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STAR TREK™

S.C.E.

#58

HONOR

Kevin Killiany



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Chapter

1

Domenica Corsi decided she wasn't dead.

Determining whether she was dying or not took a little longer.

The pain was certainly sufficient for fatal injuries. And she couldn't move. When she pushed past the pain enough to try, nothing happened. More disturbing than either the pain or the immobility was the floating in darkness, along a dark tunnel toward a light. She'd heard about that. Generally speaking, in terms of being alive, that was a bad sign.

The light went out for a while and when it came back she decided it meant she'd fallen asleep. Or passed out.

There was a sound, like leather against wood, and another like clicking or ticking, but they faded and were gone. They'd sounded alive, not like machines. There was a smell, too—peppermint and cedar. That stayed.

Pain still gripped her, but it was not as intense. More an ache than agony. And it was universal, as though someone had methodically pummeled every square centimeter of her body with a loving attention to detail.

She still could not move. But now, more aware, she realized a tightly wound blanket, not paralysis, held her in its grip.

The light she had been floating toward resolved itself into a softly glowing... She wasn't sure. It was irregular, but vaguely spheroid, and seemed to be overflowing out of a basket of woven vines. The basket was on a shelf, maybe two meters away. The shelf looked as though it had been carved out of a wall of living wood.

She let her eyes drift shut and considered the possibility she was delirious. As far as she could remember, no Federation starships were carved of wood.

Corsi forced her eyes open.

She was not delirious. She was wrapped in a blanket on a bed of something soft, the source of the peppermint and cedar scent, she decided. Her bed was low to the floor of a dimly lit room or cabin that seemed to be carved from a single block of heavily grained wood.

Turning her head the few degrees the wrappings allowed, Corsi could see the one shelf with the odd lantern, a wooden bucket or trough that was not carved from the floor, and a dark wall covering that may or may not have concealed an entrance. She had no idea where she was or how she'd gotten there, but she was reasonably certain it had not been of her own free will.

There was a padding sound again, something soft—leather?—sliding over wood. And again the series of clicks and ticks. Movement and voices, she decided, beyond the wall hanging-covered door.

Corsi let her eyes droop shut to slits, no tension to her face as she feigned sleep. Through the haze of her lashes, she saw the wall covering bow inward, then aside.

A head appeared, long and broad, just over a meter above the floor. At first she thought it was an animal, but then she realized it was carrying a tray with folded cloths of some sort. She couldn't make out its color through her lashes in the dim light, but it was dark. What she could discern of the face looked remarkably like that of a Terran chipmunk, minus the split upper lip. The tiny rounded ears that projected above and wide, lemurlike eyes compounded the effect.

It turned to one side, chittering in a series of clicks and ticks, and Corsi realized the creature was longer than it was tall. The body that extended back from the upright torso had at least two pairs of legs. The blend of disparate features struck her as being like nothing so much as a cross between a chipmunk and a centaur.

A second chiptaur entered the room, and then a third. With that many eyes on her, she couldn't risk her surreptitious observation and let her eyes drift fully shut.

Corsi willed her body to remain limp as the creatures unwrapped her from the blanket. They were as gentle as they could be; at least they seemed to be taking care, chittering softly to one another as though mindful of disturbing her. But it was hard not to tense against the pain that shot through her at every turn and pull. She thought she heard the rustle of the doorway hanging beneath the sounds of their voices and thought perhaps one had exited into the outer room or hall or whatever lay beyond her small chamber.

As they lifted her legs Corsi caught the sharp scent of urine and realized they were changing her diaper. She couldn't stop the hot flush she felt spreading up from her throat.

A sharp chirp stopped the gentle flow of clicking conversation. A pad, feeling like warm suede, pressed against the side of her face. They'd noticed her change in hue.

Corsi felt the sharp prickle of coarse fur as one of the creatures laid its broad head against her chest, evidently listening for her heartbeat. No way to hide her racing heart.

There was a startled whuff of warm breath against her chin.

This wasn't the best tactical situation for making a move, but Corsi realized she wasn't going to get to choose her moment. She followed the broad head up as it pulled away from her chest.

She hadn't been able to tell much about their physiology from her cursory observation, but she did know they breathed air through noses in front of their heads. Assuming their lungs weren't in their skulls, that meant their windpipes passed through their throats. That was the only point of attack she could be sure of.

But a blow to the throat could be fatal. She wasn't about to kill anyone unless she was sure it was the only way out. So she rolled toward the being, gasping through the pain as she came up on one knee. Grabbing a furred shoulder at the base of the neck, she threw her offside leg over its back.

The chiptaur gave a startled clack and tried to shy away, but before it had taken a step, Corsi was astride. Guessing similar plumbing and ventilation, she leaned her shoulder into the back of its skull, preventing it from throwing its head back, and snaked her left arm around the being's throat in a classic "sleeper" hold, gripping her left fist in her right hand for leverage.

Of course, given the alien's short stature, this meant Corsi was bent almost double. Which was just as well. Now that she was on her feet, or at least crouching, she could see the wooden room—the wooden walls curving seamlessly into the wooden floor—was barely tall enough for her to have stood erect. She'd have to crawl to get through the door.

There was only one other chiptaur in the room; she'd been right about one leaving. It froze by the bucket beneath the shelf, regarding her with its lemur eyes.

With her eyes wide open, Corsi could see the beings had four arms. Two small ones, about the size of a ten-year-old human's, were mounted on narrow shoulders just below the neck. A second pair about twice as large jutted from broader shoulders a half-dozen centimeters below. The arrangement made the chiptaur's upper torso vaguely reminiscent of a ziggurat.

Because all four hands were extended toward her, spread wide in an evident warding gesture, Corsi could see the upper hands had four radiating fingers. The lower hands had a central pad with two opposable thumbs like a pair of surreal mittens.

From what she could see of the horizontal lower torso, the chiptaur's four legs were arranged like a cat's.

Her captive had frozen the moment her arm had slipped around its neck. Now it seemed to settle, forcing her to one knee to maintain her grip as it apparently made itself comfortable on the floor.

The second chiptaur, evidently over its shock at her sudden attack, followed suit. Tucking its legs under its body, it braced its upper torso on the elbows of its heavier arms. Without a sound, it regarded her solemnly, almost sadly, over two pairs of folded hands.

The chittering clicks and ticks continued from the other side of the wall covering. The third chiptaur was evidently continuing its side of whatever conversation Corsi had interrupted. When it paused she knew from the give and take of the earlier exchanges that whoever was out there expected a reply from either her captive or the being looking on with an unnervingly level gaze.

She prodded the back of her captive's skull with her shoulder, the only thing she could think of to urge it to respond. She was certain it understood, but it remained silent, as motionless as a statue in her grip.

"Speak," she murmured in the round ear next to her cheek. Probably a useless sound without her combadge and its universal translator. "Answer him."

The round ear flicked at the feel of her breath, but that was all.

After a moment there was a short series of ticks from beyond the doorway. A query, Corsi suspected, though there was no rising inflection.

Still the creature beneath her remained unmoving. But for its breathing she would have thought it was carved from the same wood as the room.

The behavior of the second chiptaur was even stranger. Unencumbered by a clinging human, it showed no inclination to either answer its companion on the other side of the curtain or leave on its own. It simply sat, or lounged, and regarded her with an expression of what looked to Corsi like unflinching resolution.

At last the third chiptaur evidently decided to investigate the silence and thrust its head around the edge of the curtain. It blinked once, its already wide eyes going wider in an almost comical expression of surprise at the sight of Corsi evidently strangling its companion.

Then, with an almost human—and clearly heartfelt—sigh, the tension left its body. With the same unhurried resignation as the others, it tucked its legs up under its body and settled down, blocking the doorway in its repose.

Corsi considered her tactical options.

A tug on her captive's head confirmed it had no intention of moving. It was clear if she wanted it to come with her, she was going to have to drag it. Now that she had a feel for how densely muscled it was, she estimated its mass at about one hundred kilograms. Not an easy burden, particularly given its awkward shape. Not to mention the problem of keeping her hostage hostage while shifting its equally massive and inert companion out of the only exit.

With a heartfelt sigh of her own, Corsi released her captive's neck. She wasn't going anywhere.

Chapter 2

P8 Blue sat in darkness, looking toward a patch of grayish light her sensors told her was the mouth the hundred-meter tunnel Waldo Egg had made.

Egg without the Waldo, Pattie corrected herself. The arms came off while we were still in the stratosphere

The good news was the soft peat was firm enough to hold its shape. At least the tunnel showed no signs of collapsing in the immediate future.

The bad news was the peat was firm enough to hold its shape. Which meant it was dry enough to ignite if she fired her attitude thrusters. Not that the heat of burning peat would present a threat to the EVA pod; it had recently withstood the temperatures of atmospheric entry, after all. But if the peat burned it may close off her only escape route.

At least, she thought the material was peat. Her field was structural engineering, not organic chemistry. And Waldo Egg, as Faulwell had dubbed the EVA pod, was designed to operate in space. Which meant the sensors could accurately assess the molecular makeup of the densely packed, fibrous, organic material in which she was suspended, but the computer was not programmed with the vocabulary to give it a name.

Whatever it was filled a basin over a kilometer in diameter with a mean depth of two hundred and thirty meters. Which meant if the peat beneath her caught fire she could conceivably sink another one hundred and ninety meters.

Pattie had thought the peat basin was a dry lake bed coming in. Not that she'd had a good look at it. She'd just had a momentary impression of a clearing in the forest that looked softer than the volcanic mountains she was streaking toward.

Whatever it was had looked like her best chance for survival. She'd rotated the pod, retrofiring thrusters never meant to combat a gravity well, in a desperate attempt to bring herself down before mashing into the rock face.

She'd succeeded, plowing stern first into what she expected to be—comparatively—soft ground. Only instead of gouging a trench along its surface, the EVA pod had plunged underground at a shallow angle. The shuddering stop had been nothing like the savage bounce and tumble she'd been braced for, but it was still the roughest landing she had ever walked away from.

Or would walk away from if she could figure out a way to get out of here.

The escape hatch was on the side, pressed firmly against a solid wall of presumed peat. If the hatch had opened inward instead of out, she might conceivably have dug her way through the fibrous vegetable matter to the tunnel proper. Though it would be tough going with nothing approximating a shovel available.

Actually, she had no tools available. There had been several attached to the outside of the EVA pod. Though they were designed for satellite repair, several of them could be adapted for digging. If they were still out there after her rough descent. And if Waldo Egg still had its arms.

At the moment her escape depended on either rotating the pod so its hatch faced the tunnel or making a hole in the transparent aluminum viewport big enough for her to crawl through.

Pattie opened the emergency repair locker, extracting all of its contents and arraying them as best she could on the deck of the pod. There were a half-dozen spare isolinear chips, opti-cables of various refractions and lengths, a universal spanner, a first-aid kit appropriate for a variety of soft-bodied races, and a selection of hull patches. After a moment she removed her combadge and Klingon engineering dagger and added them to the collection.

At first glance the collection of mismatched items did not look to Pattie like the tools she needed to break out of the buried EVA pod. However, being part of the S.C.E. meant learning to think outside the box, to see solutions that weren't obvious at first glance.

Pattie rearranged the materials, grouping them by function, and considered how she could combine their applications. In several minutes of intense thought, she brought all of her structural engineering knowledge, along with a few tricks from the other disciplines she'd picked up along the way, to bear on the problem. At last she realized she was right.

These were not the tools she needed to break out of a buried EVA pod.

She looked again at the frame of the viewport. Perhaps...

The tunnel was collapsing.

Not rapidly, and not by much, but there was a definite sway to the roofline. As she watched, a clump of material fell.

"So the choices are sit in the dark for a week until the *Vinci* comes looking for us or try rotating with the attitude thrusters," she said. "Which might ignite the peat and maybe burn a hole down another hundred and ninety meters. Then I could sit there in the dark for a week."

There was no water or food aboard the pod; she'd only intended a three-hour duty tour, but surviving a week without either was possible. Barely. And the *Vinci* would have no trouble finding the pod. Even if its beacon had been fried on the way down, her combadge would guide them in with little trouble.

Reattaching her combadge, she keyed it on for the first time in half an hour.

"Blue to Corsi. Commander? This is Pattie. Do you read me?"

Nothing. Just like last time. And the time before.

Pattie shut out the image of Corsi falling—in an EVA suit, not a pod—toward the planet below.

I might survive a week at the bottom of a hole, but Corsi could be injured.

Strapping herself back into the Nasat-supporting acceleration couch, Pattie reviewed the status boards. Main thrusters and all the attitude thrusters she could angle to point directly back had been burned out in her braking maneuver. That left her with four, which should be enough, and a choice.

Her inclination was to make several spaced micro burns, allowing the surrounding peat to cool away from combustion temperatures between gentle thrusts. However, the rate at which the tunnel was collapsing suggested she didn't have the time to spare on caution.

Pattie unhooked her safety straps. If she was going to do this, she was going to need to move fast.

She'd worry about the hundred and ninety meter drop if and when she felt herself falling. First priority was reaching the hatch.

With that in mind, she triggered the hatch release. Hopefully, when it faced the empty tunnel it would pop open of its own accord, saving her precious seconds.

It was possible all of this was unnecessary, that the EVA pod would simply turn in place and she'd be able to exit at her leisure. But one thing she had learned was to never count on things going well.

A section of the tunnel sagged.

Pattie couldn't preprogram the attitude thrusters—there was no formula for plowing through peat. She adjusted their angles and triggered the all-fire, holding the contact down as the pod shuddered and began to turn.

Thirty, forty degrees, then it seemed to hang up. Something more solid than the rest of the peat had snagged one of the pod's few projections. Or perhaps the material had started to collapse, holding it more firmly.

Pattie was already giving the thrusters full burn. There was nothing she could do but keep them firing, the chance of conflagration increasing with every second.

With an abrupt lurch that almost threw Pattie from the couch, the pod came loose. The viewport became a mirror as it turned away from the tunnel.

Pattie released the thruster control as the hatch popped open. A cloud of smoke and a rotting vegetable stench filled the tiny cabin as she dropped to all eights and scurried through the opening.

The pod shifted beneath her as she leapt from the metal sill. There was a sucking, crackling sound and another billow of smoke and stench washed over her as she scrambled up the crumbling tunnel.

The peat was not completely dry, she realized, then as quickly realized her pod wouldn't have dug a tunnel if it had been. Perhaps in moist peat the danger of fire wasn't as great as she'd supposed.

She almost slackened her pace at the thought. Then a section of ceiling twice as broad as she dropped, nearly blocking her way.

"I'm arboreal, not burrowing," she reminded no one in particular as she frantically dug her way over the obstacle.

Past the mound of fallen ceiling was another and a third. But beyond that the last thirty meters looked clear. The ceiling bowed but had not yet broken loose.

She was going to make it.

Then from behind her came a sullenfwump as though someone were dumping a massive load of pillows. Or dirt. A cold gust of escaping air washed up from behind. The tunnel was collapsing.

She wasn't going to make it.

Chapter

3

“I should have gone with her,” Fabian Stevens said for perhaps the hundredth time.

“What?” Bart Faulwell asked, pulling his attention back from the vista of aqueducts and canals stretching to the horizon and focusing on his friend at the other end of the narrow oval table. “And given up the chance to be Tev’s personal adjunct on Bundinal?”

Stevens growled at the linguist with what was evidently his best impression of an angry Klingon.

“You have the inflection wrong,” Bart pointed out mildly. “Unless, of course, you didn’t mean to call me a muffin, in which case you have the wrong word entirely.”

Stevens sighed heavily and scowled at the view.

The two friends had met for lunch at an open-air bistro perched on the brow of a hill overlooking the township of Brohtz. Though its cheerfully faux rustic decor was clearly aimed at the tourist trade, the Bundinalli librarian Bart was working with had assured him the food was excellent, faithfully representing the regional cuisine.

From this vantage point they could see no less than four canals and three aqueducts. A major hub was a few hundred kilometers west of Brohtz. There was a haze from the water vapor above the elevated aqueducts; as Bart understood it, the humidifying effects of evaporation were nearly as important as irrigation to the ecology. With the sun over their shoulders, they could see hundreds of tiny rainbows hanging in the mist.

Even if the food didn’t live up to expectations, Bart reflected, the view was worth the trek up the hill.

Actually, he’d enjoyed the uphill walk past antiquated homes that exactly mirrored one another across cobbled streets. He’d spent hours combing through centuries-old civic records in the dusty bowels of the town archive. Library research, especially when it involved sifting through folios penned when the Romans were invading Britain, was always enthralling—the first few weeks. After that, it became a chore.

Bart knew his search through the local archives of the Bundinalli was right on the cusp of transmogrifying from adventure to drudgery. Frequent breaks, like this native lunch with Stevens, were helping him stave off the inevitable.

It was equally clear his friend and cabinmate Fabian had needed a break as well.

The task of coordinating the various specialists trying to figure out the Bundinalli aqueduct system had fallen to Lieutenant Commander Mor glasch Tev, second in command of thea Vinci’s own S.C.E. team. Though the job Bart had heard described at the planning session had been that of facilitator, the Tellarite had—in typically Tellarite fashion—understood his role to be micromanager of all aspects of the endeavor.

Realizing this would be a big job, even for him, Tev’s first official act had been to co-opt Stevens, who would otherwise have been idle, as his personal assistant. For the last dozen days the tactical systems

specialist had been bouncing from one Bundinalli township to the next, personally following up on instructions Tev had already broadcast in meticulous detail.

Tev's specificity was in direct contrast to the vagaries of Bundinalli. The language, and the way the natives seemed to organize thought, guaranteed Bart stretched his intuitive translation skills as he tried to decipher—or even find—the original routing instructions for Bundinal's ancient aqueduct system.

Eons ago, generations of ecological mismanagement had turned seventy percent of Bundinal's arable land into a dust bowl. The Bundinalli were facing planetwide famine. Extinction was a real possibility.

However, it wasn't a possibility they were willing to accept. At about the time humans first began experimenting with bronze, the Bundinalli were constructing a network of interdependent aqueducts and canals to irrigate their planet. Their job was made simpler—just—by the fact they inhabited only two continents, both on the same side of the globe and both extending from the poles almost to the equator. Still, it was a prodigious task.

What fascinated Bart was the fact there had never been a centralized plan, no unifying vision. Instead, the network's form had been governed by the Bundinalli's absolute insistence on symmetry. Everything in their architecture balanced. Whether it was the airy stucco and tile arches of Brohtz or the stolid timbers of Prshdt, every culture on the globe was built with symmetry.

Sometimes this led to amusing quirks, like houses with faux front doors to balance the real ones. But on a global scale it had enabled the Bundinalli to create an incredibly intricate system that had grown almost organically as they'd diverted runoff from their melting polar ice caps and desalinated great volumes of seawater to irrigate their planet.

That last had seemed particularly suspect to Bart. He didn't understand planetary ecology in any great detail, but he'd always thought worlds depended on their oceans to renew their atmospheres.

Case in point was a pair of what the locals called birds flitting about the edge of the open-air bistro. They had serpentine bodies with two sets of wings arranged in tandem. As nearly as Bart could tell, the wings never flapped in unison, or in any pattern he could discern. The entire arrangement looked aerodynamically impossible. But there they were, dashing after crumbs the tourists tossed their way, blissfully oblivious to their evolutionary improbability.

His reverie was interrupted by a trencher of hearty stew, thick with meat but steaming with the scent of walnuts and cinnamon, appearing at his elbow.

"I thought this was supposed to be a soufflé," Stevens said from his symmetrical position at the other end of the oval table.

There was an elongated mass on the platter that had been set before him. It looked to Bart as though an indifferent artist working from a verbal description had molded a fish out of pudding.

"Either it fell or it's an omelet," Bart agreed. "Though it's possible the UT just used soufflé as the closest approximation of the name."

Stevens sighed.

Calling the server back, Bart inquired into the dish's preparation. This involved a particularly Bundinalli explanation of growing seasons and traditions, but before his stew had cooled he had the gist of it.

“It’s a half-dozen eggs from our friends over there,” he explained, indicating the snake-birds he’d been watching earlier. “The whites—that’s the green part—and the yolks—that’s the grey part, are separated and whipped into a froth. Two froths, I guess. The bits of purple, burgundy, and blue are a mix of fruit, finely diced, which is called *drastentha*. The fruit involved change with the seasons. Alternating layers of whites, fruit, and yolks are then poured into a mold—fish-shaped for reasons I didn’t follow—and baked. Technically, I suppose soufflé comes closer than omelet, but it’s somewhere between the two.”

Stevens sighed again and eyed Bart’s stew with obvious envy.

“At least give it a try,” Bart urged.

Choosing a forklike utensil, Stevens carefully pared off a sliver of the mass and popped it into his mouth.

“Whoa.”

“What?” Bart asked.

“This,” Stevens swallowed and scooped a large forkful from the soufflé, “is marvelous. We have got to figure out how to replicate this stuff. We could make a fortune.”

Bart grinned at his friend’s change of mood and attacked his own stew. Not the rousing sensation Stevens’s soufflé evidently was, but it was still pleasant. Chicken, mostly, he decided, with walnuts and celery. That he tasted no cinnamon despite the aroma confused his palate, but not unpleasantly so.

The Bunderalli network of canals and aqueducts had worked well for centuries until the Breen swept through the system. Intent on more significant targets deeper in Federation space, the Breen had simply bombarded Bunderal in passing, a side jaunt to upset a bit of Federation infrastructure rather than a campaign of invasion. One of the Federation historians had called it a drive-by shooting. Abramowitz had appreciated the cultural allusion, though its significance escaped Bart.

Whatever the Breen’s purpose, the effect of their raid had been to throw Bunderal into agricultural chaos. Flooding and drought had cost them years of growing seasons in both hemispheres.

Repair of the irrigation network had been a priority.

A straightforward retro-engineering of existing foundations and structures, it had been repaired by the S.C.E. within months of the war’s end. But even though everything was in place, the system hadn’t worked. The aqueduct network was so large and complex it had been subject to coriolis effects and lunar tides—a complex consideration on a world with two moons.

Generations ago the Bunderalli had installed tens of thousands of locks, but never a centralized control. Village lock masters had known that when the sun was here and the first moon there and the second moon there they should open the lock. Or, in different positions, close it. Thus thousands of individuals, faithfully attending their singular duties without communication with any others, had kept the waters flowing.

It was a balance almost impossible to regain once lost. But finding that rhythm again was why the *da Vinci* was here now.

“I should have gone with her,” he said again once his soufflé had disappeared.

“What would you have done?” Bart asked. “Useful to the mission, I mean.”

“Anthropological survey satellites are tactical systems,” Stevens said. “There was a lot I could have done.”

“The satellite transponder reported structural damage,” Bart pointed out. “That’s Pattie’s specialty. And you don’t have the training—or the security clearance—in stealth technology Corsi has. There was nothing for you to do.”

Stevens shook his head, unconvinced, and frowned at the cavorting birds.

Bart glanced at his chronometer and made a side bet with himself on how many minutes would pass before Stevens said he should have gone with Corsi to the Zhatyra system. Bart hoped she was having a better time than the one she’d left behind.

Chapter 4

“What I need,” Corsi repeated, “are my clothes and all the equipment you took from me.”

The chiptaurs continued to ignore her, chittering to one another as they worked.

Two were changing her bandages, slick membranes that looked like veinless leaves. Peeling them away revealed drying poultices of what appeared to be chewed leaves and several deep cuts to go with bruises and scrapes that covered the rest of her body. The third, which had disappeared with the feltlike blanket she’d been wrapped in, returned with a fresh blanket folded over its upper arms and its lower pair wrapped around a bundle of fresh greenery for her bed.

Of course, it could have been a complete stranger bringing the new bedding. However, the mottled brown on brown pattern, distinctly darker along the left side of its face and upper torso, was familiar enough for Corsi to be reasonably sure this was the same one that had blocked her exit earlier.

Corsi stood, remembering to keep bent to prevent bumping her head on the ceiling, and sidestepped out of the way. One of the nurse chiptaurs moved with her, continuing to wind a fresh leaf bandage around her shin. The other helped the newcomer put down the fresh bedding neatly.

“In fact, keep the clothes,” she told the top of the head even with her knees as the nurse focused on tying off the bandage. “Just give me back my equipment. Can’t let you keep it anyway. Prime Directive and all that.”

The chiptaur—the one she’d held hostage—stepped back and surveyed its handiwork. Apparently satisfied, it chirped and chittered at her for several seconds, ending its speech with what looked like a gesture for her to stay where she was. Corsi decided this one, slightly larger than the others, was the head nurse. It certainly seemed to give most of the orders. With a brief aside to the pair working on the bed, the head nurse flowed out the door.

Deciding “stay where you are” did not include holding the same head-stooped position, Corsi eased down into a crouch, balanced on the balls of her feet.

She watched the two chiptaurs removing the greenery from the low bed frame, trying to determine if there was any social order or pattern to their behavior. She decided the one with the darker left side was older, if only because the other, with a distinctive patch of lighter hair on the back of its upper torso at the base of its neck, seemed to make an extra effort to assist it.

She mentally dubbed the pair Lefty and Spot.

Corsi couldn't help but notice she was between the open door and the two chiptaurs bundling up the old bedding. From what she'd seen, she was willing to bet they'd do nothing to interfere if she tried to leave.

On the other hand, she wasn't sure how much she'd accomplish crawling naked through an uncharted labyrinth of wooden tunnels. Probably not much before the rest of the population, however many that might be, immobilized her with another example of applied nonviolence.

Corsi rocked her weight back, taking a load off her aching muscles, and leaned against the curving wooden wall. The wood had a cool feel, slightly moist, and Corsi realized the room was carved from a living tree. A pretty big one.

For a moment she had an image, a memory, of a clouded sky arching above and a sea of branches—the canopy of a rain forest—stretching out in all directions around her. But what rain forest? What planet?

The image was gone as quickly as it had come, leaving no answers behind.

Corsi pulled her mind away from worrying at the problem. The best way to work through trauma-induced amnesia was to not work through it. Left alone, the mind would heal itself. Would it if it could.

Distracting herself, Corsi considered the basket of light on the shelf across the room. The glow was too steady to be flame and she doubted her hosts—or captors—had the technology for even electric lights. Looking directly at the light was not painful, but the luminescence was bright enough to fog details. As nearly as she could tell the light source was dozens of balls of knotted yarn packed to overflowing in the rounded basket. There was no discernible radiant heat, and no apparent convection currents, which suggested air was not warming on contact. Bioluminescence? Probably.

Of course she could have just gotten up and made a closer examination to be sure. But then again, the object of the exercise was to occupy her mind, not parse alien home decor.

With what sounded like a triumphant chitter, her former hostage returned, a bundle of black and gold in its upper arms. Corsi's moment of hope faded as she unfolded it and found only her uniform.

“My combadge?” she asked, tapping her own body to indicate where the equipment would have hung. “My phaser?”

The chiptaur chittered and tilted its head, making a gesture that could have indicated no, or that it didn't understand, or that an unseen insect was annoying its left ear.

“Okay then, how about underwear?” Corsi tried. “Or boots?”

Similar chitter, same gesture. Could be the beginning of communication. Or a persistent insect.

Examining her uniform, Corsi realized it had been cut open and repaired. After a fashion. All of the

seams had been ripped out and carefully resewn, obviously by hand, using a vegetable fiber almost like twine, though it may have been a sort of vine. Hundreds of tiny knots, along the outside, thankfully, held the seams together.

Considering the pounded feltlike material of the blankets and the leaf-skin bandages, Corsi suspected they'd never seen woven fabric before. Certainly they'd never had need of clothes given their thick coats of coarse—well, it wasn't exactly fur. More like two-centimeter-long flexible scales or fused feathers. She was sure there was an official Starfleet exobiological classification for their body covering, but for the short term she was going with hair.

At any rate, it was likely the thinner elastic materials of her underwear would have thwarted the experimental resewing process. The chiptaurs probably lacked the technology to repair her synthetic boots once they'd cut them off as well.

Her socks were undamaged; the chiptaurs evidently had no trouble figuring out how to get them off. However, bare feet offered better traction than stocking feet. She resolved to keep them handy in case the nights turned cold.

Though now that she thought of it, she had no way of knowing if it were day or night outside her little room. It was possible the current temperature, which she estimated at twenty degrees, represented the dead of their winter.

Filing that speculation under “find out later,” Corsi spent a few moments demonstrating how the clothes fastened and unfastened to the chiptaurs. This seemed to release a swarm of ear-annoying bugs. She decided the gesture meant something besides “no.” She let them practice a bit with the fasteners, ensuring the next human they encountered would escape with his or her wardrobe intact, if nothing else.

Watching the intelligence with which they examined the new technology and the way they evidently discussed it among themselves, Corsi decided the chiptaurs weren't barbarians. She'd already suspected that—nonviolence was a pretty sophisticated cultural concept—but there was a civility to their behavior that reassured her.

Evidence was tipping the scales in favor of her hosts being rescuers rather than captors.

Now if she could only remember how she got here.

Chapter 5

Pattie woke to the stench of rotting bog plants and an unpleasant sensation of moistness. The clatter and caw of what sounded like a dozen disparate animals in close proximity echoed flatly as though they were in an enclosed space.

She knew the situation wasn't good before she opened her eyes.

A cage. About twice her body length square, standard low-tech metal frame and floored with peat and mud. There was a rectangular box, evidently an overturned packing case of some sort, just big enough to hold her with an opening cut in the near side. Several varieties of what she assumed were local wetland plants were arranged in neat piles along one side of the cage, no doubt a selection of potential foodstuffs.

“Let me guess,” she said, addressing the humanoid shape beyond the bars. “You found me sticking out of a hole in the mud and assumed I’m a large burrowing insect.”

The animal keeper, if that’s what he was, started at the sound of her voice and moved closer.

He—Pattie based her assumption of gender on the fact that the alien appeared to be both mammal and flat-chested—had charcoal gray skin and a thick helmet of copper-red hair. If he had external ears they were hidden by the hair, but the thin nose, generous mouth, and widely spaced yellow eyes were all classic humanoid phenotypes. Another descendant of the ancient progenitors who’d spread their DNA over so much of the galaxy.

The keeper made cooing and clucking sounds. Not language, Pattie realized, but nonsense noises meant to soothe a possibly hurt and probably frightened animal. Reaching through the mesh of her cage he picked a sprig of a plant from one of the piles and offered it to her.

“There is no way a collapsing tunnel of peat moss knocked my combadge off.” Pattie tapped her thorax to indicate where the device had been. “That means you have it.”

The keeper froze, his eyes locked on the bare spot on Pattie’s chest.

“Struck a nerve, did I?” she asked. “Why don’t you give it back so we can have a real conversation?”

The keeper’s eyes shifted from Pattie’s chest to her face. She could not believe he mistook the reasoned tones of her bell-like language for animal noises. Whatever he thought they were, however, scared him. He dropped the sprig of greenery and backed away from the cage.

“Don’t overreact,” she said. “I’m really quite harmless.”

This did not seem to reassure the humanoid. Turning quickly, he disappeared behind a rack of smaller cages. A few moments later Pattie heard what sounded like an exterior door slamming shut.

“That went well.”

The animals in the nearest cages—and given the zookeeper’s mistake, she studied them for several minutes before deciding those in her immediate area were animals—regarded her silently. They knew she didn’t belong there, but there was nothing they could do about it. Counting, she saw they all had eight legs. A few of the smaller ones even had exoskeletons. So the zookeeper wasn’t a complete idiot; she did bear a passing resemblance to the local fauna. Or at least what a humanoid might mistake for a resemblance.

Except there weren’t supposed to be any humanoids—zookeeper or otherwise—on Zhatyra II.

But that was a question for another time. Right now her priority was escape.

Thirty minutes of thorough study later, she decided to reassess her priority hierarchy. At least in the short term. The cage was solidly built and the lock unreachable from the inside. And neither any of the bog plants nor the packing box were sturdy enough to pry the mesh work open far enough for her to squeeze through.

Evidently the most recent addition to the zoo, her cage faced an open expanse of floor and the rest of

what was apparently a warehouse of some sort. The walls she could see were log, though the roof looked like metal. She thought the floor was made of half logs fitted tightly together, their sawn faces sanded smooth but unfinished. If her theory was correct, floor polish was likely a low priority.

Directly in front of her cage was an assembly and repair area, judging by the organized tool racks and various stains on the wood floor, with storage of parts or materials beyond. There was also an office area of sorts, with desks and cabinets along the nearest wall.

There were a dozen things she could see that would have made short work of her prison. The closest was three meters out of reach.

“Since I can’t get myself out,” Pattie explained to a neighbor with reddish fur or feathers, she wasn’t sure which, “I’ll have to convince our host that I don’t belong here.”

The neighbor seemed to agree. At least it bobbed up and down several times, which seemed to indicate assent.

Thus encouraged, Pattie began cleaning out her cage. The neat piles of vegetation were transferred, still neatly arranged, outside her cage. She then improvised a shovel from a panel torn from the packing crate and scooped as much of the dirt as she could from the enclosure. It wasn’t as neat, shoving the dirt through the mesh, but she did her best to ensure it was clearly an organized effort and not the random behavior of an animal. What she couldn’t get out she swept into a neat pile in one corner of the cage.

By the time she was done the room full of cages had become almost dark. Though she could see no windows from where she was, Pattie suspected the illumination was natural. Either a storm was coming or night was falling. The gradual dimming and the lack of wind noises convinced her it was nightfall.

So did the falling temperature. It had been over twenty when she had awakened. Now it felt closer to ten. Not cold, but cooler than she liked.

Particularly in her exhausted state. Whatever her injuries from the tunnel’s collapse, not to mention the stress of events leading up to it, the toll on her system had been high. Pattie felt the stiffness in her joints and the ache in her muscles. She knew she had very little left in the way of reserves.

Though she hated to do anything that might be mistaken for animal behavior, Pattie decided to take advantage of the insulation the packing box offered. Curling up in her makeshift shelter, Pattie settled down for the night.

Chapter 6

Apparently having decided she was well enough to forgo being tightly bound in blankets, her three nurses let Corsi sleep unencumbered through the night. At least she assumed it was night. In a windowless room lit by a basket of glowing yarn, it was hard to tell. Sticking her head out the low doorway proved her nurses doubled as guards; all three of them were asleep across the only other exit from the next chamber.

In the morning Lefty presented her with a wooden bowl of water and a pack of survival rations. Predictably, the seal of the pack had been ignored and the foil sliced open.

“That had to be sharp,” Corsi said. “How many of these did you mangle before you figured out what it was?”

There were only four in the emergency jump harness’s survival kit. Two thousand calories of essential nutrients and vitamins each, along with a half-dozen water purification pills, good for a liter each.

The bowl was a bit more than half a liter, but she wasn’t going to try and split one of the tiny tablets. She dropped it in, accepting the metallic taste as fair trade for the knowledge she wasn’t ingesting any unwelcome microbes.

As she ate, she demonstrated the pouch’s unseal and reseal feature to the chiptaurs. This led to another round of left ear brushing. Corsi tentatively decided the gesture meant eitherwow! orarrgh!

After brunch, Head Nurse, Lefty, and Spot led Corsi through a series of small chambers that opened abruptly into a large indoor amphitheater. At least that was her first impression. Her second was that she was in the root system of a giant banyan tree.

Apparently realizing she needed time to take it all in, her nurses paused and made gestures that seemed to invite her to look around. Corsi did, turning in place as she surveyed her new surroundings.

Around three-quarters of the edges of a roughly oval clearing about two hundred meters across its long axis, columns of wood several meters thick rose from the ground to meet what appeared to be a network of even wider branches some thirty meters overhead. There was no sky, though the foliage above glowed with a diffuse green light that suggested daylight somewhere beyond.

Broad roots, like the one from which she and her companions had emerged, diverged horizontally from the base of each column, while smaller trunks arched between columns at apparently random intervals farther up.

The air was pungent with a dozen odors she couldn’t identify. Or almost could. A smoke, very like incense; the peppermint and cedar scent of her bedding; a sharp, sweet tang like a mixture of apples and oranges; and a musky, nutmeg odor she suspected was her hosts en masse.

And they were en masse. There were dozens of chiptaurs moving across the open area, heading in and out of tunnels carved into the wooden pillars, or angled shallowly into the ground, or disappearing into the rock face that broke into the circle of roots along about a quarter of its arc.

Corsi realized it was a city, made up of carved spaces in both rock and wood built within the root system of a giant forest, or a single tree. Though superficially the image of the chiptaurs with their mostly horizontal bodies moving about plants that dwarfed them resembled a nest of carpenter ants, there was nothing insectoid in their movements. No one seemed to be in a hurry and knots of conversation seemed to form and break up again with companionable informality.

She noticed the chiptaurs came in two sizes. Some, like her nurses, were broad and rounded, usually with a softly mottled brown on brown pattern to their hair. Others, with a more distinctive dark brown on reddish brown pattern, were narrower and seemed to have a leaner build. If chiptaurs followed the pattern of most mammalian species Corsi knew of, the broader ones were females.

Having the consideration of female nurses to a convalescing female stranger was another mark in their favor. Not enough for Corsi to drop her guard completely—female nurses might have been a cultural

norm that had nothing to do with her gender. But her attendants shifted in her mind from being it s to her s and their threat status went down another notch.

Corsi expected her three nurses to lead her to some sort of central authority. Instead they took her on a wandering tour of what seemed to be a vital community.

Wide corridors with curving walls and ceilings carved from living wood or earth and lit by myriad baskets of bioluminescent spaghetti connected the first clearing to others. Most of the tunnels were tall enough for her to walk comfortably erect, but the chiptaurs were apparent minimalists when it came to doorways. Some were a tight fit for Head Nurse, largest of her nurses.

Corsi had noticed that Head Nurse had spent the most time dealing directly with her and seemed to be in charge of the others. She'd wondered if the chiptaur's broader frame had indicated a higher status, but seeing her ease her way through a couple of doorways she realized that Head Nurse was simply overweight.

Nearly half of one clearing into which they led her was enclosed by an endless expanse of solid wood. Corsi surmised it was the central trunk of the "banyan" tree. Several wider corridors, arranged in apparent randomness, disappeared into its depths.

Everywhere there were chiptaurs. Some followed along for a while, strolling comfortably behind, beside, or even ahead of her little group. Others acknowledged them in passing, nodding their broad heads at Corsi as though she were a familiar acquaintance. Many at a distance waved or made gestures that appeared friendly.

Dozens of times, also apparently at random, her escorts stopped to introduce her to an individual or small group. These impromptu confabs seemed to involve a good deal of explanation or perhaps storytelling on the part of her nurses. Corsi suspected she and the details of her convalescence were being discussed, but she could not tell to what purpose nor what the hearers thought of the tale.

In every instance, at the end of her nurses' recitation, the chiptaur or chiptaurs to which Corsi had been presented addressed her directly with two distinct phrases of clicks and ticks. She assumed it was the chiptaur equivalent of pleased to meet you or glad you're here . In any case, it seemed friendly, if a bit formal.

Corsi did her bit for interspecies goodwill by smiling, stating her name in pleasant tones, and assuring them she was delighted to be there and to meet them whenever it seemed she was expected to contribute to the conversation. In fact, she was enjoying herself a bit. The constant motion was working the kinks and aches out of her joints and muscles while the unfamiliar sights and sounds kept her conscious mind busy. That last was doing more to help her subconscious sort out where it had misfiled her memories than lying alone in a wooden room would have done.

Extrapolating from the numbers of chiptaurs she could see in the amphitheater clearings and the flow of traffic in and out of tunnels, she estimated the population of the community was somewhere between eighteen and twenty-four thousand. Not a city, but certainly larger than a village.

At the far end of one amphitheater they entered was a raised stage on which several chiptaurs moved about in an organized fashion while a sizable crowd lounged on the ground and watched. She had no way of knowing if it was a theatrical performance or a religious ceremony. In any case, her nurses had no interest in attending and led her out another way.

They were well down another corridor when she realized there hadn't been any music to accompany the organized movement. Whether it was a ballet, a play, or a mass, she would have expected some sort of music.

Now that she thought of it, there was no music anywhere. At least, she thought there wasn't. Some of the chittering clicks and ticks that made up the background murmur of the chiptaur city could have been local opera for all she could tell. What were definitely missing were musical instruments.

There were niches or hollows lining the walls of some of the broader corridors and carved into the bases of many of the root columns. These appeared to be shops offering wares she could only glimpse in passing. Apparent fruits or vegetables, baskets of every description, a wood carver, and what might have been a physician.

She wasn't sure, but Corsi thought she remembered Abramowitz once explaining that an active economy in nonessentials and decorative arts indicated something significant about a culture's development. Of course, she couldn't remember exactly what that significant thing was.

What she could do, with a tactician's eye, was evaluate the technology around her.

No metal, of that she was sure. Cutting and carving tools appeared to be made of volcanic glass, similar to obsidian but in a variety of colors. She saw levers, pulleys, and inclined planes in use everywhere, but evidently the chiptaurs hadn't thought to attach their pulleys to the bottom of a platform to make wheels. Every burden she saw was carried; no carts or even sleds were in evidence.

Nor were any weapons. She couldn't be sure if it was planetwide or just the rules of this particular community, but there was nothing remotely resembling a spear, club, or bow anywhere to be seen. There were edge tools in abundance, from wooden shovels to chisels and vegetable choppers apparently shaped from volcanic glass. But none were shaped and balanced as weapons.

Corsi began to suspect the assertive nonviolence practiced by her nurses reflected the cultural norm here. Wherever here was.

There were cultivated areas beyond the columns of roots bordering some of the amphitheaters. This didn't seem right to Corsi, particularly since the spaces received less indirect sunlight than the clearings. Perhaps the pinkish-yellow growths were more akin to mushrooms than true plants.

Lining each mushroom garden were rows of simple lean-tos with pounded felt blankets draped over their open ends. Corsi's companions led her to one of these and made several ambiguous gestures that communicated nothing, then stood by expectantly.

"Uh-huh," Corsi said. "It's a lovely lean-to. Are these the guest quarters?"

Evidently realizing she hadn't understood what they'd meant to communicate, the chiptaurs repeated their pantomime, which seemed to involve several uncomfortable postures.

Looking past their performance, Corsi saw individual chiptaurs entering other lean-tos in the row, then emerging a few moments later. She laughed, the sudden sound startling her nurses.

"Got it," she said. "Public toilets fertilize mushroom garden. Thanks for the thought. Not now, maybe later."

At length the nurses decided she'd understood their message and declined the offer. Corsi waited with the head nurse while Lefty and Spot availed themselves of lean-tos, then followed them back toward the cliff face that bordered the other side of the clearing.

Corsi realized they were back in the first amphitheater. Orienting herself to the cliff, she headed back toward the tunnel from which they'd emerged hours before.

Her nurses headed her off and led her again toward the cliff. As they got closer she realized a stream of water ran along a stone trough at the base of the wall.

Several chiptaurs were kneeling on their front pair of legs as their back pair remained standing, dipping all four arms into the flow of water.

"Hand washing?" Corsi asked, pantomiming scrubbing.

Her nurses seemed to approve, mimicking her gestures.

"Hygiene is good," Corsi agreed and knelt beside them to wash her own hands in the water.

It was hot.

She snatched back her hands, expecting them to be partially cooked by the brief contact with the boiling water.

Leaning back on her heels, Corsi looked up at the cliff face. Now that she was looking directly at it, she realized it was strangely uniform, rising at a constant slope.

"This is a volcanic cinder cone, isn't it?"

The image was back. She was on the roof of a rain forest canopy, beneath a white sun and hazy sky. In the near distance was a ring of volcanoes, cinder cones as symmetrical as a child's sand castles barely protruding above the giant trees. Smoke or steam rising...

The head nurse chattered at her, getting her up and moving toward a tunnel leading into the face of the cinder cone.

"If the only reason you guys patched me up was you needed a virgin to sacrifice to the volcano, I'm afraid we're both going to be disappointed."

Great. Trapped and alone on a strange planet and the first time I think of Fabe is when I make one of his lame jokes. Sentimental fool, that's what I am.

As soon as they crossed the threshold, Corsi saw this tunnel was different from the others she'd seen. It was paneled, for one thing. Or wainscoted. Great broad planks laid horizontally covered the rough pumice walls to just above chiptaur height. Which was to say about even with Corsi's elbows. For another, the walls slanted in, disappearing in the darkness above the glow baskets without ever coming together. This was a natural fissure, perhaps an ancient steam vent from the volcano's early days, not a passageway the chiptaurs had carved by hand.

Corsi could sense a difference in her escorts as well. They seemed subdued, but excited as well. Their chirps and chitters took on a hushed quality, but their eyes were bright and active. Anticipation?

Reverence? Something like that. Corsi couldn't put her finger on it.

The temperature within the tunnel rose, to at least thirty-five degrees she estimated, feeling the sweat trickle down her back. A sharp, sulfurous tang watered her eyes and scratched at the back of her throat. From the deep breaths the chiptaurs were taking she guessed this was a good thing.

The tunnel abruptly opened into an irregular chamber, roughly thirty meters across, well lit by hundreds of glowing baskets. Corsi fought gagging against the stench of chemicals as she looked around. This was obviously something special to the chiptaurs and her collapsing in a spasming heap would probably spoil the moment.

Two streams, each staining the gray rocks around it with orange and red chemicals, poured from the walls, their flows caught in a series of troughs. The troughs in turn carried the water to a series of pools. Something about the interconnected waterways snagged a corner of Corsi's mind, but it was gone before she could catch it. Vents in the floor of the chamber released pungent steam; she estimated the temperature to be somewhere above forty now. From the bubbling of the pools, she guessed there were also vents under the water.

Most of the pools had a chiptaur occupying a low couch of carved wood. Other chiptaurs moved about, apparently providing their seated relatives with food and water or just companionship.

Her guides presented Corsi to each of the reclining chiptaurs in turn. She repeated her self-identification and expression of joy at being there when she thought it was indicated, wondering if she was being at last introduced to royalty of some sort. For their part the seated chiptaurs repeated the two clicky-tick phrases she'd heard so often.

As part of each interview she was directed to regard the bubbling pool of water. Some contained dozens of what appeared to be glass spheres, similar to ancient fishing net floats, others had various numbers of what looked to Corsi like koi, only mottled copper and black instead of white and gold. One pool seemed to contain a pair of large tadpoles, with two sets of legs and arms in addition to their stubby tails.

Corsi parsed that there was some connection between the contents of the pool and the status or office of the chiptaur presiding over it. Or at least she thought there was. With the complete lack of language it was hard to be sure.

They came at last to a pool with no one beside it. The attendant chiptaurs, smaller than any Corsi had yet seen but with the brown on brown color scheme she associated with females, were just finishing arranging pounded felt blankets over the couch and arranging shallow bowls of what looked like berries nearby.

Head Nurse turned to her and took both her hands into her upper pair. Sensing this was a solemn moment, Corsi dropped to one knee, drawing a sharp breath at her back's protest, to bring herself at eye level with the chiptaur.

The nurse chiptaur spoke at some length. While there was nothing in the tones of her chitters, clicks, and ticks that corresponded to human speech, Corsi had the impression it was something along the lines of a benediction.

"Amen," she said when the speech was finally over. "And same to you. Really."

Apparently satisfied, the head nurse dropped Corsi's hands and settled herself on the reclining couch the attendants had prepared. Corsi decided her earlier guess had been right. Head Nurse was a member of some sort of ruling class. Whether she ruled because of her size or had put on weight due to the extra calories being waited on entailed wasn't clear.

Corsi's two remaining nurse guides made it plain she was to leave with them. As she followed Lefty and Spot down the tunnel toward the outside world she wondered what having a personal nurse on the ruling council said about her status as a guest—or prisoner—of the chiptaurs.

Chapter 7

Pattie awoke to discover the dirt and piles of plants had been cleared from around her cage. Looking about she spied what she thought were the zookeeper's legs extending beneath a counter that held a variety of small cages a half-dozen meters away.

She decided it was best not to startle someone who might be handling a dangerous animal and waited for him to finish whatever he was doing. When he stepped into view, Pattie rose to her hind legs to bring her eye level as close to his as possible. It took her a moment to decide it was indeed the same fellow she'd met the day before.

"Good morning," she said.

A sibilant mutter responded from a pocket in the zookeeper's trousers. The man tried to jump away from his own pants.

"Still have my combadge, I see," Pattie said conversationally.

The zookeeper stopped dancing and swatting at his pocket. He stared at her wide-eyed, his mouth agape.

Humanoid dumbstruck amazement, Pattie observed. That one's definitely universal .

"In my culture, when we discover we've mistaken a sentient being for an animal, common courtesy dictates we release her from captivity and return her belongings," she said. "Do your people have a similar custom?"

The zookeeper pulled her combadge from his pocket and held it in the flat of his palm. Eyes fixed on Pattie, he stepped closer to the cage. For a moment she dared hope he was actually going to give it back and let her out of the cage, but he stopped a meter beyond her reach.

Why is it never the easy way?

"Who are you?" the zookeeper asked, bending toward her. "What is this thing?"

Not wearing the combadge, Pattie could hear both the zookeeper's words and the translation. She was surprised by the liquid sibilance of the language. Given his gray skin and dark clothing, Pattie had expected her captor's speech to sound like Cardassian. A silly bit of prejudice, she realized.

“My name is P8 Blue, though I’m known informally as Pattie,” she answered the literal question. “The device you took from me is my combadge.”

“How does it work?”

“As you can hear, it’s a translator,” Pattie said, keeping her tone pleasant. She wasn’t going to lie; lies were too hard to keep straight. But she wasn’t going to volunteer any information, either.

For a moment the zookeeper seemed to accept that noninformation as an answer.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

“Pretty far away,” Pattie said. “The vehicle I was traveling in sank in the bog. Were you the one who rescued me?”

“Yes,” the zookeeper seemed surprised to be asked a question. “My name is Solal. I am a [student animal husbandry authority].”

Pattie recognized the awkward phrasing of a term the universal translator couldn’t render exactly.

“Either you’ve lost some arms and legs,” Pattie said, diverting the conversation, “or you’re not from around here.”

In fact, Pattie had a pretty good idea where Solal was from. If she was right, the Prime Directive was in full effect; do or say nothing to indicate civilizations on other planets nor interfere with civilization on this one. Aided by the eight-extremities physiology of the local fauna, she was going to play Zhatyra II native.

If possible, she was going to get her combadge and disappear into the forest until the *Vinci* arrived. Failing that, she was going to focus on avoiding vivisection until Captain Gold rescued her.

And Commander Corsi.

“I come from beyond the sky,” Solal was saying.

“Really?” Pattie asked, packing the word with amazed interest. “Literally? Not metaphorically? Fascinating. Pull up a chair and tell me about it.”

Whatever Solal would have said died with the sound of a distant door opening and closing. Suddenly tense, he leaned close to the cage.

“Do not speak,” he hissed. “Animals that speak are killed.”

Pattie nodded, shocked.

Solal stood, then as quickly stooped again.

“What do you eat?” he asked. “Do you need anything?”

Student animal husbandry authority, Pattie thought. Keep the livestock healthy.

“Just distilled water,” she said aloud. “Local food doesn’t agree with me.”

Solal nodded and rose again. Wrapping Pattie's combadge in a rag, he shoved it deep into the back of a drawer in a nearby cabinet just as another of his kind arrived.

Pattie held perfectly still, making no move that might attract the newcomer's attention.

She guessed from his build that the new arrival was also male and, from the texture of his skin, older. His hair was a darker red than Solal's, almost a brown, and he seemed to have about twenty percent more mass, most of it girth. Perhaps Solal was an adolescent.

The newcomer, folio of some sort in hand, seemed to be reviewing information it contained with Solal. If Solal was a student, the newcomer's attitude indicated he was a teacher animal husbandry authority. Senior zookeeper at any rate. Apparently satisfied with whatever Solal had to report, the elder zookeeper then issued what sounded like a series of instructions or list of tasks.

He turned his back to Pattie, evidently pointing in the direction of something beyond the walls of the menagerie.

Taking advantage of his distraction, Pattie lowered herself to all eights, making no sudden moves that might attract his attention. Carefully, as silently as possible, she backed into the packing case shelter Solal had provided. Easing herself as far into its shadow as she could, she settled down to wait.

Animals that speak are killed.

Chapter 8

"Another week." Fabian Stevens glared into the fire.

Bart Faulwell, seated across the table from his friend, shook his head sympathetically. The two had met for lunch at a tavern in a ski resort in Pludnt. Their table was comfortably near a massive fireplace, the exact mirror of its twin at the other end of the long room paneled in dark and highly figured woods.

A few thousand kilometers to the south hundreds of solar mirrors focused their light on the face of the southern polar ice floe, starting the water on its journey north to irrigate the temperate zone. Here, however, the snow-clad slopes of long extinct volcanoes provided the best skiing in the southern hemisphere.

It was dark outside, Stevens and Bart's personal lunchtime coinciding with local dinner, and the tavern was filled with what Bart assumed were tourists. They had the festive air of people far from home and responsibilities.

It was remarkable to him that on a world close to global famine, populated by a people who across a dozen regional cultures were emphatically uninterested in events beyond their horizons, tourism was a universal passion. He'd discussed it with Carol Abramowitz. The cultural specialist had explained global tourism was a recent phenomenon, something that had developed in the last two centuries.

When the Bunderalli had developed warp drive and discovered space around them was crowded with dozens of alien species and civilizations, their definitions of "local" and "familiar" had undergone a radical

change. Now they routinely took vacations to places their great-grandparents hadn't even imagined. But fundamental natures didn't change that quickly. Tourism off-planet was essentially nonexistent. For all their newfound mobility, their destinations were still local.

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of their meal. The local specialty was a game animal that tasted very much like lamb roasted with dried fruit put up in the traditional manner—dried in front of the very hearth they were enjoying now—from the previous summer's growing season. They both had identical platters; local rules of symmetry did not allow different meals to be served at the same table, and the aroma was enticing.

Bart carved a forkful of meat and skewered a slice of fruit. Good. Every bit as good as the aroma. If he were stationed here another week he'd probably put on a kilo.

He said as much to Stevens.

"It's good," his friend said. "Almost in a league withrastentha soufflé."

Bart snorted. Stevens had been singing the praises of the Brohtz specialty to anyone who would listen.

"Any luck finding someone willing to program it into the replicators?" he asked.

"Not yet." Stevens shrugged. "Soloman said he'd look into it once the present mission was over, but..."

He let his voice trail off.

"What did Corsi say when you told her about the delay?" Bart asked.

"Nothing," Stevens said, slicing a thick chunk of meat from his portion. "Just the automated response from the shuttle."

"Isn't that unusual?"

"Not really," Stevens gestured with his laden fork. "Like Tev said, the Zhatyra observational array was due for its ten-year download when the war broke out. They've got one cloaked satellite they know is down and eleven more that need their recordings downloaded, memories purged, and other routine maintenance. Even with the extra week Dom and Pattie will probably still be at it when we get there."

Bart said nothing. The additional week was only an estimate. They both knew that if the S.C.E. couldn't get a handle on stabilizing the Bundenalli water system in that time they would be here even longer.

Reaching into his shoulder bag propped against the leg of the table, Bart pulled out a leather folio and placed it on the table.

"Here."

Stevens looked at the folio, then at Bart. "What? Your letters to Anthony?"

"No. I replicated a folio for you," Bart explained. "It's just like the one I use for writing to Anthony. I figured you might like writing to Commander Corsi."

"Writing to—I'll be seeing her in a week or so."

“I know that,” Bart said. “I also know that when I write letters to Anthony they don’t actually go anywhere until I see him again and can put them in his hand. But when I’m thinking about him, writing to him is the best way I know to feel as though he’s there with me.”

“Oh.” Stevens picked up the folio and hefted it. “Thanks. I’ll have to try that.”

Lacking a shoulder bag, he set the folio on the edge of the table at his elbow.

Bart reached into the bag again and drew out his own folio. Eyeing the location of Stevens’s, he placed his carefully on the edge of the table at his own elbow.

Catching his friend’s questioning look, he waved his hand, indicating their precisely symmetrical surroundings.

“Just in case,” he explained.

Chapter 9

The next day, instead of bringing her the usual survival rations and water, Spot and Lefty led Corsi through a number of tunnels, all of which looked familiar. At last they entered a large room, completely open along one wall. Corsi realized a wooden room so wide and deep could only be in the main trunk of the tree. She wondered how much of this carving out it could take.

There were several raised surfaces coming directly out of the floor, like truncated pillars that reminded Corsi of mesas rising out of the desert. As the number of chiptaurs lounging about them registered, she realized she’d been literally correct. The truncated pillars were tables.

“A restaurant?” she guessed.

Her two companions, evidently agreeing with whatever they thought she’d said, led the way to a table near the open wall. They were no more than a dozen meters from the ground, Corsi saw, overlooking a clearing she didn’t recognize.

“Lovely,” Corsi said, “And I’m starving. But without my tricorder, I’m not sure what foods of yours I can eat.”

This seemed to please Spot and Lefty. They settled in. Tucking their four legs beneath them, they each leaned their upper torso forward to rest the elbows of their lower arms on the table. They both indicated with their free hands that Corsi should also sit.

Corsi looked around the restaurant and saw they were being politely ignored by the other diners. The few whose eye she caught nodded politely before turning their attention back to their own tables.

More significantly, a row of chiptaurs was approaching from a different entrance, laden with bowls of food and wooden plates.

“You called ahead for reservations, didn’t you?” she asked Lefty.

The chiptaur chirped, making what Corsi was fairly sure was an encouraging gesture.

She sat, tailor fashion, ignoring the scream of protest from her left knee and thigh. The tabletop was a little too high for comfort and a bit too far away for convenience. However, with the table being a solid pillar, there was no way to slide any closer and the chiptaurs had evidently not developed booster-seat technology.

Come to think of it, how come I haven't seen any children?

Her thought was interrupted by the arrival of the waitstaff with bowls of fruit and vegetables, some raw and some steaming, and cauldrons of soup and water. These they placed in the center of the table. Wooden platters, two sorts of wooden bowls, wooden utensils that looked remarkably like human forks and spoons, were set in front of each diner.

Glancing around, Corsi saw similar communal arrangements on the other tables. The chiptaurs were continuing their practice of behaving as though she were just like everyone else. Fair enough, provided their food didn't kill her.

Bobbing politely, the servers withdrew.

For their part, her two companions continued to make their encouraging chirps and clicks, indicating various bowls as they did.

Hoping local microbes didn't like humans, Corsi indicated she would like some water. Spot poured half a liter into the smaller of her two bowls, then poured some in her own and Lefty's. It was cold, with the mineral tang of an artesian well.

Despite her thirst, Corsi was careful to sip. She couldn't help trying to taste for microbes.

From that point she was committed. She tried a tiny sample from each bowl, waiting several moments between bites to check for adverse reactions. The fruit was so bitter the tiniest nip had made her scalp contract, but the steamed greens with what looked like walnuts were delicious.

Corsi was just deciding the flavor of starchy tubers was a constant throughout the galaxy, when a scuttle of brown movement at the edge of the table caught the corner of her eye. Scorpion!

She swung without thinking. But fast as her battle-trained reflexes were, Lefty was faster. The chiptaur's heavy lower arm flashed across the table, taking the full force of Corsi's backhand before it connected with its target.

For a heartbeat no one in the restaurant moved. Then Spot rose and came around the table with an empty platter and sprig of green from a salad and began trying to coax the intruder onto the plate.

Now that she had a chance to study it, Corsi was sure she would have swung even if she'd seen the creature clearly. About twelve centimeters long, the pseudoscorpion was heavily scaled and armed with a pair of lobsterlike claws. Otherwise its general layout was similar to her hosts', with four legs for locomotion, the heavy pair of claws, and two smaller manipulative arms near its mandibles.

However, Lefty's intervention and the care Spot was taking to rescue the creature told her swatting at the thing had been a bad choice. Hadn't she just wondered where the chiptaur children were? For all she

knew, this was a chiptaur toddler going through some sort of larval stage. Or it could be a pet. Or a deity, for all she knew.

From the surreptitious glances she could see their table was getting from the other diners, Corsi suspected she'd just undone a lot of the goodwill she'd spent so much time trying to build up.

Corsi watched as Spot traded the plate with the passenger for a clean one provided by a server, trying to make her concern apparent. She was sure it was the violence of her instinctive reaction, more than the potential harm to the animal, that had upset the chiptaurs.

She just hoped a show of remorse would repair some of the damage.

The rest of the meal passed without incident. By the time she and her companions rose, the other diners had regained their relaxed and convivial air. Though, as she returned the waves of several on the way out, Corsi realized chiptaurs had been coming and going. Most of those now eating may not have witnessed her moment of savagery.

They had not traveled far along the broad corridor before a commotion broke out behind them. Or as close to a commotion as anything Corsi had seen among the chiptaurs. Several voices were raised above the general buzz of clicks and chitters, all of them apparently calling out similar phrases.

Spot and Lefty wheeled in place to face the way they'd come. Corsi turned as well, noting there was no interruption in the flow of traffic and general conversations around them. Her companions weren't looking back because they were curious; the calls were directed at them.

A party of chiptaurs was approaching, as close to a mob as anything Corsi had seen, clearly excited and in a hurry. Even in their haste, however, they did not push past anyone. Most in the corridor saw them coming and moved out of the way. However, if a chiptaur seemed unaware of them, the group paused in its rush, speaking with what looked to be courtesy and waiting until the way was again clear.

How do these people get anything done?

At last they were upon her and her entourage, but rather than crowd around her as humans would have done, the mob compressed itself along one wall of the corridor. Though Corsi's height and the curving ceiling kept her near the center of the corridor, the chiptaurs were doing their best to leave the right-of-way unobstructed.

There were four chiptaurs to the core group, Corsi deduced from the loose formation of the small crowd. But just as individuals had joined her tour of the town earlier, another dozen chiptaurs had apparently attached themselves to the central four as they passed. She still had no idea whether this was a show of support or curiosity.

The leader of the core group, a male whose reddish hair was almost copper in the light of the glow baskets, was holding something concealed in his clasped forehands.

Taking a small step forward from the others, he extended his clasped hands slightly and he chittered at Corsi.

"What is this?" asked a voice from his hands.

Corsi almost whooped.

“My combadge,” she answered, keeping her voice level as chitters and ticks emitted from the chiptaur’s hands. “It enables me to talk to others.”

Without ceremony the chiptaur opened his hands and extended the combadge to Corsi.

Trying not to snatch, but not giving him time to rethink the gesture, Corsi took her combadge from the chiptaur’s palm and affixed it to her uniform. Pretending to adjust its position, she pressed a contact, broadcasting a nonverbal signal. There was no response. Either there were no other Starfleet personnel in range, or something had happened to them. Neither thought triggered any memory.

“It was silent for many meals,” the leader observed, bringing her mind back to her surroundings.

Many meals? How long was I unconscious?

“The universal translator needed time to learn your language,” she explained.

The chiptaurs regarded her blankly for a moment. Given the level of their technology, she wondered if they thought she’d told them the combadge was a living thing.

“My name is Domenica Corsi,” she said, moving on. “How are you called?”

“We are the K’k’tict,” the copper-colored male answered. “My name is—”

The universal translator rendered a series of clicks and ticks Corsi couldn’t follow. The other three in his group apparently introduced themselves as well, oblivious to the UT’s inability to render K’k’tict proper names in a form she could track. She wondered how her name had sounded to them.

Corsi looked to Lefty and Spot, expecting them to tell her their names as well, but they remained silent. She deduced there was a social order at work and that they were not far enough up the ladder to take part in the conversation.

“I thank you for the return of my combadge,” Corsi tapped the badge and smiled her most diplomatic smile. “Will you be able to return any more of my tools?”

“No,” the lead K’k’tict replied simply. “We fear one or more of them may be instruments of harm.”

No arguing with that.

“I have no memory of how I came to be here,” she said, trying another tactic.

“You fell from the leaves,” one of the females flanking Copper answered. “Perhaps from the sky above.”

The image returned, clear and isolated, without context. The roof of the rain forest, the volcanic cones with streamers of steam, an objective... what? She was moving, reaching from branch to branch; a white sun with thin, high clouds overhead and a sense of great depth below. She tested a mossy branch, then trusted her full weight to it as she reached for the next. But the branch is an arm or a leg of some giant tree dweller. Like the sloths of Earth, it allowed moss to grow over its fur as protective camouflage. The creature twitched and twisted, trying to escape. She hurtled downward through branches toward darkness.

With a start Corsi came back to herself in the middle of the crowded corridor. She realized she'd missed the last thing Copper had said to her.

"I'm sorry?" she said. "I didn't understand."

Better than "I wasn't paying attention."

"We want to know," Copper said patiently, "why are you killing the K'k'tict?"

Chapter 10

It was by Pattie's estimation midday when Solal returned. He apparently took her earlier invitation to heart, pulling a chair from a nearby desk along with him. He had what was evidently his own lunch, biscuits with small slabs of a cheese-like substance, and a variety of local greenery in a bag.

"I'm trying to get you to eat," he explained, the combadge in his breast pocket chorusing its translation.

Pattie nodded, understanding the cover story. If she couldn't convince him to give her the combadge, she was going to have to teach him how to turn it off. If it started speaking Nasat when one of Solal's supervisors was around...

She had remained in the packing crate all morning, venturing out only to retrieve the bowl of distilled water Solal had left on his way out to do whatever chores had been assigned.

Three others of his species had worked in the menagerie for brief periods or simply walked through, apparently on rounds of some sort. Two of the strangers had been clearly female, their body shapes confirming Pattie's theory the invaders were mammals.

And they were invaders. Perhaps it was just her response to the knowledge they killed what they considered talking animals, but just as she knew Solal's people were not native to Zhatyra II, she knew their purpose here was not good.

While hiding in her packing crate, Pattie had given some thought on how best to go about pumping Solal for information. She'd decided her initial tactic of friendly interest had been wise. That he classified her as an animal worked to her advantage in that he evidently did not regard her as a threat—which did not bode well for any "talking animals" his people had encountered—and that he seemed genuinely fond of all animals.

From what she had seen of the others, she thought her estimate of his youth was also valid. If their social hierarchy mirrored most humanoid's—and if their operation on Zhatyra II was far enough along for secondary support personnel to be on site—he might not be the brightest example of his species as well—though she didn't want to make the mistake of counting too heavily on that.

"How do beings from beyond the sky come to be on the ground?" she asked, taking control of the conversation as quickly as possible.

"We come from Smau, a world like this one, only prettier," Solal explained. "Not so green. We fly into the sky with sleds. We travel for many days and then glide down to land here, on New Smau."

Electromagnetic rail sleds to launch their vehicles and gliders to land. Both fit her theory. Both also meant all of the Smau-folk on Zhatyra II had made a one-way journey.

Significant was Solal's matter-of-fact presentation. He expected an "animal" native to this world to understand interplanetary travel, agree that a world "less green" than this would be preferable, and accept the idea its home was now "New Smau." Absolutely no evidence of the concept of native rights, or even native people, entered into his reasoning at all.

Chance may have placed her at the mercy of the kindest of the invading monsters, but he was a monster nonetheless.

She was interested in Smau technology, but could think of no way to inquire without revealing a higher level of understanding than a talking animal should have. Also questions about the Smau-folks' purpose on "New Smau" might overemphasize their keeper/keepee relationship. She focused instead on playing the role of eager student—or inquisitive pet—and asked open-ended questions about Solal himself and his aspirations, topics near and dear to any young male's heart.

Over the next half hour Pattie learned quite a bit about adolescent social life on Smau. Unremarkably, there was a great deal of competing with members of his own gender for the attentions of the other, but also involved struggling to attain what the universal translator rendered as "right of [responsibility/self-determination]" without which he would never attain honor. Solal's winning that right through some series of achievements he clearly regarded as exceptional had enabled him to request emigrating to New Smau.

His personal hero was Sonandal, the leader of the expedition to New Smau.

Sonandal had been the first of the Smaunif—Pattie deduced that was what the Smau-folk called themselves—to land on New Smau even before the scientists had been sure the world could support life. Going first was the leader's responsibility, Solal explained proudly. His honor depended on his taking his responsibility seriously.

Solal explained there was no higher moral principle than being responsible for your own actions. Pattie agreed it was a better ideal than many she'd heard.

Her Smaunif zookeeper was not surprised she did not instantly recognize that it was not just "better" but was in fact the only moral code of any worth. What separated people from animals was self-determination. With that came responsibility and through that, honor.

Interested in more useful information, Pattie didn't dispute the issue. But once started young Solal seemed determined to make his point.

"Our scientists have proven that we are the pinnacle of evolution," he explained. "We are the only ones who have developed the capacity to understand that we are making choices. Thus we are the only ones with the spirit to take responsibility for those choices."

"On Smau, yes," Pattie said, unable to let that bit of elitism pass despite herself. "But could not the evolution of other worlds lead to the development of other people?"

Solal shrugged.

“We have found no other people on New Smau,” he said, as though that closed the issue.

Yet you’re comfortable conversing with a “talking animal,” Pattie thought. Undisturbed that it’s “animal” technology that makes that possible.

Much as she wanted to confront the massive conceit underlying Solal’s assumptions, Pattie forced herself to let the issue go. No ally was ever won over through religious debate. Not to mention the potential danger of reminding him the “talking animals” of New Smau were perceived as threat enough to warrant slaughter.

“So Sonandal leads in all things?” she asked.

“Any task which must be done, he must do first. The greater the responsibility, the greater the need for the leader to be first partaker.”

Pattie could see how this philosophy could lead to a sort of meritocracy. Leaders who did not dare take risks led no one anywhere and leaders who took foolish risks eventually removed themselves from the picture entirely.

Sonandal’s risk in leading the first one-way expedition to a world that might not have been inhabitable had been a big one. A potentially very foolish one, in fact. But one that had paid off with him becoming the planetary ruler. Or at least ruler of this growing colony.

Solal had been too young to be first among those who followed Sonandal. But he had been the first student of his university or trade school (the universal translator was not sure which) to meet the challenges and qualify to come.

Pattie revised her estimation of Solal’s intelligence. Apparently it was wisdom he lacked.

She did not follow all of his explanations of how he saw his personal career on New Smau leading to his becoming leader of his own colony or research facility; again Smau semantics confused the universal translator. However, she did pick up on the fact he thought being the first to study her species would be a major stepping-stone in his advancement.

That Solal was keeping her existence secret out of self-interest reassured Pattie. Altruism was far too amorphous and fickle a motive for her to trust. Her survival would have depended on his moment-to-moment perceptions of whether the greater good was protecting her or serving the mission. Solal would go to greater lengths to safeguard her if he believed this served his own ambitions.

However, if his subterfuge were discovered, it might put her in a worse position. What would he do to avoid discovery or punishment if found out? If she was in danger of being given up, or killed, she wanted some way to know what to expect.

She missed a good deal of his explanation of social life as she puzzled out how to bring up the subjects of crime and punishment. Preoccupied, she almost missed the opening when he offered it.

“A challenge of authority?” she asked, infusing her voice with several gigajoules of interest. “I’ve never heard of such a thing. How does it work?”

“If I have a better way of doing something than I have been told to do it, I can refuse to follow orders and do things my own way.” Solal struck a pose that Pattie thought suggested self-importance. “My

supervisor can either acknowledge the superiority of my method or he can order me to conform. If he orders me to conform, I can challenge.”

“In my culture, such disputes are settled by presenting both sides of the issue to a mediator,” Pattie said. “Would that be a challenge?”

“Anyone who must rely on a mediator is failing to take responsibility for their own judgment,” Solal said tersely. “A challenge can be a comparison of data. Or a duel. Important challenges, challenges to honor or to leadership of the community, can be battles to the death.”

Apparently excited by his topic, Solal leapt to his feet, leaving the debris of his lunch where it fell. Pulling a cleaning cart, a lamp, and another chair into the clear area near Pattie’s cage, he marked out a rectangle about five meters by three.

“Actually, it’s a square,” he said, adjusting the position of his lunch chair, “but then I’d have to move the racks—of poles this high.” He indicated something just above his head—about two meters, Pattie estimated. “The one issuing the challenge stands here, in the center, and points to the one he challenges, then to the ground in front of him.” Solal pointed at an imaginary adversary somewhere to Pattie’s right, then to his feet. “The one being challenged selects the weapons, if any, and they fight.”

Solal leapt about the rectangle, evidently miming some form of martial art. The awkwardness of his movements caused Pattie to suspect he wasn’t very good at it.

“To the death?” she asked.

“Rarely,” Solal said, ending his bout in an apparent draw. “Sometimes points, sometimes first blood, usually when one admits defeat.”

“So, Solal,” came a woman’s voice from among the racks and shelves at the far side of the warehouse. “Who have you defeated?”

Pattie dropped to all eights, resisting the temptation to roll into a defensive ball.

“Uh, no one, Slilila,” Solal stammered, clumsy in confusion. “I was just—”

“Imagining great victories,” the woman finished for him as she stepped into the open area. “We all do it. Just most of us take more care not to be overheard. Or do you plan on challenging Sonandal over the eradication?”

“No!” Solal uttered his protest emphatically, apparently missing the teasing tone that even Pattie could discern. “The tree dog infestation is a danger that must be addressed thoroughly and directly.”

“You quote well.” Slilila chuckled. “Which is as directly and thoroughly as a youth exempted use of weapons can take responsibility for the solution.”

When the Smaunif spoke, Nasat tinkled from Pattie’s combadge, lying with its rag among Solal’s lunch trash. Fortunately, it was close enough to the cage that the sounds could seem to be coming from Pattie. She tried to help the illusion by waving her antennae every time the combadge repeated the Smaunifs’ words.

Solal belatedly realized what was happening. He hurriedly scooped up the combadge, bundling it tightly

in the trash and rag, then stuffed the lot into the waste can on the cleaning cart. He had the wit to park the cart next to Pattie in case any further sounds emerged.

Solal left with Slilila, apparently already late for some shared chore, leaving Pattie with her combadge less than a meter away but completely inaccessible.

Chapter 11

The devastation covered several thousand acres.

A dense carpet of what looked like saplings, though Corsi realized they were trees built along a more normal scale, washed up around the base of the giant banyans. The abrupt demarcation between rain forest and what looked like conifers must have indicated something about the soil, but Corsi didn't know what.

From her vantage point beside Copper on a low branch of one of the giant banyans, Corsi could see a giant rectangle of the conifers about a kilometer distant had been clear-cut. There were several low buildings of wood and metal near the center of the cleared area. Just beyond them was what looked like a broad straight road to nowhere. A landing strip, she decided, for something very large or something that needed as much margin of error as they could give it. To the right of the buildings a shallow basin, perhaps a hundred meters across, had been dug in the soil and lined with metal. The thin metal tower at its center confirmed her suspicion it was an antenna. Corsi was not an expert on agronomy, but much of the cleared land seemed to be in various stages of cultivation. Not so much a working farm, she decided, as an experiment to see what would grow.

Whoever these people were, they were here to stay.

More immediately significant was a broad road, a dozen or so meters wide, that was being carved through the trees directly toward the rain forest. Progress appeared to have been slow, trees felled near the edge of the cleared area had had time to turn brown. But the leading edge of the incursion was close enough for Corsi to hear the thud of hand axes.

"How long have they been here?" Corsi asked.

Copper batted at his left ear. "Long enough to do what you see."

"Many meals?" Corsi guessed. It was plain the K'k'tict didn't measure time. "I've been meaning to ask: What does that left-ear gesture mean?"

"Surprise, embarrassment, confusion."

"Ah. We do this for the same thing," Corsi slapped her forehead.

"Yours is a violent people," Copper said.

"Many would agree with you. But we have learned to moderate our violent nature through reason and compassion." She indicated the clear-cut forest below. "That is not the work of my people."

Copper batted at his left ear again.

“However, my people are not the only ones of this general design,” Corsi added, spreading her arms to indicate her two-arm, two-leg construction. “If we could get closer, I may be able to tell you who these rude guests of yours are.”

Copper began descending, which Corsi took as expressing a willingness to take her closer to the strangers.

The forest floor beneath the giant banyans was covered with a variety of fernlike plants, most only about knee-high; chest-high on K’k’tict. There was no real underbrush, and the areas between banyan root systems were like broad boulevards. It was Corsi’s impression the trees and ferns got larger closer to the volcanoes.

As soon as the invaders hacked their way to the edge of the banyan forest, it would be an easy march to the K’k’tict tree town.

“[unintelligible noise] and [unintelligible noise] will go with us,” Copper announced, indicating Spot and Lefty from among the several K’k’tict waiting at the base of the tree. “The experience will aid their [maturity/education].”

Corsi revised her earlier theory that Spot and Lefty had not spoken in the presence of the leaders because they were of a lower caste. Apparently they were youngsters.

The three immediately headed in the direction of the strangers. Some of the remainder settled down to await the expedition’s return, while a few headed back toward the tree town.

“Do your names mean anything?” Corsi asked after they had gone a short distance. If she was going to communicate, she’d have to address individuals as something besides she, you. “Corsi is a shortened form of the name for an island my family came from.”

“Our names are our names,” Copper said, stopping. “We are who we are, not where we are.”

“I understand.” Corsi decided to set aside explaining that Domenica meant Sunday to a species that did not measure time. It was tempting to leave the name issue alone, but she had no idea how long she would be among the K’k’tict and clear communication was essential.

“My combadge does not comprehend, and renders your names as sounds I cannot emulate,” she explained. “Do you have simplified names?”

Blank stares all around.

“Would it be offensive if I gave you nicknames so that I might indicate individuals?”

“What names?” Copper asked.

“Well, your coloration is the feature most apparent to my eyes,” Corsi said cautiously, aware external coloration was the galaxy’s most common source of prejudice. Seeing only expectation in her listeners, she went on. “I think of you as Copper, you as Lefty, and you as Spot.”

Lefty bowed her head low to the ground and began shaking it back and forth. Spot began batting her left

ear furiously. For his part Copper seemed content to watch the other two.

“What did I say?” Corsi asked, concerned. “Did I give offense?”

“Spot has been her [tease her name] since she emerged,” Lefty said. “She hates it.”

“Ah,” said Corsi, making a note that violent head-shaking near the ground indicated laughter. “Sorry about that.”

Though the smaller trees of the forest looked like pines, they were of much denser wood. Corsi found it impossible to bend any but the smallest saplings and branches could not be casually brushed aside. If the hand axes she had heard were the invaders’ only tools, she was impressed with their tenacity.

For their part, the K’k’tict moved silently through the thick and thorny underbrush. Corsi noted they did not travel in straight lines and they varied their pace, frequently pausing to listen. Remembering Copper’s question about why she was killing K’k’tict, Corsi wondered if this stealth was instinctive or a survival skill recently mastered.

She noticed they kept their large, lemur eyes squinted almost shut long after they’d left the twilight of the banyan forest. Apparently adaptation to life beneath a few hundred meters of shade tree meant even the dappled sunlight they were moving through was painfully bright.

Copper had led them in a curving route that brought the recon party to the edge of the cleared roadway several dozen meters behind the workers. They were indeed clearing the land with only hand tools, watched over by guards armed with what looked like stylized crossbows. At first Corsi thought she was looking at slave labor, then realized the guards were watching the underbrush, not the workers. They were protection.

The beings themselves were humanoid, with skin as gray as Cardassians’, but not scaled. They also seemed to share the Cardassian fondness for wearing black, but their hair color ranged from blonder than hers through orange and red to a maroon that was almost brown. When the closest guard glanced her way, she saw his eyes were a metallic yellow that looked almost artificial.

Zaire? Zoysia? Something. Corsi knew she’d seen a data file on these people, but they were advanced way beyond hand axes and crossbows. And they should not be here. Something was not right. She rocked back on her heels, unfocusing her eyes, and waited for the memory to fully develop. Nothing.

Giving up, she signaled Copper she had seen enough. The elder K’k’tict led them away from the strangers.

“I know of this species,” Corsi said as they regrouped in a small clearing, “though I have never seen them.”

She received understandably blank looks from the other three. However, she was not about to explain data files and life on other worlds to them.

“These are not my people,” she repeated, holding up one hand back toward them. “Coloration.”

The K’k’tict bobbed, acknowledging the point.

“Could we get closer to their camp?” Corsi asked. “Perhaps we can learn more about them.”

With a typically K'k'tict lack of comment, Copper turned and began moving silently through the underbrush in a new direction. Corsi followed, bent low to stay under the stiff branches of the trees, with Lefty and Spot behind her.

The clear-cut area was not as flat as it had appeared from the banyan tree. There were piles of logs apparently curing in the sun, the acidic tang of their resin threatening to trigger a sneeze with every breath. Conical mounds of smaller branches waited to be dry enough to burn. About two hundred meters from the buildings, however, near the edge of the shallow basin lined with metal, the cover ran out. Corsi wished for a set of binoculars, but made do with squinting.

By the long runway was what appeared to be the frame of a glider being carefully dismantled. Though it was large—she estimated it could have carried perhaps two dozen of the newcomers—it was not huge. Which meant the runway's expanse was indeed to give the landers a wide margin of error.

Gliders arriving without power and cannibalized for parts and metal meant the—whatistheir name?—were making a one-way trip to get here. It also explained the hand tools and crossbows. Keeping mass to a minimum meant no heavy machinery and weapons that used locally available ammunition.

But while the details made sense, the overall picture was wrong. What were these people doing here?

As if in answer, a column of blinding light descended from the sky.

Chapter 12

"It looks like weapons damage," Corsi said, eyeing the warped access panel beneath her gloves.

"I would love to disagree with you," Pattie's musical notes sounded in the helmet of her EVA suit. "The thought of someone shooting a cloaked anthropological satellite is disturbing. Especially one orbiting a preindustrial world. But armor damage is consistent with a barrage by several very large lasers."

Corsi nodded to herself as she keyed the release sequence on the access panel. She could have done this from the Shuttlecraft Shirley hanging a few dozen meters away, its rear hatch gaping toward them, but where was the fun in that? She enjoyed the EVA work.

Not as much as Pattie seemed to be enjoying Waldo Egg. The Nasat was delighted with what she called her demi-Work Bee.

Resembling an upright egg with four manipulative arms, the Nasat-specific design had been the brainchild—and personal project—of Louisa Weldon, an engineer with the S.C.E. team on the Khwarizmi. Her special interest was adaptive technologies to enable nonhumanoids to interact effectively aboard admittedly humanoid-centric Federation vessels. She'd known Pattie for years, Corsi had learned, and had designed Pattie's special chairs aboard the da Vinci.

Her latest invention was allowing Pattie to be the main muscle as they uncased the anthropological satellite. An unaccustomed role she was clearly enjoying as she easily manipulated the massive sections of shielding.

For her part, Corsi was finding it a little tougher going than she would have liked.

When working this close to an atmosphere, Starfleet SOP required her to wear an emergency jump harness over the standard EVA suit. Little more than an ablative heat sheath that gloved over the suit proper with a rear-mounted chute harness, it was designed to get a spacewalker safely to the surface in an emergency.

She had jumped in an emergency rig before, of course, in training. Though it was nowhere near as maneuverable or versatile as an orbital jumpsuit, it got the job done. She also understood the logic behind using safety equipment, especially in such a hostile environment. What she hated about it was the fact that it was piggybacked on her regular EVA suit, adding stiffness and bulk she did not enjoy working against.

And this was the first of twelve satellites, though—if things went according to mission specs—it was the only one they were going to have to field strip.

The Zhatyra system was unusual in that it had two class-M planets, both of which had developed sentient life. Corsi wasn't up on the details, but knew Zhatyra II, floating directly behind her, had a preindustrial culture while the most advanced nations on Zhatyra III were analogous to mid-twentieth-century Europe. The orbits of the two worlds were such that twice a year they were close enough to affect each other's tides.

The effect was small, only detectable with sophisticated seismic scans. And it was twice during one of the planet's years, but not the other's.

Corsi shook her head, clearing the cobwebs.

"What have you got there, Pattie?" she asked, realizing her partner had been silent for several minutes.

"I'm changing my assessment from one heavy laser barrage to several individual laser hits," the structural specialist said. "The damage indicates remarkably consistent and massive bolts, but metal fatigue and decay around the hits varies from two years to a few weeks."

"So whoever's been shooting our satellite has been coming by every few weeks, firing one shot and then going away again over the last couple of years? That makes no sense."

"Even more interesting to me is how they were able to detect one, and apparently only one out of a dozen, cloaked anthropological satellites to shoot at in the first place."

"Might be a—"

The satellite exploded.

After the fact, Corsi's mind had replayed the vision of a massive column of coherent light coming from deep space somewhere beyond Pattie's work bee. But that hadn't registered in the first heartbeat.

With the exterior shielding removed, the laser beam had struck the fragile interior of the satellite. The exposed sensor arrays, data storage cores, and isolinear networks had exploded in an expanding cloud of gas, shrapnel, and droplets of molten polymer. An armor panel, propelled by the expanding cloud, slammed into Corsi before she could react. Its speed had not been great, but its mass was sufficient to swat her out of orbit like a fly.

“Pattie!”

“Here, Commander,” Pattie answered promptly over the comlink. “Waldo Egg lost two and I think half arms, but pod is tight. Louisa evidently anticipated explosions.”

Corsi nodded inside her helmet. Zhatyra II rose and fell as she tumbled. It wasn't getting appreciably larger, but she knew she was falling. She applied thrusters minimally, conserving fuel as she oriented herself for atmospheric entry.

“What's your status?”

“It appears the blast gave me a retrograde boost. Waldo's thrusters aren't up to regaining orbit, so it looks like I'm taking a long spiral to Zhatyra II. You?”

“Taking a direct route,” Corsi said.

She was glad neither would be drifting alone in space. Intellectually she knew it was no more dangerous, perhaps even less dangerous, than waiting for rescue on the planet's surface, but the idea of hanging alone in the emptiness in nothing but an EVA suit...

Bringing her left forearm up, she tapped the shuttle interface. Time to send an emergency signal.

Nothing.

“Pattie,” she said, retapping the command sequence, “I can't get a response from the Shirley.”

“The stern bay was wide open and facing the satellite,” Pattie pointed out. “It's possible the internal systems were damaged.”

Corsi cursed. “Nailed all four targets with one shot. What are the odds on that?”

“I don't believe it was a weapon. I was scanning when it struck the satellite. I believe it was an interplanetary communications laser.”

“With our geosynchronous satellite directly over its target?”

“Apparently. Close, at any rate. Projecting along its path, I'd say the intended destination was somewhere near that ring of volcanoes.”

Corsi squinted at the globe below. Nothing but mottled grays and greens.

“You've got better visuals than I do.”

“Sending you coordinates.”

“Got 'em.”

The numbers were very close to where Corsi's fall was taking her. She fired her thrusters, bringing her trajectory more in line.

“You going to make a complete orbit coming down?” Corsi asked.

“Two at least. Though I have enough thrust to slow for atmospheric insertion, I may go a bit farther. Hard to say. Louisa never mentioned how Waldo was coming down on a planet.”

“I’m going to try for that ring of volcanoes,” Corsi said. “If you can get close, maybe we can meet up. Otherwise, just button down and hang on till the cavalry gets here.”

“Will do.” Pattie’s voice began to break up as her pod arced over the horizon. “Good luck.”

Chapter 13

“Are you okay?” Corsi asked for the dozenth time.

The three K’k’tict had been completely blinded by the planetary communications laser striking its dish a hundred meters in front of them. Each was now tightly clutching the one ahead with a lower hand as Corsi led them through the underbrush. With their upper hands pressed over their damaged eyes, they were nowhere near as silent as they’d been. Corsi exaggerated the arc of their path, putting as much distance as possible between her charges and the wood chopping party while still keeping their objective in sight.

When they reached the others, the waiting K’k’tict teamed up in pairs, one on each side of a stricken comrade, and rushed them through the ferns toward home.

Corsi kept pace for a few dozen meters, but her injuries and common sense made her slow to a walk. She waved on the few K’k’tict who’d stayed with her, assuring them she would catch up.

“Corsi to Blue,” she said as soon as she was alone. “Come in, Pattie.”

She had not been alone since recovering her combadge and had kept the verbal transmitter disabled. Wouldn’t do to have strange voices pop unexpectedly out of the air. But there had been no response to her nonverbal signals and she thought it was time for a more direct approach.

Nothing.

Tabling any worry about her companion, Corsi considered their tactical situation.

She now remembered she was on Zhatyra II. Which meant the invaders were from Zhatyra III. Neither race had warp capability and the Prime Directive was in full effect. Actually, the people of Zhatyra III should not have had space flight. Their presence was as improbable as mid-twentieth-century Europe colonizing Mars.

No, that wasn’t true, strictly speaking. Zhatyra II and III passed very close to each other every... She couldn’t remember the interval. At least once a year for the outer world, she recalled. Close. Zhatyra II would be a tempting target dominating their night sky for months at a time—quite a motivator.

The communications laser wasn’t a mystery. Many cultures, whether because of the spectral behavior of their primary or their planet’s magnetic field or any of a dozen other factors including they just never thought of it, managed a high level of technology without developing radio. For a visually oriented culture

laser communication was the logical extension of the semaphore.

The size of the laser and the violence of the beam were impressive. It indicated tremendous power being used very inefficiently. They couldn't be firing something like that from inside their atmosphere. Did Zhatyra III have a moon? Probably.

Two things, maybe three, were clear. First, the invaders were here to stay; they didn't have a choice. Second, their method of colonization was to reshape the world they'd found to fit their own image. And third, for whatever reason, they were coming after the K'k'tict. Given what she estimated was the invaders' rate of progress chopping their road through the forest, they'd be to the edge of the world, and an easy walk from the tree town, in a couple of days.

Her rescuers were going to have to make a choice, and soon, between fighting and getting out of the way. Moving twenty thousand plus individuals would not be easy, but from what she'd seen, the K'k'tict weren't likely to fight.

These last two suppositions, the impending genocide and the K'k'ticts' refusal to fight, were confirmed by Copper when she found him reclining in the shade of a notch cut into the base of one of the roots. His eyes were bandaged, covered with leaves that no doubt held in place a poultice of some sort.

"We befriended the first of the Tznauk't when they arrived," he said. "They were beyond the edge of the world, but foragers had seen their silver leaf fall."

World was banyan forest and silver leaf was glider, Corsi deduced. The first landing without a runway must have been rough.

"We met as many as we could so that we could know one another, but they did not understand," Copper said. "They have a [consensus of one], which we do not fully understand. He is named Tzuntatalc."

"Their leader," Corsi supplied.

"[Consensus of one]." Copper nodded. "A difficult concept."

The K'k'tict made decisions by consensus, Corsi realized. They didn't have leaders. That certainly fit with her wandering tour. Every K'k'tict in the tree town had been given a chance to observe her so that each could make up his or her mind about their guest.

But what did that mean about the ruling class being pampered in the cave? Something else to find out after the current crisis was over.

"When you say they did not understand you," Corsi said, trying to find a handle on the situation, "do you mean they didn't understand your speech or did not understand your intent?"

"Both." Copper sighed, remembering. "In the beginning I believe the Tznauk't did not recognize our speech as speech. We tried speaking to them in their own language, but they use many sounds we cannot make. Our first efforts were clumsy. They were amused until we became more successful."

Copper stopped speaking and simply sat, the weight of his upper torso on the elbows of his folded lower arms, and rocked. After a while Corsi realized he'd finished.

“What happened after you were successful?”

“They became afraid.” Copper sighed again, a heavy sound.

“That’s when the Tznauk’t began killing K’k’tict,” Corsi said.

Copper said nothing, rocking.

“Do you know why the Tznauk’t are coming here, toward your tree town?”

“Yes.”

Corsi watched him rock for a long ten-count.

“Could you—” She stopped herself, recognizing she’d almost invited another dead-endyes . “Would you explain to me why?”

Copper stopped rocking, turning his bandaged face toward her as though regarding her through the poultice. “They know of our birthing caves,” he said at last, his voice heavy. “Of the place of emergence. They know we can live nowhere else.”

Corsi gaped.

Spot’s “tease her name” since heremergence .

She’d wondered why she’d never seen any K’k’tict young, never realizing she’d been taken on a tour of their nursery. They gave birth or laid eggs or whatever the process was called in the mineral spring cave. Dozens of spheres that looked like glass globes, which became something like fish, then something like tadpoles and then “emerged” as chiptaurs. The ones she had taken to be attendants were what? In day care?

Head Nurse hadn’t been fat; she’d been pregnant.

On the heels of that thought came the realization that the K’k’tict metamorphic process, whatever it was, must be violent. At each stage of development, the larger the inhabitants of the pools, the fewer there had been.

She set that speculation aside and focused on the situation at hand.

“Are there other caves?” she asked. “Other birthing places?”

“We know of no other.”

Corsi realized moving the K’k’tict away from the Tznauk’t’s landing site was out of the question. They could not abandon their young and they had no place else to go.

“Do the Tznauk’t know the location of the birthing caves?” Corsi held on to one last hope of misleading the invaders, gaining the K’k’tict some time. Time for what she wasn’t sure. Negotiations?

“Yes,” Copper said simply. Then, anticipating Corsi’s follow-up question: “They asked. We told them.”

Corsi scrambled to her feet and stalked away. It was that or call Copper a suicidal idiot to his face. When death had landed on their doorstep, they had gone out and invited their own destruction.

If the K'k'tict would give back her phaser she'd solve their problem—decisively.

No, she wouldn't, she admitted a few steps later. The Prime Directive was clear. Events on this world must be allowed to follow their natural path. She could not interfere. She could not...

Could not reveal the existence of advanced technology or life on other worlds...

“Cortzi?”

Corsi spun, startled.

Spot was seated, eyes bandaged, in a patch of darker shade at the base of a root column. As with Copper, others were sitting in attendance, but moved off as Corsi approached.

“How did you know it was me?”

Spot swung her head close to the ground. “You are the only one who walks on two legs,” she said. “Nothing thumps about like you.”

“Why will your people not fight?” Corsi asked when she was settled beside her former nurse. “If you do not, the Tznauk't will destroy your birthing cave. The K'k'tict will be no more.”

“Then the K'k'tict will be no more,” Spot said. “We share life. We are one spirit. How can we harm our own spirit?”

“This isn't a time for philosophy,” Corsi couldn't keep the edge of frustration from her voice. “This is a time for action, for survival.”

“If we harm others, we do not survive,” Spot answered. “We share life—”

“You won't share life for very long,” Corsi cut her off angrily, “if you don't do something to stop the slaughter!”

“But we shall do something to stop the...hurting.”

“You will? How?” Corsi snapped. “Because unless you're disguised Organians, I don't think you stand a chance.”

Spot batted at her left ear.

“I do not know what that is.” She sounded hurt. “But we are preparing, those of us who will meet the Tznauk't.”

“Meet the Tznauk't?” Corsi tried to soften her voice. “What are you talking about?”

“We know where they will enter the world,” Spot said as though speaking to a child. “We will meet them there and tell them the truth. When they understand, the hurting will stop.”

“The truth?” Corsi demanded, as annoyed by the tone as the fact that her friend was talking nonsense. “What truth?”

“We share life,” Spot repeated. “We are one spirit.”

“Wait a minute. Say that again.”

Corsi turned off her combadge and heard Spot recite the same two phrases of clicks and ticks intoned by everyone she’d been introduced to on her first tour of the tree town. They had meant nothing then and they had no power now.

“The Tznauk’t have no universal translators,” she said when hers was back on. “They will not understand you.”

“We have been practicing their language,” Spot explained. “They taught it to many when they thought we were animals that mimicked sound.”

The young K’k’tict uttered two phrases of slurred sound. The universal translator could make nothing of them. Corsi could not tell if Spot had indeed spoken in the language of the invaders. Or, remembering the natives substitutedtz for thes in her name, whether what she’d said would be intelligible to the Tznauk’t.

“That is what you are preparing for?” she asked. “To recite words in a foreign language to those who would kill you?”

“Oh, no,” Spot said. “We are preparing to die.”

Chapter 14

Bart Faulwell grinned as he listened to Fabian Stevens try to sway Carol Abramowitz and Soloman to his choice of lunch spots.

Actually, it would be lunch for Bart and Stevens. For Soloman it was breakfast time and Abramowitz was looking for a late dinner. While transporters made it possible for members of a globe-spanning effort to meet for a meal, they did nothing to simplify the choice of restaurants.

At the moment the four of them were strolling under a noonday sun in Trizist, a pleasant enough town though its only claim to fame was a single aqueduct junction just visible over the rooftops to the south. Plus a library stocked with reliable copies of scrolls from several neighboring towns lost to the Breen bombardment.

The local architecture had a square and stolid look, though the blocklike buildings were topped with upswept gables—perfectly balanced, of course—and incongruous bits of gingerbread. The absolute symmetry dulled the spontaneity a bit, but Bart still found the effect pleasantly whimsical.

He noticed he was the only one enjoying it. Stevens and Abramowitz were deep in their debate over restaurants and Soloman had his nose to a padd, evidently counting on his companions to keep him from banging into things.

Pleasant as the architecture and climate were, however, lunchtime fare in Trizist tended toward raw vegetables, jerked meat very similar to venison, and a stew thick with barley and simmered until it was almost solid. Having sampled it yesterday, Bart came away fairly certain he would choose it over survival rations, but it would be a near thing.

“There’s plenty of reasons for having lunch in Brohtz,” Stevens insisted, focusing his argument on the cultural specialist as the harder sell.

“There are?”

“Rastenthasoufflé!”

“Again?” Bart shook his head at Stevens’s enthusiasm. “I think it’s time we gave rustic Brohtz a rest. The cuisine of Franthc is, I’m told, very like Earth Asian barbecue.”

“Sounds good,” Abramowitz said. “I’m in the mood for spicy. And we need to take another look at the southern hemisphere’s concept of lunar cycles anyway. I’m thinking there’s a fundamental disconnect between how they timed their lock cycles and the schedule employed in the north.”

Soloman’s head snapped up, his large eyes locked on the cultural specialist.

“That’s it.”

“What’s it?”

“A fundamental disconnect,” the Bynar said.

“I know,” Abramowitz said patiently. “We have to figure out how to resolve it.”

“You misunderstand.” Soloman turned his padd to show his companions, then realized the screen was too small for them to see clearly. He glanced about, but there were no display panels in the tourist area with which to interface. “If I could draw...” he murmured.

Bart offered him his folio, but the Bynar waved off the fine parchment. Stooping low, he snatched up a twig and began sketching in the dust. He drew a circle, remarkably precise, about half a meter in diameter.

“Bundinal.”

The humans nodded.

Soloman drew two parallel lines a hand’s width apart, bisecting the circle.

“Northern aqueduct system,” he said, indicating the hemisphere above the double line. “Southern aqueduct system.”

Then he drew a series of short lines connecting the two parallels.

“Forty-eight aqueducts, evenly spaced around the equator,” he said. “Connecting the two networks.”

“Yes,” Abramowitz said, “one for each week of the Bundinalli calendar. The length, twelvezrht,

corresponding to the number of days.”

“They should not be there.”

“But they were always there.”

“They were never there.”

“Wait a minute, Soloman,” Bart spoke up. “The foundations were there. The measurements are BUNDINALLI tradition to the core and their placement corresponds to BUNDINALLI records. The reconstruction team simply restored the superstructures destroyed in the bombardment.”

“Where are the locks?” Soloman asked. “Nowhere in the BUNDINALLI water systems do canals or aqueducts meet without lock gates to control the flow of water. Yet there are no locks at either end of any of these forty-eight spans.”

Bart frowned at the drawing in the dust, then up toward an aqueduct junction in the middle distance. Even at a couple of kilometers, the boxy structure of the lock mechanism was clear. And he knew, from studying hundreds of drawings and verbal accounts, that every single juncture had been constructed to exactly the same specifications.

Except the forty-eight, the calendar aqueducts that had joined north and south. Those had simply connected the two hemisphere-spanning networks with plain right angles.

The houses between where they stood and the arch of the aqueduct caught his eye. Each was laid out in perfect bilateral symmetry, with windows, gingerbread, gables, and gardens all exactly matching. Including a faux front door to balance the real.

“Symbolism,” Abramowitz said, a half second quicker than he on the uptake. “The forty-eight aqueducts weren’t real, they didn’t actually connect. The BUNDINALLI just needed their symmetry to keep the world in balance.”

“Would the BUNDINALLI actually forget to tell us something like that?” Stevens asked.

“Most BUNDINALLI would have assumed it was so obvious they wouldn’t have thought to mention it,” Abramowitz said. “Do you remind everyone you meet not to stick their hand in a fire?”

“But if they knew what we were doing—”

“Fabe, in all your traveling has even a single BUNDINALLI asked you about what we were doing beyond his or her own village?” Bart asked. “Curiosity about the big picture is not in their nature.”

“If we restore the aqueducts properly,” Soloman said, focusing on the problem at hand, “and close off both ends of the connecting spans, the two systems should attain equilibrium.”

“Immediately?”

“No, they are much too massive for that. The parameters and variables are too complex for me to evaluate without computer models.” He shrugged. “Four local years, maybe six. But once started, the process will be inevitable.”

“Fabe,” Bart said with a grin, “why don’t you give Tev a call?”

Chapter 15

Adozen Smaunif were working on small electric motors, taking them apart and checking each circuit individually. From what Pattie could see, they were finding different things wrong with each one. A broken connection, dirt or moisture inside a sealed casing, a fouled or broken gear. Little things, any one of which could be attributed to normal wear and tear or misadventure.

That all of these minor breakdowns had happened at once indicated something other than chance was responsible. Pattie could not tell from the technician’s body language if they were simply frustrated or they suspected someone was responsible for their difficulties. For her part, she took it as evidence Corsi was somewhere close at hand.

Over the last couple of days she and Solal had talked—or he had talked and she had listened—about the problem of the tree dogs. She had only to explain she was from far away and was eager to learn more about them to trigger an exhaustive and wide-ranging lecture on local fauna, religion, and responsibility.

The tree dogs, who looked very much like her red-haired neighbor but about three times the mass, had appeared shortly after the first landing. They were clever mimics who had amused the first explorers by approximating Smaunif gestures and performing various antics.

Their most annoying trait had sprung from their playfulness. Whenever a Smaunif hunter had been about to gather game, the tree dogs had run about making loud noises, frightening the animals away. They apparently thought the point of hunting was to surprise animals.

The tree dogs had gone from amusing near-pets to threat sometime just before the third wave of gliders had arrived. (From context Pattie deduced the third landing had been a few months ago and that Solal had arrived aboard one of those gliders.) It was then that the tree dogs had started imitating speech.

The imitative speech was a natural outgrowth of their mimicry, of course. There was no intelligence behind it. But it was disconcerting, particularly when they began putting individual words together in new orders. And it raised a possible problem for the colony.

Because, although those who had been around the tree dogs from the beginning understood they were simply animals, a newcomer might mistake their mimicry for intelligent speech. And if they were tricked into believing the tree dogs were intelligent, the question of whether the tree dogs were—and here the universal translator could not decide if the phrase meant self-aware, responsible for their actions, or even possessed of a soul—would arise. That would throw the entire validity of the colonization of New Smau into question. Valuable years would be lost in foolish debate over the behavior of animal mimics.

Fortunately the tree dogs were limited to the forest of huge trees not far from the landing site. There were no others in all of New Smau.

Pattie wondered how he had come by that information, particularly since he’d proudly explained earlier that the colonists here were the only Smaunif to ever visit New Smau. But that was only one inconsistency in a myriad and she had not wanted to interrupt the stream of information, no matter how

skewed it was.

Sonandal, leader that he was, had decided how to avoid wasting those years that should be spent establishing the colony and developing the planet. Having heard this sort of logic before in the histories of dozens of worlds that made up the Federation, Pattie was braced for the leader's solution. Still, it had been a shock to actually hear it.

"Sonandal will lead us to the forest," Solal had explained, then amended: "Those of us authorized to use weapons. We will eradicate the infestation of mimicking tree dogs. Once the animals contaminated by interacting with people are removed, there will be no cause for confusion. In the future, colonists will be careful to avoid tree dogs to prevent similar problems."

That had been yesterday.

Solal had left before Pattie could rebut any of the horror he'd spewed, apparently unaware of his madness. Pattie had come closer to wanting to commit violence than she could ever remember. She'd wanted to shake him until his brain rattled, force him to see the stupidity of his racism.

Today from first light she'd been treated to the sight of disgruntled technicians repairing equipment. Evidence, she was sure, of Corsi taking a hand on behalf of the tree dogs, or whatever the indigenous people of Zhatyra II called themselves.

But she knew sabotaging equipment—while it might distract the colonists from their goal for a while—was not going to be enough. She hoped the techs would take their noon meals elsewhere and that Solal would come for their usual lunchtime discussion.

Technically the letter of the Prime Directive dictated that she do nothing. But she could not sit by and not try to help. She could not reveal who or what she was, of course. That would do far more harm than good. But she had to try and reach Solal, loyal follower that he was, and try to make him see the crime that was about to be committed.

She might do nothing more than get herself killed as another tree dog, but she had to try.

At last the technicians left. And Solal, carrying his usual lunch, came in, exchanging greetings with the others in passing.

Pattie remained silent as he retrieved her combadge from its hiding place and dragged his chair over. After three days of her refusing anything but distilled water he had stopped offering food.

"Solal," she asked when he was comfortable. "What am I?"

Solal smiled with what Pattie recognized from years among humanoids as a condescending smile. She knew his answer before he opened his mouth.

"You are a talking animal," he answered. "A very clever and charming one."

"And why are you studying me?"

Gesturing with his cheese, Solal said, "Because if I can learn how and why you imitate people, we can avoid problems like we are having with the tree dogs."

“Solal,” Pattie repeated firmly, making sure his eyes were on her, “how do I imitate people?”

“You talk,” he began—and stopped, looking down at her combadge.

“Yes, I talk,” she said. “Expressing ideas that did not come from you, speaking a language you do not understand but which is made plain to you by a technology you have never seen before.”

Solal did not look up from the combadge.

“Solal, how do I imitate people?”

The young Smaunif looked up at last and met her gaze. His eyes were full of something too confused and subtle for Pattie to read. She wished the lad had antennae so she could better judge his mood. She couldn't tell if he was on the verge of a breakthrough or racial violence.

“Your gliders landed in a very primitive region of the world you call New Smau,” she said, making sure he tied the unknown technology in his hand to this world and no other. “The people here do not use tools as we do. They do not believe animals should be hunted for food.” That was a guess based on his description of their reaction to hunters. “But the native people you call tree dogs are not animals. They are people. They have a right to live their lives the way they want to live.”

“Like the Smaunif?” Solal asked.

“If you mean a culture on your world that chooses to live simply,” Pattie said. “Then, yes. Like the Smaunif.”

Solal's eyes focused elsewhere. Some point of infinity between his chair and Pattie's cage.

“Solal,” she said, trying to find the right balance between gentle and firm, “Sonandal is about to make a terrible mistake. Many innocent and harmless people will die because he does not have all the information he needs to make a responsible choice.”

At least she hoped that was true. It was quite possible the Smaunif leader knew exactly what he was doing in slaughtering the locals. But she didn't want to confuse Solal further by raising the possibility his personal hero was evil.

“Solal, please give me my combadge and let me out of this cage. We need to help Sonandal. If we do not, he may become responsible for a tragedy. And we will carry the responsibility of not having done what we could have to prevent it.”

The Smaunif's face suddenly contorted and Pattie started in sudden fear, fighting the reflex to ball. Solal's body heaved, shuddering with silent sobs.

“What?” Pattie asked, belatedly recognizing grief, feeling the first stab of dread. “What is it?”

“This morning,” Solal gasped between spasms. “They left to kill the tree dogs this morning.”

Chapter 16

Corsi could not move.

The K'k'tict had not appreciated her act of sabotage the night before. Though conceding she had harmed no one, Copper—his eyes now unbandaged and clear—had condemned the hurtful intent of her actions. And the general consensus concurred. Now, aware of her violent nature and knowing she wanted to help, K'k'tict hemmed her in on every side. Held gently immobile, she could see all that was happening but could do nothing about it.

The Tznauk't had chopped their way through the last meters of woods and underbrush under the watchful eyes of the K'k'tict. A hundred meters away, concealed among the root columns, it was impossible for Corsi to gauge what they were thinking.

What she could see, above the heads of the assembled K'k'tict, was the woodsmen clearing the last of the underbrush with a curious thoroughness, scraping the ground to create an unobstructed path a dozen meters wide. As they dragged the last of the vegetation away, back toward their base camp, a hundred or more Tznauk't parted to let them pass.

These were different from the woodsmen. They carried crossbows, with loaded quivers over their shoulders and heavy swords at their belts. When the last of the deforesters were through, the armsmen had closed ranks and advanced, all deadly business as they approached.

Looking in from the bright sunlight, they could not clearly see what awaited them. That changed when they stepped across the shadow line.

They stopped abruptly.

A thousand K'k'tict stood in neat ranks, filling the fern-carpeted boulevard between the giant banyan trees from side to side.

Whatever the invaders had expected, this was not it. They hesitated visibly, unnerved by the sheer number of K'k'tict. Or perhaps by the calm with which the natives stood, not a weapon or closed fist among them.

The Tznauk't in the center of the first rank, larger than most with a thick helmet of bright red hair, stepped forward into the open space between the two groups. Corsi could not read his expression, but his body language had nothing of bravado or victory about it. He seemed businesslike, weary but resolved, facing a job, not a battle.

He turned his back on the K'k'tict and addressed his own men. Nothing rousing. Flat instructions. The troops decocked their crossbows and slung them.

Corsi's moment of hope died as they drew their swords.

The leader, sword in hand, turned again to the K'k'tict.

But before he could speak or act, a lone K'k'tict stepped forward to greet him. Even at this distance, Corsi could see the distinctive circle of bright golden hair high between her shoulders. Spot.

Hefting his sword, the Tznauk't leader raised it over his head, then paused as Spot began to speak. Corsi could not hear her words, but could see her arms spread wide, open palms up as she addressed

the invader.

“Blue to Corsi, come in, Commander!” said Corsi’s combadge.

The K’k’tict around her shifted in surprise, but did not move away.

“Go.”

“There’s an extermination force headed for the natives!”

“They’re here, Pattie.”

“I know how to stop them,” Pattie said.

The heavy sword of the Tznauk’t came down. Slashing through bone and flesh, it split the circle of bright gold in two.

Corsi was drowned in a sea of nutmeg and musk as loving arms surrounded her, stopping her and pulling her gently, irresistibly, to the ground.

Pattie’s voice, muffled by the earth and press of K’k’tict, barely reached her.

“It’s honor. You can challenge their leader to a duel.”

Corsi stopped struggling.

“Primitive racism,” Pattie was saying, “they think the natives are animals.” Corsi had never imagined the tinkle of Pattie’s bell-like laughter could sound bitter. “They think I’m an animal. But you’re humanoid. They’ll see you as a person.”

Sensing she was no longer trying to get up, the K’k’tict eased away from Corsi. She knew they could understand the words coming from her combadge. She wondered if they understood she was talking to someone far away or thought the golden piece of metal had come to life.

In the distance she could hear a sound, repeated, of wet rags slapping wood. Or melons being split. Around her the K’k’tict moaned as Corsi kept her eyes focused on the ground, keeping her emotions in check as she listened to her friend explain the Smaunif code of responsibility and the challenge to authority.

Corsi’s first thought was to get to Copper. But he wasn’t a leader. The K’k’tict made decisions by consensus; each of them had an equal say. She’d have to reach them all. Or maybe just enough.

She started with her guards, explaining as quickly as she could a plan that involved concepts alien to them and behavior they could not understand. Corsi felt her first hope when her guards turned away from her without comment and began addressing their own knots of K’k’tict. Her plan was helped, perhaps, by the sounds of death reaching them from the front of the crowd. It was clear that what the K’k’tict were doing was not working.

The slaughter, when she steeled herself to look at it, was continuing. A rank of K’k’tict would step forward. Some would have a chance to speak, some would not before the heavy swords of the Tznauk’t, the Smaunif, rose and fell. Then the next rank stepped forward.

Not wanting the Smaunif to see her before her challenge, Corsi crawled from group to group, explaining her plan. Some moved on to tell others. Some stood, looking straight ahead at their brothers and sisters dying beneath the invaders' swords. Waiting their turn.

Every so often the carnage stopped for a few minutes. The front rank of the Smaunif would drop back, exhausted, and make way for the next to take their place. Now that she was close enough to see their faces, Corsi was heartened to see weariness, even revulsion. These were not warriors being carried to excess in the heat of battle. If they even imagined the beasts they were slaughtering were people...

The red-haired leader—Sonandal, Pattie had called him—stood to one side, the point of his bloody sword to the ground. Corsi pointed him out to the K'k'tict, tried to explain the concept of leader, of consensus of one. He had struck the first blow—Corsi fought to keep the anger out of her voice at the memory—and now stood witness, taking responsibility for his actions.

And supporting Corsi's argument to the K'k'tict.

Against the bizarre background of death and those waiting to die, Corsi crawled and politicked. How many K'k'tict were killed while she struggled to make her case?

Copper made his way to a group Corsi was addressing. Her heart leapt at the sight of him. He might not be a leader, but his opinion carried weight. Many K'k'tict would go along with any plan he endorsed without question.

"You cannot fight for us," he said before she could open her mouth. "We share life. It is better we die than we take another life. Or let a life be taken for us. We are one spirit."

"I will take no life for you," Corsi said. "If I can, I will do no harm at all. But to stop this madness I must challenge their leader to a duel."

"But they hear us," Copper said. "They hear our words of life. If we do not waver they will see the truth of our words."

"There are no words," Corsi said. "They cannot comprehend what you say."

"We speak their language."

Corsi bit back her hot retort.

"I'm going to turn off my combadge," she said to Copper and the knot of K'k'tict around them. "I want you to repeat the words I say and listen—listen—to the differences."

With her communicator switched off, Corsi pointed to the row of invaders, then to their leader.

"Smaunif."

"Tznauk't," the K'k'tict chorused.

"Sonandal."

"Tzuntatalc."

Corsi looked Copper in the eye and challenged: “Fickle Fizzy fancies sausage and rice.”

Copper managed a stuttered series of ticks and clicks before he fell silent. None of the others made the effort.

“Their understanding is stunted,” Corsi said, turning her combadge back on. “Because you do not look like them they do not recognize you are people. And because you cannot make the sounds they do, they do not recognize your words.”

“But I spoke with them,” Copper said.

“Let me guess,” Corsi said. “You understood their questions and they understood only your yes or no.”

Copper hung his head and Corsi realized she had won.

“I am a chief of security,” she said. “I protect those who might be harmed from those who would harm them. Please let me save your people.”

Chapter 17

Corsi crouched low, her face centimeters from the crushed ferns, waiting her chance. It had to be done right, according to honor, if it were to work.

At last the horrible sound of chopping ceased. How many dead? A hundred? Two? She forced the thought from her mind, making sure the eyes she turned toward Copper carried no rage.

“Now.”

“Now,” the K’k’tict around her murmured and pulled back.

Lefty, Copper, and two of her recent guards delayed for a moment, standing up stripped saplings and jamming them firmly into the loamy earth. Then they withdrew without haste.

Corsi uncoiled, coming to her full height in the center of the challenge square.

The Smaunif froze. Some with their swords half drawn, some stooped to drag bodies from the way, one with his hand halfway to his crossbow. For a long moment there was no sound.

She knew she was a sight, bruised and wounded in her hand-tied uniform. But she was a humanoid, the first non-Smaunif humanoid the invaders had ever seen. And where she stood right now spoke to their very core.

“Sonandal!”

The Smaunif leader snapped from his daze at the sound of his name.

“Your lack of honor and failure to take responsibility for your mistakes has cost innocent lives.” Corsi

based her challenge on forms Pattie—and someone named Solal—had explained, trusting the language file transferred from Pattie’s combadge to choose the most stinging phrases. “The lives of my friends require recompense. I challenge you, now, here, to defend what honor you hope to possess.”

Sonandal looked at his troops. The troops looked at Sonandal. If he hoped to ever lead again, he had no choice.

He gestured to a young male close to him. The trooper pulled his sword from its sheath.

Clean, Corsi saw. Perhaps the slaughter had not been going on as long as she’d imagined. The K’k’tict bodies stacked like cordwood said otherwise.

She had hoped Sonandal, seeing her unarmed, would choose to fight hand to hand. It would be harder to keep her promise to the K’k’tict with swords.

Holding it by the blade, Sonandal tossed the clean sword to Corsi as he stepped into the ring.

She caught the hilt, twirling quickly to parry his charging lunge. When he spun back around, she was ready, guiding his scything blade up and over with the broad of her sword.

The Smaunif sword was more a cutlass than anything else. Nowhere near as subtle and balanced as the saber she had trained on at the Academy. Almost a chopping tool.

In fact, she realized as she wove it in front of her, parrying Sonandal’s attacks, it probably was just that, more machete than sword. These blades had probably traveled to Zhatyra II as part of a wing assembly or a bulkhead.

And Sonandal was not a swordsman. With each flurry of chops and thrusts he came at her as though she were a tangle of vines.

Which was a very good thing, Corsi realized as she almost missed a step. She was not fully recovered from her fall; her left side was beginning to betray her. Against a master swordsman she’d have been hard pressed to keep her feet, much less keep her opponent at bay.

She had to end this before her body gave out. But not with swords.

Ignoring the tremor in her left thigh, she lunged forward, slapping at Sonandal’s blade with the flat of her own sword. Startled, he staggered back, barely able to keep his blade up as she drove him across the square with rapid fire slaps; loud, frightening, and harmless if he’d had his wits about him enough to realize what she was doing.

Corsi stopped abruptly, letting the Smaunif stumble a few steps clear of her. She fought to breathe steadily, not let her chest heave. The stamina wasn’t there. Flourishing her sword, she leaned right and drove its point into the ground just outside the square.

Hoping she wasn’t making a mistake, she held both hands toward him, palm up, then beckoned with her fingers. Come get me .

Sonandal reversed his own sword, thrusting it into the ground. Technically it was still inside the ring, but Corsi suspected stopping proceedings now on a point of order would be counterproductive.

The Smaunif surprised her.

Leaping forward like a frog, he planted his hands on the ground two meters in front of her and spun. It was an awkward-looking round-off, but before she realized his target he drove his heels into her left thigh.

Pain spiked from her knee to her scalp. She barely managed to pivot away without breaking the joint.

Clinging to balance, she turned to take his next attack.

Rolling out of his frog kick, Sonandal came up from the ground with all of his weight behind a smashing roundhouse.

Corsi almost thanked him.

The edge of her hand met the back of his fist, deflecting the force of the blow away and down as she rolled her hand to grip his wrist. Her other hand came up, catching Sonandal below the shoulder blade. Turning at the waist, she let herself fall away, pivoting, and leveraged her weight into his momentum.

The redirected energy of his lunge tumbled the Smaunif leader through the air. He landed with a hollow thud, the breath forced from his body.

Corsi danced lightly to her right, hoping her bounce did not reveal the electric shot of pain stabbing up from her left knee with every step. A duller ache radiated from the center of her back and a ghost of numbness flowing down from her elbow warned her not to depend on her left hand's strength.

She wasn't going to last much longer. If she was going to win, she had to win quickly.

Taking advantage of Sonandal's slow roll to his feet, she turned to Copper, standing closest to the violence of all the K'k'tict.

"If I am to prevail, I must attack."

"Then do not prevail."

Sonandal's bear hug caught her from behind, crushing the breath from her. The Smaunif arched his back, raising her in the air, then slammed her to the ground.

Her senses reeling, Corsi rolled away, scrambling to gain distance. Roaring in triumph, Sonandal came at her, his arms wide for another grab.

Coming up on her hands and damaged left knee, Corsi lashed out with her right leg; the from-the-hip kick connecting solidly with Sonandal's knee. He shrieked, stopping himself before his forward drive snapped the joint backward. Getting her right foot back under her, Corsi pushed off from the ground. The right move, the power move, was to come up in a left mule kick to the Smaunif's gut followed by the heel of her right hand to his nose, driving the shattered sinus bones back into his brain. But she knew her left knee couldn't take the impact.

The patched fabric of her trousers popped in the wind as she snapped her left leg up and around in a roundhouse. Pain flamed up her leg as the top of her bare foot slammed into his cheek, spinning him bonelessly away.

Corsi's back muscles spasmed, turning her pivoting recovery into a crablike stumble.

Sonandal hung, his arms limp, slowly swaying forward, away from her. If he fell, he'd be outside the ring. The fight would be over, she would have won, but not the way she wanted. Not the way that mattered.

Lunging forward, she caught a fistful of the Smaunif's uniform just as he fell. Hauling back with all her strength, she pulled him into the ring; tripping him over her right ankle so he sprawled in the bloody mud.

Her left arm would not respond, still bent against her ribs by her spasmed back. Corsi had to turn her back on Sonandal, even as she saw him gathering himself, to reach his sword. Grabbing its hilt, she yanked it from the earth, backstepping with the same motion and slashing it backward.

Her back screamed as she halted the swing.

On his knees, Sonandal met her eyes along the length of the bloody blade.

Corsi deliberately dropped her game face. She let her professionalism drop from her like a cloak and let her horror and disgust at the slaughter show through. Digging deeper, she focused on Spot, her life blood spilling as the Smaunif blade—the blade she held in her hand—split her body, willing the butcher to see her hate and rage.

He saw it. She could see in Sonandal's eyes he saw her hate and knew he was dead.

There was a moan from the K'k'tict, low and despairing.

From the Smaunif, stony silence.

Her left arm would not move. She needed her left arm for what she had to do. But it was still trapped uselessly by her traitorous body's leftward crouch. She was going to have to improvise.

With a curse she flourished the sword, the blade flashing dully as it spun. Reversing her grip, she drove the point of the blade into the ground. Keeping a firm grip on the hilt, she risked switching her weight to her left leg. She took a moment to gather her focus, then she lifted her right foot and kicked down to the side, against the flat of the sword.

Her luck held. The blade snapped first try. And she stayed on her feet.

Corsi brought the broken blade up, almost in a salute, then flung it away.

"We share life," she said quietly. Then again loudly so the nearer crowd could hear. "We share life!"

"We share life!" the K'k'tict chorused. Her combadge—and another, she was sure, now somewhere close behind them—carried the words clearly to the Smaunif.

She felt tears streaming down her face, but she didn't care. She swung her right arm wide, indicating the K'k'tict, the Smaunif, and the bloody corpses strewn about the killing field.

"We are one spirit!"

“We are one spirit!” the K’k’tict repeated.

Corsi leaned close to the kneeling Sonandal. She’d had a speech prepared, what she would tell these invaders when she had the chance. But as she looked into the bewildered eyes centimeters from her own she realized none of those things were right.

None of those things were K’k’tict.

“We all share life,” she said quietly. “We are all one.”

Chapter 18

Corsi stood across from Captain Gold’s desk in his ready room. He hadn’t invited her to sit. He was reading her report, rereading it, she knew. He didn’t look happy.

“What would you recommend for the Zhatyra system, Corsi?” he asked at last. “What would you like to see happen next?”

“I’d like to see the Smaunif sent packing,” she answered promptly, keeping it formal. “Failing that, relocate their colony to the southern continent.”

Though Copper and his tree town had not known of other volcanic birthing caves, the anthropological satellites had documented dozens more, all in the northern hemisphere and around the equator. The southern continent, with its placid plate tectonics and lack of volcanoes, was the only uninhabited region on Zhatyra II.

Gold sighed. “How would you characterize your compliance with the Prime Directive?” he asked.

“Under the circumstances, fair,” Corsi replied. “Particularly given both Pattie and I were injured and unconscious when contact was made. Except for our combadges, the natives saw no advanced technology function.”

All of their personal equipment, the Waldo Egg, even Pattie’s Klingon dagger, had been recovered by transporter without witnesses. Just as Corsi and Pattie had been.

“Starfleet may determine your actions on Zhatyra II warrant an inquiry.”

“Sir?”

“You’re a Starfleet officer,” Gold said. “Blue isn’t held to the same standard you are because she hasn’t had your Academy training. You’re expected to know, and to uphold, the Prime Directive.”

“Neither Pattie nor I ever did or said anything to indicate we weren’t native to Zhatyra II,” Corsi said, careful to keep her voice in report mode. “Nor did we at any time mention the possibility of life on other worlds.”

Gold rubbed the back of his left hand. A sure tell he was worried. “Of course protecting developing cultures from the disruption of advanced technology or life on other worlds is part of the Prime

Directive,” Gold said. “But those considerations are not the key, not the fundamental reason behind the directive.” He sighed, leaning back from his desk. “The purpose of the Prime Directive is to remind us we do not have the right to impose our moral view, our cultural values, on another people simply because we have better weapons. It’s there to keep us from playing God.”

Corsi blinked.

“You mean I shouldn’t have done anything?” she asked. “And we aren’t going to do anything?”

Leaning back in his chair, Gold again sighed. “The answer to your first question is no—absolutely, you had to act. And, in fact, what you did may not have been to the letter of the Prime Directive, but it was definitely in the spirit. By letting the Smaunif know what the K’k’tict really are, you made it more likely that they’ll stop damaging the K’k’tict’s culture. But it also means the answer to your second question is yes. We can hope the Smaunif remain bound by their own honor and allow the K’k’tict to flourish. But the Federation can’t interfere with events on Zhatyra II without being as arrogant as the Smaunif invaders; certain of their place as the crown of creation.”

“But when we see something wrong and don’t fix it...” Corsi let her voice trail off, gathering her thought. “Doesn’t the Prime Directive let the Federation avoid its responsibility to the rest of the universe?”

“On the contrary, Corsi. The Prime Directive, by its very strictness, requires and enables the Federation to honor its greatest responsibility: To respect the right of all peoples to find their own way.”

THE END

About the Author

KEVIN KILLIANY has been for twenty-five years the husband of Valerie Killiany and—for various, shorter periods of time—the father of Alethea, Anson, and Daya. In addition to being a writer, Kevin is a minister and mental health care professional in Wilmington, North Carolina. Honor is his second eBook in the S.C.E. series; his first, *Orphans*, appeared in 2004. Three of Kevin’s short stories have also appeared in *Strange New Worlds* (Volumes IV, V, & VII). In addition to *Star Trek*, Kevin also writes in the *Classic BattleTech* and *MechWarrior: Dark Age* game universes. His short fiction can be found on the *BattleCorps* website and his first *MW:DA* novel *Wolf Hunters* will be released in June of 2006.

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