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WOUNDS Book 2

Ilsa J. Bick



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Chapter

1

So, contestants, today's puzzler. Given the opportunity to whack off some poor guy's leg without anesthesia, would Elizabeth Lense rather:

- a)chow down on a bowl of wriggly gagh chased with shots of piping hot bahgol while simultaneously squatting naked as a jaybird with Tev in a mudbath and being tortured with Klingon painstiks;
- b)have Captain Gold as her therapist forever because there's no way in hell she's going to be anywhere near normal if she ever gets off this dustball of a planet;
- c)gladly go anywhere in the known universe with Julian Bashir while he gabs on about being a Remarkable Frontier Doctor;
- d)all of the above;
- e)What, haven't you been listening? Julian Bashir is dead; Lense is stuck somewhere hell and gone; people are trying really hard to die right and left; and you're worried about some dumb stupid game? Get out of my way.

Blood drizzled in a sludgy brown stream, soaking thin linen thrown over a makeshift surgical table, a wood pallet balanced on twin stacks of flat rocks. The wound site was a mess: a gory crater of pulverized bone and blasted flesh midway below the right knee. There was no way in hell Lense could save that leg.

You know, d is pretty damned attractive.

"Okay, okay, hold him still," Lense said. They were nine in all: Lense and the patient as well as the seven others she needed to hold her patient thanks to that lack of anesthetic. To Lense's left, Mara controlled the leg from the knee down, and Saad stood to Lense's right. The leg was flexed at a right angle and

Saad pulled down on the knee until it canted fifteen degrees from horizontal.

Reeling in a deep breath, Lense spread the fingers of her left hand over the man's inner thigh. His skin jumped and his head snapped up, and his knee wobbled as he strained to kick free. "Please," he said. His teeth were bared in a grimace of fear and pain, and he was sweating so much his gray-blue skin shone as if oiled. "Please, please, please, don't take off my leg, please don't take my leg, please, don't—"

"No, I'm sorry, got to do this, just hold on," Lense said, and then simply whipped her scalpel over his skin. The knife bit through skin, slashing open his thigh and cutting fat, fascia, and muscle in the first pass.

The man let go of a high, keening shriek. Chocolate-brown blood spurted from severed veins and arterioles, and he bellowed with pain. The pallet shifted, and she heard the squawk of wood grating on stone.

"For God's sake, hold him!" she shouted. Last thing she needed was to cut herself, or send the blade through the artery before she was ready. "All I need is a couple more minutes!" This was a lie; she needed a lot more than two or three minutes. There were muscles and tendons to cut; nerves to suture to muscle; an artery to find, clamp, and then tie off so he wouldn't bleed to death—to say nothing of sawing through bone. And that was just to get the leg off.

"Hurry." Saad, at her right elbow. He was a big man, easily two meters tall and muscular, but even he was struggling. "You must work faster, Elizabeth."

She slashed through muscle and fascia. Talked herself through it: Okay, coming across the top now; there goes the semimembranosus, and then I got to be careful because of the sciatic nerve; got to cut that fast and then tag it so I can suture it to the short head of the biceps femoris; yeah, that'd be best....

She tagged the sciatic nerve, then clamped and tied off the saphenous vein. (Were these the right names for here? Probably not. But with some significant exceptions—the heart, the left lung, a thick sternum, their very large spleen and thymus, and their queer blood—this species' anatomy was virtually identical to humans'. Lucky her, she'd had plenty of casualties to practice on, do a couple half-dozen autopsies to get the anatomy down.) She was drenched in sweat; the back of her khaki tee was plastered to her shoulder blades and the front spattered with blood that came fast and brown. But no pumpers, thank Christ, though the femoral artery wasn't too far away now.

Trickiest part; got to clamp it off and make sure you got plenty of artery there or else it'll retract....

She made her next cut and saw the femoral artery now: a fat, bluish-brown, pulsating tube wedged close to the bone medial to the knee and between two large thigh muscles. The tube throbbed a rapid staccato, her patient's heart rate ramping up with fear and pain. He was still screaming and trying to kick, and she kept praying that, please God, he'd pass out because this was insanity, she was out of her goddamn mind....

First proximal, then distal, because if the artery tears, at least you've got control of the business end of things. Clicking open two arterial clamps, she gently eased the teeth of one around the artery at a point closest to the hip and then snicked a second clamp shut two centimeters distant. She was already thinking three steps ahead: Tie off the artery, then get rid of the rest of the tissue, cut the bone.

So what happened next probably occurred because she wasn't focused, wasn't reading how his few intact muscles kept jerking and twitching, wasn't listening to how much he screamed because everyone

screamed. So Lense slit the artery in two—at exactly the wrong moment.

“Stopstopstopstopstopstop!” he shrieked. The thigh above the cut bobbed, and Lense flinched, her scalpel snagging in the handle of the proximal arterial clamp.

“Hell.” Can’t lose the artery, can’t lose it. Then she heard a warning yelp from Mara and looked up just in time to see her patient’s left foot angling for her face.

“Jesus!” Lense ducked but not fast enough, and the blow caught her left temple, slamming her back. She went down hard; her scalpel skittered over rock, and she lost her grip on the clamp.

“Elizabeth!” It was Saad. He’d caught hold of the patient’s left leg and was forcing it back, passing it off to the men opposite. “Elizabeth, the artery!”

Cursing, Lense grabbed his proffered hand, clawed her way back to her feet. Her head throbbed, and tears stung her eyes. Her vision was blurry with pain, but she could see well enough and then wished she couldn’t. A geyser of blood jetted over raw muscle and bare bone, but the elastic artery itself had snapped back into muscle and was nowhere in sight.

“Oh, no no no no!” She tried fishing for the artery with her clamps, jamming the curve of her instrument into bloody meat. But there was nothing to snag and so much gore Lense couldn’t see worth a damn. “Hold him, hold him!” Quick as lightning, she slashed away at the remaining tissue right down to the bone. She was sloppy about it; her scalpel scraped against nerve-rich bone and the patient flopped and wailed in agony. Then, mercifully, finally, he fainted.

The sudden quiet rang as a high whine in her ears. The only sounds were ragged breaths and the drip-drip of blood pouring into and overflowing from a thick lake on the pallet to patter in rivulets onto rock with a sound like rain on tin.

“Okay, okay, just a few more seconds,” she said, lying through her teeth. She abandoned the clamp, squirming her naked fingers into warm muscle until she felt blood spewing with every beat of her patient’s heart. Grunting with effort, she tried tweezing the artery between her thumb and forefinger, pushing and tearing through thick muscle.

If I don’t get it this time, either I cut away more muscle or that leg comes off right now. She concentrated, closing her eyes; then, her breath snagged in her throat. “Got it, got it,” she said, her teeth clenched hard enough to hurt. “Just another sec, just another—” But then she felt her blood-slicked fingers slip and the artery pulled back like a taut elastic band snapped in two.

“Damn!” She huffed out a breath, then dug out a thin coiled wire strung between two metal handles. “Got to cut the bone, get more maneuvering room,” she said, whipping one end of the wire beneath the nearly-severed leg. “Otherwise, I’ll have to cut away more meat.”

Or he’ll just bleed and die; supply will peter out and his pressure will hit the basement; and there’s no way in hell that’s happening on my watch, not on my watch!

She palmed the metal handles of her saw: a very fine, very tough wire. (Admiral McCoy, guest-lecturing a history of medicine course, talking about how the principle behind this kind of primitive saw, a Gigli, proved what Thugee assassins had known for centuries—that garroting with razor-thin wire almost always resulted in decapitation.) The saw made a buzzing sound like sandpaper over stone; but she had no lubricant for the saw, and friction and thickening blood made the wire heat, then snag and hesitate.

She struggled, the saw giving in grudging fits and starts.

“Let me,” said Saad, and then he simply jerked the handles from her and bent to the task with a will. His shoulders strained, but he moved fast; the saw zipped through the bone in less than sixty seconds.

“Thanks, okay.” She was already crowding in just as the leg came free. She pushed the disarticulated limb aside; it dropped to the rock with a sodden plop but she ignored it because that was dying meat and in the way. She grabbed up a linen and swabbed, but the linen was saturated in seconds and blood still jetted from the severed artery. However, she now had a marginally better view, looking at the stump on end, like a rump roast sliced in two: bone and its circle of bronzed marrow a little off-center, slabs of glistening raw muscle, and the spurting tube that was the artery, wide and fat, held open by the pressure of blood being forced through.

One more time. She watched the geyser pump, the blood chugging like oil. A quick nod to Mara, who sponged the area clear and then Lense was plunging the clamp deep into the muscle, forcing the tough tissue back, spreading the clamps as wide as they would go—knowing she was going to grab meat, too, but not caring—then jammed them together, hard.

For a second, she didn’t know if she’d hit the artery or not because there was still so much blood—on the stump, splattered on her and Mara and Saad, pooled on the pallet—she couldn’t see, and her boots squelched in coagulating muck. But the pumping had stopped. She held her breath for five seconds, then ten. Her eyes clicked over raw muscle; she registered ooze from small vessels. But no spurts, no more geysers.

“Okay,” she said, releasing a long breath. She felt queasy. Because she was out of her league, and knew it. “Okay.”

“Okay? This is all right with you? You call this mercy?” Saad’s tunic was sheeted with blood. He was panting; gore slicked his hands, and he held them up for Lense to see. “This is your mercy?”

Her cheeks burned with shame. She opened her mouth then closed it.

Saad stared at her a second longer. He was so enraged, he trembled. “Elizabeth, whatever you think of our customs, this is blood on my hands, this is—” Then, whirling on his heel, he hooked his thumb over his shoulder, and one of his men stepped up to take his place.

Lense found her voice. “Blood on your hands... and it wasn’t before?”

“Not this way.” Saad’s lips had compressed to a thin dark line, like a crack in stone. “Because I never made my people beg.” He stalked out, and Lense heard the echoes of his footfalls several seconds after he was gone.

Mara plucked up a length of teal-colored suture threaded through a needle between the jaws of a clamp. “He’s right.”

“Thanks,” Lense said tersely. She took the needle but she couldn’t look Mara in the eye. Her face flamed with anger, embarrassment. “I know that.”

“Something has to give. We can’t keep on like this.”

I know that, too. Lense squeezed her eyes tight. She tried counting to ten and made it to three. “So what

do you want me to do, huh? Give up? Stop trying to help? We have virtually no equipment! But if there's even a chance...!"

"For what? We still lose men, or they stay alive long enough to die of complications, as you call them. So, is this for them, or you?"

Lense had no answer for that. "Fine, whatever. Let's just give this guy a nice scar."

"A scar," said Mara. "And here you were so worried about fitting in."

Chapter 2

"You are out of your element, Colonel." Security Director Blate's face looked more squashed than usual on Colonel Idit Kahayn's vidcom, those walleyes so magnified she thought of some ancient, bottom-dwelling flatfish. "You've had almost six weeks. Your tactics are completely transparent. Stalling my inquiry does not change the fact that your patient is my prisoner."

"Oh, come on, Blate. I haven't stalled anything." From his seat across her desk, Major Arin's eyebrows reached for his hairline, but Kahayn ignored him because she had to concentrate on phrasing her lies just so. "Three weeks ago, he got short of breath just walking to the bathroom."

"He doesn't have to run a marathon, Colonel. All he has to do is answer questions."

"He's answered questions."

"But I am not satisfied. That accent, for one... have you ever heard anything like it?"

"No."

"Are you at all satisfied with his story?"

She hedged. "Care to be more specific? Bashir's told us what he remembers. I can't help it that the poor man's got retrograde amnesia. People with head injuries can have huge gaps—"

"I've consulted with other physicians, Colonel. So let me ask you. What are the chances of complete and total retrograde amnesia?"

He had her there. "Small."

"Try slim to none. How many reported cases in the records since the Cataclysm?" He held up his good hand, the left. "Three. Now your records clearly document that this... Bashir," he made a vague conjuring gesture, "if that's even his name... suffered minimal traumatic damage, correct?"

She said nothing.

"In fact, didn't your own brain imaging studies reveal several anomalies? Neural functions that have no correlate in our database?"

“Anomalies happen, Blate. We call them mutations. We call them syndromes. For all I know this is something that’s already been described but the data was lost after the Cataclysm.”

“Perhaps,” he said, like he’d sucked on something very sour. “But no damage other than the usual EEG slowing seen after a concussion, isn’t that so?”

“Yah. And, Blate, well, I’m impressed. Soon you’ll have my job.”

“No, Colonel. Soon, I will have your patient.”

“Care to make a little wager?”

“Bashir is lying. You know he is. And I have eyes and ears, Colonel.”

“As do I, Blate. Torturing Bashir won’t get you anywhere. Keeping him alive and cooperative is much more in our interests. His physiology alone merits further study—”

“You’ve had time to study. But you and Major Arin withheld information—”

“Hold on. Dr. Arin was following my orders, Blate. You have any quarrels, you have them with me.”

“No, I don’t think so, and do you know why?” Blate laced his fingers, like a professor. “Because loyalty is key. Loyalty is the glue that binds us Kornaks together and makes us strong. Loyalty allows us to function as one, with one goal, one mind, one purpose.”

“But there’s the individual, Blate. You can’t control hope, or fantasies, or dreams.”

“But we’re well on the way, aren’t we, Colonel? You’ve had your failures, of course.” He paused. “But your primates, they’re an example, yes?”

“I still can’t separate them for long.”

“A problem you’ll solve, I’m sure. Besides, perhaps autonomy is not desirable.”

“People have to be able to choose, Blate.”

“You didn’t always think so.”

“But I think so now. Besides, we only know of one donor, and now he’s gone. I can’t replicate someone so unique. We need a single voice to direct the others. If not, then what’s the point? The others might function as a unit, yes, but they can only go so far. Anyway, Bashir is so different, I can’t see how he could be the one to—”

“We both know that your patient is no random mutation. His story is shot through with lies. I can prove it.”

She had a sinking feeling in her gut. This was precisely what she’d been afraid would happen. “The fMRI? In your dreams. His brain’s so different, it won’t work.” A lie. The fMRI would prove Bashir a liar, and that was only the first step down a road that could only end in a place she didn’t want to be again.

Blate said, "I disagree. You will run the scans in a week's time. Only I will ask the questions, not you."

"And why a week?"

"Because General Nerrit's quite interested."

Arin muttered a curse. She felt dizzy. A week didn't give her much time...and to do what, exactly?

Because you believed in this once. Else why keep on with the work? Why keep separating the primates to see if maybe you've cracked it? Because we're dying, that's why; if I can't take this further, do something...

"Well, we'll certainly look forward to seeing the general again," she said with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. "You said there was something else?"

"Yes," said Blate. "I thought you might like to know what we determined about Bashir's very interesting suit. An amazing bit of technology. It's designed to provide air, pressure, and temperature control. It's got a battery pack that we don't understand and a novel form of computer integration my people can't crack. We know that the Jabari and the other Outliers don't possess this technology. We certainly don't." He paused. "Tell me, Colonel, have you ever seen a machine that flies?"

She was confused. "You mean, other than a propellant grenade? No. No one has. We can't...it's not possible."

"Mmmm. What if I told you that Bashir's suit flies?"

She was so stunned she couldn't speak for a moment. "Fly? You mean, off the ground, through the air?"

"Yes. The suit is designed for flight. We think only for a limited period, you understand, and it seems that the suit would function better with less friction. But this thing could fly."

"But...no one flies," Kahayn said, stupidly. "No one knows how."

"Not precisely, Colonel. We did know once, didn't we?"

"But that's all ancient history, Blate. After the Cataclysm, the ban..."

"Prohibits development and so on and so forth; I know, Colonel. But that would explain much, wouldn't it? How, after all, did Bashir get inside the perimeter? There is no other way except by underground tram, and he'd have needed a pass which, I think we can agree, he didn't possess. But this suit flies, Colonel. That's troubling, don't you think? What are the chances that a people this advanced live in some idyllic country we've never heard of?"

She said nothing.

"Yes, I'd thought you'd agree. So," Blate said, ticking the items off on his fingers, "Bashir's suit provides for pressure, air, heat, propulsion, and also, we think, communications. Everything you would need."

Her heart was hammering so hard she felt the rhythmic pounding, like a timpani drum, in her temples. "For what?"

“Why, for traveling inspace, Colonel.” Blate folded his hands upon his desk and gave Kahayn a beatific smile uglier than a snarl. “It has everything you would need for space.”

* * *

After Blate rang off, Kahayn and Arin stared at each other. Neither spoke for a long time. Then Arin stirred. “You don’t have to do this. You have a choice.”

Kahayn pulled in a deep breath. “No.”

Arin frowned over his glasses. “No, what? No, you won’t do it, or...?”

“I mean, no, I don’t have a choice. We have to do something, Arin.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, or we’re all gonna die.” Arin chewed on the inside of his cheek. Then he jammed his glasses back into place. “Explain something to me. We go through all this trouble to save this guy, protect him, keep him isolated so no one messes with him, all so you can cave? So you can kill him?”

“I was doing my job,” she said, but distractedly. Her mind was going around in circles: The suit proves it; but if I convince him to give up the information willingly... Or maybe I shouldn’t; maybe our only destiny can be what we’ve already made for ourselves.... “I’m still doing my job. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Yeah? Well, I understand this.” Arin pushed to his feet. “When did we become the monsters?”

“We’re not monsters,” Kahayn said. She pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger and sighed. “We’re just trying to survive, Arin. This is a war, if not with the Jabari or other Outliers then with our bodies and this dustbin of a planet.” She made a helpless gesture with her hands. “We’re just trying to survive,” she said again.

“Until when? The military’s swallowed us up and locked us down tight. When was the last time you even heard about cleaning the air or water, or doing something about the soil so radioactivity doesn’t stunt crops or saturate our systems; or even helping people have a normal baby?”

“Damnyou, Arin!” Kahayn brought her artificial fist down on her desk with a sharp bang. “Don’t you understand? Blate said it. The suit canfly! Put it together! We figure out the principle—”

“From one dinky suit?”

“Better than a propellant grenade. It’s a start. Besides, every particle of anything this guy’s everseen could be ours. There’s an excellent chance that he knows much more than he thinks.”

“That’s not ours to take, Idit.”

“Says who? You want to stay here? Because this is about getting us the hell off this rock! Maybe not in your lifetime or mine—”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. Keep switching out parts, and we might last a good long time.”

“You know we won’t. Eventually, our bodies will outlive our brains. But he could be the key. Just because we can’t see the stars anymore doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try for them.”

“Nothing justifies murder.”

“I won’t kill him.” A pause. “He won’t die, I promise.”

“Why should he be any different than the others?”

“Because he is, Arin. Have you ever seen a brain like his? Ever? I’m not talking simply structure. I mean, function. His brain is working better, faster, and more efficiently than you or I or the smartest person on this planet could ever hope. He picks things up that would take us triple the time. He’s not just intelligent, Arin. He’s brilliant. And to top it all, he’s antigenically neutral. So maybe he’s the one who could facilitate repair and—”

“So that justifies a bargain with the devil? With Blate? What, the hell we’re living in right now isn’t good enough for you?”

“Don’t you lecture me, Arin. Not when I spend my days ripping out organs that don’t work, or hacking out cancers, or reeling out rotten gut.”

“Idit,” said Arin, but it was a hopeless sound. Like someone who’d used up all of his strength. “Don’t you see? Blate has his reasons for wanting whatever information Bashir’s got, and you have yours, except they really don’t come close to overlapping. Do you really, really think Blate or Nerrit wants what’s best for us?”

“I don’t know about what’s best. All I know is war, Arin. Fighting the rot, or the planet, or Blate...all I know is how to fight. If you stop fighting, you might as well just walk out of here and into the desert, and keep on until you drop. Or put a bullet in your brain.” She was silent for a moment and then said, a little dreamily, “In the beginning, it all seemed like such a good idea, a way we could stop fighting among ourselves. A way to keep going in these bodies for a near eternity. It can still be a good thing.”

“Are you trying to convince yourself? Even you must surely see that whatever your dream was, Blate will pervert it to a nightmare.”

“I still have to try.”

He searched her face. “Maybe you do. But what, exactly, are you going to call this now? An experiment? Or exploitation?” Without waiting for a reply, Arin limped for the door, favoring that left knee. He yanked the door open, then paused. “You talk about reaching for stars. But maybe this is all we deserve. Maybe people like us shouldn’t be allowed out there,” he gestured toward the ceiling, “messing up stuff for everybody else. And maybe he knows that our place is here.”

“Arin, if the situations were reversed, would you help his people?”

“Of course.”

“As would I. So who is he to judge us?”

“He’s a person, Idit. However different from us, he’s still a person. If he’s lying, maybe it’s for a good reason. Perhaps that’s where his honor lies. An ethical line he cannot or will not cross. There are some universals, Idit. Dignity, respect. And honor. Heaven knows, I’ve lost mine.”

They were silent. Then Kahayn said, miserably, “I’m doing the best I can. I’m doing what I have to do.”

“Oh, shut up.” Arin’s face twisted. “Lie to yourself, but don’t expect me to bless you for it. You think this is a war? Do you know what they say about war?”

“What’s that?”

“The first casualty in war is the truth.” Arin gave Kahayn a hard stare. “That’s what they say.”

She was quiet for a moment. Fidgeted with a stylus. “When the time comes...”

“I’ll be there.” He sounded resigned. “I always have been.”

“No, Arin. I don’t want you to assist.”

Arin stared. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“Yeah, I just don’t believe it. Why not?”

“I don’t want you involved. Whatever happens, I’m responsible. Someone has to be responsible. That’s me. You understand?”

“But I’m already involved!”

“And I’ve appreciated everything you’ve done.” She was still playing with the stylus, then tossed it aside with a sigh. “But this far, and no further, Arin. You’re out of the loop as of now.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“No, I don’t.” She read his sudden pain, and waited for an explosion of anger. Maybe she wanted it. But it never came.

Instead, Arin blew out a breathy laugh that had no humor in it. “Well, this is a hell of a thing.” He paused, almost seemed to think better of what he was going to say and then changed his mind. “I’ve known you a very long time. I’ve been your friend. I used to think I was a little in love with you, even when Janel—”

“Arin—”

“No, let me finish. Janel was my friend, Idit, before he ever was your lover. But I... I respected both of you, and when he died, I stayed away.”

“No, you didn’t. You were always there for me, Arin.”

“But only as a friend, and I knew that. I still hoped that maybe, someday... Anyway, now I wonder what that’s like.”

“Love?”

“Hope,” he said. “Because here’s the hell of it: I’m your friend, Idit. I always have been. You need me more than you think, because you’ve the devil on one shoulder, and an angel on the other, and sometimes

you need reminding of which is which. Janel's gone, I dit. But I'm here, and I always will be, even when this is over. Because if you go through with this, you'll hate yourself, and you'll need me to remind you that, once, you were on the side of the angels."

He turned away. The door snicked shut.

Kahayn sagged back in her chair and exhaled a long sigh, suddenly very weary. "I know, Arin. That's just the problem."

Chapter 3

Almost two months. She'd been here two months. And still counting.

Lense was filthy, and her clothes—blood-stiffened khaki pants, a khaki tee ringed with a necklace of sweat edged with dried salt—could probably stand on their own. Her mouth was gummy and dry, like she'd been marooned in Vulcan's Forge for a month. But at least she'd acclimated to the low oxygen. No headaches or nausea in two weeks. Her sleep was still off, though. Dreams of fire, and Julian, always there, forever just out of reach.

She slumped on a rock slab outside a honeycomb of mountain caves about three days' travel from that inland sea. That hazy orange ball of a sun was setting now, throwing rust-red bolts across a sky filmed with a yellow-brown smear. But better here than back in her ad-hoc recovery ward, a gray dank cavern reeking of old blood, stale urine, and fresh pus.

I just want to go home. She slipped her hand into her right trouser pocket and fingered her combadge, tracing the familiar contours. Please, I just want to go home.

She couldn't get that near disaster this morning out of her mind. All right, maybe that was melodrama. Worst-case scenario, she would have revised the amputation up, kept cutting until she had enough artery to tie off. But she wasn't doing anyone any good, hacking and tearing and cutting them up bit by bit. Who was she to think that she could?

She stared south. The terrain reminded her of Vulcan's Forge, too, only flatter. Long stretches of pancake-flat, sun-blasted red desert shimmering with heat waves. But where the valley opened up, there were boulders edged with stunted trees and irregular swaths of scrub. The horizon wavered with heat, and the air wobbled like something alive. This high up, she could just make up the edge of the sea, black as the blood crescents beneath her nails.

Three, four days' walk to that compound, probably. Even if she went there—if she didn't cook on the way—what then? Would things be any different, better there? Probably not.

Besides, there was Saad. Good-looking. Okay, more than that; very...well, drop-dead gorgeous. Very nice eyes. Beautiful hair, all that brown spilling over his shoulders. Odd thing, though. No scars, at least none that were visible. Maybe, beneath his clothes, probably had a nice back...

Whoa, kiddo. You start thinking about some guy, you know what you're really saying? That you're stuck. That they've stopped looking for you...

“Elizabeth?”

“Saad.” She swallowed, quickly knuckled away her tears, blinked the others back. “Just taking a break, but I’ve got to get back. My clothes, I’m a mess, I need—”

“You need rest.” Saad slid next to her. He’d changed out of his bloody tunic, and he smelled clean and, faintly, of musk. Beads of condensation dewed a tall gray mug he held in one hand. “I came to apologize.”

“For what?”

“Getting angry. I know you’re doing the best you can.”

“Hunh.” She gave a wan smile. “Best isn’t good enough. I thought I could pull this off. Back in my...country, there are stories about wars from very long ago. People getting all blasted to hell, and doctors operating with cleavers. I used to think that was heroic. Frontier medicine, you know?” That reminded her of Julian—how cruel she’d been and how much she wished she could take back everything she’d said—and she had to push past a sudden lump in her throat. “Winning against all odds, that kind of stuff.”

“And now?”

“Now, I think it’s vanity. Arrogance. Oh, a doctor has to be pretty narcissistic to begin with. Otherwise, you’d never pick up a, uh,” she’d been about to sayprotoplaser, “scalpel. A doctor’s got to believe in her hands and her head. On quick thinking and no room for doubt or error.”

“And what about this?” Saad flattened his palm over his sternum. “Is there no room for heart?”

“Not much. Compassion, sure. But the heart has doubts. The heart gets in the way.”

“Of everything?” He said it mildly enough but she was suddenly very conscious of how close he was, his scent. The way he was looking at her now, with a degree of intimacy she didn’t think she was imagining. She wasn’t entirely sure she disliked it.

“Most things.” She changed the subject. “Anyway, I’d do better with the proper equipment, more supplies.” Thinking:I’d do better with tools I recognize in a world you can’t imagine .

“Such as those in this...country to the north?”

“Yes,” she said. She wasn’t prepared for what she thought next: how much she wished he could have seen her inher world.A world that’s gone. “But I wouldn’t leave now anyway. You don’t just walk away from responsibility.”

“So you’ve never walked away, Elizabeth?”

“Never,” she lied, thinking that, of course, she couldn’t tell Saad the truth:Well, see, there was this kid, only he was really old and he harbored this incredibly deadly virus and... The point was shehad walked away; knew there was no choice. No use telling herself that Dobrah would outlive her by centuries; that time would heal him in ways she couldn’t. “I wouldn’t mind leavinghere, though.”

“Ishere so very bad?”

“You know it is.” Again, she felt this tug of danger and steered the conversation somewhere safer. “Why is it that the Kornaks don’t just wipe you out?”

Saad blinked as if perplexed by her sudden jump. “Beyond the obvious? That there are stretches of desert and rough terrain and water so mucked with pollution you could practically walk over it? That we’d simply fade into the mountains and our caves?” He shrugged. “It’s a good question. Actually, I think the answer’s deeply psychological. Every power needs an enemy, even if it’s just a vague theory that there’s someone out there who wants to do away with your way of life.”

“You do want the Kornaks gone, though.”

“No, I want them different. I want them to see how perverse their reality is.”

“Yeah?” Her gaze skipped to the blasted desert, then to Saad. “That looks pretty bad out there. Just how much worse do you want their lives to be?”

“I didn’t say worse. I said different. The Kornaks need us as a distraction from their tyranny. So, they make us the enemy.”

“Everyone has enemies.”

“But not everyone needs them. The Kornaks see everything as a war. They fight us. They fight the planet with their prosthetics and grafts. But the planet’s not an enemy. It’s our home, very broken, but still our responsibility.”

“You’d turn your back on all technology?”

“Some technology,” he said. A pause that was a beat too long, and long enough for Lense to wonder what “technology” Saad meant. “Some.”

“That seems fairly simplistic, Saad. What if the planet throws a terrible plague your way? You don’t want medicine?”

Saad shrugged. “Maybe that’s the planet’s way of thinning the herd. There must’ve been a point in this planet’s past when everything was in balance.”

“So why not work with the Kornaks, instead of against them? My experience, you get more done from the inside.”

“We tried that.” That too-long pause again. He looked away.

She let the silence spin out. Then: “What about negotiation? Anything’s got to be better than living like this.”

“What, you mean without prosthetics? In exchange for what? Ration credits for food, water, housing, clothes? Credits for loyalty, so you move up on the transplant list, or get better drugs to fight the cancers? No, thank you. I’m a flesh and blood man, Elizabeth, and I will live and die as one.”

There was really nothing to say to that. So she didn’t. The day gradually slipped away. The air cooled. A brassy glow to the clouds to the south: the Kornak city or complex or whatever it was. The rest of the

sky shaded from a yellowish-brown to a kind of dark beige smudging to a solid brown along the eastern horizon. Odd, but she hadn't stopped to look at the stars since coming here. Were there any to see? She didn't know.

And she was conscious of Saad by her side, and that didn't bother her. She didn't want to speak or do anything to shatter the moment: this small, fragile bubble of peace. So she let her mind drift; she thought of nothing at all. That was all right.

In the end, Saad spoke first. "Rain coming."

She roused herself as if from a trance. "How do you know?"

"I smell it."

"I don't smell anything."

"You have to be here awhile to know. And the clouds have been heavier these last few days. So, maybe, a week. Two at the most." He paused. "I'll be gone in a day or two."

"All right," she said for want of anything else to say. "Where are you going?"

"I am following up on some...intelligence."

Whatever that meant. "Okay."

"Elizabeth..."

"Yes?"

"If things were easier for you, do you think you'd stop hating this place so much?"

"Easier how?"

"Supplies. Equipment."

"Well, yeah, that would make my job easier. But I don't know about the rest."

"Staying here, you mean." He waited a beat. "With us."

Or do you mean, with you? She was surprised that this pleased her, very much. "I already said I don't walk away. But are you giving me a choice?" Saad's face was shadow, and the gathering twilight threw blades of darkness over his hard, lean features. "Am I free to go?"

"If you want. I won't stop you."

She was so stunned, she almost blurted it out: And go where, exactly? Instead, she said, "Do you want me to leave?"

"No. I can't promise I can make things better. I'd like to try. But I need time."

"What are you going to do?"

“I need time,” he said again.

Her gaze flicked to the horizon behind his shoulder. She couldn't see any stars, but maybe it wasn't dark enough yet. “Okay. Then we've got a deal.”

“Good,” he said. Then she felt his hands close over hers. She started. “Relax,” he said. “I brought something for you.”

Her fingers closed around something rough and very cool. Moist. The mug. “Thank you,” she said, mystified. Well, she was thirsty. But this water seemed...different somehow. It smelled clean. So different from what they called water here: triple filtered but still gray as ash and with a chemical smell.

He must have intuited her bewilderment because he said, “When people bind themselves in a relationship...”

“Relationship?”

“Or a partnership, a friendship, whatever you want to call it. It doesn't have to be romantic.”

“Of course not,” she said, feeling like a complete jackass. Then, wondering why she felt so let down. You idiot, this is one of those alien culture things. “So you bind yourselves...?”

“With a gift of something valuable.”

“Water.”

“A very precious commodity here; this is from someplace deep in the mountains. If you want, I'll take you there. Bathing is quite refreshing.”

“Ah,” she said. “Well, thank you. But what are we promising?”

“Not you. Me. A month ago, I gave you back your life. You've kept your promise. You work hard. I admire that.”

“Could be ego,” she drawled. “Could be I'm stupid.”

“Well, then I applaud your blind egotism.” The glint of a smile. “As you said, doctors are narcissistic. But it seems only fair that I try to level things a bit.”

“But what—?”

“Give me time.” He cupped her hands with his, a touch that made her pulse stutter. “Now we seal the bargain.”

“Okay.” There was a startling, wild heat in her thighs, her skin. She was a little out of breath, too, and not from bad air.

He drank first. Then it was her turn. She inhaled that deep fragrance of still green forests and misted ponds, and her heart hurt with longing. She closed her eyes; she drank. The water was very cold and made her teeth ache and tasted very good. She drank it all down. Then she lowered the mug. His hands

still cupped hers. “It’s all gone,” she said.

“No,” he said, and then she felt his hand on her cheek, and then his fingers skim her chin, linger over the bounding pulse in her neck. “No, it isn’t,” he said, and then his mouth closed over hers.

Lense felt some knot deep inside loosen and come undone. It was a kind of letting go. Of restraint and inhibition, yes, but also of her past: her life in Starfleet and on the *da Vinci*. Commander Selden. Julian Bashir. Dobrah. And why not? They were gone. She couldn’t change the past, and she had to stop wishing for a better one. So she let it all go. She slipped her arms about Saad’s waist and then cupped his shoulders and just...let go.

And if there were stars in that sky, Lense didn’t see any that night. But she didn’t care.

Chapter 4

“You think you’re the only one with his ass on the line? Julian, I need you to understand just how dangerous things are for you now, and me. Blate’s serious. This isn’t just an idle threat.”

“Oh, believe me, I understand,” said Bashir. He stood at a solitary table in a room that was, essentially, a big off-white box: no window, bright overhead fluorescents; a small bathroom off-center along the far wall that contained a toilet, a sink, a shower. A bed he kept neat, the blanket tucked because Bashir knew that morale depended on the little things. A muted vidscreen hung on one wall; Bashir had tuned it to a news station—the only one, government-run—and some newscaster chattered in antic silence through a story that Bashir gathered was about those rebel fighters these people were so obsessed with. There was a straight-back chair and the table strewn with medical texts—*anatomy*, *emergency medicine*, *physiology*, and other books, history principally, that Kahayn had provided at his request, and that he’d devoured and thank the Lord, he could read the language. So he knew about the Cataclysm and what he was up against.

“Let this security man and his people come.” He gave his tunic a little tug for emphasis the way he’d seen Captain Picard do once. The long-sleeved tunic fit well but felt odd because it was so loose: some kind of beige cotton with a Nehru neck and a pair of olive trousers. A pair of brown leather shoes with laces. “But I don’t know how many times we need to go through this. I’m from another country—”

“But really far away and so, of course, all your people have escaped the Cataclysm and only wish to remain anonymous and, oh and by the way, technologically advanced enough to equip a pressure suit that withstands vacuum and can fly.” Kahayn snorted. “You think I swallow that? I’m trying to help you. Anything you want, I got. Books, news...”

“And guards,” said Bashir. “Don’t forget my locked door, and just in case I find a way out, my lovely guards at the end of that long corridor and on the other side of a door that’s very thick and very locked. Yes, how can one not feel positively pampered?”

“Would you do any differently? In that amazing...country of yours?”

Of course, the answer to that was yes, after a fashion. “Doctor, you’ve been good to me—more, perhaps, than I could expect, given how I was dropped on your proverbial doorstep.”

“Considering your suit...yes, that’s probably accurate.”

And touché, Doctor. Bashir put on his most winning smile. “But I don’t know what will convince you that I’ve told the truth.”

“Oh, don’t be insulting. Fine, you’re a doctor. I believe that. But this fantastic, wonderful country no one’s heard of? Please.”

“Right. Well, I see your point.” Bashir debated, then snapped his fingers. “I know. Let’s just say I’ve told you what I can.”

“Uh-huh. Well, I have a better idea. What say we play a game called Trust. Here are the rules. You tell me the truth; I tell you the truth. See, in my land, that’s what we call trust...and don’t you say it, Julian, don’t you dare. Because I know you don’t trust me.”

Bashir closed his mouth. He’d been about to say just that. Only it would have been another lie.

“Yah,” she said after a pause. “Now let me tell you another, very important truth. You remember Blate?”

“Ah. Yes. Very unpleasant fellow. Those goggle-eyes. He really should have them attended to.”

“My sentiments, exactly.” The ghost of a smile brushed her lips. “But that’s the way he likes them, and you will have an excellent opportunity to study them right up close. He’ll be here in about four days.”

“Ah.” Bashir’s stomach churned. “More interrogation? You weren’t thorough enough?”

“Not for him. And this time, it won’t be just talk. You’ll be hooked up to an fMRI. You know the theory?”

Bashir was silent. Oh, he understood it. The machine was something out of the twenty-second...no, no, twenty-first century. fMRI: Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging, a primitive system dependent upon alternations in magnetic susceptibility and designed to measure, in the brain at least and very crudely, areas of neural activation.

In humans, oxygenated arterial blood contained oxygenated hemoglobin, which because of its iron matrix was diamagnetic and had, therefore, a small magnetic susceptibility effect. Deoxygenated blood was more highly paramagnetic and, therefore, the machine detected a larger observed magnetic susceptibility effect. In essence, fMRI allowed a window into the brain: a sort of watch-while-you-work.

He wondered how well that technology served this particular species. His gaze skipped over Kahayn’s features. That bluish cast to her skin...he knew what it was. Her blood, as well as that of everyone native to this world, already possessed huge quantities of methemoglobin: hemoglobin whose iron was ferric, not ferrous, and quite poor at binding oxygen. Still, if they were going to use the fMRI on him, the technology must work pretty well on their species, and that was bad because it meant the machine was very sensitive indeed.

“I understand the principle,” he said finally. “A lie detector test, right?”

“Yup. Virtually foolproof.” She gave him a tight, humorless smile. “Lying causes a very characteristic pattern of brain activation in seven different regions.”

“In other words, lying is hard work.”

“That’s right. By contrast, telling the truth is much easier. Truth only requires four neural pathways. Pretty characteristic pattern.”

“Ah. So you’ve concluded that we share enough commonality that my brain will tell the truth even if I lie.”

“You lie? I guarantee that screen will light up.”

“Mmmm.” Bashir nodded, his neutral expression—the one he’d practiced in that Dominion prison—firmly screwed in place. But a bolt of panic shuddered into his chest. Their just catching him out in a lie probably wasn’t the end of it. Maybe they’d take his conscious mind out of the equation. Use truth serum, perhaps, or some other way of cracking his resistance. Or just plain torture.

And—bugger it all—for what? Yes, yes, of course, his oath, but was that important now? Elizabeth was dead, and Ezri lost to him before he’d ever set foot on that runabout—and his heart with her. His suit, uniform, and combadge had been confiscated. Picking apart the suit’s guts and the combadge would take time, but these people would likely manage. So, if everything he’d ever known was gone; if he were tortured to death or left as some sort of mental vegetable, what did a theoretical abstraction like the Prime Directive, the product of a universe that wasn’t perfect but liked to pretend that it was, count for now?

Maybe not very much.

He looked up and met her eyes—compassion there, sympathy; and sadness, too; why is she helping me, why does she care?—and said nothing.

She nodded, though, as if he had. “Our world’s dying, Julian. We compensate but we can’t change things back, not in time to save ourselves.”

“What about your children?”

Pain arched across her face. “Can’t have any. Most of us can’t. So we switch out parts; rebuild ourselves. Keep staving off the inevitable as long as possible.”

“And then I show up.”

“And then you show up. You’re the same, sort of. A close match but still very different in some very important ways. For example, I know that you come from a place where there’s more oxygen in the air. I know for a fact that the amount of silica and copper and arsenicals in your body is only a fraction of what it is in ours and that’s because there aren’t industrial pollutants in your air or water. Your heart is simpler and still very efficient. You have less surface area in your lungs, and your immunological status is much less reactive than ours. I know because I finally had to give you a transfusion; you’d just lost too much blood.”

“Oh,” he said, with a dry smile. “I’m sure my system loved that.”

“Not to worry; I added a reducing enzyme to convert the iron from ferric to ferrous so you’d bind more oxygen. But the point is you didn’t have a transfusion reaction. You didn’t go into anaphylactic shock. Your system seems remarkably antigenically neutral, at least to our tissues.”

“That’s important?”

“As you’d say, quite. Because there’s one more thing about you that’s very different: your brain. It works really, really well. Is that the way it is with all your people?”

He said nothing. Her lips quirked into a half-smile. “Right. I forgot. You’re one of us. But do you know I’ve never heard an accent like yours either?”

“Oh, that. Well, my accent’s very common where I come from.”

“Then I’m glad I’ve never visited. I might get a headache. Oh, and there’s this other thing that just won’t go away: your remarkable suit that resists vacuum, and flies.” She paused. “You see what I’m driving at.”

“Even if your scan says that I’m lying, nothing changes the fact that I can’t tell you more than I have already.”

“Can’t? Or won’t?”

“Would you believe both?”

“No, because one’s predicated on ignorance and the other on will. But that little distinction won’t matter, not when this is over.”

He tried to be jolly about it, a bit gay, the way he imagined a debonair agent caught in a thorny situation might. “What, torture, Doctor? Thumbscrews? Bamboo under the fingernails?”

“What’s bamboo?” Then she waved that away. “Never mind. This isn’t a joke, Julian. Because the horrible part is you won’t have a choice.”

He forced a devil-may-care grin. “I’m sorry. For the life of me, I can’t fathom that.”

“Yah, for the life of you,” she said. “I’d say that’s about right.”

No idle threat there. His eyes wandered to the room’s vidscreen again, and he watched as a soldier—clearly, Kornak—aimed a rifle at the back of a prisoner’s head. He turned away. Any fool knew what came next. “So what are my options?”

“I’ll show you. And take a good hard look, Julian. Then, you choose.”

He took her in: her blue skin and that left eye and her left hand. “What if I still choose my way?”

“Then heaven help you,” she said, keying in the code that opened his door. “Because I won’t be able to.”

Chapter 5

When Lense got news that Saad was back, it was midmorning nine days later and she was in the middle of changing bandages. She wasn’t prepared for that tug of happy anticipation and the queer fluttery

feeling in her stomach.

So this is what it's like to be smitten. She hadn't even felt like that when she and her jackass of an ex-husband started dating back at Starfleet Medical....

She pawned the bandage-changing job off on one of her assistants, then hurried down passages and ducked through corridors. She got some queer looks and bobs of the head in greeting from the others. No secret about her and Saad. The look on that guard's face when he found us on morning patrol after that first night... But, God, this felt good. Everything looked brighter somehow; she felt better, more acutely aware of textures and smells. She liked exploring his body; she loved the feel of his skin, and his smell was rich and spicy. She liked pleasing him, and receiving pleasure. She just wasn't, well, depressed, and she certainly slept better. Her grin broadened. When Saad let her.

Even if it's just infatuation or lust, I don't care because I'm happy. I'm on this godforsaken world and every day is blood and more blood, and still, at least for now, I'm happy....

"Saad," she said, as she rounded the last corner, "I'm so gla—" She stopped. "Mara." Then, awkwardly, to Saad: "I'm sorry. They said you wanted to see me." She edged the way she'd come. "I can come back."

"No." Saad beckoned her forward. "No, no, I want you here. I asked Mara to join us. Please, come."

For a fraction of a second, she wasn't sure how to behave. That made her angry, like she was some giggly, gawky adolescent with a crush. "Of course," she said, sliding down to sit cross-legged on a low flat rock. She spotted a lumpy bundle of something heaped a short distance away. Saad sat across from her, but Mara hung back, leaning against the cavern wall.

She looked from one to the other. "Why do I think this has nothing to do with planning some raid for medical supplies?"

Mara just stared. Saad smiled, though only with his lips. "Oh, we still plan a raid. But something else has come up."

"And what's that?"

"I've just gotten word that General Nerrit is on his way to the Kornak complex at the edge of the sea. I think I might pay him a visit."

"And it would be suicide, Saad." Exasperated, Mara pushed off from the wall and paced, the clap of her boots banging off rock. "That you're even thinking of getting anywhere near Nerrit again."

Again? "Who's Nerrit?" asked Lense.

"Supreme Commander for the Kornak Armed Forces," said Saad. "His command center is about five, perhaps six days' travel. But he's on his way, apparently. About four days out at this point."

"Oh. Well, you want to kidnap him, take him out, what?"

"Under other circumstances. But now I have new information that makes me wonder what to do next."

The sound of Mara's pacing was giving Lense a headache. "I'm sorry, but I don't see how I can help

here. You want a list of supplies, I'll give you a list. I'll give you ten. But anything tactical, military..."

"It's not that clear-cut, Elizabeth. Trust me on this."

It was the first time he'd called her by name since she'd entered. Her gaze flicked to Mara, who paced and looked black as a thundercloud, and then to Saad. Something else going on, something to do with her... But what?

You're being paranoid. It's probably nothing.

She said, "Well, what does this—your source say? How many people do you have on the inside, anyway?"

"We had a few. Three, to be exact. One was discovered, and the other's gone silent. This one... the last time we had contact was a little over a year ago."

Mara cut in, her voice quaking with fury. "I don't care if we've had ten, a hundred sources... that you're even thinking of going back there—"

"Back. What does she mean, going back?" Lense looked from Mara to Saad, who was staring daggers at Mara. She switched her gaze back to Mara. "What do you mean? Going back to what?"

Mara opened her mouth. Clamped it shut. Threw Saad a look so charged that if it had been fire, he'd have burst into flames. She said, "You need to tell her. She needs to know. You need to ask."

"Ask me what?" Lense said. "What the hell's going on?"

"Mara..." Saad's voice thrummed with frustration. "I will ask questions when I..." Then he let out his breath, looked at Lense and said, more calmly, "Mara isn't very fond of a particular portion of that base."

Mara was unable to contain herself. "Gee, you think?"

Ignoring her, Saad squatted on his haunches beside Lense and drew a wide circle with the tip of his index finger. "Here's the layout. Perimeter security, checkpoints—here, here, and here." He jabbed his finger dead center. "The main hospital's here, at the heart."

Lense's eyes clicked over the rough drawing. "That's a lot to cover, and even if you get in... how are you going to do that, anyway?"

Saad's mouth twisted in a wry smile. "Nerrit may have new parts, but he's an old man with ingrained habits. He always travels with a rear guard. We'll ambush the guard, steal their ident tags and then slip into the complex. The beauty is that Nerrit isn't going to the main facility. Once he's in," he sketched a rough square, "my source tells me that he'll peel off here."

"A separate building?" Lense looked over at Mara. Mara just shrugged, looked away. "What is it?"

"A specialized research wing, underground. Totally cut off from the main complex. The only way in or out is a tram tunnel, and a separate foot tunnel."

"Why the special tunnel?"

“They’ve had to cut power there in the past. And there were...disturbances.”

“So, is it for a SWAT team?” Lense knew of them, of course; all prisons had them if inmates got loose and cut off power. Underground tunnels ensured speed, stealth, and surprise. “What is it, a stockade?”

“No, I told you. It’s a research wing.”

“Well, then that level of containment usually means a biohazard.”

“Yeah,” said Mara. She was holding up the wall again. “What the lady said. Biohazard. Right, Saad?”

“Well, no,” said Saad. “I don’t think that biohazard really does it justice.”

Chapter

6

They’d taken a left from his room, away from the guards at the end of the corridor, and then doglegged right. Bashir spotted an adjacent, nearly dark corridor on his left, and he thought he saw some kind of sensor winking like an angry red eye.

But they didn’t go there. Instead, they turned right and passed room after silent room through a maze of corridors. They didn’t speak. The only sounds were the taps of their shoes and the whoosh of a ventilation system. They finally dead-ended at a thick metal containment door. The door’s sheen reminded him of Deep Space 9, all that Cardassian gray. Access required retinal scan and a thumbprint ID. Kahayn submitted to both, and the door slid open with a whine of hydraulics.

The door gave onto another corridor that was much shorter, and now Bashir recognized familiar smells: the sharp bite of fixative mingling with a fuller musk-ripe odor of feces and the wine odor of fermented fruit. The right wall was painted yellow cinder block, he thought. Midway down, the wall was faced with a large rectangle of clear glass. Inside was something that looked like an exhibit in an old-fashioned museum: specimens suspended in jars; a long gurney that gave onto a metal sink and adjoining counter; a ring of metal counters on which stood equipment, analyzers of various sorts. Another metal door, wide enough for a gurney. A freezer, probably. Bashir knew the basic setup of an autopsy suite when he saw it.

But they hadn’t entered. Instead, Kahayn went left to another door. She’d pulled it open and a fruity smell pillowed out, one mixed with excrement and hay for bedding.

Animal room. But there was something very wrong here. Bashir turned a slow circle. That strange air, it felt...His skin prickled. Alive, and all edges and sharp angles.

“Cold, isn’t it? But you feel it.” Kahayn stirred the air with her index finger. “Howthick it feels?”

Bashir nodded. “Yes. Crowded. Like I’m being jostled.” He did another turn. The room was perhaps six meters square, and bathed in fluorescent glare. Wire cages lined three walls, two to a wall. Each cage held an animal similar to TerranPan troglodytes, chimps, but with orange fur like orangutans and a bit larger.

And they were very strange. For one, they were absolutely silent. Not that this was unusual; Earth chimpanzees hooted only in panic or fear. But these animals were... sizing him up, yes. They sat on their haunches, but their heads followed him to and fro, like perfectly behaved spectators to a slow-motion tennis match but in a kind of ripple, like a wave, as if the next picked up where the one before left off.

“You can get closer,” said Kahayn. Her voice sounded unnaturally loud in the hush. “They don’t initiate.”

“That’s an odd way of putting it.” Cautiously, Bashir sidled up to one cage. The primate inside squatted, watchful. Waiting. But Bashir noticed it right away: a shift in the air. A sense of...he frowned. Expectancy?

And that’s when he saw an odd bulge tenting the crown of the primate’s scalp. The bulge was a rough circle with a diameter of six, maybe eight centimeters. But there was nothing external, no protruding wires or electrodes. A quick glance at the other cages revealed exactly the same bulge in roughly the same place.

He turned back to Kahayn. “It’s an implant, right?” When she nodded, he continued, “For what?”

“This.” She stirred air again. “What’s it remind you of?”

Bashir closed his eyes. Thought. Almost smiled. Quark’s. “A bar,” he said, opening his eyes. “Too many people in a small space and they’re all talking at once, so there’s only this general buzz but you can’t make out the words.”

“Do you feel as cold now?”

He blinked. “No, it’s gone.”

“That’s because they’re not as worried about you.” A pause. “What would you say if I told you there was a conversation going on?”

“You mean the animals? But how—” He stopped. Pulled air in a quick gasp. “My God.”

“Yah,” she said, softly. “That’s right.”

* * *

“Neural regeneration,” said Saad. “The Kornaks are good at developing prosthetic limbs and eyes and ears and a whole host of other appliances. Someday, they’ll build a man from scratch; count on it. They’ll have to, eventually.”

“Why’s that?”

“Can’t have kids,” said Mara. Her expression was bland, and her tone matter-of-fact, as if she were talking about something no more important than the weather. “Kornaks, us. Oh, we get a couple. But usually something’s wrong with them. Most of them die.”

“The Kornaks have focused their energies on replacing themselves piece by piece,” said Saad. “But that only works up to a certain point.”

Lense nodded. “The brain’s the limiting factor. It doesn’t regenerate. You can rebuild a lot of the body,

but if you're senile, who cares? It's like a fail-safe device. We're pretty much wired for obsolescence."

The cave was silent. Then Saad said, "Well, not all of us."

* * *

The autopsy suite smelled just as primitive as it looked: a strong tang of some disinfectant mingling with the gassy odor of rot. The microscope was also primitive. Binocular eyepiece, adjustable objectives, a slide with a specimen in paraffin mounted on a staging table. But Bashir saw well enough and he didn't like it one little bit.

"Massive rejection. Looks like a battlefield after a war." He exhaled. "Dear God. The tissue's absolutely ravaged. How long did you say the process took?"

"In the primates, within two weeks," said Kahayn. She stood by his right shoulder. "The problem is that with all the damage done to our environment and the weird bugs that developed over time, our immune system is quite reactive to just about everything. To get around that, all our prosthetics are biomimetic and possess a DNA chip that allows for recognition and then integration into the host body. Still, the trick is to make prosthetics as antigenically neutral as possible."

Bashir arched his eyebrows. "Hard to do, with DNA as a template. You produce RNA, which produces proteins, and you'll get rejection. The only way to get around that would be some sort of, I don't know, universal DNA donor. On the other hand, the brain's privileged, relatively antigenically isolated, so it might work. But there's no such thing as a universal DNA donor."

She gave him a strange look. "Well, I tried something different. There were a few records left from before the Cataclysm. I stumbled on some literature about certain species of sea life that regenerated neural tissue."

"I see," said Bashir. Yes, she was on the right track; many Earth species of starfish and amphibians, not to mention Ludian halofish on Lentrex VII, could regenerate entire nerves and whole limbs. "What did you try next?"

In reply, Kahayn switched out slides, peered through the eyepieces, adjusted the focus, then straightened. "Have a look."

Another brain section, but now something in the center. . . . When he changed magnifications, he couldn't believe his eyes. Entire neuronal tracks had been reconstructed; the membranes bracketed with an overlay of. . . . "That microglia's much too dense, and those axons. . . . my God, is that metal?"

"A combination of silica and copper. You're looking at what happens to a primate's brain when it's exposed to MEMs. Microelectromechanical machines, a variant of nanotechnology developed for computer systems. You're familiar with their function?"

"Not really," Bashir lied. Thinking: Ancient history; computers and hard drives, copper and silica chips and tungsten for an interconnect.

"MEMs can rewrite and repair information on nanodrives. So my thought. . . our thought, was to replicate this function within a brain. It's one thing to hook up an artificial eye or ear." She touched the corner of her left eye. "Everything works just fine because it's a discrete system, a totally dedicated subunit, you might say. But it's quite another to jury-rig whole tracts of interconnecting neural tissue, or an entire lobe.

So my initial idea was to use DNA chips as the programming matrix in a MEM. But in order to facilitate axonal repair, I inserted DNA from a species of diatom. Plankton, actually. Very hardy. Their cell walls are made of silica.”

His mind bounced around the problem. Simple biology: there was usually only five to ten grams of silica in the body, either ingested or absorbed from the environment. Silicic acid dissolved in water; silicates in dust. So long as the silicon remained bound as siloxanes, not much of a problem, health-wise. Why, look at any fracture site in bone and the ratio of silica to calcium was nearly double.

On the other hand, these people lived in a kind of pollutant stew: silicates, chromated copper arsenate, copper oxides in the air. So Kahayn looked to rebuild brain by armoring it with a substance that could not be rejected. Ingenious.

“So this would be like encasing your regenerated neurons in an exoskeleton of silica and copper that was antigenically neutral,” said Bashir. “Quite elegant, Doctor.”

She bobbed her head at the compliment, but her expression was still grim. “Everything went fine. We induced disease in the primates, put in the MEMs, and the primates regained function. It was like a miracle and...”

He read the struggle in her face. “And? But?”

“Things we...I couldn’t explain, didn’t see coming.” She put her hands into the pockets of her white lab coat and shrugged as if suddenly cold. “What is it that a complicated computer does?”

“Information processing. Data storage. Problem solving.”

“Plus, the capacity to relay or manufacture commands, tell different parts of a program to run at a certain time or in a certain way, right? But what if a machine wants to share information with another machine?”

“Oh, that’s easy enough. Primi—” He caught himself before he could say primitive. “Microwave, for example. Beaming messages back and forth; I mean, really, all communications technology relies upon transmission of encoded energy. But a machine can’t decide things like that. The capability has to be put there.”

“Yah, you’d think. But that’s not the way these implants worked. The MEMs decided...they began to rewrite portions of healthy brain. The MEMs interpreted normal brain as damaged. And then when I was doing imaging studies, the primates—maybe the MEMs, I don’t know—they decided to link. I couldn’t stop them, and they didn’t stop with just one machine. These scanners hooked into more sophisticated systems, and then other systems linked to those computers in a cascade. They were like a virus. But instead of crippling the network, they and the network—our computers—became dependent upon one another. They joined forces.”

Networking; brains meshing with a computer, behaving like a computer the way a Bynar’s must; an amazing discovery... “What happened when you tried to disconnect them? Shut down the computers?”

“They just...died. Like they needed the machines. Or had become them.” She looked bleak. “They just died.”

“Then what about the animals I just saw? Are they linked to a computer network somewhere?”

“No.” She shook her head. “You’re in the isolation wing. Our power is self-contained. Our computers are in a separate area. Our communications don’t even tie in with the main complex. The animals you saw were never exposed to anything more complicated than a free-standing system that’s not on any network.”

“But you just said that these MEMs, their natural proclivity is to try to link with another system. So if you—well, I don’t know—starve them for contact, what do they link with?” Then he remembered that crowded air in the animal room. “To each other?”

She nodded. “But, again, limited by distance the way one would see with microwave transmission, or line of sight technology. I keep trying to separate them. Interrupt the MEMs, introduce a lesion, all sorts of things. But I keep failing. I separate them too long or too far, they die.”

“Well, then, that would be the end of it, wouldn’t it? I mean, you really can’t take this any further.” But that was a lie. Because Bashir knew that he’d have been tempted to take the next logical step. “What did you do?”

“Isn’t it obvious, Julian? If a brain’s information could be uploaded or downloaded with another machine...”

“Why not manipulate data, yes? Download information into the primates and vice versa?”

“Pretty much,” she said, quietly. “It was all so... exciting, you have to understand that.”

“Oh, but I do,” he said. “The brain’s immense, and there’s so much of it we don’t use. So I understand the temptation, completely. Honestly.”

“No arguments about ethics?”

“Just because I understand temptation doesn’t mean there are no ethics involved, Doctor,” he said, gently. “I said I understood. Here you’d stumbled on a mechanism to put knowledge in or take it out, yes?”

“That’s right,” she said, her voice thin, intense. “Data is data. That’s all we are, really: chemicals and molecules and atoms, and all of it some rearrangement according to a code. All there, just waiting for a compatible system, a way to read it, to edit and to add. It was like being given a key to a locked door. Turn the key and, instantly, you know the thoughts and memories and desires of someone else. Just waiting for me to open that door.”

“But some doors are locked for reasons,” said Bashir. Thinking: I’d have been tempted. A window into the mind of an animal, or even another species...

And then it hit him.

She said memories. She said thoughts and memories of someone else. Not something, not an animal. Someone.

All those isolated empty rooms, each with a bed and a chair and a table and a vidscreen. Just like his. And that angry red eye of a magnetic lock at the end of a silent, dark corridor.

Oh, dear God. Everything came crashing in, and when he looked at her—at that stricken, remorseful

face—it was like he saw her for the first time. Not just her blue skin or the chocolate cast to her lips, or even her artificial left eye that had no capillaries and a left hand that made a tiny clicking sound when she moved a finger, and held no warmth. For the first time, Bashir saw—really understood—what all this meant for him now on this godforsaken waste of a planet.

Because she wore her insignia over her left breast pocket. And there was her rank, bars here instead of pips, tacked to the collars of a uniform shirt.

A scientist who broke barriers, and a soldier who followed orders.

“You said a key to a locked door.” His voice was ragged with urgency and hoarse, as if he’d run a great distance, and his mind had only now caught up. “But you didn’t have to open it, Kahayn. Not every door demands that you open it! And even if someone tried to compel you, if they ordered you, you’re a doctor, you’re a physician! For the love of God, you don’t pick people apart! You’re a healer! You could always refuse, you could say no; you could say that I am a person and a person may only go this far and no further....”

“Oh, you could, Julian, you could,” she said, and her voice was so full of remorse and compassion and regret he felt like weeping with her. “In a perfect world, you even might. But the thing is... I didn’t.”

Chapter

7

Lense felt frozen, like that moment that always came in the transporter just before she dissolved: that tiny hitch in time when things were as crisp and detailed and immutable as if cut into the heart of a rare diamond.

“But who would volunteer?” she said. Yet she already knew the answer: the military. Not different from Earth’s sometimes-not-so-distant past at all; in every war, whether with guns or experimental craft or bioweapons, soldiers were fodder. Sometimes they knew what was happening, and why. Many times they didn’t.

“They were desperate,” said Saad, as if reading her mind. “We’re all desperate, Elizabeth, just in different ways. So they did it.”

“And?”

“At first, it didn’t work. They had the same problem with rejection.”

“But that’s what’s so strange about this whole thing,” she said, without really thinking it over first. “I don’t understand the violence of this rejection business. The brain’s relatively privileged, comparatively well isolated antigenically.”

She was only aware when the silence grew that Saad was staring, as was Mara. It occurred to her, too late, that human brains were privileged. But here, their spleen and thymus are so large, probably hyperreactive to stimulus... She thought about trying to backtrack but then figured she’d put her boot in it. “How did they overcome the problem?”

“By finding someone uniquely compatible with everyone else.”

“Like a universal donor.” Well, it could work. There was blood as a precedent. But DNA? “I take it that’s rare.”

“Rare. Yes. Likely a mutation, but a very convenient one.”

“So they incorporated his...her DNA?” she asked. Saad nodded. Mara’s eyes had narrowed to slits. “And these people, they linked up and couldn’t be separated?”

“Right.” Saad held up a finger. “All but one. This universal donor, as you say. He linked, but he could also unlink, still function and think independently. They weren’t really prepared for that.”

“Why couldn’t the others?”

Mara looked at Saad, and Saad stared at a point above Lense’s head for a moment, sighed. “I think they don’t really know. But maybe he was what you called privileged.”

“But then...even if they link, who decides? Which one of them gets to, I don’t know, call the shots? What happens to free will?”

“Isn’t that obvious?”

Of course, it was. But then she thought again about what he’d just said. “You said was privileged. Past tense. What happened to the donor?”

Saad shrugged. “Gone. And no use cloning his DNA without him around to, as you say, call the shots. The rest of the pod was like a computer idling, waiting for a command. So the Kornaks started looking for another, very special person. But now, you see, Nerrit’s coming.”

“So they think they found someone. Okay. But why are you telling me all this? How is this related to me?”

“Because I have to ask you a very important question, Elizabeth. And I need for you to answer me honestly, truthfully.”

“I’ve never lied to you, Saad,” she lied. “What do you want to ask me?”

“When Mara found you, you said you’d come here with friends, on a hike.”

“Yes.”

“And that you got separated.”

“Yes.”

“And you had no equipment.”

“What is this, Saad?”

“Funny,” he said. He pushed up, walked to that lumpy, wrapped bundle she’d noticed earlier, and twitched the cloth free.

Lense went absolutely, perfectly still.

“Because you know?” Saad picked up her helmet and turned it this way and that. “I was just about to ask you the same question.”

* * *

Bashir’s chest was tight. He couldn’t breathe. He was burning up, and then freezing cold and the hackles on the back of his neck stood on end, and then he started to shake, uncontrollably. He couldn’t help it, couldn’t stop it. The beat of blood in his brain was so remorseless he thought his skull would explode. His thoughts raced like rats on a wheel spinning to nowhere: about cogs in a machine and implants and those primates and the air above his head filled with their silent words and images... Ah, God, if he could just stop his brain from thinking, just for an instant! Just shut his brain off, just shut down!

“Julian.”

Got to get out of here. He squeezed his eyes tight, but he was still thinking, thinking, thinking, and he wanted to run to a dark closet and hide and draw his knees up, the way he had when he was small and stupid and couldn’t say his name properly; and still he’d laughed with all the other children because he was so lonely and too dull...

“Julian.”

...too simple to understand that they were laughing at him...

“Julian.”

...at poor, simple, dim little Jules, the ninny, the nit no one liked and his parents despised.

“Julian, look at me.”

His eyes snapped open. “Why did you show me this?” His voice cut his raw throat like a knife. “Why?”

“Because you needed the facts.” That wash of yellow fluorescent glare turned her skin the color of bile and made his look dead. “Truth for truth.”

“But why?” Hot fury flooded his veins and then before he knew what he was doing—or maybe he just didn’t care—he had her by both arms, the way he might with someone he loved and hated in equal measure. She tried to twist away, but now he had her and he hung on tight. “Why have you done this, why? To torture me? What do you want? For the love of God, what do you expect of me?”

“The truth.” Her eyes ticked back and forth, the left lagging a bit; and she’d gone so pale he saw the solitary salt track of her tears dried onto her right cheek. “Where do you come from, Julian? Who are you? What are you? If you don’t tell me the truth or give me something tangible, I can’t help you. Look at it from my perspective. If you have nothing to hide, then why should I interfere? Why show you anything? You would take the fMRI and pass.”

“But Blate wouldn’t let me go. You know that. Even if I passed, would that really stop him? Or you?” He gave her a rough shake. “Really? Look at all you’ve done already! Wouldn’t this man Blate simply decide that I’d fooled you in some way? Because, remember, there’s the suit, Doctor, there’s the suit. So would

he order you to do this anyway?"

"Yes."

"Then what's the point?"

"Because I need to know! I need something that tells me this far and no further because there's more at stake here than you can possibly know or understand. So I need to know the truth. Before I risk everything, I need to know and I need to know right now, Julian, right now—before it's too late."

"Too late?" Now he gripped her very hard, harder than he'd ever held Ezri even when she was killing his soul, though he'd wanted to. Oh, God, how he'd wanted to break something in that runabout on that long trip back from Trill to DS9, when she'd let him go. Because it was too late for Julian, always too late: too late with Jadzia and then with Ezri. And yet how delicate he'd been, how so very polite because good, sweet, dear Julian was brought up not to make a scene because it might draw too much attention and then people would start asking the wrong questions. So he'd always been in hiding, all his life. Even in love because the truth was so dangerous. "Too late? What does it matter now what I say when Blate's mind is made up?"

"Because it does. Don't you see, Julian? I've been honest with you when I could've lied. Nothing impelled me to choose against myself by showing you everything. All my ugliness and all these mistakes, ones I made even when I thought I was doing good rather than harm. But I showed you because you are a person, not an animal. I did it of my own free will, and that is the last thing that separates me from the machine, but it is the very...last...thing!" She was weeping again, tear upon tear but only along one cheek, one. "A machine can decide, but it can't think. Unless it is programmed to do so, it will not choose against itself nor make any other judgment other than what fact allows it to see."

"But then there's this." She put the flat of her palm upon his chest and over his galloping heart, and he gasped because that touch burned him like a brand. "There is faith," she said, "and there is hope, and all the emotions that are the truths that bind us in a way that a machine can never know."

"I...I..." His lips clamped together; despair visited his heart, and then because he knew that he would surely kill her where she stood, he spun away. "No, no, no, damn you!"

And then because he couldn't stand any more—because he knew with a sudden, awful clarity what his fate was—he wheeled around, grabbed the microscope and hurled it across the room with all his might. It rocketed straight as a missile and smashed the glass with a tremendous bang! The glass exploded in a starburst, shattering with a sound like hard, ancient ice. The sound broke him somewhere inside, like a dam giving way, and he howled. His heart battered his ribs; and he was weeping, too, as much from fury as dread because he was, after all, only a man.

"I can't! Please, please, don't you understand? If I could, I would, but I can't! I want to; believe me, you don't know how much. Do you think I want to end up like them? Like those animals in those cages? Ask me something I can answer, and I will do it! Because however much I wish I could change this, change myself, you've asked for the one thing I just simply cannot do, and precisely because of this!" He banged his chest with his fist and then held it there, every beat of his savage heart shuddering through his living flesh because it was still his heart; it was his. "My faith! My heart! My hope and my truth! And I cannot part paths with any of that even to save myself because then I will no longer be a person I...recognize!"

And then it was like a cord snapped, like he was a marionette whose puppeteer had cut his strings. He broke off, turned away. Stumbled for someplace as far away as he could manage in that awful place.

“And so there’s your truth, Doctor,” he said, utterly spent. Swaying, he slid down the length of the far wall. His knees folded and he squeezed his roaring head between his hands. “It’s the only truth I know.”

He didn’t know how long he sat there like that. Maybe long enough to turn to stone. (Please, God, he wanted that because a stone can’t feel love or agony, or the chilling despair of knowing that there is absolutely nothing left—not even hope.) Certainly he sat long enough for his head to stop roaring and his breathing to quiet.

Then he heard a hesitant step, a crunch of glass. When her hands took hold of his wrists, he started, not only from her touch but because his right wrist was cold and his left was not.

“Julian.” Her voice was watery. “Please forgive me, but you must try to understand how very much, how very important this is.”

“Why?” His head was still woolly, and he was so tired. “What do you mean?”

“I envy you,” and then she swallowed hard. “I envy you your heart. Your faith, your integrity, your passion. So let me ask you a different way.” She pulled in a breath. “Julian, will you fail?”

“What? Why?”

“Because it’s important. It’s everything. So in four days, when I have to hook you up to that scanner, will . . . you . . . fail?”

And there: He saw what she was doing in that instant—allowing him to tell his truth in the only way he could, and he was more grateful than she could ever know because now, at last, he could answer, and it would be no lie.

“Yes,” he said.

* * *

“I don’t know what that is,” said Lense. Saad had her EVA suit now and when he shook it, a shower of grit rained upon rock with a sound like rice. “I have no idea.”

“It looks to be about your size.” Saad hefted the helmet. “Is it yours?”

She said nothing.

“This is a waste,” said Mara. “Let’s stop this little charade and—”

“Be quiet.” Saad hadn’t even turned around. His eyes fixed on Lense, and she felt her heart swell with anger. This was so stupid; what did the Prime Directive mean now? More than that, she didn’t want to lie to Saad, not anymore.

I care for him, and he cares for me, and that should count for something, shouldn’t it? In this whole crazy universe, doesn’t love count for anything?

And then her mind snagged on something else: Nerrit, and Saad’s source. Nerrit was coming, and that was unusual. Nerrit was coming all the way out here, but not because of her suit. Saad had her suit. But

Nerrit's coming was somehow about her, anyway. But that would have to mean that this was about somebody else, someone like her...

Oh, my God, my God!

"Elizabeth?"

"Yes?" She forced herself to focus just on Saad's face and his eyes and everything there was for her in his heart she didn't want to lose.

"Is this suit yours?"

She swallowed. "No."

"Saad," Mara began.

Saad held up a hand, and Mara sank back into silence. He looked like he was weighing something on a mental scale, debating how to ask the next question in a way that she might or could answer. Then he replaced her suit and laid her helmet on top and walked to her and knelt and took her hands in his.

"Well, then," he said, very gently. "Answer me this, my love. Are you the only... one?"

She knew what he meant. More important, she knew who.

"No," she said.

* * *

Kahayn still had him by his wrists. Whether she tethered him there, or this was a comfort to both of them, he didn't know. It didn't matter.

Bashir said, "So what now? What happens now?"

"That depends," she said, "on how much you trust me."

* * *

"Bashir," Lense said. "His name is Julian Bashir. He's a doctor, like me. We were traveling together and got...separated."

"All right," said Saad. He still knelt, still had her hands, but now there was uncertainty in his eyes. "Are you and he, are you...?"

"No. Just...we're friends."

His shoulders eased a bit. "Can you tell me where or how you got...?"

"No," she said again. "But Julian's why Nerrit's coming, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"And your contact?"

“Has a plan, a way to get us in by the footpath instead of the tram. It’s risky. And we’ve got to go now. Nerrit will be here in a few days, and it will take us that long just to get within striking distance of his convoy.”

“Saad,” said Mara. “Please. This isn’t wise.”

“Really?” he drawled. “I think you’ve made that abundantly clear.”

Lense saw the sudden hurt in Mara’s eyes. “Don’t dismiss her out of hand. She’s your second. She knows your capabilities probably better than you do because your mind’s already made up.” And why; why is he so persistent, and how does he know so much if...?

“I thought you didn’t know anything about the military,” he said, showing a thin sliver of a smile. “I admit, this isn’t exactly the smartest thing I’ve ever done in my life, but that doesn’t matter. If the Kornaks are right about this Bashir, then we’ve got to stop them. Even if they’re wrong, they will take whatever they want from his mind, and then the man you know, Elizabeth, just won’t exist anymore. He’ll simply be. And everything locked in your head that you will not say they will rip right out of his. So I’m not doing this for you, Elizabeth, or even for him. I’m doing it for all of us.”

She blurted it out. “No, you’re not.” She saw the edges of his eyes tighten but pushed on anyway. “Don’t kid yourself. You’re doing this for you.”

“I am?” Saad was very still. “Why?”

“Because,” said Lense. She was aware of Mara’s eyes on her as well, but she kept hers firmly on Saad. “You’ve got a grudge.”

“About what?”

“You’re the donor, Saad. You’re the one who walked away.” Now she looked over at Mara and saw the emotions chasing across the big woman’s scarred, ravaged face. “Or did you break him out?”

“Broke him out,” said Mara, hoarsely. “We were in the same unit. Saad was my CO. Then Nerrit... they tested us. Took Saad. I... we figured out what was happening, and then we got him out. We had help on the inside, a few of the scientists.”

“Your contacts?” asked Lense. Mara nodded. “What happened to them?”

“One we know for sure was killed. Janel was his name. The other two... like Saad said, we’ve not heard from them for a long time. Until now. But we got Saad out.”

“And I’ve never forgotten it, Mara,” said Saad. He’d been staring at Lense but now swiveled his head around to his second. “Your bravery and your loyalty.”

And maybe her love, too, Saad, though she’d never say it. “Then you need to listen to her now,” said Lense. “Mara’s right. You’re too emotionally involved.”

It was the wrong thing to say. Saad sat up a little straighter, and he withdrew his hands from Lense’s—not quickly. But he took them back. “And you’re not? You don’t care about this Bashir?”

“Yes, of course, I care,” she flared. “Don’t twist this around to make it my fault. I’m not in command. You are, and you can’t lead on emotion. You’ll make mistakes.”

“Listen to her, Saad,” Mara said. “She’s right. We were lucky once, but you go back and I feel it down deep, you’ll never get out.”

Saad’s jaw firmed. “And what if you can’t get Bashir out, Mara? Are you prepared to die for this man? Are you absolutely clear that if the time came, you could kill both Bashir and yourself?”

“Strangers are easy.” Mara’s face had gone as stony as Saad’s, though her cheeks glistened. “My friends, the people I care about, they’re hard.”

Lense was incensed. “What are you two thinking? You’re not going to kill anybody!”

“If we can’t get him out, we’ll have to,” said Mara, flatly. “Otherwise, the Kornaks will still have him.”

“Then we’d better be damn sure to get him out,” said Lense. “Because you try that, you’ll have to kill me, too.” She drilled Saad with a look. “We clear on that?”

“You’re not going, Elizabeth. I won’t allow it.”

“Try and stop me. You said I’m my own woman, so I get to choose, and I choose for Julian. You have to take me. Why should he trust you? He doesn’t know you. Besides, he might be hurt, and I’m a doctor; I’m the only one who can help him. So, like it or not, you need me, and even if you didn’t, I’m sure as hell not staying here. Because let me be crystal clear about this, Saad. I’m not doing this for you, either. I’m doing it for Julian, and I’m doing it for me because it’s the right thing to do. I don’t have any other choice.” She paused. “He’s my friend.”

Saad looked from her to Mara and then back. “All right then, I guess you’re coming. But I’m still going.”

“And how are you going to be sure that you don’t end up as a permanent guest again?” asked Mara.

“By sending them to hell,” he said.

Neither woman asked what that meant. They had a pretty good idea.

Chapter 8

The rain had started six hours ago: a persistent drumming that was primordial and remorseless. Blate liked the way it lashed his windows, trying to break through, break him. Well, come, let it try.

He was strapping on his sidearm when his vidcom chimed. Annoyed, he looked at his screen, noting the time on a desk chronometer with his left eye while scanning the incoming call with his right: Kahayn. He punched his vidcom to life. “Yes, Doctor, what do—Doctor, what’s happened?”

Her hair was disheveled; a blotchy purple and brown bruise spilled over her right cheek; her lower lip had swollen, and a dark chocolate rivulet of fresh blood oozed from her mouth. Her collar was torn open at the throat, and Blate saw a livid necklace of fresh bruises. “Bashir,” she said.

“Bashir did that?” A very interesting development. He was surprised by the prisoner’s ferocity. Ah, but then, four days ago, Kahayn had taken it on herself to give this Bashir what she called a tour. One smashed window and a microscope damaged beyond repair later, she’d conceded defeat. “He attacked you,” he said, without inflection. Inside, he was...cautious.

“About an hour ago. Stupid, I thought I could still persuade him to cooperate. Anyway, Bashir,” she looked away, struggled for control, “he broke free. Backhanded me across the face, then went for my throat. Screaming something about some woman. A lover, I presume, someone who jilted him. The guards pulled him off.”

“You’re lucky he didn’t kill you.”

“We’re just lucky the guards didn’t do him any damage. But there’s no question now.”

“I’d say not. Only a guilty man struggles.” Bashir’s outburst was interesting, even puzzling. Why now? Because the ax was about to fall? Probably. He supposed even a spaceman could panic. He’d always regarded the fMRI as his trump card against Kahayn, anyway.

Because she’d never have been able to refuse, not in front of Nerrit, because then she’d lose control over the project. That would kill her. Because I know your mind, Colonel, and I have eyes, and they don’t miss much.

Aloud, he said only, “So you wish to proceed with the operation instead?”

She gave a curt nod. “When is General Nerrit due?”

“Four, five hours, I believe.”

“Give me three.” Her lips peeled back in a smile. Her teeth were stained light mahogany with blood. “You and General Nerrit can have ringside seats.”

“Very well, Colonel. But I want Arin there, too.”

She seemed to hesitate. “I don’t need an assistant.”

“Arin has always assisted you in the past.” Blate fingered up a slim radio from his desk and slipped it into his left trouser pocket. “I should think that past experience with Bashir would’ve sensitized you to just how...different he really is.”

“Good point,” she said. Her tone was neutral. “I’ll contact him.”

“No, no, I’ll do that. Oh, and Colonel...do wipe your mouth. You’re getting blood on your uniform.”

* * *

Well, Arin tilted back in his chair, listening to the electric fizzle of his vidcom fade and the lashing of the rain. The wet made his knee ache. This is a hell of a thing.

If Kahayn had second thoughts or harbored hopes that Bashir might fail, they had evaporated. Worse, he’d gotten roped in as assistant. And it changed everything.

So how to make this work now? I won't be in place...

He debated for a moment, then pulled a bronze hinge affixed to the top drawer of his wooden desk—an antique with an ornately carved lip—and fished around until he found what he was looking for. The spectacles case was very plain and quite old. Some sort of extinct hardwood with a geometric inlay of diamond shapes lacquered purple. He thumbed open the lid. The specs were black-rimmed, a little square. He unfolded the eyepieces. They were quite delicate. He unhinged his steel-rimmed glasses from his ears, and then carefully slid on this second pair. His reflection, ghostly and surreal, stared back from his empty vidcom screen. He hadn't worn these glasses in a long time, over a year. They made him look bookish. Even better, they didn't slide down his nose.

Then he reached into the drawer again. He found the tiny nub he was looking for. A slight pressure and a small, rectangular panel slid noiselessly from the space between the overhanging lip and drawer.

The radio was very slim and a brushed pewter color, about the size of a largish calling card. It folded, and now he unhinged it, stabbed up the power and then took a moment to decide exactly what he would say.

* * *

Everything had changed.

The room was at the end of a far corridor in the research wing. The corridor was always in shadow, the lights on motion sensors that clicked on and off, so that she trailed darkness behind. The room was secured with a magnetic lock that was always armed. It was a corridor she had not shown Bashir. Indeed, few people knew of it. Arin didn't. Neither did Blate, because as he'd pointed out, she commanded this hospital, not him. So there were nurses, always the same ones and one to a shift, three times a day. And there was her. She came every day whether she needed to or not.

The only sounds in the room were the hiss of a ventilator, the steady atonal blip-blip-blip of a cardiac monitor, and the tiny chug of an IV pump pushing a yellow nutrient solution through an indwelling catheter tunneled under the skin of the patient's chest and into one of the large veins supplying the heart so he wouldn't starve.

Kahayn sat on a tall stool alongside the bed. Her mouth still hurt. Bashir had hit her very hard. She hadn't expected that. But she understood why.

And now there was Arin to worry about, too. She'd still perform the surgery in this wing, of course; had to. She counted on it. Because the OR was specially refitted, and the computer didn't tie into the hospital's database. Everything would be contained. So everything that happened would happen here and too quickly for anyone to do anything about it. But Arin was a problem because things had to stop, and Arin would not understand.

This far. And no further.

Things would only stop if every piece was gone: the technology, her records, the primates. Maybe even her, if she couldn't get away. She wasn't quite ready for death. Knew, though, that maybe it wasn't so far distant after all.

And, of course, Julian would have to die. There was no question. Even he saw that. Hadn't liked it.

Who would? But he saw the logic and knew it was the only way out. The only recourse left.

Because there can't be anything, absolutely nothing to work with. Nothing left.

She looked down at the bed. She'd managed to rebuild the skull from where the bullet had blasted away bone and brain. She'd even managed a nice scar. She stared at the seamless face—because a man in a coma does not dream and cannot think. He can only be, like an empty glass waiting for something to fill it. And the supreme irony: The machines, these rudimentary tools with no innards of any interest, kept him alive even as the machine hidden away in his brain would fill and transform him from the inside out and only waited for the key—the donor—to turn the lock once more.

This far. She bent and kissed him—the man he'd been—gently, thoroughly, and for the very last time because the man he was would be gone as soon as she flipped the switch. His lips were warm. But she didn't cry. Couldn't. Her tears were all gone, and there was still so much to do.

And no further. Because along every journey through adversity and darkness, a little bit of the self dies. Ego. Dreams. Hope. And love. Sometimes it's right just to let go.

She flipped the switch and sat back to wait.

* * *

Bashir was freezing. His skin was prickly with goose-flesh, and he was shivering, like when he was little and came in from the cold. Only he didn't talk very much or very well when he was little and so it always came out: I'm shivering. His parents didn't like it. But his aunt, the one on Earth who hugged him and told him his nose was cold as a brass button and his cheeks little bright apples, always laughed: Come in now, Jules; no need for shivering anymore because Auntie loves you. Come now, warm up by the fire and have some nice hot cocoa and biscuits.

The hand he hit Kahayn with throbbed. Felt like a bomb going off in his hand, like all his bones shattered to dust. Still hurt.

His thoughts kept slewing right and left. Like trying to walk across an endless ice field with thin-soled slippers. His head was airy, too, like the inside of a big balloon, the kind with a thin string that Auntie tied around his wrist when he was very little so he didn't lose it. When he walked, the balloon bobbed up and down and kept tugging to get free.

The cold, maybe, or the sedative. His right hip stung from the needle. How much had they given him? Enough.

The operating theater was very bright. Lights all around. He saw red inside his lids. The smell was sterile and icy, like the edge of a blade stuck in snow. He wanted to get warm. Couldn't. Thin gown. Nothing underneath. Bare feet. The gown tied in back and his neck itched. Couldn't move either. Thick bands around his wrists and upper arms. Legs. Restraints because he'd hit Kahayn and mustn't get away.

Maybe he slept because then there was a buzzing, brrring sound. Not bees. Time to get up? Too early. Not time for duty yet. Wanted to sleep. Where was his pillow?

And then there were fingers on his temples, then a hand on his forehead, rolling him right. His head was very heavy. The hands had a sharp, chemical smell. Then, something itchy silting like grass around his ears. He tried to roll his head away, and he must've said something, too, or made a sound. Because the

buzzing stopped and someone, a woman, said, “There, there. Just shaving your head. Doctor needs to see what she’s doing.”

“Buh...” His tongue wouldn’t work. He tried opening his eyes, but his lids were very heavy, and the light was too bright, and he gave it up. “Coal...coal...”

“That’s the cooling blanket.” The buzzing started up again. Something pulling at his scalp, and the hands nudged his head left. “Doctor said she wanted your temperature down. Don’t ask me why. She never uses the blanket for these things, but she says you’re different and it’s to protect you. Something about your system. But not to worry, you won’t feel cold in a few more minutes. You just relax and take a nice, long nap.”

“Buh...nooo,” he moaned. But he was starting to drift again. The string knotting the balloon to his wrist was coming undone. “Coal...”

“There, there, not to worry,” the someone said. “Doctor’s good. She’ll give you a nice, new scar.”

And at that, the string came loose, and there was nothing more he could do.

So Bashir let go.

Chapter 9

At first, the rain came hesitantly in big, fat, gray drops, and then picked up speed. Now Lense stood, soaked through to the bone and cold for once, and the rain was still coming, its sound a loud, continuous hiss. The desert was gushing with sudden streams sluicing through gullies.

Saad’s men worked fast. From beginning to end, the ambush took, perhaps, ninety seconds. She watched now as one of Saad’s men hauled the seventh and last Kornak soldier from the transport, splayed the body out and started stripping off protective, sand-colored armor.

Another soldier stomped up, rifle in hand, the hump of a radio at his left shoulder and now she saw that the mystery of just how anonymous Saad expected they could be was solved. Besides the armor, the soldier wore dark protective eyewear and a helmet with a low brow that flared around his ears. Thick ropes of sodden hair straggled over his shoulders, and water cascaded over the helmet.

“You’ll have to put your hair up.” She practically had to shout to hear herself over the rain. “Why the glasses? How can you see?”

“Polarized. I see fine,” said Saad. “They wear their glasses all the time, though. A good sniper can take out an eye, of course, but the glasses stop shrapnel.”

“Seven soldiers. Seven uniforms. But I make eight.”

“Change of plans,” he shouted over the rain as Mara splashed over, though Lense could only tell it was her because of the jaw. “Sorry. There’s no other way.”

Lense thought something was up. When they’d been crouched atop a flat mesa before the rain, Mara

slithered over, a communications device in her hand. She'd whispered into Saad's ear, and Lense watched the color drain from Saad's face and his expression darken. When she asked what was wrong, Saad only shook his head. Then he and Mara moved back in a low crouch from the rim. She couldn't hear what they said, but they were arguing.

Now she said, "But what am I supposed to do?"

At that, Mara palmed her rifle in her right hand and nudged Lense with the barrel. "Exactly what you're told."

* * *

First, she went to check on Julian. It was the second time she'd been to the OR that day, but the first that she'd seen Julian since that morning. Julian was asleep atop green surgical sheets; another was draped over his body, and she saw by his bare shoulders that they'd removed his gown. There was a face mask over his nose and mouth to give him more oxygen, one of the things she wanted to make sure the anesthetist hadn't forgotten. Very important.

They were just putting up the drapes to cover his torso and leave his head free. They'd prep his head with antiseptic soap while she scrubbed. When she returned, she'd have them position the remaining drapes in a tent over Julian's face, leaving only the crown of his head exposed. Then she'd make her incision marks with a purple felt-tipped pen and then, well, she'd go to work.

She was sorry Julian was asleep. She didn't want him to feel pain and he must've been worried, maybe frightened when she wasn't there. But maybe it was better this way. He looked very strange without hair, and his scalp was much paler than his normal complexion. For some obscure reason, she cinched up the sheet to cover him just a little more. She didn't know why. But he looked defenseless. Vulnerable.

Everything depends on me now. I'll be as fast as I can, Julian, but I have to be careful, or this has all been for nothing.

The room was chilly. Her primary surgical nurse for this wing, not the hard-ass major, was laying out instruments. The anesthetist was there, checking over his syringes. He complained about the cooling blanket because it made the anesthesia trickier. But she was firm, and he gave up because, she figured, he knew it wasn't his ass on the line.

As she turned to go, her gaze fixed on a glass-enclosed viewing room high on the near wall just behind Julian's head and opposite the door that led from pre-op. There were four chairs in the viewing room, a vidcom on the wall for communications through this wing, and that was all. The room was dim and would stay that way. Like a performer on stage, Kahayn didn't really want to see Blate and Nerrit, not too clearly. But they would have an excellent view. Maybe that's why they called it a surgical theater.

In the adjacent scrub room, Arin was already lathering at a large, rectangular, metal basin. They wore identical garb: blue surgical scrubs, blue gauze cap and booties and a surgical mask that hung around their neck, the bottom ties already knotted. Arin's gaze bounced on her and then away. "Filthy weather," he said. He palmed a stiff-bristled brush and scoured his nails with a thick, rust-red antiseptic soap he'd dispensed with a foot pedal. "Surprised Nerrit made it at all."

"Mmmm." Kahayn operated the foot pedal, squirting soap from a dispenser onto her palms and working the scrub into foam. "Nerrit wouldn't miss this." The rules said five minutes for each hand and arm, a minute to every finger, and Kahayn followed this procedure scrupulously. They scrubbed, not talking, the

only sound the fits and starts of water splashing against metal and the rasp of bristle brushes. Then Kahayn said, "Sorry you got dragged into this."

Arin hunched his shoulders, let them fall. "Luck of the draw, I guess," he said, passing his now-sterilized hands and arms through a steady stream of hot, gray, filtered water. He shook water from his hands, then crooked his elbows, holding his still-dripping hands and arms up and away from his body, palms turned in. Water dripped from his elbows. "Nothing to be done about it."

"Mmmm," Kahayn said again. "Promise me one thing. No matter what happens, Arin, do exactly what I tell you. Nothing more, nothing less. You understand?"

His eyes narrowed imperceptibly, and she saw the questions there. "All right." He hesitated. "Idit, if you—"

"Don't say any more, Arin. Don't ask questions. Just do what I say, and everything will be fine." She butted open the door. "By the way...nice glasses."

"Thanks," said Arin.

* * *

The two guards, a PFC and corporal on duty at the entrance into the research wing, didn't like it. More to the point, the corporal hadn't heard anything about it. He eyed the phalanx of dripping wet soldiers, seven in all. "I haven't heard anything about any prisoner."

"Not my problem." The master sergeant, a strapping hulk of a man and obviously SC by the insignia, looked dour enough to eat bullets. "Think we've got nothing better to do than cover your collective asses? You people weren't so sloppy, you'd've picked her up yourself. But now we got her, and we get the credit. General Nerrit's going to want to see this one."

The corporal ran his eyes up and down the prisoner. She was small with a head of limp wet curls plastered to her scalp and clothes that clung in interesting places. Not half bad. But she was also very pale, and what was with those pink lips? She looked scared to death. And cold.

He looked at the PFC. The PFC simply shrugged. "Just a minute," the corporal said, and turned to a vidcom set to the left of the containment door just above a magnetic lock. "I got to check this out with Security Director Blate."

"You do that," said the sergeant. He grinned. "For a prize like this? We got time."

* * *

"Describe her again?" Blate listened carefully as the corporal talked. "Just a moment." He muted the audio and turned to Nerrit seated to his right in the surgical theater. "One of your men seems to have apprehended another one of those," he nodded in the general direction of the operating theater where Kahayn was gloving up, "like Bashir there." He described the prisoner, then added, "She was caught outside the complex by your rear guard."

"Yes?" Nerrit was rail-thin and very severe with a hatchet face. His eyes were silver today instead of green. His whisper-thin lips disappeared in a half-moon of a smile. "Do they know how she got here?"

"No. Your sergeant wants to secure her down here." Blate made a face, shrugged. "We could

interrogate her together after Kahayn's done."

"Excellent idea."

"Good," said Blate, turning back to the vidcom. "I'll have one of the guards escort her to a holding room."

* * *

He'd gowned and just finished gloving when Arin saw the vidcom in the viewing room come to life as a pale blue, electric glow. His eyes flicked to a clock on the right wall and noted the time. Then he stood, patiently, as the nurse reached around and fitted his mask over his nose, pinched it down, and then knotted the upper ties firmly at his crown. He saw Nerrit and Blate lean together, and then Blate turned to the monitor. He couldn't hear what Blate said because of the glass, but it didn't matter.

Kahayn, he saw, was directing the nurses where to place the surgical drapes around the field. "Do me a favor," he said to the nurse. "My glasses need adjusting again, damn things. Would you just give them a good jab, right on the bridge there...a little harder, don't be shy...that's got it. Thank you," he said, straightening. He wrinkled his nose. "That's so much better."

He heard a sudden gasp and then an exclamation. Startled, he turned just in time to see Kahayn falling in a faint, taking a tray of instruments crashing to the floor with her.

* * *

"All right," said the corporal, stepping back from a vidcom. "We'll take it from here."

One of the soldiers, a woman just behind the sergeant, glanced down at something on her wrist, then edged a bit closer to the sergeant. Murmured something. The sergeant half-turned and looked back at the corporal, displeased. "No can do."

"Yeah, well," said the corporal, turning away and tapping out the code that would unlock the door, "those army orders."

"But we have ours." A shuffle of boots over concrete. "They take precedence."

"Give it a rest." The corporal ticked in the last number and just as the door sighed to one side, he heard the PFC say, "Hey, he...!" Then, just gurgling, choking noises.

The corporal spun around. He had time to see the PFC's knees buckle and twin arcs of brown blood. But that was all.

In the next instant, the big sergeant had him in an embrace. He tried pulling back but couldn't, and then he felt pain stab the center of his chest, just below the notch of his ribs. His eyes bulged, and he opened his mouth to scream but the sergeant clapped a hand over his mouth.

"Shh, shh, it's all right," and then the sergeant pulled him even closer into a bear hug. "It's all right; shh, now."

That was the last thing the corporal ever heard.

Chapter 10

He'd pushed her to one side and now Lense watched Saad step in closer, angling the point of his knife up and jamming its length the rest of the way into the guard's heart. And then the guard just died.

The thing was, Lense wasn't as upset as she thought she'd be. She'd seen a lot of gore the past two months. She watched Saad lower the body to the floor. Mara was wiping her knife clean on her trousers, but her soldier wasn't dead. He gurgled and his fingers scabbled at the concrete with a sound like mice.

She found her voice. "For God's sake, bad enough you slit his throat. Don't make him suffer."

"Yeah?" Mara gave Lense a hard look, sheathed her knife, and then hunched behind the dying man. Reaching around, she hooked the man's jaw in one hand, palmed the side of his head with her left and then twisted his head right and jerked down. There were crackles, and the mouse noise stopped. "There you go. Happy?"

Lense said nothing.

"The important thing is the door's open and not a shot fired," said Saad. "How's the signal?"

Mara glanced down at her wrist, then back at Saad. "Still there. Damn lucky Arin still had the transponder."

"All right," Saad said again, then took Lense by her right arm. "We'll get Bashir. Mara, you stay here, head off any reinforcements if they get out an alarm. We don't have enough men to secure both this and the footpath. So this is our way out."

"You're not going in there without me."

"I need you here."

"You need me to watch your ass." A jerk of her head at Lense. "She won't be able to."

"Mara's right," said Lense. "I can't tend to Julian and cover you at the same time."

Saad glowered, then gave a curt nod. "One more thing," he said to the remaining men, "if soldiers come and we're not back, you've got to seal this door. Smash the mechanism if you have to, but if you don't hear from us," he tapped the radio at his shoulder, "then nobody else goes in. You need to buy us time to destroy as much as we can."

"I thought you said this wing was self-contained," said Lense.

Saad had taken off the black eyeglasses and his expression was set. "I don't put anything past Blate. He'd be prepared for any contingency even if all he needed to do was take a leak. I swear the man's got eyes in the back of his head."

"No," said Mara, "just on either side."

“Doctor?” Blate had toggled open an intercom. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” said Kahayn. Arin saw she was embarrassed; her neck was hectic with color. “Just got dizzy. That run-in with Bashir.”

“But you’ll be able to continue?”

“Of course.” She sighed, tugged down her mask. “But I’ll have to break scrub; I ripped my glove. Sorry.”

It took Arin a minute to let that sink in. If Kahayn broke scrub, that gave Saad more time. It was like some kind of gift.

Kahayn was talking to the anesthetist now, a puckered-looking fellow who didn’t look happy. Arin understood the feeling. Lower Bashir’s body temperature with a cooling blanket, then throw in anesthesia that would inhibit automatic responses to cold, like shivering, and there’d be hell to pay if things got out of hand. Resuscitating Bashir once was quite enough, thanks. Plus, it would take time to warm him back up.

Come to think of it, getting him alert enough to move will be almost impossible now. . . .

But there was no more time to think about that because Kahayn was breaking scrub and the circulating nurse had scurried off to retrieve another anesthesia tray. “I’ll be right back,” Kahayn said.

“Take your time,” said Arin. His eyes slid to the clock and back. “We sure as hell aren’t going anywhere.”

Yet.

* * *

“How much longer?” Lense whispered. The corridors here seemed endless, and she was thoroughly lost. Worse, Saad had told her why the signal from Arin was coming from an operating room.

And what if they’ve started? What if they’ve already made their incisions, made burr holes and taken out bone?

She felt sick just thinking about it. Because it occurred to her that she might not be able to reverse what Kahayn had done quickly enough to get them out.

She was so busy thinking about all kinds of disasters that when Saad pulled up abruptly and ducked left into an adjacent corridor, she tripped over his legs. She would’ve gone sprawling if he hadn’t snagged her arm and reeled her in against him. Mara crowded in a second later.

“We’re there,” he whispered, then lifted his chin and jerked his head right. “Through that door at the end of the hall. Leads into a central bay for pre-op where they put in the IVs, give the pre-op sedative. The way into the operating room is to the left, through a set of double doors. Very small, just one room. No magnetic lock; they’re automatic, touch-plate activated.”

“No way to spring a surprise there,” Mara said. “Doors will open too slowly. And that still won’t take

care of Blate and Nerrit.”

“Right. So here’s how we’re going to play it.”

* * *

“Better now?” asked Arin.

“Much. Thanks.” Kahayn turned to the anesthetist. “How’s he doing?”

“Pulse and blood pressure are good. A little cardiac irritability. That’s the cooling blanket.”

“Anything to worry about?”

“No.”

“Then push in the contrast dye, will you? I’m going to bring up the iMRI.”

* * *

“What’s happening now?” asked Nerrit. He was leaning forward, his eyes slitted with intense interest.

“Dr. Kahayn’s asked for a contrast dye in conjunction with the intraoperative MRI... that device there, you see it? She’s operating it via a foot pedal, bringing those two large discs up at the head of the table, one to either side of Bashir’s head.”

“And those are?”

“Magnets. It’s a compact MRI, relies on a magnetic field. She explained it once, compared the brain to watery gelatin and said that during procedures, the brain shifts and sloshes, so she likes to be sure she’s in the right place. I’ve only seen her do this when there’s some sort of tumor, but this man Bashir is quite unique as you know. She may merely wish to highlight those regions of his brain that are so different from ours.”

Nerrit gave him a narrow look. “You’re saying the MRI isn’t usual?”

“Oh,” said Blate, and he told his first lie of the afternoon. “No. Not at all.”

* * *

Dye and iMRI. What the hell was Kahayn doing?

It had been on the tip of Arin’s tongue to say something when she’d asked for the dye. The dye made no sense. They already knew what Bashir’s brain looked like, and it wasn’t as if they were getting ready to excise a tumor.

But then he remembered: Do nothing. Say nothing. No matter what happens. And had he imagined it, or had Kahayn shot him a brief glance just before? He couldn’t remember.

Hurry, Saad, hurry. Arin’s mouth was so dry, he couldn’t swallow.

“Looking good,” said Kahayn.

“Yeah,” Arin managed. “Great.”

“All right.” Kahayn depressed the foot pedal once more and the iMRI discs scrolled down with a mechanical whine. Standing at the head of the table, she held out her right hand, and the surgical nurse slapped a scalpel into Kahayn’s palm.

Arin went cold. Too late...

“Hold on!” It was the anesthetist, and when Arin looked over, the man’s color was just the near side of ash. “We’ve got a problem!”

Kahayn turned sharply. “What kind?”

But Arin could hear it: the beeps of Bashir’s cardiac monitor, accelerating, going wild. Oh, dear God...

“Cardiac instability,” the anesthetist said. “All of a sudden, I don’t understand. I was getting bursts of tachycardia, but now his heart’s slowing down, pressure’s falling. Looks like heart block, and now there’s a PVC...there’s another! I’m picking up fibrillations...!” The anesthetist was standing now, fumbling at his syringes, swearing. “He’s crashing, he’s gonna crash!”

But Kahayn was already moving in a blur, tearing down the surgical drapes, shouting orders: “Break out the crash cart! Get these drapes off him now, go, go, go! I want an amp of dompenephrine, IV push now! Start cardiac compressions!”

Cursing, Arin ripped green drape from Bashir’s chest and started pumping with all his might. It was all going to hell, it was going to hell! He should have seen this coming; he should’ve stopped her!

Do nothing, do nothing? His brain was raging. So you could kill him? “Idit, what about the cooling blanket?”

But Kahayn didn’t answer. The anesthetist was already jabbing a needle into Bashir’s IV port, depressing the plunger, sending a drug coursing into Bashir’s veins. An instant later: “I don’t get it; it’s having no effect at all. Worse, it’s like the opposite of what...Dr. Kahayn, his pressure’s gone! We’re flat-line!”

“What? How can that be?” Kahayn had torn her mask off, and her eyes were wild. “Are you sure you gave him the right drug?”

“Idit!” Arin shouted. “The blanket!”

She rounded on him with a snarl. “Quiet, Arin. Do exactly what I say and not a scrap more, do you understand me?” She whirled back to the anesthetist. “What about my dompenephrine?”

“I’m positive! I labeled these syringes myself!”

“Give him another one!”

“But it only had the opposite...!”

“Damn you!” Kahayn snatched the syringe from the anesthetist and pushed in the drug herself. “Do what I say!”

Opposite. Arin was so stunned, he nearly stopped in mid-compression. The tray, she knocked over the tray... "Idit?"

"Not now, Arin! Don't you stop those compressions, you hear me? Do exactly what you're doing, you understand? Do exactly what I say!"

* * *

Blate and Nerrit were on their feet. Blate banged open the intercom. "Colonel Kahayn, don't you lose this man, don't you lose him, or I'll...!"

A tremendous crash, and then Blate was staggering back against Nerrit as the door into the viewing booth slapped open. A burst of gunfire roared into the air above his head: the distinctive staccato snap-crack of large-caliber rifle fire. Blate ducked as bullets tore a seam into the ceiling. Chunks of tile and plaster rained down on his back and pinged off his arms as he curled up, trying to protect his head. He heard the rifle fire sweep counterclockwise and then hit the glass with a hollow bap-bap-bap! He rolled away from the front of the booth just as there was a solid smack of a boot against the glass and then a thunderous smash as the glass gave way in a jagged shower. The air stank of burnt cordite and hot metal.

"Nobody move!" A woman's voice. Blate looked up to see a giant of a woman: blond, with a scar arcing across a disfigured left jaw and no nose.

I know her, I know her!

Another bang of doors bursting wide open, and Blate jerked his gaze down to the operating room. Two people barreled through the doors leading to the recovery room: a slim, small woman with dark curls—her skin, so pale, like Bashir—and a broad, muscular man with a shock of long brown hair whom he recognized instantly.

"Kahayn!" Saad screamed. He leveled his rifle. "I'm here to send you to hell!"

"No, Saad, no!" The small woman, by Saad's side and then, my God, yes, Arin, too.

"Saad, no!" Arin screamed, lunging for Kahayn who stood to his left, by his side. Kahayn was shocked to immobility, the defibrillator paddles still in her hands. "Saad, you don't understand! Don't shoot her, don't shoot!"

But Saad fired.

Chapter 11

The rifle was set to three-round bursts, and when Saad pulled the trigger, the bullets screamed from the barrel. The distance was so scant that Lense heard the crack at the precise instant the bullets hit.

The first hit the woman with the defibrillator paddles. A rose of brown blood blossomed on her surgical gown, and she went down without a sound.

The second hit the man with black spectacles who was screaming at Saad to stop—Arin, that’s got to be Arin—because he’d lunged for the woman to push her aside. Lense saw blood spray erupt from the hump of Arin’s shoulder, and then he crashed to the floor.

The third hit no one because everyone had hit the deck, and smashed into the opposite wall.

“No, Saad, stop!” she cried. “What are...?” But then she saw Julian. She sprinted for the table; her gaze jittered over his body: the endotracheal tube, the IV tubes, and his scalp with purple lines to mark incisions, they’d shaved his head....

She spun around and snagged what must be the anesthetist by the collar. “You, what’s going on?”

“He’s in arrest.” The anesthetist was a pruned, wizened man, and when he spoke, his lips quivered. “Looked like heart block, followed by v-fib; Kahayn was just going to defibrillate!”

“No!” A man’s voice, hitching with pain. Arin, on the floor, on the opposite side of the table and struggling to his knees. He was panting, and his face was gray. “She put something in the dye and she switched out the drugs!”

“What?” cried the anesthetist.

“What?” Saad said.

“On purpose, she did it on purpose! She knocked over the tray; she must’ve rigged the other tray, mislabeled the syringes. That’s why she put him on the cooling blanket, to protect his brain when she stopped his heart!”

“Oh, no,” said Saad. His voice was stricken. “What have I...?”

Of course. Lense’s mind raced. Bring his metabolic rate down; the brain will shut down, but it won’t die; like cold water drowning, he can still be revived even after hours; that must’ve been what she planned....

“I’m a doctor, but you have to help me,” she said to Arin. She threw a frantic, helpless look at all the drugs and machines. “I’m out of my element here; what do I do?”

“Keep calm.” Arin’s face was twisted with pain as he clambered to his feet and blood sheeted over his fingers from his shoulder. “Just do exactly what I say.”

* * *

The big woman had made her first mistake: not searching him. Nothing Blate could do to capitalize on that yet. Maybe, though, soon. For now Blate watched, his fury growing with every passing moment: as Arin, that traitor, led the woman—like Bashir, exactly like him—through each step. Switching off the cooling blanket, setting it to warm Bashir’s body as she administered drugs and then sent electric bolts charging through Bashir’s body. Saad roughed the anesthetist back to his feet to monitor Bashir, keep the ventilator going. Five minutes, ten, and then fifteen...

And they brought Bashir back to life, an inch at a time.

First the hesitant, irregular blips from the cardiac monitor and then the blips steadied, picked up speed. He heard the anesthetist sing out a blood pressure, and he saw the woman, the one like Bashir, and her

wet cheeks and knew she wept with relief.

But Blate had eyes, and so he saw many things at once: not just Bashir but off to his left, the blond woman; out of his right, Nerrit, who'd edged closer.

"How soon can you move Bashir?" The blond woman. She moved closer to the blown-out window. "Saad, we've got to get out of here and—"

She was interrupted by a shout. "My God!" It was Arin, and Blate's right eye saw Arin crouched over Kahayn. "She's still alive!"

Saad and the woman with the curls, simultaneously: "What?"

"What?" said the blonde and, out of his left eye, Blate saw her start forward.

That's when the big woman made her second and last mistake. Because he moved into her blind spot. And he had eyes.

* * *

Saad watched Lense revive Bashir, and he held his ground, his rifle up, covering the others. But he felt numb. Kahayn had tried to save Bashir....

Because she couldn't think of another way, and she didn't tell Arin, or else he'd have let us know. She must've thought I'd never believe her, not after Janel...

So when Arin called out that Kahayn lived, his heart squeezed with a sudden spasm of hope. Yes, maybe there was some atonement for this wretched business, some way of letting Kahayn know that her efforts hadn't been in vain, and if they could get out Arin, and Kahayn, too...

He glanced up when Mara shouted, and then he saw Blate whip around, a pistol in his right hand.

"Mara!" He swung his rifle, trying to catch Blate before he could fire. "Mara, lookout!"

The viewing booth boomed with a roar like thunder.

* * *

Blate saw Saad out of his right eye. Saw the big man pivot, that rifle come up. Saad's bullets were faster. But Blate had a head start, and he was closer. He lunged for the big woman and pulled the trigger two seconds before Saad fired. His pistol jerked, and there was a spurt of yellow-orange muzzle flash. The bullet bored into the woman's right eye and kept going. Her head exploded in a cloud of fine brown mist and brain and bone.

But Blate was already down, rolling for the door. Something hummed over his head and then there were three soddenwhops as the bullets slammed into Nerrit.

Blate didn't stop. He banged out of the booth, his left hand already dragging out his radio to raise the alarm.

* * *

Lense saw Mara's head blow apart, and then a figure barreled out of the viewing booth. "Saad! He's

getting away!”

“You can’t catch him!” Arin’s teeth were clenched, biting back pain. “Too far from here to the hall! Saad, you’ve got to clear out, you’ve got to go!”

Saad swayed, turned. He swiped his streaming eyes. “Elizabeth,” he said hoarsely, “can you move Bashir?”

She shook her head. Julian was breathing on his own now but still unconscious. “You’d have to carry him. I could cover you, but I don’t know...”

“No.” Saad was in control again. He flicked his rifle at the nurses and anesthetist, who were still cowering. “You, get out.” When they didn’t move, he said, “I don’t ask twice.” Then, as they scurried out, Saad turned to Arin. “You, too.”

“I’m staying.” Arin started wrapping his shoulder. “I die now, I die later. It’s all the same to Blate. And Kahayn’s still alive. I can’t leave her.”

“We’re not dead yet,” said Saad. He shouldered his rifle. “Elizabeth, help me move Bashir to the floor...easy now,” he said, as they slid Bashir off and eased him down.

It was only then that Lense realized Bashir was totally naked beneath the sheets. He was starting to shiver now as his body fought off the hypothermia. She swaddled him in sheets and drapes. Then she clutched his chilled hands in hers and put her mouth to his ear. “I’m here, Julian; it’s Elizabeth. Don’t worry, it’s going to be all right.” She clamped down on tears. “I’m going to get you out of here.” She didn’t know if he heard. She didn’t know if it were even true.

Saad jerked a metal gurney onto its side, swinging it around between them and the door that led to pre-op. Then he kicked the brakes on the operating room table and clattered it to the operating room doors. Bending at the knees, he wrapped his arms around the single, off-center pedestal, wedged his right shoulder under the table and heaved. The table was blocky and very heavy, but it toppled with a loud, metallic bang. Saad braced it against the door, then scuttled back and began overturning instrument trays and maneuvering the ventilator to make a barrier.

“I can hold them off for a bit,” he said. “Elizabeth, can you help Kahayn?”

Lense bent over the woman. Kahayn was on her back. Her neck veins bulged. Lense ripped open Kahayn’s gown, using the surgical scissors again to split the gown in front and then slit her scrubs in two. The wound was centered directly over the lower part of her thick, armorlike sternum: a round ugly hole punched into her flesh. But there was no exit wound.

Suddenly, there was a squall of static and then a frantic voice coming over the radio on Saad’s left shoulder. The sound was so loud and so unexpected that Lense’s heart nearly jumped out of her mouth. Saad listened, then shouted, “Say again?”

“Soldiers!” A voice scratchy with static. Cracks of gunfire. “There are too many, we can’t hold them off, we can’t—”

“Doren!” Saad keyed his radio again. Got nothing but static. “Doren, do you read me?” More static.

Lense went cold. Soldiers on the way. They’ll kill Arin but not Saad. They need Saad, and they’ll

probably keep Bashir and me alive so they can—

“Pericardial tamponade,” said Arin.

“What?” Lense looked at Arin. “What did you say?”

“Her neck veins, the entry wound. She’s got pericardial tamponade; must’ve hit the heart!” Still clutching his wrapped shoulder, he shuffled closer on his knees. “If you can decompress the pericardial sac, maybe we can fish out the bullet and repair the tear.”

“Here?Now?”

“There’s no time,” said Saad.

“I haven’t got anything better to do,” said Arin. He looked at Lense. “Bashir is stable. Please.”

She took a deep breath, nodded. She helped Arin struggle into a right glove, and then snapped on a pair of her own.

“Go for a subxiphoid approach,” said Arin. “Just make a window with a scalpel.”

“This won’t even be close to sterile.” Lense felt for the notch at the junction of Kahayn’s ribs and drew a scalpel in short vertical. Blood welled up and Arin sponged it away with his good hand. She cut again, and this time she was through skin and into skeletal muscle.

“Easy,” said Arin.

She cut again. There was the staccato sputter of gunfire not far now, just down the corridor from the operating room.

“Hurry.” Saad, by her side, his body angled, trying to shield her.

“Do what it takes,” said Arin. “Don’t hurry. We’re not going anywhere.”

“There’s no time!” Saad scuttled closer. “I want you out of here, Elizabeth! Leave Bashir. You and Arin just get out.”

“And go where?” asked Lense. She didn’t look up. She was through muscle now. Under the smashed xiphoid, she saw the pulse of the bluish-brown pericardial sac, streaked with fat. The sac ballooned with blood being forced out with every beat. She rooted in a clutch of instruments. “I can’t stop now, and I won’t leave Julian. So we just take our chances.”

“Elizabeth.” She heard the anguish in his voice. “Don’t you understand? I can’t let them take you, or Bashir. Or me.”

“I know that. So, don’t shoot me until I’m done.” And now she did look at him. “Deal?”

He looked at her for a long moment, then kissed her hard. “I love you.” His voice was ragged. “Hold that in your heart, Elizabeth, and remember.”

The pock-pock of sniper fire was so close it made her jump. So she said everything she could with her

eyes before turning back to her work—because there was more to do and very little time left.

She fished out a slim pair of surgical scissors. “When I cut through, there’s bound to be a clot and a lot of blood, Arin. Better hope it’s through and through so I can close. You’ve got to plug the hole, then tell me which suture to use.”

“Don’t worry about me,” said Arin. “I’m ready.”

Hollow thuds, then bangs against the door. Muffled curses and then a grate of metal as whoever was on the other side tried, unsuccessfully, to push open the door.

“They’ll come around to the scrub room, or blow that door,” said Saad. “You’re almost out of time, Elizabeth.”

One chance. Lense made first one, then two, then three cuts. A dark brown clot spilled out along with fresh blood, and then Arin had his thumb over the tear in Kahayn’s still-beating heart.

“That’s got it there.” Arin squirmed his index finger around back, searching for another tear. “Got it. Bullet can’t be in the heart. Okay, you need suture for—”

But that was the last thing Arin said that Lense ever heard.

Because then, suddenly, she felt a tingling along her skin, one that raised the hackles on her neck. She gasped but knew this was no dream.

The combadge in my pocket; the transporter; they found us; only seconds left!

“No!” she screamed as the air broke apart. Kahayn’s blood was warm, but her hand was cold because, in another instant, Lense knew she wouldn’t be there at all. “No, please, let me finish!”

“Elizabeth!” Saad, spinning around, stopping dead, the glow of the transporter reflecting off his skin, turning it white as bone. “Elizabeth!”

She saw them all in that last crystalline second and knew she’d never reach or save them all: not Julian and Saad and Arin. And even Kahayn.

One chance. One choice.

She took it.

Epilogue

Well, at least the stars were right again. But so many questions with no answers. A sense of things left undone.

Ship’s night now. She prowled the corridors of the *Vinci*. She was listless, no appetite. She slid into inky shadows splashed in the well of a bulkhead and let the sturdy metal brace her up.

Gomez and her people had rescued them, doping out some kind of alien device that had access to other universes. She didn’t understand half of it—and from the sounds of it, neither did anyone else, though

Tev seemed to think he did—and when they got through and detected gunfire and Bashir’s vitals in such poor shape, they beamed them out quickly. Standard procedure.

She hadn’t wanted company. After Gold debriefed her, no one pressed. She gathered a lot had happened—phrases like Empok Nor, Rec Station Hidalgo, Artemis IX, Avril Station, and more flew by her ears.

Oddly, it had only been two weeks since they left Deep Space 9, despite how much time they’d spent on that planet. She didn’t care. She stayed in sickbay or her quarters, alone. Falcão and Wetzell let her be in the former, and Corsi’s shifts kept her out of the cabin for the latter. Often, she asked the replicator for a glass of ice water and then ordered lights out. Then she’d sit in the dark and smell the wet and try conjuring visions of green forests. But imagination failed, and the water tasted sterile.

And then there was Julian. The whole time the *Vinci* was on its way to rendezvous with the *Defiant* to drop him off, she hadn’t been able to face him. All the awful, hurtful, cutting things she’d said and wished she could take back. Once spoken, forever done: That’s what they said.

The night before they were to meet the *Defiant*, Bashir came to see her in sickbay. “Julian.” Her voice was barely able to say his name.

He came closer. She noticed that his scar was still there, a seam centered on his forehead. For some reason, the EMH never removed it when treating him. “I . . . I wanted to see how you were doing.”

“I’m fine,” she lied. She forced herself not to look away. “On the runabout, I—”

“It’s all right.”

“No, I have to say this. Apologizing doesn’t feel like enough, but it’s all I’ve got. I was wrong, Julian. Wrong to hold you responsible; wrong to hate you. Just . . . wrong.”

“Selden was a bad situation.”

“But the Seldens of the universe are to blame, not you. You were right, too. All the people we’ve lost on the *Vinci* this year, and on the *Lexington* during the war. A patient I cared about that I couldn’t cure. I got mad. Probably my way of not getting depressed. But anger doesn’t change anything, and I can get pretty hard to take.”

“Yes,” he said. “Several hours in a runabout and I was ready to transport you to deep space. Except I’m insufferably polite. But I fail at many things, and I hurt,” he said, and bunched his fist over his left breast. “Right here.”

She felt like crying. “Do you think she made it?”

“Kahayn? I don’t know. I’d like to think so. She wasn’t evil, just desperate, and I think there was much more to her story than I’ll ever know. She was very sad, a little haunted. I think she struggled to make things right.”

“In the end, she chose for you. She might still be alive.” If Saad didn’t kill them all, and himself.

“Perhaps. If she isn’t, someone else will pick up her work. The Kornaks are willing to sacrifice a lot to survive. Loss of soul. Loss of self.”

“Just like the Borg.” The words were out of her mouth before she knew it. “Do you think—?”

He shrugged. “Don’t know. This alien device may have slipped us sideways into a parallel timeline. Into the past, the future, or maybe the same moment somewhere else. . . Who knows? For that matter, maybe we got a good look at a past that’s happened in this timeline on a planet we’ve never known. Before they were the Borg, the Borg were something else. There’s got to be a Borg homeworld somewhere. We just haven’t found it yet.”

“Or maybe we did.”

“Maybe.” He was silent. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Saad.” Saying his name hurt. Her eyes burned. “I hope he died. I don’t want to think of him, hooked up. . .” She cleared her throat. “I just hope he died.”

She was surprised when Julian reached out and thumbed away her tears. But she didn’t pull away, and he didn’t either. “It hurts.”

She nodded then bunched a fist over her heart. Mouthed the words because she couldn’t speak: Right here. Then she released a breath, closed her eyes. This was okay. She cupped his hand with both of hers. Yes, this was all right.

They stood like that for a long time. Then Julian said, “You know, I wonder who won the Bentman. My God, it seems ages, centuries ago that we were boxing around that. I can’t imagine either of us won—and something extraordinary: I don’t care.”

She realized suddenly that she didn’t either. “I think the rules say you have to be present to win.”

“Well, then we bollixed that up. I don’t think the judges’ll countenance alien widgets and time-space anomalies. Can you see us explaining? Uh, yes, well, we got sucked into this anomaly and then our runabout disintegrated and then we thought we were both dead . . . well, that is, each of us thought the other’d kicked it, only we were mistaken and then. . .”

She had to laugh. “God, stop. That’s so sick.”

“I know; that’s the beauty of it. You know something? I want to save this for next time I need an excuse. Do you know that time-space distortions could be blamed for, oh, scads? Like doing your homework, you go to your professor, all hail-fellow-well-met.” He dropped his voice an octave and frowned.

“Sorry, old boy, can’t turn that in. Got sideswiped by a time-space continuum thing, bugger it all. Bloody inconvenience; so sorry, but you understand, don’t you, old chap? There’s a good fellow.”

They laughed until her sides hurt. She knew the joke wasn’t that funny, but laughter was medicine, too. They finally trailed off; they held hands and looked at each other. It was comfortable. That was all it had to be.

“Your scar,” she said, suddenly, “are you going to keep it?”

“What?” Frowning, he fingered the ridge of flesh. “Do you know I forgot it until just now? Like it’s a part of me somehow.”

She traced his scar with the tip of a forefinger. “I can take that off. I’ve had practice,” and then at his expression, she laughed. “God, no, not with a scalpel.”

“Well, thank heaven.” He captured her fingers, folded them over his own. “Who could refuse such an offer from a woman. . . I’m sorry, a colleague? And let me return the favor. You don’t look well, Elizabeth.”

She shrugged it off. “Just tired.”

“Mmmm. Mind a more professional, unbiased opinion? Or are you one of those doctors who make horrible patients?”

“Which do you think?”

“Mmmm. Right. A positive horror.” He tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow. “Shall we?”

“Lead on, Macduff.”

“Ouch. Didn’t Macbeth kill him? Lop off his head or something?”

“Relax, Julian. I’m just getting rid of your scar. Anyway, it’s Macduff who kills Macbeth. But the witches were still there at the end. So, the evil wasn’t gone. Macduff just couldn’t see it, was all.”

“Well, then, it seems that things didn’t end for the best after all, did they? At least, not for Macduff.”

* * *

Security Director Blate stood, goggle-eyes whirring as his gaze ticked down the length of scarred metal. The metal was hollowed out and spanned the height of a full-grown man and had a core of honeycombed material he couldn’t fathom. The metal was scorched with soot that was sticky, a little oily. Like Bashir’s suit. . . He looked back at the soldier. “Is this all?”

“No.” The soldier shook his head with the audible click and whirr of a gyro. “There’s wreckage strewn over a wide area. Mostly pieces like this, and one big chunk. Some sort of control mechanism.”

“Very well, I want a team out there. Bring it all back, and I want it secreted here, in this wing. You are dismissed.”

Well, well. Blate walked a corridor of the research wing. The slap of his boots cracked like pistol shots. He entered a room that was the only one occupied for the moment—but only for the moment. All is not lost, and more gained than I supposed. Pity about Janel, though. I underestimated Kahayn’s resourcefulness.

The room was very noisy: the tick-tick-ticking of IV pumps; the atonal blip of cardiac monitors; and the whoosh and sigh of ventilators. The nurse on duty, a major, stepped smartly to attention and reported that all three patients were doing well.

He ran his fingers along each patient’s scalp. Saad’s scar was old and firm. But Kahayn’s and Arin’s were new, the sutures not yet removed, and Arin’s new left arm was a wonder: jointed with a thick pincer instead of a hand. None of them dreamed; they were too heavily sedated for that. But he wondered if, when Saad awoke, they would share dreams, too. He knew for sure, though: the man Saad

would cease to exist because Blate would break him.

So we're not done for yet. In fact, we've just begun. His lips curled into a smile. Because no door ever closed that another didn't open.

* * *

"Oh, my God," said Lense. She sat on a biobed in her own sickbay, absolutely stunned. "Julian, that can't be right."

"But it is," said Bashir. The overhead light turned the smooth skin of his forehead a warm bronze. "I can run it again but," he put a hand to her neck, "there's no mistake, Elizabeth."

"But..." She hooked her hand onto Julian's arm and just hung on. "I don't know what to do," she said.

"Well, you could give happiness a whirl. Maybe this is good."

"Or maybe it's bad."

"Possibly."

"I don't know what to do," she said again.

"Elizabeth," said Bashir, and he touched his forehead to hers with easy intimacy. "Don't do anything, my dear."

"Donothing?"

"Do nothing. You have time. Give it thought. But above all," he pulled back until their eyes locked, "be...happy. Because this is rare, and very precious. It's like something out of the ashes. Maybe you won't want it in the end. But maybe you will, because it's a gift of things past and a possible future. It's a gift."

"You think?" And then she said it, out loud, to make it real and because she thought that, maybe, this was a gift she should keep.

"I'm going to have a baby, Julian," she said. "I'm going to have a child."

About the Author

ILSA J. BICK is a writer as well as a recovering child and forensic psychiatrist. She is the author of prizewinning stories, such as "A Ribbon for Rosie" in *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds II*, "Shadows, in the Dark" in *Strange New Worlds IV*, and "The Quality of Wetness" in *Writers of the Future Vol. XVI*. She's written for *BattleCorps.com*, *SCIFICTION*, *Challenging Destiny*, *Talebones*, *Beyond the Last Star*, and *Star Trek: New Frontier: No Limits*, among many others. Her first published novel, *Star Trek The Lost Era: Well of Souls* cracked the 2003 Barnes and Noble Bestseller List. Forthcoming is "Bottomless" in the *Star Trek: Voyager* anniversary anthology *Distant Shores*. Her first *MechWarrior Dark Age* novel, *Daughter of the Dragon*, was published by Roc in June 2005. *Avatar*, a murder-mystery novel set in the *MechWarrior Dark Age* universe, is tentatively scheduled for December 2005. When she isn't writing—like, yah, when is that?—she lives in (mostly frigid) Wisconsin with her husband, two children,

three cats, and other assorted vermin. Sometimes, she even cooks for them.

The Star Trek: S.C.E. Timeline

Compiled by Keith R.A. DeCandido

This is a rough guide to the timeline of the S.C.E. series of eBooks. It includes all the eBooks published to date (#1: *The Belly of the Beast* through to #56: *Wounds Book 2*), as well as any other stories the crew of the *Vinci* might have appeared in, plus a hint or two from future eBooks (though nothing spoilery, we promise). Other episodes, movies, novels, and short stories have been included where appropriate, generally to provide a frame of reference.

Please be aware that the creation of a monthly eBook series that coordinates with a variety of TV shows, movies, and other prose fiction is very much a work-in-progress, and there may be occasions where there are inconsistencies between a story's placement in the timeline below and chronological cues in the stories themselves. In each case where that happened, it was out of a preference for going with what worked for the story over what would maintain a strict, perfect chronology. The management apologizes for any confusion that may engender among our readers, and also allows as how this chronology may be superseded in the future.

Above all, the purpose of this timeline is to provide a rough guide to how S.C.E. fits in with the overall Star Trek tapestry. Emphasis on "rough."

Citations: Television episodes are listed in "quotation marks," with abbreviation indicating series (TOS=Star Trek, TAS=Star Trek [the animated series], TNG=The Next Generation, DS9=Deep Space Nine). Novels and eBooks are listed in italics, with non-S.C.E. titles given an abbreviation indicating series (VGD=Vanguard, NF=New Frontier); S.C.E. installments are given their number. Short stories are listed in "quotation marks," with the book the story appeared in provided in italics.

2265

- An engineering team is sent to repair an observation post along the border of the Romulan Neutral Zone. The team includes Lt. Commander Montgomery Scott, soon to become chief engineer of the *U.S.S. Enterprise*, and a Starfleet Corps of Engineers team led by Lt. Commander Mahmud al-Khaled on the *U.S.S. Lovell*, Captain Daniel Okagawa commanding. [#17: *Foundations Book 1* by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore]
- The *Lovell* is sent to the newly constructed Starbase 47, a.k.a. Vanguard, to solve several technical problems that have cropped up in the base's hasty construction. [#64: *Distant Early Warning* by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore, *VGD Book 2: Summon the Thunder* by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore]

2267

- The *Enterprise*, under the command of Captain James T. Kirk, dismantles the Landru computer that has been controlling Beta III. Starfleet then sends in the *Lovell*, as well as a team of sociologists, to help the planet get out from under Landru's influence. Scott stays behind as well, and helps when Landru is accidentally reactivated. ["Return of the Archons" (TOS), #18: *Foundations Book 2* by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore]

2268

- The *U.S.S. Defiant* is lost in an interspatial rift near the Tholian border. They were being chased by a Tholian ship that was trying to keep the *Defiant* from providing evidence that the Tholian

Assembly attacked a Klingon colony. TheEnterprise is sent to find them, and is almost lost in the rift as well. TheDefiant disappears. [“The Tholian Web” (TOS), #4-5:Interphase Books 1-2 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore]

- TheEnterprise and theI.K.S. Klothos are trapped in the “Delta Triangle,” and encounter the community of aliens who have also been trapped, and accepted their imprisonment. After Captains Kirk and Kor effect an escape, Starfleet sends theLovell to attempt to learn more of the region. [“The Time Trap” (TAS), #44:Where Time Stands Still by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore]

2279

- Commanders Scott and al-Khaled are part of a team testing a Kelvan drive system on theU.S.S. Chandley. [#19:Foundations Book 3 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore]

2294

- Captain Scott, distraught over the apparent death of Kirk, decides to retire to the Norpin colonies. He meets Ensign Matt Franklin in a pub in Scotland, and accepts the young man’s invitation to hitch a ride on his new assignment, theU.S.S. Jenolen. En route, theJenolen encounters a Dyson Sphere and crashes into it, killing all hands save Scott and Franklin. They are able to store themselves as repeating patterns in the transporter while awaiting rescue. [Star Trek Generations, Engines of Destinyby Gene DeWeese, “Relics” (TNG)]

2321

- The Starfleet Academy track team, which includes Cadet David Gold, competes against Columbia University’s team, which includes a student named Rachel Gilman. Columbia wins, and Gold and Gilman start dating. [#28:Breakdowns by Keith R.A. DeCandido]

2322

- Gold and Gilman get married. [#28:Breakdowns by Keith R.A. DeCandido]

2323

- First-year Cadet Jean-Luc Picard wins the Academy marathon, stunning the upperclass students, among them Gold. [“The Best of Both Worlds Part 2” (TNG), #1:The Belly of the Beast by Dean Wesley Smith]
- Gold graduates from Starfleet Academy. Along with classmate Augustus Bradford, he is assigned to theU.S.S. Gettysburg under the command of Captain Mark Jameson. Bradford idolizes Jameson. [#13:No Surrender by Jeff Mariotte]

2324

- Gold and Gilman move into a house in the Riverdale section of the Bronx in New York City, a house they would remain in for at least the next fifty-two years. [#28:Breakdowns by Keith R.A. DeCandido]

2339

- Seven-year-old Kieran Duffy announces to his father that he intends to travel to the stars. [#24:Wildfire Book 2 by David Mack]

2341

- Duffy is given a dog named Alexander by his father, but the dog is too willful to be contained by a single backyard, and the Duffy family give Alexander to an apple orchard. [#24:Wildfire Book 2 by David Mack]

2348

- Duffy is given a pair of gravity boots for his sixteenth birthday by his uncle Jim, and he spends most of the next six months using them. [#10:Here There Be Monsters by Keith R.A. DeCandido, #24:Wildfire Book 2 by David Mack]

2351

- Cadet Duffy's father dies. [#24:Wildfire Book 2 by David Mack]

2355

- Aldo Corsi's cargo transport is commandeered by Starfleet Intelligence for a mission near the Cardassian border. The mission goes very badly, resulting in the death of Aldo's brother Giancarlo. [#25:Home Fires by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore]

2357

- Dr. Bartholomew Faulwell enlists in Starfleet, where he is assigned to the U.S.S. Pisces as a linguist during their long-term exploration mission. [#21:War Stories Book 1 by Keith R.A. DeCandido]

2364

- Jameson, now an admiral, reveals shortly before his death that he broke the Prime Directive during a mission to Mordan IV forty years earlier. The knowledge that his hero did this is devastating to Bradford, who resigns his commission and ends his friendship with Gold. ["Too Short a Season" (TNG), #13:No Surrender by Jeff Mariotte]

2365

- Sonya Gomez graduates Starfleet Academy and is assigned to the U.S.S. Enterprise -D as an ensign in engineering under Lieutenant Geordi La Forge. Her first meeting with Captain Picard has her spilling hot chocolate all over him, an incident that prompts Gomez never to touch the beverage again. ["Q Who" (TNG)]
- Gomez aids in the rescue of La Forge from Pakleds. ["Samaritan Snare" (TNG)]
- Lieutenant (j.g.) Domenica Corsi, the deputy chief of security on the U.S.S. Roosevelt, and her long-time lover, Lieutenant (j.g.) Dar Ableen, a supply officer, travel together to Pemberton's Point while on shore leave. [#25:Home Fires by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore, #54:Security by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- The Enterprise surreptitiously saves the world of Drema IV from tectonic instability that threatens to destroy it, knowledge of which was gained from Lt. Commander Data engaging in unauthorized conversations with a young Dreman girl named Sarjenka. Dr. Katherine Pulaski, under Picard's orders, alters Sarjenka's memories so she has no recollection of the events. ["Pen Pals" (TNG)]
- During a mission to the colony of Mariposa, Gomez is among the engineering personnel whose cells are harvested for possible cloning; the samples are subsequently destroyed. ["Up the Long Ladder" (TNG), #57:Out of the Cocoon by William Leisner]

2366

- After months of flirting, Lieutenant (j.g.) Gomez invites Lieutenant (j.g.) Duffy on a date at the arboretum. [#24:Wildfire Book 2 by David Mack]
- The Roosevelt is assigned to aid the Izar Peace Officers in solving a multiple homicide that matches homicides on three other worlds. Corsi and Officer Christine Vale soon determine that Ableen is the guilty party, and Corsi shoots him in order to save Vale from being his next victim. The incident prompts Vale to apply to Starfleet Academy. [#1:The Belly of the Beast by Dean Wesley Smith, #6:Cold Fusion by Keith R.A. DeCandido, #54:Security by Keith R.A.]

DeCandido]

- On Ferenginar, a Ferengi named Lant appears from the future to make his fortune by speculating on market trends he already knows. An S.C.E. team from the U.S.S. da Vinci follows him back and forces him to lose all his wealth. [#32:Buying Time by Robert Greenberger]
- Duffy is part of an engineering team on the Enterprise led by Lt. Commander La Forge that deals with invidium contamination of various systems. ["Hollow Pursuits" (TNG)]

2368

- Gomez is promoted to full lieutenant and assigned to the Oberth for a one-year mission shortly after the Enterprise is damaged by a quantum filament. She breaks it off with Duffy. [#7:Invincible Book 1 by David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido, #24:Wildfire Book 2 by David Mack, #28:Breakdowns by Keith R.A. DeCandido, "Disaster" (TNG)]

2369

- The Enterprise encounters the Dyson Sphere the Jenolen crashed into, as well as the Jenolen itself. They rescue Scott—Franklin's transporter pattern degraded too far for him to be saved. Scott decides to explore the galaxy in a shuttle on permanent loan from the Enterprise. ["Relics" (TNG)]
- Elizabeth Lense and Julian Bashir graduate from Starfleet Medical as valedictorian and salutatorian, respectively. Bashir would have come in first, but for a mistake in what he claimed was a trick question. Bashir is assigned to Station Deep Space 9, Lense to the U.S.S. Lexington. ["Emissary," "Explorers" (DS9)]
- Gold, now commander of the about-to-be-decommissioned U.S.S. Progress, is assigned to help establish a base near Drema IV. Pulaski, his chief medical officer, uses this opportunity to check up on Sarjenka. [#61:Progress by Terri Osborne]
- Lant tries to escape the S.C.E. by jumping forward three years, but the team finds him and brings him back to 2366 to undo the temporal damage. [#32:Buying Time by Robert Greenberger]

2371

- Admiral John Harriman announces his retirement as liaison between the S.C.E. and Starfleet Command. He recommends Scott for the job. ["Full Circle" by Scott Pearson (Strange New Worlds VII), #62:The Future Begins by Steve Mollmann & Michael Schuster]
- Bashir and Lense meet on DS9 when the Lexington docks at the station. ["Explorers" (DS9)]

2372

- Fabian Stevens, assigned to the U.S.S. Defiant as an engineer, works with fellow engineer Enrique Muniz to modify a probe to fire a torpedo on a Jem'Hadar ship in the atmosphere of a gas giant. ["Starship Down" (DS9)]

2373

- Muniz is killed on a mission to the Gamma Quadrant. Shortly thereafter, Stevens's enlistment ends, and, grieving over Muniz, he chooses not to reenlist. He returns home to the Rigel Colonies to work in his family's shuttle business. ["The Ship" (DS9), #22:War Stories Book 2 by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- Bashir is revealed to have received illegal genetic enhancements at the age of six. His father accepts imprisonment for the crime in order for Bashir to retain his rank and medical license. ["Dr. Bashir, I Presume?" (DS9)]
- During Yom Kippur, Gold goes to the Captain's Table to reflect—and fast, until it's the equivalent of sunset in New York City—and tells amidrash to several of the bar's patrons. ["An Easy Fast" by John J. Ordover (Tales from the Captain's Table)]
- Dominion forces take DS9, signalling the beginning of the Dominion War. ["Call to Arms"]

(DS9)]

2374

- Commander Selden of Starbase 314 calls for an investigation of Lense to see if she, like Bashir, was illegally genetically enhanced. Lense is cleared of the charges after a month of confinement on the starbase. She returns to the Lexington in time for a battle in the Setlik system, during which her entire medical staff is killed. [#3:Hard Crash by Christie Golden, #16:Oaths by Glenn Hauman, #21:War Stories Book 1 by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- Stevens reenlists in Starfleet and is assigned to the S.C.E. team on the Theda Vinci, joining the crew alongside a Nasat named P8 Blue; the team also includes a pair of Bynar civilians, 110 and 111, temporarily assigned to the ship. They are tasked with studying a piece of Dominion technology while repairing a relay station; when the Dominion attacks during repairs, they figure out the Dominion device and use it to win the battle. [#22:War Stories Book 2 by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- Gold's son, Nathan, and his wife Elaine Welsh, are living on Betazed, and are interviewing Lwaxana Troi for a book Nathan is writing, when the Dominion conquers that world. Nathan and Elaine are killed in the assault. ["In the Pale Moonlight" (DS9), "The Ceremony of Innocence is Drowned" by Keith R.A. DeCandido (Tales of the Dominion War)]

2375

- The Evorans are fast-tracked into Federation membership, a process aided by the U.S.S. Enterprise -E, even though Picard cuts the mission short in order to divert to the Briar Patch. [Star Trek: Insurrection]
- Faulwell is assigned to Project Mungin, a top-secret cryptography project. [#63:Echoes of Coventry by Richard C. White]
- Scott at last accepts Admiral William Ross's offer of Harriman's former job as S.C.E. liaison. [#4:Interphase Book 1 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore, #62:The Future Begins by Steve Mollmann & Michael Schuster]
- Leaving a subordinate in charge of the S.C.E., Scott and Admiral Leonard McCoy go on an inspection tour in the Runabout Hudson. ["Safe Harbors" by Howard Weinstein (Tales of the Dominion War), #62:The Future Begins by Steve Mollmann & Michael Schuster]
- The Breen ally with the Dominion, an alliance they announce by attacking Earth. ["The Changing Face of Evil" (DS9), "Eleven Hours Out" by Dave Galanter (Tales of the Dominion War), "Safe Harbors" by Howard Weinstein (Tales of the Dominion War)]
- After a mission to Kropasar, Scott resigns his commission. He eventually takes a job as a greeter on a restaurant on Risa. [#62:The Future Begins by Steve Mollmann & Michael Schuster, NF: Excalibur Book 2:Renaissance by Peter David]
- Theda Vinci is charged with retrieving a Breen encryption device on Lamenda Prime, with the aid of two people from Starfleet security, who help against the Breen soldiers who don't want them to get it. Afterward, Duffy and Stevens go on shore leave, where they get very drunk and wake up the next morning without their clothes. ["Field Expediency" by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore (Tales of the Dominion War), #24:Wildfire Book 2 by David Mack, #25:Home Fires by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore]
- A team of linguists and cryptographers, led by Faulwell, are assigned to Starbase 92 to crack the Dominion's latest code. With aid from a Ferengi trader, they do so. While on the assignment, Faulwell meets Lt. Commander Anthony Mark, and they become a couple. [#21:War Stories Book 1 by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- The U.S.S. Sentinel is the only surviving ship in a mission to sabotage a Dominion outpost, which paves the way for an offensive in the Orias system. Lt. Commander Gomez, the ship's chief engineer, alters the ship's warp field so that they are disguised as a Cardassian freighter while behind enemy lines. [#1:The Belly of the Beast by Dean Wesley Smith, #21:War Stories Book 1

by Keith R.A. DeCandido]

- Theda Vinci must dispose of an alien ship called the Dancing Star that has entered the Randall V system, which contains a Federation listening post that must be kept secret from the Dominion. Commander Salek, the first officer, is killed during the course of the mission. [#33:Collective Hindsight Book 1 by Aaron Rosenberg]
- Hostilities with the Dominion end when several Cardassian ships turn against their Dominion masters and allied forces take Cardassia. [“What You Leave Behind” (DS9)]

2376

January–April:

- At Scott’s long-distance recommendation, Commander Gomez replaces Salek on the Theda Vinci. Lt. Commander Duffy is the second officer on the ship, the first time the two of them have seen each other since she left the Enterprise. [#1:The Belly of the Beast by Dean Wesley Smith, #7:Invincible Book 1 by David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- Gomez’s first mission as Theda Vinci first officer is to the Tellarite colony Maeglin, where they encounter Overseer Biron of the Androssi. [#6:Cold Fusion by Keith R.A. DeCandido, #10:Here There Be Monsters by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- Ross convinces Scott to rejoin Starfleet and take his job as liaison back, which he does after aiding Morgan Primus and Ensign Robin Lefler on Risa. [#62:The Future Begins by Steve Mollmann & Michael Schuster, NF:Excalibur Book 2:Renaissance by Peter David, NF:Excalibur Book 3:Restoration by Peter David]
- Theda Vinci’s S.C.E. team sets up a water system on a desert planet that is a candidate for Federation membership. After that, they are sent to salvage a giant alien vessel that fired on the Enterprise, with the aid of Enterprise personnel La Forge and Lieutenant Vale, who is now security chief on that ship. The aliens who have taken over the ship, nicknamed the Beast, are stopped, but not until after they kill 111. [#1:The Belly of the Beast by Dean Wesley Smith]
- 110 intends to return to Bynaus in order to be re-bonded following the death of 111, but he finds he does not wish to sully her memory by re-bonding. [#2:Fatal Error by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- Vale returns to the Enterprise. La Forge remains on the Theda Vinci. He aids the S.C.E. team when they are summoned to repair Ganitriul, the computer that runs the world of Eerlik and which has been sabotaged by an extremist group. [#1:The Belly of the Beast by Dean Wesley Smith, #2:Fatal Error by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- Theda Vinci is sent to Intar to stop a ship that is destroying their capital city. The ship is alive, in a symbiotic relationship with its pilot, who died. The S.C.E. crew is able to fix it and send it home. [#3:Hard Crash by Christie Golden]
- The experience on Intar convinces 110 to remain unbonded. This makes him an outcast in Bynar society, and so he takes on the nickname “Soloman,” since he is no longer permitted a numeric designation. He also enlists in Starfleet. [#3:Hard Crash by Christie Golden]
- The Constitution-class Defiant reappears in the spatial rift near Tholian space, and Theda Vinci is sent to salvage it, a mission that is complicated by the Tholians attacking in order to keep the evidence of the hundred-year-old attack out of Federation or Klingon hands. [#4-5:Interphase Books 1-2 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore]
- Gomez is sent to the chimerium-laden world of Sarindar to supervise the construction of a subspace accelerator that will offload the chimerium into orbit. [#7:Invincible Book 1 by David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- A renegade Jem’Hadar ship attacks DS9, destroying the U.S.S. Aldebaran. The ship is stopped, but one Jem’Hadar transports to the station and irreparably damages the fusion core, almost destroying the station. [DS9:Avatar Books 1-2 by S.D. Perry]
- On the anniversary of Ableen’s death, Lt. Commander Corsi seduces Stevens to avoid thinking about the events that day. She intends for it to be a onetime thing. [#6:Cold Fusion by Keith R.A.

DeCandido]

- Several S.C.E. crews are diverted to DS9, but Theda Vinci instead rendezvouses with Lieutenant Nog on the Runabout Rio Grande to salvage the fusion core from DS9's long-abandoned sister station Empok Nor. They drive off Biron and his crew, who are attempting to transform Empok Nor into a mobile weapons platform, and then tow the station back to the Bajoran system. A distress call from Gomez forces Theda Vinci to cut their aid short. [#6: Cold Fusion by Keith R.A. DeCandido, DS9: Section 31: Abyss by David Weddle & Jeffrey Lang]
- The subspace accelerator project on Sarindar is attacked by ancient chameleon robots that look like mutated versions of fauna native to the planet. Eventually, and only after many workers are killed, Gomez is able to stop the robots. When Theda Vinci arrives, Gomez decides to start her relationship with Duffy up again. [#7-8: Invincible Books 1-2 by David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido]

May–July

- Dozens of gateways designed by the ancient civilization known as the Iconians start opening, causing chaos throughout the galaxy. Scott is involved in figuring out the reasons behind the openings, though the crisis is eventually solved, mostly due to the efforts of the Enterprise. [TNG: Gateways Book 3: Doors Into Chaos by Robert Greenberger, “The Other Side” by Robert Greenberger (Gateways: What Lay Beyond)]
- Theda Vinci must figure out what destroyed an outpost on BorSitu Minor, which turns out to be a digging device run amok. [#9: The Riddled Post by Aaron Rosenberg]
- Theda Vinci is assigned to cleanup work following the gateways crisis, including towing ships, fixing burned-out relays, and rounding up a group of giant extradimensional creatures that have been trapped on Maeglin. [#10: Here There Be Monsters by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- A fleet of Munqu ships attack both Theda Vinci and the mining colony on Beta Argola. [#11: Ambush by Dave Galanter & Greg Brodeur]
- The planet Keorga purchases a computer to run their planet, but find that they cannot read the user manual. Faulwell, Soloman, and cultural specialist Carol Abramowitz are assigned to help out, and then must figure out the problem when the computer threatens to destroy the planet. [#12: Some Assembly Required by Scott Ciencin & Dan Jolley]
- The prison known as the Kursican Orbital Platform malfunctions, and Theda Vinci is called in to repair it, even as the ship and the planet are put in danger by the political extremists who damaged it in the first place—among them Bradford, who is killed, but not before Gold talks him into allowing his daughter and grandson to be saved. [#13: No Surrender by Jeff Mariotte]
- Theda Vinci rescues a Ferengi escape pod that comes from a ship that has been taken over by the Landru computer. [#14: Caveat Emptor by Ian Edginton & Mike Collins]
- The Evorans request the S.C.E.'s assistance with an archaeological find; the mission goes badly when an extremist group attempts to cast the Federation out. [#15: Past Life by Robert Greenberger]
- A deadly disease breaks out on Sherman's Planet, which Lense is able to cure with a radical therapy. [#16: Oaths by Glenn Hauman]
- The S.C.E. has to stop a runaway ship that has been travelling at high warp for several weeks. They are unable to save the ship, but they do save the Senuta passengers. [#17-19: Foundations Books 1-3 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore]
- Biron obtains several Theda Vinci crew logs in order to study in more depth the crew that has defeated him on two different occasions. [#21-22: War Stories Books 1-2 by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- Theda Vinci investigates the disappearance of the U.S.S. Lincoln and the freighter Vulpecula. It turns out both ships were “swallowed” by a holographic ship that is divided into several sections that provide holographic scenarios to entertain those within. [#20: Enigma Ship by J. Steven York and Christina F. York]

- Gomez and Duffy go on a date on Betazed. Duffy decides he is going to propose to Gomez. [#24:Wildfire Book 2 by David Mack]
- TheU.S.S. Orion under the command of Lian T'su attempts to test the Wildfire device on the gas giant Galvan VI. The test goes horribly awry, and theOrion crew is killed, the ship plummeting into the planet's turbulent atmosphere. [#23:Wildfire Book 1 by David Mack]
- Duffy proposes to Gomez while theda Vinci is constructing a mining platform on Tenber VII. Before he can finish doing so, theda Vinci is diverted to Galvan VI to salvage the Wildfire device from theOrion. The first attempt fails, and theOrion crashes into theda Vinci, destroying its warp core, sending it deeper into the atmosphere, and killing half its crew. The remaining crew are able to retrieve the warp core from theOrion and escape, while Duffy sacrifices his own life to stop the Wildfire device from detonating in the atmosphere, saving the lives not only of the remaining da Vinci crew, but also of the energy beings living inside Galvan VI, the Ovanim. [#23-24: Wildfire Books 1-2 by David Mack]
- TheU.S.S. Mjolnir tows theda Vinci back to Earth. A funeral is held at Starfleet Headquarters for all those who died, and a board of inquiry clears Gold of any responsibility for those deaths. [#24:Wildfire Book 2 by David Mack, #28:Breakdowns by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- Theda Vinci undergoes repairs at McKinley Station. [#28:Breakdowns by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- Gold goes home to New York City, where he is greeted by a large portion of his extended family; he spends the next several weeks personally contacting the families of those who died. [#28:Breakdowns by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- Gomez goes home to Vieques to visit her parents and sister, but is despondent over Duffy's death. [#28:Breakdowns by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- Blue goes home to Nasat, deciding it isn't safe for her larvae on theda Vinci, and while there helps solve an ancient mystery on the Nasat homeworld regarding the other sentient species on the planet. [#27:Balance of Nature by Heather Jarman]
- Corsi goes home to visit her parents. Stevens insists on coming along, as repayment for his being with her that one night. Corsi's father tells her of how her uncle Giancarlo died, and the two of them come to an understanding for the first time since she left home to join Starfleet. [#25:Home Fires by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore]
- Lense travels to Pike City on Cestus III. [#57:Out of the Cocoon by William Leisner]
- Ensign Robin Rusconi encounters a strange inter-dimensional portal on the moon. [#28: Breakdowns by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- Abramowitz goes on a cruise, which is cut short by a mission (with Faulwell and Soloman) to Vrinda, where she needs to get in touch with her feelings. [#26:Age of Unreason by Scott Ciencin]

August

- Gold and Gomez encounter each other while each is paying a condolence call to Duffy's mother, and Gomez realizes that Duffy's death wasn't Gold's fault. [#28:Breakdowns by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- Gold gathers the remaining crew of theda Vinci at his home for a feast cooked by Gilman, and also granting promotions to Nancy Conlon, Songmin Wong, Anthony Shabalala, and Vance Hawkins. [#28:Breakdowns by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- Theda Vinci is fully repaired, with several modifications engineered by Duffy before his death, and computer upgrades supervised by Soloman. [#20:Enigma Ship by J. Steven York & Christina F. York, #28:Breakdowns by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- Several new personnel join theda Vinci, among them new second officer Lt. Commander Mor glasch Tev, a Tellarite recommended by Scott. He is heavily involved in their first mission out of McKinley, when several Cabochons in San Francisco expand from ball-bearing size to the size of buildings, and also contain entire cities within—the devices are also claimed by hostile aliens.

- Both Scott and Chief Miles O'Brien aid the S.C.E. [#29:Aftermath by Christopher L. Bennett]
- Theda Vinci aids the Venus Terraforming Project. Soloman encounters a “proper” bonded Bynar pair for the first time since 111 died, and is met with severe prejudice. [#30-31:Ishtar Rising Books 1-2 by Michael A. Martin & Andy Mangels]
- Theda Vinci encounters temporal disturbances that turn out to be an ancient time machine that Lant is using to go back in time and make a fortune on the market. Tev, Gomez, Abramowitz, and Corsi travel back in time to stop him. [#32:Buying Time by Robert Greenberger]

September

- The Dancing Star appears again, which surprises the S.C.E. crew, since they thought they'd destroyed it. They manage to do so successfully this time, while also keeping the ship out of the hands of the Androssi. [#33-34:Collective Hindsight Books 1-2 by Aaron Rosenberg]
- Gomez deciphers a distress signal coming from the event horizon of a black hole. Theda Vinci discovers a Resaurian prison camp there, one that the Resaurians would rather remained a secret. [#35-36:The Demon Books 1-2 by Loren L. Coleman & Randall N. Bills]
- Theda Vinci is assigned to aid the non-aligned Tellarite colony of Kharzh'ulla in fixing the planet's massive orbital ring. Gomez learns that Tev, who grew up on Kharzh'ulla, wrote the definitive study of the ring, but his work was stolen by Eevraith, who now has a successful political career on the basis of his stolen work. [#37:Ring Around the Sky by Allyn Gibson]
- A generation ship that has gone out of control is investigated by a joint team that includes the S.C.E. team on Theda Vinci and a Klingon team of engineers on the I.K.S. Qaw'qay'. The teams are able to put the ship on course and also solve the occupants' fertility crisis. [#38:Orphans by Kevin Killiany]
- As part of the terms of a disarmament between two planets in the Rhaax system, Theda Vinci is ordered to make sure both worlds' weapons systems have been disarmed. [#39:Grand Designs by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore]
- Bajor joins the Federation. [DS9:Unity by S.D. Perry]

October–November

- Theda Vinci crew determine that neither side in the Rhaax conflict has any intention of truly disarming. [#39:Grand Designs by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore]
- Gomez, Stevens, Abramowitz, and Deputy Security Chief Vance Hawkins go undercover to Teneb to disarm an observation device that has crash-landed on this pre-warp civilization. All four team members are almost killed. Afterward, Hawkins and Abramowitz decide to start a relationship. [#40:Failsafe by David Mack]
- Gomez, Corsi, and Lense try to determine what happened to a ship that is bereft of all save a lone two-hundred-year-old child named Dobrah. Lense learns the crew died of a disease that she cannot cure. [#41:Bitter Medicine by Dave Galanter]
- While clearing out a “sargasso sea” of derelicts, Theda Vinci encounters a ship powered by manipulating probabilities—a drive system that is malfunctioning and endangers reality itself before Soloman is able to shut it down. [#42:Sargasso Sector by Paul Kupperberg]
- The S.C.E. is called in to repair the weather system on Risa, and find themselves discovering a new life-form. [#43:Paradise Interrupted by John S. Drew]
- Theda Vinci travels to the “Delta Triangle” in order to provide a cultural service for a member of the community that has been trapped in that region of space for centuries. [#44:Where Time Stands Still by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore]
- Non-aligned tycoon Rod Portlyn asks for the S.C.E.'s aid in setting up a research-and-development facility, but they soon uncover Portlyn's shady dealings. [#45:The Art of the Deal by Glenn Greenberg]
- The Lokra request the S.C.E.'s aid in stopping a seeming derelict that is heading for their planet, but the “derelict” is actually a ship occupied by a dormant silicon-based life-form. [#46:Spin by J.

December

- Theda Vinci returns to Earth for the wedding of Gold's granddaughter Esther to Khor, son of Lantar, the first-ever Klingon-Jewish wedding. At the wedding, Mark expresses interest in marriage to Faulwell. [#47-48:Creative Couplings Books 1-2 by Glenn Hauman & Aaron Rosenberg]
- Stevens and Tev aid in the holodeck test of a prototype Starfleet vessel, theHyperion, which is victimized by practical jokes gone horribly wrong. [#47-48:Creative Couplings Books 1-2 by Glenn Hauman & Aaron Rosenberg]
- While testing a new warp slipstream, theda Vinci comes to the aid of a Koas who is holding his planet in a box. They manage to figure out the controls to the box before aliens known as the Silgov destroy theda Vinci to get the technology for themselves. [#49:Small World by David Mack]
- Two crewmembers, security guard Ken Caitano and engineer Ted Deverick, are killed by unknown means. Eventually, Corsi learns that they were victims of a "sonic bullet" embedded in a padd holding a Gamma Quadrant-based novel. Theda Vinci, with the help of personnel on DS9, trace the novel to a renegade Vorta in the Gamma Quadrant. [#50:Malefactorum by Terri Osborne]
- Upon their return to DS9, Lense learns that her paper on Dobrah has gleaned her a nomination for the Bentman Prize. Since Bashir is up for the same prize, they depart together on the RunaboutMissouri. [#51:Lost Time by Ilsa J. Bick, #54:Security by Keith R.A. DeCandido, #55-56:Wounds Books 1-2 by Ilsa J. Bick]
- In an alternate universe, the crew of theGettysburg, commanded by David Gold, attempt to learn the location of the Celestial Temple of the Bajoran Prophets by querying other universes. This has devastating effects in the mainline universe, as it's done through an Androssi security device left behind on Empok Nor. The S.C.E. team and DS9's crew manage to communicate with the other universe—Soloman is stunned to learn that 111 is alive in that universe, and Gomez is likewise floored by learning that Duffy's alive there—and solve the crisis before the Bajoran system is destroyed. [#51:Lost Time by Ilsa J. Bick]
- The events on Empok Nor also activate a long-dormant alien device that opens gateways into parallel universes. TheMissouri encounters one, and crashes on a planet in that universe. Lense and Bashir are separated, each thinking the other dead. Lense falls in with Jabari rebels, who resist cybernetic replacement of body parts, while Bashir is captured by the Kornak military. [#54:Security by Keith R.A. DeCandido, #55:Wounds Book 1 by Ilsa J. Bick]
- Theda Vinci returns to Earth for Caitano and Deverick's funeral. [#50:Malefactorum by Terri Osborne]
- Gomez takes a one-week leave on Rec Station Hidalgo. During that week, theda Vinci's attempts to decipher an alien device in the Artemis system are complicated by the arrival of the Androssi. [#52:Identity Crisis by John J. Ordovery, #54:Security by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- Theda Vinci arrives at Hidalgo to pick up Gomez, only to find that Gomez has gone crazy and taken over the station. This is revealed to be a complex AI program designed to help a treasury minister on Sigma V steal a lot of money. [#52:Identity Crisis by John J. Ordovery]
- The S.C.E. team is split up in thirds. Two teams go to pre-warp planets, Coroticus III and Sachem II, that were conquered by the Dominion during the war to examine cultural contamination and set up new observation posts. Theda Vinci performs upgrades on Avril Station. Sachem II is uneventful; however, an insane Vorta remained behind on Coroticus and has been killing the natives over the past year. [#53:Fables of the Prime Directive by Cory Rushton]
- On Avril Station, Tev goes behind Gomez's back regarding a diagnostic program. Tev's program later crashes the station's system, resulting in Gomez giving him a severe reprimand.

- [#54:Security by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- Lense becomes the medic for the Jabari rebels, and starts to form a relationship with the rebel leader, Saad. The doctor in charge of the military hospital where Bashir is imprisoned is trying to help him, but is facing resistance from the security director. [#56:Wounds Book 2 by Ilsa J. Bick]
- Caitano's replacement is from Izar, and his presence is like opening an old wound for Corsi, who finally tells Stevens about Ableen, the first time she's ever talked about it. The two of them, after dancing around each other for months, finally become a proper couple. [#54:Security by Keith R.A. DeCandido]
- The S.C.E. and DS9 learn that Bashir and Lense never arrived at the awards ceremony. Both the da Vinci and the Defiant engage in search operations. The former ship finds the alien device, and are able to determine which alternate universe the Missouri entered. They go in just as the Jabari are attacking the hospital, and Lense and Bashir are reunited. The da Vinci beams them both out. [#54:Security by Keith R.A. DeCandido, #56:Wounds Book 2 by Ilsa J. Bick]
- Bashir examines Lense and discovers she's pregnant. [#56:Wounds Book 2 by Ilsa J. Bick]

Coming Next Month: Star Trek™: S.C.E. #57

OUT OF THE COCOON by William Leisner

Centuries ago, the S.S. Mariposa transported two sets of colonists—one a “back-to-nature” group called the Bringloidi, the other a collection of scientists—to new worlds. Over a decade ago, the Starship Enterprise™ brought the colonies back together as a solution to two problems—the Bringloidi had lost their home to solar flares, and the Mariposans faced a breeding crisis brought about by their use of cloning.

However, the union has not been as fruitful as Captain Picard had hoped, and now the S.C.E. team of the U.S.S. da Vinci has been called in to solve the Mariposans' difficulties—but will the solution be even worse than the problem?

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