrug. “That’s not my problem.”

“Oh, but I’m afraid it is.”

“I told you,” said Lense. “I was with friends. We were on a hike. We got separated.”

The man’s brown-black eyes slitted. Lense forced herself not to look away. Her stomach was turning somersaults, though. If she couldn’t convince these people that she was just some stupid hiker, there was no way out of this, and there sure as heck wasn’t going to be any cavalry charging over the hill to come to her rescue.

She was in some sort of rebel camp: a warren of caves several hours north of where she’d been. The caves were a good ten degrees C cooler than outside, a welcome relief. The air smelled wet and there must be some sort of underground river or stream because Lense heard a faint but steady drip, like moisture pattering on rock. The place was well ventilated, too. Every now and again, a finger of cool air brushed along the nape of her neck and gave her goose bumps. Torches flared along the walls, releasing curling tendrils of sooty smoke that streaked the rocky walls charcoal black. Couldn’t keep the torches going if there was no way to replenish air.

“So why didn’t they go looking for you?” the man asked.

“I’m sure they did. If your people hadn’t interfered, they’d probably have found me by now.”

The man grunted. “My people wouldn’t have come anywhere near if there’d been the slightest hint of a search party. But there wasn’t one, and I have to wonder about that. They’re your friends, so why didn’t they raise an alarm? Those woods ought to have been crawling with Kornaks. But you were alone. So these. . . friends of yours, they can’t be that fond of you now, can they? After all, what type of friend leaves someone with no supplies to wander around on her own? In fact, Mara here,” he nodded at the blonde with the scarred jaw and no nose who stood on his left, “she says you were foraging for wood and very noisy about it. So, with friends like that—”

“With friends like that, I don’t need enemies. Right, right.” Lense feigned impatience. “That just goes to prove my point. If I were some sort of spy, I’d be, well, kind of stealthy, wouldn’t I? Spies usually sneak around.”

He arched an eyebrow, the left. “Maybe you’re a very poor spy.”

“Or maybe I’m not a spy. That’s what I’m telling you. Look, I don’t know what it is about no that you don’t understand, but for the record: My name is Elizabeth Lense. I’m not a spy. I was out with friends. We were separated. I was trying to make myself comfortable before it got dark. I am confident my friends will be looking for me, are looking right now. They’ll be worried sick. Period, end of story.”

“Then why are you dressed like that, hmm? That looks like a uniform. And what’s this?” He flipped her combadge like a coin, caught it one-handed, thrust it under her nose. “What is this, some sort of insignia?”

Her fingers itched, and it was all she could do not to snatch the combadge from his hand. “It’s jewelry. I told you.”

“I don’t believe you. How stupid do you think the Jabari are, eh? Hiking; that’s absurd. You don’t have a pack. You don’t even have a canteen.”

Lense was silent. Mara, the blonde, had asked the same things. They’d shepherded her along a corkscrew trail that doglegged and cut along switch-backs through the mountains north of the sea. The terrain had turned progressively worse, the vegetation sparser, and Lense’s boots were not up to the task of hoofing it up trails filmed with crumbly scree. She’d fallen a lot, ripped her uniform pants at the knees and gotten banged up pretty good. But it was when she started coughing that they stopped to rest. Mara and the men swigged water from canteens while Lense leaned back against a boulder, dripped sweat and wheezed. Her chest was killing her and when she could work up a mouthful of spit, it came out rust-colored, and her mouth tasted like metal. That scared her.

That’s when Mara scowled. “Where’s your canteen?”

Lense worked at getting air. “I...I lost it.”

“Lost it. How could you...?” Then Mara gave a horsey snort, scrubbed the spout of her canteen with the flat of her hand and thrust the canteen under Lense’s nose. “Here. But don’t get any ideas. You’re worth a lot more alive than you are dead.”

Lense hadn’t argued. The water smelled of a combination of tin and petrochemicals. Probably the stuff was going to make her as sick as a Klingon on fish juice, but it was wet and she gulped it back.

Now, the man—the obvious leader—said, “I see two options: believe you, or kill you. Either way, though, you can’t expect that I’ll just let you walk away.”

“And why not?” Lense thrust out her chin. “Did I come looking for you? No. Your people came after me.”

Mara cut in. “Saad, this is a waste of time. Her family’s got money; they’ve got to be rich. She’s just too well-fed to be from one of the other Outlier tribes.” Mara tossed Lense a narrow-eyed, suspicious look. “All you have to do is look at her to know that she’s got connections. There’s not a scratch on her, no visible prosthetics. I’ll bet that if we strip her down, she won’t have any scars either. No organ transplants, nothing.”

“So you’re talking ransom,” Saad said slowly. His eyes were that shade of brown that’s almost black, and now they clicked over Lense, clearly taking inventory. “Maybe. But look at her skin, Mara. See how pale she is? And that blood.” He pointed at the scratches on Lense’s arms and her crusted knees. “It’s too red. Maybe she’s a mutant that got cast out of the city.”

“Or maybe they’re side effects from new medicines.”

“But maybe not. Mara, if she’s a mutant, no one’s going to pay to get her back, and we can’t trade her for anyone. Then she’s useless.”

Lense didn’t like where this was going. “Excuse me, but I’m not a piece of furniture. How about including me in the decision, all right?”

Mara opened her mouth to say something but Saad silenced her with a look. “You’re right,” he said to Lense. “You’re not a chair. But you could be a deserter, or a spy. Yes.” He stroked his chin between a thumb and forefinger. “The more I think about that one, the better I like it.”

“How is that better?” Mara’s lips twisted into a scowl, and this made her scar jump and wriggle like a fat, purple-blue worm. “If she’s a spy, we can’t let her go back, no matter what’s offered.”

“But if she’s a deserter, she can’t go back either. We win either way. I think this puts her in a rather interesting position and I suspect—” He broke off, and now Lense heard the commotion, too: a gabble of angry voices, shouts, the sounds of footsteps clapping against rock. A moment later, a wiry man with the half-moon of a scar arcing in a scimitar over his neck hurried in and sketched a hasty salute. “What is it?” asked Saad.

“Kornaks.” The wiry man had chocolate-brown spatters on his shirt that looked like dried mud. “Got two of our squads.”

“Squads?” Saad shot Mara a look.

“I don’t think there’s a connection,” said Mara. “No one around where we found her.”

“Unless they’ve come out looking for her,” said Saad. The corners of his mouth tightened. “How many Kornaks?”

“At least fifteen that we saw,” said the wiry man. “We killed nine, but the others kept up a suppressing fire and we had to retreat.”

“No possibility you were followed?”

“None.”

“What about our losses?”

“Five dead. The rest of us made it back, but we’ve got two wounded, both badly. I don’t think we can save either one. Do you want them executed now, or—?”

“Executed?” The word was out of Lense’s mouth before she could bite it back. “What are you talking about? Where’s your medic?”

“Shut up.” Mara nudged her with the point of her rifle. “Really.”

“You object,” Saad said, his tone more curious than hostile. “Why?”

Lense weighed the value of keeping her mouth shut, then decided she'd already put her boot in it and if Gold ever saw her again, he'd string her up by her thumbs for that Prime Directive stuff. Only these people would probably kill her anyway and deprive Gold of the pleasure.

So you might as well go down for something useful, not some dumb runabout accident, right?

"Yes," she said. "I object. Your people get hurt, you fix them up. You don't automatically decide that someone's life is worthless just because he's been wounded. You don't have that right."

"Don't talk to us about right," said Mara. "You, a Kornak, of all people..."

Lense kept her eyes on Saad. "You don't have the right."

"Convince me there's a better way," he said.

"What do you mean, better? Why should I have to convince you that it's better to be humane and better to treat someone even if he ends up dying? Otherwise, you'll never know whether you might have saved him." It occurred to her that in triage situations, sorting through who was worse off and who she might save, she did let people die. But she couldn't think about that now.

"Interesting point," said Saad. "You talk as if you have some sort of training. What type?"

She paused. "I'm a physician."

"Really?" Both of Saad's eyebrows went up this time. "Do you have trauma experience? Combat?"

Her thoughts jerked back to the Lexington, and the air electric with screams and klaxons and smelling of singed hair and clotted blood, and she thought that, yeah, she had plenty of experience and some to spare. "Yes," she said, wondering for a second if that meant she'd cinched her own execution as a Kornak spy or soldier or terrorist, or whatever and whoever the hell a Kornak really was. "But even if I didn't, even if I had only a passing acquaintance with using antiseptic and old-fashioned bandages, you don't execute people who get hurt doing their job. You don't throw people away like garbage. You people, you're out here, running around with those,"—she gestured toward Mara's rifle, an antique with a long barrel and a gas suppressor—"you get shot at and you don't have a medic, anyone with training?"

"Our medic is dead," said Mara. Her face was twisted with rage and nearly the color of a fresh bruise. "I have some training but not enough, and it wouldn't matter anyway. We barely have supplies to treat minor injuries, much less major ones. Anyway, why should a Kornak worry her head about one more dead Jabari? The only thing you'd care about was that you couldn't harvest him—"

"You shouldn't do this," Lense said to Saad. "I don't care what your customs are. You're their leader, not their judge and executioner." When he said nothing, she said, "For crying out loud, let me look at him! What can it cost you? You've already said you're not going to let me go. If I'm a spy, what more can I learn to compromise you than I have already? Maybe I can help this man! At least let me try."

He stared down for a very long time, though it was probably only a few seconds. Then he turned to Mara, and there must have been something in the set of his face because she huffed out an exasperated snort and said, "Wonderful. I'll get whatever supplies we've got."

"Good," said Saad mildly, but Mara had already stalked out, ducking into an adjacent tunnel. Saad turned back to Lense. "All right. I will let you examine these men." He wrapped a hand around her left

bicep, and his grip was firm. “And let us see whether or not you can buy back your life.”

Chapter

8

“Oh, this is just perfect.” Enraged, Kahayn dodged around the security director and made for the gurney. The suited figure was still writhing, but she couldn’t see who or what was inside. The faceplate, which she assumed was clear, was shiny with a thick layer of soot that had an astringent smell and smeared like oil when she touched her finger to it.

Cursing, Kahayn snatched up a large square of gauze. “Give me a hand here,” she said to the tech as she leaned down hard on the patient’s right arm and started scrubbing at the faceplate, “grab that other arm, get it out of my way. The rest of you, I need a crash cart, stat, and get me an ET tube. As soon as I get this clear, I want this guy wired for sound. Call anesthesia, get them down here, we’re probably going to intubate.”

“Stand down, Colonel!” said Blate. His bullish face was a mottled purple. “That’s an order!”

“You don’t outrank me, Blate.” Kahayn threw the nurses a look. “Go.”

This seemed to be all the nurses were waiting for; they moved fast, one nurse racing off for the crash cart, and the other whirling toward a wall-mounted comm.

“Arin.” Kahayn craned her head over her shoulder. “Did you check for explosives?”

“Colonel Kahayn!” Blate, again. “You are ordered—!”

“Shut up, Blate.” Kahayn tossed aside one stained gauze and wadded up another. Residue’s sticky like tar, like he’s been in a chemical fire, maybe a fuel depot that went up—but this suit, I’ve never seen anything like it. “Arin, what about it, is he packed? What about contamination?”

“No.” Arin came alive. Taking the distance in three loping strides, he relieved the tech, leaning down hard on the patient’s arm. “Get me restraints,” he ordered, and then to Kahayn: “No explosives, and the suit’s not radioactive as far as we can tell.”

“What about scanners?”

“Colonel,” said Blate.

“Scanners are a nonstarter,” said Arin. The tech returned with brown leather restraints and Arin got busy belting down the patient’s left arm. “The suit’s impervious, maybe lead-lined. We can’t see anything.” Arin threw a restraint around the patient’s left leg as the tech took the right. Then Arin crowded next to Kahayn, threaded leather through a buckle and cinched down the right arm, tight, midway up the patient’s forearm. “Can’t call up anything on tomography, either.”

“We’ve got to get this suit off.”

“Yeah, but those lights, the ones going to red on his wrist, they bug me.”

“You’re thinking countdown?”

“Maybe.” Arin peered at Kahayn over his glasses. “No way to be sure, right? Except we crack it and hope we don’t go boom?”

“That is precisely why you must release this intruder to me,” said Blate.

“Forget it, Blate. Write me up.” She grabbed another gauze. The patient’s faceplate was smeary, but she caught a glimpse of a face. Almost there. “Better yet, arrest me. I haven’t had a decent night’s sleep in a week.”

“This isn’t funny, Colonel.”

“Blate, you idiot! You think the Jabari or an Outlier have the technical know-how for a suit like this? And this junk, this crud on his suit and faceplate, this is forreal! This isn’t just charcoal smeared on for effect to trick a couple of your sentries. This guy’s been toasted; he’s been in some kind of fire, and...” She gasped, peered more closely at the faceplate then, cursing, fumbled up a pair of gloves and snapped them on. “Forget this, forget this, I need hands here!”

“Idiot!” Arin said. “What about a bomb?”

“No, it’s the suit! Don’t you get it, Arin?” Frantic now, she was running her gloved fingers along the lip of the helmet searching for a catch, a way to get this thing off! “He’s been in a fire! This is a protective suit, and that means he’s had air, but look at the lights! He’s got no air! That’s what they mean! He’s out of air! Let go, let’s go, let’s get him out of this thing now now now!”

She’d found two nibs, felt them give when she pressed down, and gave the helmet a twist. Then she heard a hiss, barely a sigh of escaping air and a suck of suction, a wet sound eerily like the sound of a primate’s cranial cap being pulled away. And then she heard the man’s tortured, agonized wheezes; saw the open mouth and flare of bloodied nostrils as he worked hard trying to pull in air; and then the smell hit her, metallic and very strong.

“My God, there’s blood everywhere. Arin, get a tube down him and bring up the tomos,” and then she and the tech were tugging at the neck of the suit, fumbling with catches, peeling the suit away, jerking them free of the restraints. She registered the clothes underneath, a uniform of some kind and an odd piece of gold jewelry on his left chest, but then she couldn’t think anymore about it because the nurse rumbled in with the crash cart. Whipping around, Kahayn tossed the tech a set of scissors. “Cut his shirt and trousers away, I want these clothes off; I’m going to throw in a CVP line; we need some access, let’s go, let’s go!”

“No!” It was Blate, just behind, and then she heard the unmistakable metallic snick of metal on metal. “Stand down, Colonel! Now!”

The room went so quiet that Kahayn could hear the slow drip-drip of blood from the helmet and the man in his death throes—and he was dying, he would die, there was no question because there was all that impossibly bright red blood, and the bulge of his jugulars and pink foam that frothed his lips. She saw the tech, who stood with his scissors caught in mid-snip; her gaze clicked to Arin, who’d gloved and stood, frozen, with an endotracheal tube in one hand, and in the other, a shiny metal laryngoscope with its curved blade out and locked into position. And then Kahayn turned, knowing already what she’d see.

She was right, but that was no consolation. Because there was Blate, of course, and there were his soldiers.

And there were three rifles centered on her chest, aiming right for her heart.

Chapter
9

Saad's men lay on rough pallets of torn linen. One had multiple abdominal wounds; his green shirt was soaked through to a dull rust; and he moaned in deep guttural groans that were as regular as a basso foghorn. He was clammy to the touch, and his skin was very cold.

Losing blood fast; probably a lake in there; what have I done, what was I thinking? Lense knew in an instant that she couldn't help him, and she'd been a fool to think she could. Operate here? In a cave? No anesthesia, no way to keep a sterile field, no tricorder to help with diagnosis, and his anatomy's probably so different; I can't do it, I can't help, and if I can't help, they're going to kill me. . . .

She concentrated on the other casualty. This one was sucking air in great gasps that sounded almost agonal, except he was conscious; his eyes bulged and his hands were clapped over a glistening splotch on his right chest. His fingers were streaked with dark chocolate-brown blood.

"Well?" Saad, just behind her left shoulder.

Lense felt sick. "There's nothing I can do. The one with the gut wound. It's too involved, and he's lost so much blood, I don't know. . . ."

"Yes," said Saad, his voice neutral as if he'd just been told nothing more interesting than the weather. Then he drew his pistol from his right hip holster in one smooth motion, and Lense froze. The pistol grip was stippled and blocky and fit easily in his huge palm; the metal was matte black and the barrel was square with a round bore. He bent, pressed the muzzle against the wounded man's temple and pulled the trigger.

There was a tremendous bang that echoed off the walls, an orange spurt of muzzle flash, and the man's head erupted in a fine brown mist of blood, brain and bone. The air was instantly saturated with the brackish odor of fresh blood, scorched hair, and burnt skin.

"What are you doing?" Lense cried, horrified. She scrambled to her feet. "What have you done?"

Reholstering his weapon, Saad looked at her with a bland, matter-of-fact expression. "You said you couldn't help. I stopped his suffering."

"But you don't just. . . you can't just kill a man! You've got to try!"

"And how do you suggest we do that? Look around you." Saad spread his arms in an all-inclusive gesture. "This is only a forward camp, but this is very much like our home. This is who we are. This,"—he indicated an orange medical kit Mara had retrieved—"is all we have. You say that you're a physician. Then surely you can appreciate the cold calculus of life and death. We don't have the luxury of pretending that it's otherwise."

"Death is never preferable." She was trembling with rage. "It's never just another option."

Mara spoke, her tone dripping with contempt. "It is if life is a death sentence. Oh, but I forgot. You're a Kornak, and a privileged one at that. No need for prosthetics, no scars. . . ."

Saad hacked the air with his hand. “Enough. We’re wasting time. You, Elizabeth Lense, can you help this other man, or not?”

She was going to say that she would try when one look at Mara let her know that she’d better do more than that. So she said nothing. She squatted before the kit and stared into a jumble of medical supplies, most of which she didn’t understand and had never seen. Her eyes roved over packets of gauze and bandaging materials, and thank heavens, she knew what they were, and there were brown vials of liquids—antiseptics and alcohol, she imagined, and other drugs, antibiotics, painkillers. . . she didn’t know. Gloves, of course, hard to mistake those. Intravenous needles in sterile plastic packets, plastic and glass syringes: stuff from a history of medicine class to which she’d paid almost no attention.

Twentieth century equivalents, maybe twenty-first. Or nineteenth, they had rubber by then but not plastic, I think. I just don’t know; what have I done?

A voice over her left shoulder. “Well?”

“It’s fine,” Lense lied. Yeah, right, so get going. Swallowing her panic, Lense knelt by the man with the chest wound. “I need some hands here,” she said, grabbing the man’s shirt. “Someone get over here and take his hands out of the way.”

Two of Saad’s men dropped to either side of the man’s head and took an arm. Lense ripped open the shirt and hissed in a quick breath through her teeth. “Oh, God. . .”

A projectile wound, about as big around her thumb and forefinger, punched through the right chest just beyond the nipple and over the sixth rib. Some blood dribbling but not a lot. Skin retracting between his ribs with every breath, so he was working very hard, pulling in air past an obstruction or through resistance. Her eyes clicked to his throat; his Adam’s apple was pushed left of center, and the large veins of his neck, his jugulars, were fat around as purple-brown worms. The man’s nail beds were even bluer than Mara’s, and his lips had shaded to a muddy plum. She brought her ear level with the wound, listened hard, didn’t hear air escaping. That’s when she noticed tiny blebs beneath the skin of his chest and when she pressed them with her fingers, they made tiny crinkly sounds, like bubbles in a plastic polymer.

Crepitus, deviated trachea, right lung, probably a pneumothorax. . .

“Turn him onto his left side a second,” she said and then she quickly scanned his back. No exit wound, so the bullet was still in there.

That’s bad; how am I going to get that out? She thought a moment. First things first; he builds up much more pressure in there, he’s not going to last long enough for me to worry about that.

Turning aside, she riffled in the kit with only a vague sense of what she was looking for. Her fingers walked over packets of suture materials and gauze packs, tape and vials. Then she fished out an instrument: two flexible tubes connected to curved metal prongs surmounted by perforated plastic nibs at one end and a heavy dual-function metal contraption at the other end—something with a drum on one side and a bell on the other.

Earpieces, diaphragm, bell. . . they called it a. . . a stethoscope, used for magnifying sounds. . .

She’d never listened to a heartbeat in her life. She’d never heard breath sounds. Although she knew on general principle that tympanic meant hollow and something that sounded dull was either fluid or

something solid, she had no idea, really, what meant what. Everything she'd ever done as a physician had been through a filter of gadgets that did the thinking for her: screens that spat out data; algorithms that ticked through possibilities and whittled down the available options; a tricorder that told her what was invisible beneath the skin. Sure, there was clinical judgment. There was guesswork. But it was really hard to argue with a computer that thought a thousand times faster than she could, whizzing through data on thousands of species, humanoid and otherwise.

She screwed the earpieces of the stethoscope into her ears, didn't hear a thing for a moment, then realized that ear canals canted forward. Forcing her fingers to steady, she removed the earpieces, twisted the prongs until the earpieces aimed forward and away, then popped them into her ears. This time she heard plenty, and it was so startling that she froze for an instant, then fingered the instrument's diaphragm. There was a loud rasping sound like fingernails running over paper or cloth, and she heard a faint background roar that she realized was the sound of air filtering through the cave but magnified tenfold.

She put the diaphragm over the man's chest, and she heard the rapid thudding of his heart—going a kilometer a minute, sounds like . . . like three sounds, not two, and they're so loud—but she heard virtually nothing over the right chest, only a hollow pull of air. Just to be sure, she checked the left side and was confused for a second when the heart sounds faded—and then she realized that the man's heart was in the very center of his chest just beneath the sternum. Right then, she didn't know if that was good or bad.

Doesn't matter; look at how much bluer he is; he's only got a few more minutes, I've got to move, move!

Quickly, she pulled the earpieces out, started pawing through the kit. "He's got a tension pneumothorax. It's a one-way air leak," she said, riffling through packets, chattering, thinking out loud as much to them as herself, talking herself through the problem. Mechanics, it's simple physics, you can do this. "Either he's got a collapsed lung and air's escaping into the chest that way, or there's only this puncture wound so that every time he breathes in, the negative pressure created in the chest is pulling air into his thoracic cavity. Either way, there's air in there that can't get out."

Negative pressure, air going in one way not coming out, need a tube. "I have to vent the thoracic cavity, let the air out, then make sure it can't get back in." Tube, I need a tube and then something flexible to make a valve . . .

Then she found them: packets of needles, some covered with plastic tubes and some not. Different gauges, and she knew that the lower the gauge, the bigger the bore of the needle. Needle, I can use the needle and now all I need is something for a flutter valve; yes, a glove! She pulled out a paper pack of unopened latex gloves, ripped open the packet, pulled out a glove and snipped off the middle forefinger.

"What are you doing?" asked Mara. She sounded more curious now than angry, almost intrigued. "What is that?"

"A flutter valve," she said, poking the needle through the snippet of pale beige latex. "It'll relieve the pressure but keep the air from getting back in." She pulled the glove finger all the way to the flange, then rooted around for a syringe, opened the packet, and fitted the needle onto the syringe. Moving fast now, she ripped open another packet of gloves, then packets of antiseptic swabs. Gloving, she splashed rust-colored antiseptic onto the man's ribs, thinking furiously: Which rib is it, second or third; third's in line with the nipple, but does it matter which one? She couldn't remember; the computer usually did all this for her. Hell, she'd never had to manually evacuate air from a tension pneumo in her life. Walking her gloved fingers over his ribs, starting at the armpit, working her way down. Heart's in the center, what does that mean? And what about the intercostal artery? Is it running above or in the groove along the

bottom of the rib, same as humans? She was sweating now; her lips tasted like salt. She stared for a long moment at the space between the man's second and third rib.

Do it, just do it; either they'll kill him, or he'll suffocate, just do it!

"Hold him still," she said then jabbed the needle through his skin. The man flinched, but she was pushing now, guiding the needle over the top of the third rib. She felt the needle pushing through muscle, scraping over bone, and she winced, clenched her teeth, kept pushing, pushing...

She felt it go through at the same moment there was the sensation of a tiny pop—and then there was air gushing, hissing out of the end of the needle. She breathed out a sigh of relief as the snippet of glove fluttered. "Got it." She looked up at Saad and Mara and then said, with fierce satisfaction, "I got it."

Saad cocked his head to one side. "That will help?"

She nodded. "It should. I just have to cover over this wound...the bullet hole here, so I can stop him sucking air in that way."

There was no way to probe for the bullet, and there was no exit wound either. So there was a nice dirty bullet floating around in this man's chest and unless she could do exploratory surgery in a cave, it was going to stay there. Later, later, one disaster at a time... Quickly, she snipped up the rest of that one glove, removing the fingers and then filleting it open until it lay flat. Then she cleaned up the wound as best she could, let it air-dry and then taped the latex flap over the wound on three sides, leaving the fourth free as another relief valve.

It was only when she'd finished that she realized the man's gasps had diminished. She put the stethoscope to his right chest, heard air going in, saw that both the flutter and relief valves she'd made were limp. The air pressing against his lung was gone. His face was less blue, and his trachea had returned to center.

I did it. She felt limp. My God. I really did it. She sat back on her heels. Stripped off her gloves and pushed to her feet. Her hands were streaked with white talc and felt sticky.

She looked up at Saad. "I got it," she said again.

His brown-black eyes searched her face, then narrowed slightly. "Yes," he said. "You did. He looks better."

"He is. A little. He's still got a bullet in there. I don't dare try to get it out."

"Will he survive?"

"I..." Her gaze flicked to the corpse lying on its tumble of bloody linens. She straightened her shoulders, pulled out of her slouch. "I don't know. Maybe. A dozen things can go wrong: infection, more bleeding, the bullet wandering around and shredding something else. I don't know."

"If you had more or better equipment, could you do more?"

Yeah, right, I do just great with antiques. "I don't know. Depends."

"On what?"

Lense gave what she hoped was a negligent shrug. “On how badly someone’s hurt. I wouldn’t expect miracles.”

“I’m not asking for any.” A hint of a smile touched Saad’s lips and he seemed to reach a decision. “Very well. We have to talk.”

“We? Meaning you and Mara and—”

“And a few others, yes. In the meantime, you will go with this one,”—he gestured at the wiry soldier who’d brought in the news of their ambush—“and he will show you a place where you can wash, change out of those clothes. Rest. Have something to eat and drink.”

Remembering the lake and its awful smell, the way it looked and felt, Lense wasn’t sure she trusted or wanted either one but then figured she didn’t have much choice about that. “What is this, some kind of last meal?”

“Perhaps.” Saad’s eyes were sober. “When we are through discussing the matter . . . maybe so.”

Chapter

10

For a moment, no one moved, no one spoke: not Blate; not the soldiers who stood poised with their rifles aimed at Kahayn’s heart. Not the nurse who’d brought the crash cart on a dead run; not Arin who’d paled to a shade of light aqua; and not Kahayn. The only person who did move was the dying, blood-soaked man on the gurney. His clothes were in tatters; his knees flexed and extended, and his legs strained against their restraints like he was trying to run in an awkward, slow-motion shuffle. His breathing had dropped off to irregular, deep gasps that scored Kahayn’s heart like jagged glass.

Agonal breaths, brain’s starving for air, we’re running out of time!

“Blate,” Kahayn said, urgently, “Blate, please, you have to let us finish!”

“It could be a trick.”

“Damn you, Blate, I don’t have time for this!” Kahayn shouted so fiercely that even Blate took a step back. “Hedoesn’t have time! This man is drowning in his own fluids, and he’s going to die if we don’t help him! So either shoot me, or get the hell out!” Then she looked over at Arin, the nurses, the tech. “Let’s go, people, let’s do it!”

She saw the soldiers glance at one another; Blate’s eyes narrowed. Arin hesitated, looked at the soldiers, then at Kahayn, and snapped to. “You heard her! Move!”

That was all her people needed. Personnel swarmed around Blate and the soldiers; the nurse rattled up with the crash cart; Arin slid a tube down the man’s throat, attached a bag, and then the anesthetist pushed his way in and took over as Arin moved to bring up his scanners. Kahayn pulled on fresh gloves as fast as she could, then slapped the man’s skin beneath his right clavicle with antiseptic solution. She bent over him, feeling for the notch of his clavicle with her right index finger and judging the distance before stabbing a large-bore needle threaded through a central venous catheter. There was a flash of blood in her syringe as the needle pierced the subclavian vein.

“I’m in!” She threaded the catheter into the vein and then nodded to a nurse who flicked on the IV while Kahayn threw in two quick sutures to hold the catheter in place. She snapped off her soiled gloves as the nurse moved to bandage the site. The corporal had started a line in the left arm and was taping down the tube. “Careful not to open that up wide; we don’t want to overload him.” She glanced behind her shoulder and saw that Blate and his men had taken up position along the far wall. Best I can hope for . She turned back to the corporal. “Get the rest of his clothes off! Move!”

“I want the clothes,” Blate said, “and that suit!”

“Yeah, yeah, when we’re done,” Kahayn said, not turning around. “Arin, what you got?”

“In a second!” Arin’s fingers flew over his control panels. “Bringing tomography and 3-D on line now!”

“Corporal, check for wounds. Then clean off his face, I want to get a good look at that gash, and get the portable X-ray up here; I want pictures of that skull, make sure—”

“Idit, pressure’s dropping!” Arin sang out. “Heart rate one-thirty-five; we’ve got significant pulmonary hypertension, and I’m getting atrial fibrillations here, sporadic PVCs! No periatrial waves at all!”

“What’s his potassium?” Kahayn shot back.

“Calculating...normal.”

“Dial down the IVs, then hit him with a diuretic, ten of pentatix! Let’s get some of that fluid out of him. Someone get me a catheter in there, let’s make sure his kidneys are still working.” She spun left toward the anesthetist. “Give me positive pressure ventilation, short bursts, pure oxygen, keep those alveoli open, don’t rupture—”

“Idit,” Arin said, “I’m getting couplets!”

Kahayn swore. “Pull up 3-D of that heart, I want to see what I’m dealing with here.” She snatched up a stethoscope and slapped the drum to the middle of the man’s chest. She frowned. “Where’s...what the...what the hell...I don’t hear...?”

“Idit! V-fib! No pulse!”

Kahayn hopped off the gurney. “Corporal, start compressions! Charge up that defibrillator! Two hundred!” The defibrillator gave a crescendo whine as the machine charged, and she grabbed the gelled defibrillator paddles, rubbed them together. “Everyone off!”

The corporal jumped back, and Kahayn slapped the paddles onto the man’s chest, one at the apex of his right chest and the other at the tip of the sternum. But then what she’d heard flashed through her brain. Nothing in the center or to the right; heart’s shifted left; what’s it doing there, maybe pushed over because the right lung’s boggy, but that doesn’t make sense and the sound’s all wrong; what am I missing? She closed her eyes, imagined how that heart must look beneath the chest, how the electrical impulse must flow, and then she repositioned the paddles, the sternal paddle directly over the sternum just beneath the notch and the apical paddle on the left chest just below and left of the nipple.

“What are you doing ?” cried the anesthetist. “Doctor, no, that’s wrong .”

“No, leave her!” Arin shouted. “Idit, go !”

“Clear!” Kahayn thumbed the push button of the apical paddle. There was a faintpuh as the paddles discharged, but not the melodramatic flopping around that holodramas were so fond of. “Arin?”

He shook his head. “Still in V-fib. No pulse.”

“Charging again, two hundred...” Listening to that crescendo whine, thinking about that weird heart: Arin said no periatrrial waves at all. Her eyes raked over the man’s body, over smooth skin and taut muscle. I’m missing something, what’s missing; what if he doesn’t have a periatrium to jump-start...? The defibrillator trilled. “Clear!” She discharged the paddles, heard thepuh, waited. “Arin, anything?”

“Nothing.”

“Okay; charging up; nurse, get me an amp of xentracaine ready after this next—” She broke off as the charger whined. “Arin, you saidno periatrrial waves, right?”

Arin gave her a look. “That’s what I said.”

“That can’t be right,” said the anesthetist. To Arin: “It’s not reading right.”

“It’s right,” said Arin, giving her that look again. “I’m reading it right.”

No periatrium, no way to jump-start—Kahayn gasped, then jerked around to the nurse. “Charge it to three hundred.”

The nurse went as goggle-eyed as Blate. “Doctor?”

“Justdo it!”

“Wait a second,” said the anesthetist. “That’s not—”

“Three hundred,” Kahayn said to the nurse.

“But, Doctor—”

“Are you deaf? Three hundred!”

The nurse swallowed hard, looked at the anesthetist, who shrugged, and then to Arin, who did nothing. Then she toggled up the charge. “Three hundred.”

“Clear,” Kahayn said, hoping like hell that she was right. She thumbed the discharge. There was that dull puh. “Arin?”

“That did something.” Arin looked at her over his glasses. “I got about five, six beats before the rhythm degenerated.”

“I got a little flutter up here,” said the anesthetist, almost grudgingly. “Though heaven knows why.”

Kahayn let out a breath. “Okay; Corporal, resume compressions; nurse, push in that amp of xentracaine, see if that’ll tamp down that cardiac irritability. Charge up the defibrillator again.” She and Arin exchanged a wordless stare; then he gave a minute nod, easily missed if she hadn’t been looking for it,

and Kahayn said, “Three...fifty.”

She saw the nurses glance at one another before the nurse dialed up the voltage. Without a word, she took up the paddles. “Tell me when the minute’s up.”

That minute crawled by in an eternity of seconds, and it was long enough for Kahayn to wonder what she would do if this man—whoever and whatever he was—pulled through. The corporal had managed to clear away most of the blood and she stared now at his face: black, close-cropped curls slicked with blood capping a high forehead; delicate cheekbones; a chin that was more oval than square. That forehead wound was ugly and oozing, and he looked as if his nose was broken. They would probably have to give him some blood, and that forehead would need stitches. She would make him a nice scar...

And then, with a jolt, she realized what was missing.

No scars. Her eyes traveled over the man’s chest, his abdomen, his hips and legs. There are no scars anywhere, nothing, as if he’s never had a wound or prosthetic in his life .

“One minute, Doctor.”

“Right.” But she didn’t move. She stared into that face, and for a brief, disorienting instant, that wasn’t a stranger lying there—and whatever else you are because you are not like us, not like us at all—but her Janel, because they did look a bit alike and she missed the man he’d been.

And then he was not Janel but a stranger who needed her: a man without scars inflicted by time and an unkind planet. And the difference between the two, between the man who had been Janel and the one here now, was the wound in her heart that had never properly healed.

Oh, my beloved, how I wish I could have saved you, really saved you.

“Clear,” she said, and then as the corporal jumped down, she placed the paddles on the man’s chest, took a deep breath and pushed the button.

Chapter

11

Saad came to find her after several hours though she’d lost track of time. Lense sat on a rock just outside the entrance to this system of caverns. The guard was with her, of course, but she’d wanted to go out. Maybe just to convince herself that there was an outside world, something that was not a warren of dank, glistening gray caves. That orange ball of a sun was setting to her right, its light refracted to a dark red that glowed on the undersides of a pillow of yellow clouds and turned them a peachy blush. It was a little cooler now, too, and she was more comfortable in the clothes they’d given her: a rough cotton khaki tee and matching trousers, with sturdy, worn black boots and thick socks. They’d taken her uniform, though they’d given her combadge back. Why, she didn’t know. It rested in the right pocket of her trousers. Felt good there. She slipped her hand in now and again just to feel it. Knowing she still had it made her feel better.

Then she smiled a little. Probably make Gold feel better, too, her being so by the book, keeping “advanced technology” from the natives when all she wanted was to remind herself of a little bit of home. She tried hard, though, not to think about whether she’d ever get back. No point to it. Not yet anyway.

She was breathing better. They’d given her some kind of mask: an adaptation of a re-breather, she

figured, similar to what divers used but with a carbon scrubber. At least, that's what the guard told her. As long as she kept the prongs fitted into her nostrils, her lungs didn't burn, and she was comfortable enough. Her mouth still tasted like ash, though.

There was a crunch of gravel, and then she turned and stood as Saad slipped out. His pistol was still in its black leather holster. Saad gave the guard a look then hooked a thumb over his shoulder. Obediently ducking his head, the guard slid into the caves and out of sight. Saad edged closer. His leather holster creaked on his hip. "I see that you've washed and changed. You've eaten?" When she shook her head, he asked, "Why not?"

She decided honesty—and a little humor—might lighten things a bit. "I just wasn't hungry. Figured that if you were going to kill me, somebody else could use the food more than me. That's the way things work here, right?"

That faint smile again. "You catch on quickly. Where did you say you were from again?"

"I didn't. Say, that is." She quickly thought back over what she'd gleaned from the runabout's sensors during those few chaotic moments that had happened only six hours ago and felt more like a century. "I come from very far north, another continent." And please don't ask me the name.

"Ah," was all Saad said. "Odd that you and your friends should wander this way. I know,"—he held up a hand when she opened her mouth—"I know. You were hiking. And they'll be looking for you."

She clasped her hands behind her back, felt the straps of the re-breather pack dig into her shoulders. "So have you decided, or not?"

"First, since you don't seem to know anything about us, I need to explain a few things." He waved her over to a hump of rock a meter long and flat on top. He sat, and indicated that she should sit as well. "I need you to understand why I'm going to do what I'm going to do."

Her heart fluttered against her caging ribs, like a trapped bird. "Okay," she said, though it wasn't at all.

"You were surprised when I shot Apariam, the one with the belly wounds. You were more than surprised. You were outraged. And I thought to myself that, Saad, this is a woman who truly does not understand the Jabari, or any of the Outlier tribes. Or the Kornak." His dark eyes slid to hers in a sidelong glance. They were only a half meter apart, and he was so close she caught his scent, a mixture of musk and sweat. "Truly amazing, that she doesn't know."

"Know what?" she said. Her voice quavered, and she swallowed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, Elizabeth Lense, that you are lying, and I do not believe your story." His voice was mild, not accusatory—more...intrigued. "I have eyes—my own, fortunately—and your skin, the color in your cheeks and lips...you're lying."

She wasn't as shocked as she thought she'd be. After all, it was one of those things a person would have to be brain-dead to miss. Standard Starfleet-speak, though, Prime Directive junk: lie your head off and hope no one catches on that you aren't just a teensy bit different than, say, oh, that guy over there with five tentacles and seven eyes. "Okay," she said. "And?"

"And, if that's so, then you don't understand this. You don't understand me or my people, or what we're up against. So I will explain. We Jabari fight the Kornaks because they are machines."

“What do you mean, machines?”

“Living machines. They add prosthetics when their limbs wither, or replace their organs with those they’ve harvested in transplant or with a mechanical equivalent. Our planet hasn’t been very good to us, or maybe it’s the other way around. Our air’s bad; the water’s polluted; there’s residual radioactivity in some areas.” He shrugged. “It’s our life here. Mara and I, the rest of us, we don’t want to be machines. We don’t think the Kornaks should force their will on the planet or its people, especially not when a prosthetic is a reward for how loyal you’ve been, or what you haven’t consumed.”

The scars on Mara’s neck, those people missing hands, legs...they’ve either removed their prostheses or declined them outright. “Why not?” Lense asked, genuinely mystified. “If you’ll live better and longer lives, isn’t that worth the trade-off?”

“No. Because if I accept that more and more of me isn’t flesh and blood, then I give up what it is to be a man.” Saad’s eyes lingered on hers. “And, above all, I’m a man, Elizabeth Lense. I have lived and I will die as one.”

She stared back, and the insight was like the quick flash of a shooting star: A little like the Borg, but without the collective. Her eyes searched Saad’s face, its clean lines and strong bones. No scars at all, and that struck her as odd, though perhaps his scars were hidden by clothing. But she liked what she saw, and it had been a long time since she’d seen a man she hadn’t dismissed out of hand.

And then, on the heels of that thought, she remembered what Julian had said: I am a person, and I have feelings to hurt...

“And me?” she asked. She looked away and hoped that Saad hadn’t noticed that shame, not embarrassment, burned her cheeks. “What about me?”

“You are a free woman, Elizabeth Lense. You may live and die as one.”

“But only if I stay here.” She glanced at him askance. “Right? Otherwise, I’ll die free, only a lot sooner.” When he nodded, she said, “So I can be your medic, or you’ll kill me. Not much of a choice.”

“No, but it is a choice. Whichever you take, however, one thing is certain.”

“And what’s that?”

“Either way,” he said, “there is no going back.”

Chapter 12

Two hours later, after the patient had been stabilized and a corporal had wheeled the gurney out of the ER for an isolation unit in the ICU, Blate came and stood over Kahayn and Arin, who were seated at a workstation, busily entering their notes and data into the official computer record. Arin saw him coming first, casually stabbed a control that blanked the 3-D VR, and gave Kahayn a gentle nudge with his elbow.

“Yes, Blate?” Kahayn sighed, pushed wisps of brown hair from her eyes, looked up. “What now?”

“Don’t think that your heroics here will preclude a full account of your conduct. I intend to make my report, and I will most specifically make note of your carelessness.” The security director’s right eye skidded left, then tacked out to fix a glare. “You may be cavalier with your own life, Colonel, but I have a complex to think of and a command to which I owe my loyalty.”

“As do I, Blate.”

“Don’t be stupid, Colonel. You had no way of knowing if that man was infected. For that matter, you still don’t know. He could be incubating some disease.”

“Well, then if I die, I won’t have to worry much about what you report, will I?” Then Kahayn snorted. “You know something, Blate? I can’t figure out if you’re mad because he didn’t die, or because I didn’t keel right over and kick off from some phantom virus.”

“Perhaps you will.”

She was tempted to point out that then he’d likely dance a jig but quashed that as unhelpful and downright dumb. “Blate, there’s nothing there. I sent off blood for culture. We’ll see if anything grows. But I doubt it. As for the patient, I’ll tell you what. I’ll keep him in isolation. In a couple of days, I’ll move him to the research wing. How about that? The wing’s got no systems that feed back to this complex, and I’ll be the only doctor, okay? Me and a couple of nurses, and that’s it. Arin to take over in a pinch. We’ll take full precautions.”

Blate’s eyes clicked from her to Arin and then back again. “I’m still making my report. And I expect updates and all your data, Colonel. All of it.”

“Of course,” Kahayn said and managed to sound like she’d expected that. “It’s standard procedure for a potential security risk, right?”

“Yes,” said Blate, and then his lips thinned to a smile. It didn’t improve his looks. “Because I have eyes, Colonel, I have eyes.”

“Of course you do.” She paused. “And I should know; I put them in myself, and just like you wanted them, too. But you really ought to come in and let me adjust the tracking on that leftie, Blate. It’s downright scary.”

“No, thank you. I like my eyes the way they are. But I have eyes, Colonel. I can see as well as the next man, and I saw that patient.” Blate waited a beat. “No scars, Colonel. He doesn’t have any scars.”

Her pulse ramped up. She swallowed back a flutter in her throat. “Except the one on his forehead.”

“Which he got today. Which you gave him. But nowhere else.” Blate breathed in, pulled himself up. “Not one. That’s interesting for a . . . native, don’t you think?”

She said nothing.

Blate nodded as if she had. “This isn’t over, Colonel. This is far from over.”

Arin waited until Blate was gone. Then he sighed, stabbed at his glasses and looked over them at Kahayn. “That’s not good.”

“Don’t start.” Weary to the bone, Kahayn slumped, washed her face with her hands. “One disaster at a time.”

“Mmmm.” Arin hesitated and then said, “How did you know? Without my having to say anything?”

“I didn’t.” Her eyes were still closed and she cocked her head to one side. “I...heardit. Or I didn’t hear it. That’s what it was.” She opened her eyes and gave Arin a tired smile. “No click. So, no periatrium. It seemed the only explanation.”

“And the defibrillator? That was one-fifty above the recommended charge.”

She hunched her left shoulder, let it fall. “Without the periatrium to kick in at the PA node, I figured there’d be more resistance. So I jacked it up. Lucky guess.”

“Yah,” said Arin. “Lucky.” Then he brought up the 3-D VR they’d been studying just before Blate approached. The heart was outlined in green; the lungs were gray and air-filled spaces were black. Arin pointed. “A heart with four chambers instead of five. That’s amazing. And look at that left lung. Two lobes.”

“And not three, yah. You’d expect that, the heart shifted over to the left. No room for another lobe. How the hell does he get enough oxygen without the extra surface area?”

“That’s a damn good question. And that organ on the left wedged under the diaphragm, what is that? Too small for a spleen, and his thymus is a third the normal size.”

“Beats me. For that matter, why is the blood ferrous? Like it’s much more deoxygenated and he requires way more oxygen, a higher partial pressure than we do.”

“I don’t know. But he’s different, that’s for sure.” Arin massaged the bridge of his nose between his thumb and right index finger, then blinked and resettled his glasses. “Weird, but I’m not getting that creepy-crawly feeling you get when youknow some guy’s a mutant. Know what I mean?”

“Yah. I know. I’ll bet when he’s tuned up, his system’s going to work just fine. That kind of throws out mutant right there.”

“So, if he’s not a mutant...”

They were silent. Kahayn thought of that weird suit. Then she said, “Don’t go there. Not yet. Give it some time.”

Arin nodded. “Okay. I can do that. I’d do anything for you; you know that?”

“Yah.” She squeezed the back of his hand with her good one, her right. “I know. Would have fallen apart a long time ago without you.”

Arin’s eyes roamed her face, and his lips parted as if he were going to say something. But then he seemed to change his mind and, instead, said something else. “Idit, you won’t be able to hold off Blate forever. Sooner or later, he’ll be back and he’s going to ask for this stuff, and we’re going to have to turn this stuff over.”

“I know that.” Then she gave her friend a narrow, sidelong glance. “But that guy’s pretty sick. I mean,

really sick...”

“Very sick.”

“And we wouldn’t want a relapse.”

“No. We wouldn’t.”

“Because he’s very sick, and I think we both know what will happen if we act too soon.”

“He’ll relapse.”

“Right. So how about we make sure that we turn these over much later?”

“How much later?”

“Say... a month. Six weeks?”

“That’s a long time,” said Arin. “I think it’s too long. Remember, Blate’s got the suit and that helmet. That piece of jewelry, or that pin, or whatever it was. And that uniform... I have to tell you, I agree with Blate on that one. That patient? He’s military in someone’s army, and it’s sure not ours. So Blate’s going to be back long before that month’s up. I give him a week. Then he’s going to want some answers.”

“We’ll give him answers.”

Arin shook his head. “It’s one thing not to volunteer information; but it’s another to lie. We got away with it today because we didn’t lie, not technically. We simply—”

“Didn’t mention a few pertinent details. Like that heart, his left lung, and the iron in his blood.”

“Right. And you’re going to be seeing this guy every day. You’ll have more data, right? So when Blate asks, how are you going to hide things? There are records, you know. Lab values in the computer any person with two neurons on a T-connector could pull up.”

She thought. “I can keep two records. One here. The other on the computer in the lockout room of the research wing. That’s an isolated system, doesn’t tie in here at all by design. So it’ll just be a sin by omission. Things that I was just kind of storing. For study, you know?”

“Might work for a little while.” Arin laced his fingers in his lap in thought. “Either way you look at it: We do this, there’s no going back. This is like being a policeman or a detective and not handing over evidence. You know?”

“I know that. In a way, we are the detectives, aren’t we? The police? We’re all part of the same military, and the military runs things.”

“Runs everything.”

“Yah.” She paused. “You like that?”

“I don’t know any different.”

“But I can imagine different. I can imagine a time when the military serves the people, not the other way around.”

Arin poked at his glasses. “Careful. Now you’re talking like a Jabari. An Outlier.”

Like Janel. A talon of grief snagged her heart. “I can’t... cooperate with that kind of thing. Not now.”

Arin was silent. Kahayn said, “I think a lot of the work we do is important. Otherwise people die. I’m a doctor; I don’t like that. But what I also don’t like is using what I do to take away a person’s freedom. That’s not right.”

“But you’re doing it anyway, Idit,” said Arin. “With the primates. That neural implant.” He didn’t have to add: and those test subjects. She knew that was there, by implication.

“That’s,” she searched for the word, “different. You know it is. I don’t have a choice about that.”

“No,” said Arin. “You do. You could choose to give it up. I really don’t know why you haven’t. But you don’t like the consequences of giving that thing up, whatever you think they are. There are no test subjects anymore. Just the primates. So I don’t get that. Anyway, let’s just say that you aren’t wild about the choices you do have.”

She wanted to argue, but he was right and she told him so. Then she said, “So, this guy... They don’t ask, we don’t tell. Okay?”

They stared at each other without speaking. Then Arin nodded, sighed. “Okay. Let me ask you something, though. Why are we doing this?”

In reply, Kahayn tapped a command into the computer, and the image of that strange heart vanished. Not forever. Nothing, Kahayn knew, was forever except, maybe, love. Or its ghost. And Arin was right because Blate would be back, and then, maybe, there’d be more hell to pay. But she did it anyway.

She looked up at Arin. “Because it’s the right thing to do.”

“Right or wrong, there’s no going back,” Arin said again.

“Yeah,” she said. “You got that. No going back.”

Chapter

13

He came to himself in bits and pieces, and in tremendous pain. Everything hurt. Pain knifed his brain; his throat was raw and felt bloody. His lungs burned. There was something hard in his mouth and down his throat and when he tried to swallow, he couldn’t.

Then he heard a weird gasping groan like the wheeze of an old bellows. There was a gabble of voices, all overlapping, like the conversation of too many people in too small a space—or maybe that was a memory. He couldn’t tell. But there was someone, a woman, telling him not to fight the tube: Don’t fight, try not to fight, try to relax, let us help you...

His eyelids peeled apart, slowly. Light, too bright, out of the corner of his right eye. The light hurt. Felt like a red-hot poker jammed into his eyes. Bed. Pillow under his head. Bars to either side. Linens and

something scratchy on his right arm. Blanket, maybe. Something in his mouth. That queer grunt of air, pulling in, pushing out. His chest rising. Falling...

Falling. He remembered falling. And he remembered blood in his eyes, the iron taste of it in his mouth. The crawl of blood on his neck, dripping from his fingers. He also remembered the moment the runabout shattered in an agonized squall of metal shear that spiked his brain at the same time that a steely vice of panic squeezed his chest. He remembered the way his lungs exploded with pain as superheated air and gases scorched his throat and boiled away his voice so there was no sound when he screamed.

Runabout...gone...Elizabeth...

He must've moved because something stirred in the darkness. Movement to his left. He tracked it with his eyes, and then he saw the opaque white of a tube attached to a machine.

Ventilator. Tube down my throat; what's wrong with my lungs? He realized now that he was hooked to a machine that breathed for him. He didn't like it; he wanted that tube out; except when he tried to raise his arms, he couldn't move.

And then he panicked. Maybe he didn't have arms anymore; he couldn't feel them, and he was so cold, and there was the machine breathing for him. Fear clutched his chest, and suddenly he couldn't breathe at all, despite the machine. He was back in the runabout, superheated air scorching his throat and he couldn't even scream...

"Easy, easy. Relax." A woman's voice, and then she materialized out of the shadows: a shoulder-length fall of dark-brown hair framing a square chin, full lips, and brown eyes, but her skin was dark, an odd shade of blue, and there was something about her eyes, something not right...

"Listen to me." She put a hand on his shoulder, and that slight touch made him feel better. "My name is Dr. Kahayn. You're in a hospital. You were very badly hurt. We had to put in a tube to help you breathe. I kept you sedated because you kept trying to pull the tube out. You're in restraints. That's why you can't move, but I didn't want you to panic and pull out the tube before I could explain. Your lungs are better now, and that's why I let the sedative wear off so you'd wake up and I could take out the tube. Do you understand? Nod if you understand."

He nodded.

"Good." She gently tugged tape free from his mouth. "This is going to be unpleasant. You're going to feel like you can't breathe for a second. But I'm right here. I won't let anything happen to you, so just relax and then it will be better, I promise."

It was more than unpleasant. It was awful. A sensation of plastic slithering at the back of his throat, like a long, rigid snake and he gagged, tried to pull away, but then the tube was gone.

"Take it easy," she said. Turning aside, she flicked a switch and the ventilator wheezed to a halt. "Deep, regular breaths. That's better. But your throat probably hurts. Would you like some ice chips? You'll feel better."

She fed him ice chips on a spoon, one at a time; told him to take it slow and suck the chips not chew them. The melting ice eased the pain in his throat, and he thought he'd never tasted anything more wonderful. When he nodded that he'd had enough, she put aside the cup of chips and then unbuckled the leather restraints tethering his wrists to the bed.

Then she said, "What's your name?"

It took him a few seconds to get the words out, his throat was that raw; it felt like knives cutting him to pieces in there, and it hurt to talk. "Bashir," he managed, finally, and he was shocked at how weak he sounded. "Julian...Bashir." He swallowed to wet his throat. "How...how long...have..."

"Three weeks," she said, and then as his shock must've spread to his face, she added, "You would've regained consciousness much sooner, but I had to keep you under sedation because of the tube."

"Tube...how bad?"

She explained his injuries: parenchymal damage and pulmonary congestion from breathing in smoke and superheated gases; a concussion; a broken nose. "And that cut on your forehead was pretty bad. Went way up into your scalp, like you'd smashed into something."

"My..." He raised his fingers to his scalp, felt a ridge of stippled flesh jutting from bristles because they'd shaved part of his head to cut at the gash. Then he saw that a tube snaked along his left forearm and was attached to a bag of clear fluid hanging from a metal pole next to his bed. "What...what's...?"

"An intravenous line. You have another one running in under your collarbone on the right, under all those bandages. You keep down fluids today, and I'll pull the central line tonight. If you're still doing well tomorrow and can keep down soft foods, I'll pull the other IV." She paused. "You lost a lot of blood. You've been very sick. You're lucky you're not dead. But you're bound to feel pretty weak and awful for a while, and you'll be short of breath for a bit because of the damage to your lungs, even though they're much better. So take it easy and go slow." She paused. "Your scalp wound was very bad. You're lucky you didn't bleed to death."

His head was whirling. Intubation...ventilator and intravenous lines...like being in a museum... Then, another thought, this one much worse, and he felt a sudden clench of dread: She's a doctor. I'm in a hospital and she's a doctor. She saved my life, but that means she examined me; she's given me replacement fluids and drugs, so she must know...

She cut into his thoughts. "What happened? Do you remember?"

"I..." He paused, as much to gather his thoughts as form the words. "Accident. My vehicle...crashed. A fire. I don't remember much." Then he thought of something. "Did you...I was with...a woman. A friend. Did you...?"

"No. You were the only one brought in."

Elizabeth. He wasn't prepared for how he felt: an emptiness in his chest, a feeling of grief. Guilt, too. My fault; I should've listened to her. My fault we were separated...

"Do you know where you are? That is, do you know the name of this hospital?" When Bashir shook his head, she said, "You're in Rangdron Medical Complex of the Kornak Armed Forces." She paused as if that should mean something, but he didn't know what. So he didn't say anything.

Instead, he studied her face again. That blue skin. Very familiar. Not Andorian, though, or Bolian. But familiar. And there was something wrong with her left eye...

“This is a secured facility,” she said. “There are guards on the perimeter, and you need to have built up enough credits to be let in at the main gate. The underground trams are monitored.”

“Yes,” he wheezed. He didn’t know what else to say. That left eye. Not tracking as well with the right. No blood vessels. That eye’s artificial, some kind of prosthetic...

“You’re quite different,” she said. “For a Kornak, I mean. You don’t have any prosthetics.”

“Been...been lucky.” It was the only thing he could think to say.

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. You’re not from around here.”

Even whispering hurt. “No, you’re right. I’m from...from very far away. North.” He tried to remember what Elizabeth had said about the planet. Was there one northern continent, or two? He risked it. “From the northern continent. This is the first time I’ve...I’ve been here.”

But she gave a regretful shake of her head. “That’s not true and that’s not what I meant. You know that. Now, I know that you’re not Kornak, or Jabari, or any of the Outlier tribes. You’re...different. Then there’s the matter of your suit. And that uniform you were wearing.”

“My...?” he began, then stopped. She meant his environmental suit. He tried thinking of something that would explain the suit away and his uniform but couldn’t. So he said nothing.

She waited for a moment, maybe to give him time to think of some new lie. Then she nodded as if confirming something for herself. “Right. Thanks for not insulting my intelligence.” She paused. “You’re not...from here.”

He was silent.

“At first, I thought maybe you were a mutant. But I discarded that. See, by definition, most mutants don’t work well. Like a machine where the blueprints get all mixed up, so that what you finally build doesn’t work very well. But you work. You’re injured, and it’s pretty serious. But your body’s healing. Everything in your body, from your organs to your chemistries...they all work efficiently, neatly. And your brain’s even better than that. So you work.”

He said nothing.

“Right,” she said. “And then there’s the not-so-little matter of your anatomy. Your skin color, your heart, that left lung of yours. Your blood, like you’re used to and require a lot more oxygen.” She touched the ventilator by his bed, and there was a tiny click and a whirr because, he saw now, her left hand was artificial, too. “More carbon dioxide as a respiratory trigger, too. That threw me. You were having trouble one day and I hyperventilated you, blew down your carbon dioxide level and you flat-out quit breathing. That gave me another big scare.”

“Another?” he whispered.

“Yah. You tried dying in my emergency room, and very actively I might add. Then I realized that your central respiratory system needs a higher set point of carbon dioxide to initiate breathing. Anytime I tried going for what’s normal—what’s normal for me and everyone else here—your body tried to die. So you’re different, Julian Bashir. You are very different.”

He said nothing.

“That’s right.” She inhaled, let the breath go. “Like I said. Different. Not one of us. So, I think we need to talk about this, Julian Bashir.” She cocked her head to one side. “Don’t you?”

TO BE CONTINUED...

About the Author

ILSA J. BICK is a child, adolescent, and forensic psychiatrist, and a latecomer to fiction. Still, she’s done okay. Her other *Star Trek* work includes “A Ribbon for Rosie” in *Strange New Worlds II*, “Shadows, in the Dark” in *Strange New Worlds IV*, “Alice, on the Edge of Night” in *New Frontier: No Limits*, the *Lost Era* novel *Well of Souls*, focusing on Captain Rachel Garrett and the *U.S.S. Enterprise -C*, and the previous *S.C.E. eBook Lost Time*. Her short fiction has also been published in *Writers of the Future Volume XVI*, *SCIFICTION* on *SciFi.com*, *Challenging Destiny*, *Talebones*, and *Beyond the Last Star*, and she has written novels and short stories in the *Mech Warrior* universe. She lives in Wisconsin with her husband, two children, three cats, and other assorted vermin.

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