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BLACKOUT

Phaedra M. Weldon



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Chapter 1

Pressure.

The morning sun burst through the small cavern's recently excavated stained-glass window, casting reds, greens, blues, purples, and yellows against the carved back wall. Dust glinted as it moved lazily through beams of light, sparkling now and then. The room smelled of old books and forgotten knowledge.

Water moved nearby in an underground stream no wider than a meter, discovered half a kilometer from the first chamber.

Pressure, pressure, pressure. Jewlan Omi thrust her lower lip out in a small gesture of frustration as she stared at the beige pages of her notes. Every letter of every word placed together to form every sentence was perfectly drawn, painstakingly positioned in her grandmother's own style, which had been commended by the Board of Linguistic Anachronisms as being the finest in historic realism.

And how is any of this supposed to help me?

"Pfff," the sound came out as a pressing of air between her lower lip and the teeth of her upper jaw. There was no word on the page that closely resembled the sound—it was just something that Jewlan had done since childhood. A noise that irritated her father, whether he were in Beta or Alpha States. "This has to prove there are more than four laws, right?"

Her voice echoed against the walls, as no one answered her.

Not that Jewlan expected anyone to really hear, or care.

She sat alone in the First Chamber. The others in her group had returned to the city, forty kilometers west of this latest archaeological find on a planet her people claimed more than a century ago. Two artisans, two news tellers, the team's former expert in mechanical investigations, and the site's financial backer. Everyone used the mechanic's shift to Beta State as their reasoning for departure, proclaiming a new mechanic should be found, interviewed, and approved for work.

And no one in their right mind had declined an opportunity to return to the city to partake of the modern

conveniences there.

No one except Jewlan, that is.

The painful truth was Jewlan failed to crack the symbols leading out of the Fourth Chamber. After six weeks, people were tired, dejected, and very grumpy.

The First Chamber had been an accidental find. Digging in the area had revealed a door covered in unfamiliar markings. There had been four distinct symbols, each framed in an equal-sided box. Jewlan, an instructor and professional in cryptography and linguistics, had been brought in from the local university to translate the symbols. Working with Doren Hazar, one of the capital city's brightest experts in cultural mechanics, had been easy. The two combined their skills in engineering and linguistics to decipher the first combination of symbols to open the first door.

It'd been simple once the base root letters had been identified. Jewlan found the key within the Four Laws of Life, discovered decades ago on tablets carved in the Temple of a site south of where they were now.

The First Laws were of Light, which she'd corresponded with the universal element of fire, or a common beginning of all things.

She took up the pages and moved through the bits of floating dust to the Second Chamber door. Inside, artificial lights illuminated a trickling fountain, fed by the underground stream and decorated with carved symbols representing the Second Laws of Water.

In the Third Chamber they'd found tables, chairs, beds—all manner of archaeological treasures to give Jewlan's people a better understanding of the race that had perhaps lived on the world of Asario before her people colonized it.

Jewlan had liked the books best—especially the ones written by hand—and had made formal requests to be involved in studying them once her task at opening all the doors had been complete.

That task had now come to an abrupt halt for two reasons.

Finding a fifth door was the first.

The second was Doren's Beta-shift to Loran Hazar. Loran was a regional representative in the Primary Conclave, and refused to go against their strict laws of gender-based occupations.

Archaeological Mechanics was not Loran's profession. She insisted on returning to the city and once again take up her role as a lawmaker.

Which left Jewlan alone with the problem. No one knew of a Fifth Law. A team had been sent to the Temple to look for any clues to this new site. They had found nothing helpful.

What if it were going to take science to open the door and not the magic of words? Everything had to work off a trigger mechanism. Simply pressing the right combination of plates triggered the door to open. Mechanics.

Jewlan neared the door and looked closely at the seams. She imagined looking through the walls to either side. If they had some way to look through the rock into whatever mechanism these people had used, it

could be possible to find the—

She stopped her thoughts from traveling any further. They were wrong thoughts. They were mechanical thoughts.

They were Jolen thoughts.

She looked around the room, almost expecting to find someone watching her, reading her mind. Ready to point a finger at her.

But that was impossible. No one could read minds. Especially not the Conclave.

She blinked. Could they? They sure as hell knew it was me that set off the sprinkler system at the party two months ago. Accidents happen, right?

Focusing on the four panels in the door, Jewlan listened to the hum of a nearby lamp. The heat felt good against her exposed skin. The sun had set some time ago, and the temperature had dropped. It would be two days before anyone returned to the site—that is, if they found a mechanic to replace Doren.

I only hope I don't Beta-shift, or I'll be removed from the entire expedition. There would be no need for a computer specialist. Not in the middle of ancient ruins.

And that would just suck.

There was no one around. No one in the caves. The two guards left behind to protect Jewlan were outside in one of the temporary shelters, warming up to a good game of Bathces. The project supervisor was no doubt sleeping off her latest cup of Polin tea. She'd be unconscious for hours.

Jewlan tapped her lower lip with the index finger of her right hand. The papers remained half folded, clutched in her left hand.

Had anyone considered the consequence of simply pushing random buttons? She couldn't remember ever suggesting the idea to Doren, mainly because the two of them had had such a good time solving the puzzle that neither had thought of it. There hadn't been a reason for guessing.

Well, why not?

Dr. Sesar had told her to continue working on deciphering the Fifth Law while he headed back to the city for a hot bath, but he hadn't said anything about not touching the door.

Right?

Jewlan set the papers on a nearby table and rubbed her hands together. With a deep breath, she stepped forward and pressed each of the symbols she recognized in the order she'd identified them, leaving the final two symbols for last.

Nothing happened.

But then, she hadn't really expected anything.

Until all of the artificial lights went out.

“Oops,” Jewlan muttered in the darkness. “At least we hadn’t installed sprinklers.”

Chapter

2

The airy, lithe plucks of eighteenth-century harp music inside the small cabin onboard the U.S.S. da Vinci did little to ease the nervous anxiety of Bartholomew Faulwell. The linguist felt tension in his hand as it rested upon a long-grain sheet of paper. Between his first three fingers he held his favorite pen, its nib sonically cleaned after every use.

On the paper he’d written “Just a brief note,” as he’d always started his letters to his lover, Anthony Mark. He stared at the words. Crisp, blue-black ink. Flawless curves and extenders above and below each word.

Everything was perfect.

Everything except the words. There were none. And for a linguist to have no words—this was something indeed.

I—I don’t know how to begin. What should I say to him first? Should I apologize for my behavior at the wedding, or do I start by describing my experience with releasing the Koas pyramid? Do I tell him about Caitano and Deverick? I’ve not even told him of Elizabeth’s pregnancy.

Where were those words he’d so carefully stored in his memory for the past month, waiting for this opportunity to write them down?

And yet—that wasn’t all he’d noticed was missing. There had been no stain on the tip of the finger of his right hand for several weeks. After Anthony’s less than subtle suggestion the two of them marry, Bart had all but stopped writing letters.

No—that wasn’t completely true. He’d tried to write them. Began the ritual he so loved—of pulling the crisp, off-white sheet of paper from its box and smoothing it against his desk, selecting the perfect pen and filling the reservoir with the exact shade of ink. All of these tiny steps had brought him uncommon pleasure and peace.

Because they’d always brought him closer to Anthony.

Bart sighed aloud, the sound little more than a whisper amid the harp’s chords. He set the pen down and leaned back, his arms crossed over his chest. Staring at the simple phrase did nothing to help the words come any faster.

While in space, floating above the wonder of creation as the Koas’s world was restored and her people once again safe, Bart had believed there was nothing more pure, more fulfilling in life than companionship, and he was richer because of his relationship with Anthony.

And he’d wanted to write him and tell him what he’d seen. Anthony would understand. Words had jumbled themselves into Bart’s mind since then and he had planned for this down time to finally put into words his experience at that moment.

Looked forward to it.

Needed it.

And yet nothing came to him.

He compared the feeling to revving an engine, pressing simultaneously against the fuel pedal and the brake, only to slam into an unforeseen wall the moment the brake was released.

Splat.

I'm avoiding the larger issue. Bart rubbed absently at his salt-and-pepper beard with his right hand. All those pretty words in my head mean nothing if I can't even talk with Anthony about serious commitment or the reasons why I just... can't. He groaned as he rubbed his forehead. It'd been easier to write that article for the Sato Linguistics Institute.

A familiar sound interrupted his thoughts as his cabin's intercom whistled. "Faulwell," came Captain Gold's gruff but pleasant tone, "please report to observation."

Saved once again by the call to adventure.

As Bart removed the pen's reservoir a bit of ink splashed onto the tip of the third finger of his right hand, in precisely the spot where it usually stained. After setting the nib into the sonic cleaner and replacing the paper to its box, Bart grabbed up a towel and rubbed at the ink, knowing it would have to wear away.

He stood and tossed the towel onto the desk as he looked at his finger. Bart had always thought of the stain as a badge of honor, a symbol of his dedication to Anthony, a dedication he carried through in his writing of letters.

But no letter had been written. This stain was little more than a red herring—a false clue. He rubbed at it harder with the palm of his left hand as he turned to the door. "Out, out damned spot," he muttered as he stepped into the corridor.

Perhaps after whatever it was the captain wanted was finished, he could return and finish the letter, and then the stain would mean something. Maybe the words would come to him with what lay ahead. Buoyed by that completely false hope, and with a final glance at his stained finger, he departed the cabin he shared with Fabian Stevens.

Bart couldn't remember looking up even once during his walk to the observation lounge, yet somehow he'd managed not to run anyone over. When the doors opened for him he stopped just inside.

Everyone was seated around the table and the combined looks from all his colleagues nearly bowled him over. Were they all looking at him for some reason other than he'd been the only one to just enter the room? Likely.

"Faulwell, please be seated," Gold said from his seat at the head of the table.

Carol Abramowitz, the ship's cultural specialist, stood just behind Gold beside the viewscreen. Displayed was a planet of greens, blues, and whites. It looked very much like Earth.

Commander Sonya Gomez sat to Gold's left. Seated to Gold's right was the Tellarite, Mor glasch Tev, theda Vinci's second in command. Beside Tev was the single Bynar, Soloman, the ship's computer specialist. Beside Gomez sat Domenica Corsi, chief of security, and the one that would protect the S.C.E. team's rear ends in case of any emergency. Standing just behind her was Makk Vinx, theda Vinci's Iotian security guard.

This looks interesting, Bart thought as he took up the chair opposite the captain's. He made note of P8 Blue and Fabian Stevens's absence. And where was Elizabeth? Not quite a month had passed since she and Dr. Julian Bashir had been rescued from an alternate universe. Elizabeth had been quiet and subdued since her return. The news of her pregnancy had spread throughout the ship, and Bart had been one of the first to congratulate her.

What he hadn't expected was the haunting sadness he saw in her eyes. Not even a forced smile could hide it. Bart recognized it. He sometimes saw it reflected in the mirror.

Something was bothering Dr. Lense, harsh and very personal. And when it came time to talk, Bart was sure he'd be the first one she came to.

They always did.

Captain Gold interlaced his fingers as he rested them on the conference table before him. Bart wondered briefly if the captain's artificial hand actually felt the pressure of the knuckles of the other hand. "Asario is one of the Federation's newest members, its technology on an independent level very close to our own. Unfortunately, as of seventy-two hours ago, Asario experienced a planetwide power blackout."

"Planetwide?" Gomez frowned. "How did we receive any calls for assistance from the Asarions if they have no power?"

"Captain Scott received the message via subspace." Gold glanced at Tev.

The Tellarite nodded to the captain and took over the discussion, his snout thrust high. "Apparently two of the government's ships were staffed and in orbit when the blackout occurred. They immediately sent out distress calls that reached Federation ships. One of the ships, the Mercury, was able to establish a small communication with the government's leader. A female by the name of Corlis."

"Do their scientists know what caused the blackout?" Soloman asked. "Electromagnetic pulse?"

"That was Stevens and Blue's first guess as well," Gold said. "I briefed them as soon as I received the message from Captain Scott. Our primary concern at the moment is to get power restored on a larger scale. Primarily to hospitals."

"I take it they're having trouble turning the power back on?" Gomez said.

Tev nodded. "Nothing with an amp output of more than sixty-five megawatts will work. We suspect a higher output with portable fusion reactors might be more efficient."

"What type of power source do they use?" Gomez asked.

"The Asarions are a sparse race, their population only numbering half a million or so, refugees from a Borg invasion of their homeworld over a century ago. They occupy only a small part of the larger continent. Their main source of power is a single fusion reactor located in the center of the city."

“And something knocked it out,” Gomez said.

“And is keeping it out,” Gold finished. “Apparently whatever caused the initial burst that shut systems down is also preventing them from restarting power.”

Tev nodded. “Small fields are unaffected by this dampening effect.”

Gold’s bushy white eyebrows furrowed as he looked at the team. “At present, they’ve been able to make do in keeping the more critical patients alive and comfortable. The worst of the situation is the heat. Asario is in its summer months on the larger continent and the heat index during the day can reach zeniths near those of Death Valley on Earth. They’ve started gathering the elderly and children into common areas where some generators can still power cooling units. Either way, it’s our job to get these people’s power back up. They’re working on small reactors now, but there aren’t enough of them to power the entire city.”

Bart had kept quiet during the exchanges, listening intently. He was also aware of the stain on his finger and kept tucking the hand under the table. After a few seconds, the linguist finally cleared his throat and asked a question that had started rolling around in his thoughts. “Captain Gold—why was I called in?”

Gold smiled. “Corlis has expressed interest in any help we could give her people in linguistic science—her words exactly. She believes the initial reason for the blackout has something to do with ruins found several kilometers outside the main city.”

“The blackout,” Bart glanced at Carol, who had remained quiet since he sat down, “was caused by ruins?”

Gold nodded. “That’s what the leader said.”

“Fabian, Pattie, and Soloman will work with Tev and me on the power problem,” Gomez said. “Vinx will be our security. Bart, you’ll go with Carol and Domenica to take a look at the excavation.”

Bart nodded, as did everyone else. He was excited about the prospect of looking at an alien culture, of studying their letters and their words, the syntax and their language. But not even that excitement could quell the nagging guilt he felt at not writing to Anthony.

“Now,” Gold said and turned toward the patiently waiting cultural specialist. “I’m going to turn this over to Abramowitz, who is going to brief you all on the cultural and the unique physiological nature of the Asarions. So please, everyone, listen carefully.” Gold shook his head. “You’re all going to need to know this.”

Carol gave her commanding officer an arched eyebrow. “Thank you, Captain.” She looked at everyone. “Asarion culture isn’t much different than our own when looked at in generalizations. They developed their technology much the same way we did. They used fossil fuels and even had their own dark age of a sort. What does set them apart are their severe physical differences.”

Bart narrowed his eyes as the screen changed. He expected to see some sort of bipedal, scale-covered insectoid from the way Carol was building it up. Instead he saw an attractive, almost human-looking woman. Broad shouldered and lean body-type. The only noticeable difference between a human female and this one was the eyes.

As he leaned forward to see the image better, Bart couldn't put his finger on what made the eyes different, only that he knew he would recognize an Asarion among the crew of the *Vinci* by just looking into their eyes.

Bart couldn't see what other physical differences Carol was talking about.

"Asarions have two states of being. They possess an Alpha State, the sex in which they're born into, and a Beta State, the sex into which they shift. These states are not always the same, meaning female isn't always the Alpha or vice versa. Their Alpha is determined by their birth state. Or their home state."

"Whoa." Makk Vinx abruptly spoke up. "Beggin' your pardon there, Doc, but are you saying these people—" He winced. "—they shift sex? A broad could be a fella, just like that? All—" He glanced around the room, his gaze apologetic to the women in the room. "I mean," Vinx made a nodding gesture to the lower part of his torso, "even...?"

Carol nodded. "Yes, very much so." Bart could see the excitement evident in her expression.

He took a step back. "Unbelievable."

"Vinx," Corsi said in a low voice, "be seen, not heard."

"Yes, ma'am."

Carol continued, a slight smile on her lips. "You can only imagine the sort of culture that would grow out of this physical change. Puberty brings about an Asarion's first shift, where the body changes to the opposite sex into what will be their Beta State. Shift states can last from one year to three years, and there is a record of a Beta-Shift lasting up to six years."

"You mean they're male until puberty, then wake up one morning and now he's a she?" Corsi asked. "They're not Hermats? Because I've met a few Hermats. They even have their own set of pronouns."

Bart glanced at the security chief. She looked as puzzled and awed as he felt.

"No, they're not Hermats. They don't possess the genitals of both male and female simultaneously. Their bodies actually become a single-species sex other than the one of their birth state. There's also no change of identity of the individual's likes and dislikes, their personality, or their knowledge. Some Asarions shift in even amounts. Two years Alpha, two years Beta, without fail. Others shift 'off-clock,' or randomly. An Alpha State may last three years and a Beta only one."

"Interesting," Tev said, turning his face from Abramowitz to the screen where the Asarion pictured abruptly mutated into a male version of the female.

Carol smiled. "Once an Asarion female gives birth, she loses the ability to shift. This life choice is considered an honor. Because of this the balance of female Alphas to male Alphas has increased. And that imbalance long ago triggered the Asarions' present governmental structure to relegate their society's skills to gender-particular trades."

"Now that's just crazy," Gomez rubbed at her forehead. "Gender-dictated life paths?"

"In a way. The males are the defenders, the builders, and the craftsmen of the society, while the women are the scientists, the business leaders, and the political officers."

Tev made a rude noise. “There is their greatest flaw—no men in government. Vastly debilitating philosophy.”

Ooh, Bart winced inwardly. I think the commander needs to juice up the dosage on Tev’s sensitivity classes.

To his credit, Tev noticed the looks his comment was earning him, and he said, “I would say the same if there were no women in it. If a government is to be properly representational to the needs of its people, it should include both male and female.”

“Even so,” Carol said while glaring at Tev, “everyone should be aware that you could possibly be working with one person one day, and then they’re abruptly replaced by someone else.”

Gomez lowered her head, but looked up at Carol under her eyebrows. “So, if I were an Asarion female, and suddenly became a man, I could no longer work with woman things. I’d have to do man things now.”

Carol nodded. “Yep. Any questions?”

Corsi nodded. “I have one. Will my being a security officer offend anyone? I am, after all, a female, and a defender.”

Bart nodded, pursed his lips. Good question.

“No, the Asarions aren’t a proselytizing race. There are no records of any of Starfleet’s emissaries being forced to adhere to their societal rules. So we should be okay.”

Bart sat in silence with the team. He could only imagine what was going through their minds. His own thoughts were a jumble of questions, ranging from what would happen if your lover or husband’s sex suddenly became unsuitable to one’s tastes?

He was sure the society had compensated for this small glitch, just as his own had. But still...the thought of Anthony abruptly becoming Antoinette was more than a bit...unnerving.

“Thank you, Abramowitz,” Gold took charge of the briefing once again. “We’ll be arriving in the Asarion system in four hours. I suggest we all make the best of that time. Dismissed.”

Chapter 3

“Bart,” Carol touched Bart’s arm on the way out of the conference room.

The linguist stopped in the hallway just outside as Carol stepped through the door. He really wanted to return to his quarters and prepare himself for their arrival. But, as usual, someone needed to talk. “What’s up, Carol?”

Carol Abramowitz had a slight build, with large eyes and a full mouth. Her close-cropped dark hair shone under the lights as did the twinkle in her eye. “Congratulations—you’re writing again?”

Bart frowned. He'd made the mistake of sharing his recent tardiness in writing to Anthony with Carol over dinner. But how did the woman know he'd actually attempted a letter?

Catching the look of confusion in Bart's expression, Carol reached down and grabbed Bart's hand, the one with the stain. She held it up for both of them to see. "It's nice to see that little mark again."

With a little more force than intended, Bart pulled his hand out of Carol's grip. Guilt pressed down harder against his shoulders. "It's nothing. It's not what you think. I didn't...couldn't..."

Carol leaned toward Bart. "You didn't write Anthony a letter?"

He opened his mouth to respond and then closed it. A loud sigh escaped him as he leaned against the nearest bulkhead. They were alone in the corridor. "I started to. But then I wasn't sure what to say. I wanted to tell him about the Koas and what I saw. And about Caitano and Deverick and about Elizabeth's baby. And then a small voice told me I was only avoiding the larger issue. But something kept staying the words."

"You mean Anthony's mention of marriage." Carol put her hands on her hips and leaned her head to one side. "Bart...why would someone like you, who enjoys a stable, long-term, long-distance even, relationship with a wonderful man, be afraid of commitment?"

Though his own inner voice had asked the same question over and over, Bart hadn't heard it verbalized. It immediately put him on the defensive. "I am not afraid, I'm just..." he paused.

I'm just what? Cautious? How often had he used that excuse on himself, sabotaging relationships before? Cautious because of his own job? Since joining Starfleet over eighteen years ago, his life had been full of adventure as well as danger. He knew he'd over-rationalized the higher road—knowing casual relationships were best as he never knew if one mission would lead to his death.

All that changed when he met Anthony Mark on Starbase 92 over a year ago.

Or so he'd believed.

In space, on a ship, how would anyone know what next step would spell the end? It seemed so easy while I'd been out there, watching the Koas pyramid unfold, watching a miracle take place. Knowing then I'd wanted Anthony in my life always, to share such experiences with me. So what happened? Why can't I even verbalize my own anxiety at the thought of marriage?

"Bart? You're doing it. You're overthinking."

He blinked at her. "I am not. I'm just trying to figure out what's wrong with me."

"Well then, talk to me."

He frowned. "About what?"

"Whatever is bothering you. People always go to you when they're confused or need an ear. Why won't you talk to me? Or to Fabian? Or Pattie? Or hell, even Tev—you seem to get along with him better than anyone."

That much was true. Bart didn't feel the same animosity toward the Tellarite that the rest of the crew did. "Look, you're right. Maybe I need to talk. And maybe I will...one day. I have to figure out what's wrong with me, and I have to figure it out on my own."

"Nothing's wrong with you. You're just a man with cold feet."

"I don't have cold feet."

"Iceberg."

"Eh," Bart turned and pressed his forehead against the nearest bulkhead, a little harder than he intended, making a nice thunking noise. He closed his eyes as he spoke. "I don't have cold feet. I'm only considering Anthony, that's all. My life—our lives here—are in constant danger. Something tragic could happen at any moment."

"To him or you?"

"Both."

"And this is something no other Starfleet officer has faced before?" Carol frowned.

Bart opened his eyes and straightened up. "I'm not an officer."

"No, but Anthony is. And he accepts those risks every day. I don't think you're being fair to him. I think you're being selfish. I think this is all about you and something you haven't faced."

Selfish. Me?

Bart rubbed at his forehead before running thin fingers through his thick, salt-and-pepper hair. "When I think about a permanent commitment, something inside..." He searched for the perfect word and plucked it from his stressed mind. "Twists."

"You're repulsed at the notion of marriage? Bart, you and Anthony are in love. I saw the way you two were at the wedding. That man adores you." She shook her head. "I think you don't know why marriage gives you cold feet."

"No, no, no. Argh...I'm not saying this right." Me. A linguist, and I can't even put into words the reasons why I can't—

"Hey, Bart," came Fabian Stevens's voice from Bart's combadge. "You there?"

Bart touched his badge with a sigh. "I'm here. What's up?"

"We just got another subspace message from Asario. Apparently they've picked up some sort of low-level emission from the excavation site."

"Emission? Like a radiation emission?"

"No." Fabian paused. "More like a repeated message. It's sort of riding piggyback on whatever's dampening the planet's magnetic fields. I'm going to pipe it to the communications station on the bridge. Can you check it out?"

“On my way,” Bart turned in the direction of the bridge and Carol followed. “Do we have anything on the planet’s history?”

“I’m afraid not. Or not much more than what the Asarion people have found since their colonization of it.”

“Upload what you can to the communications station.” Bart preceded Carol onto the bridge and turned immediately to the station.

Captain Gold sat in his chair and gave a half turn to watch Bart seat himself. “You received Stevens’s message?”

“Yes, sir.” Bart grabbed a receiver and slipped it into his left ear as he sat down. He tapped a sequence of pads on the console and found Fabian’s upload. Making sure the receiver was snugly in place, Bart cued the message, adjusted the volume, and played it.

At first he thought something was wrong with his receiver, as the message was little more than a series of static whistles and clicks. He adjusted the resonance and compensated for distance and stream.

Abruptly the whistles and clicks became a voice—but not any voice Bart had heard before, or in any immediately recognizable language. He glanced at the captain, who was watching him patiently. Frowning, the linguist quickly analyzed sounds, looked for repeating patterns, pinpointed consonants and vowels.

“Anything?” Gold prompted.

Bart pursed his lips as he fed what he heard into the computer. The universal translator was busy doing high-speed comparisons. But the linguist didn’t really need the computer’s aid to understand the meaning of the message. Tonal inflection as well as basic language syntax was all Bart Faulwell required. He had deciphered thousands of codes, languages, and symbols.

“Captain,” the linguist said. “It’s a warning.”

“A warning?”

“A warning?” came Fabian’s voice from the speakers. Obviously the tactical specialist had been monitoring bridge communications. “From whom to whom? And what?”

“Dunno,” Bart said. “I can tell it’s a warning, and it’s being repeated in precise intervals. I’d say it’s automated.”

“But no idea on who and what?” Gold said.

“Not yet. But I’ll have it.”

“I know you will. Keep at it.” Gold lifted his chin. “Stevens, you and Blue come up with any more power scenarios?”

“Not on the whys, sir. We’ve scraped together a little over fifty or so portable fusion generators. They’ll help get the city’s basics back online for us to work with. I think we’ll do better once we can actually

take a look at the situation. Get a hands-on reading.”

Bart allowed himself to become immersed in the message. He closed his eyes, allowing his fingers to move over the station’s controls on their own as he listened to each word, broke it down, and reinvented it.

Words. He loved words. He loved sounds, their shape and form in his mind. Communication was a subjective science and one that depended on as well as interwove with a culture’s beliefs. Their spiritual doctrines.

And their military might.

This message had the sound of being military-based. Sparse. Staccato. Powerful.

This was a people who were confident in their control of the situation. Whatever that may have been.

Bart checked the information Carol had given him. The newest site, the one where Corlis believed the blackout originated, was the oldest of the discoveries. He displayed images of symbols, the language written, on several of his monitors, quickly identifying sounds with representations.

Speaking a language and seeing its symbols written were two different experiences, and Bart could only have imagined what linguists who worked on the ancient pyramids at Giza had thought after so many years of seeing the language of the ancient Egyptians when it was actually spoken.

The translator beeped at him, and Bart scanned the computer’s interpretation of the message. He did a double take as he checked the computer’s findings. “What the—”

“Found something?” Gold rotated his command chair to face the linguist.

Bart glanced up at Gold. “I’ve got a tentative translation. And I mean tentative. I’d have to check the computer’s findings against my own knowledge, but...” He paused. “The tone of the message—the way the language is spoken—it doesn’t make any sense when considering what I think the words mean.”

“Oh? What does it say?”

Bart had the whole of the bridge crew’s attention; though many remained focused on their stations, everyone was listening.

He took a deep breath. “Do not to your neighbor what is hateful to yourself.”

No one spoke.

Then Gold sat forward, his expression as incredulous as Bart’s own. “Faulwell—that’s impossible. That’s a famous maxim by Hillel.”

Bart nodded his head slowly. “I know, Captain.”

“And that’s all it says?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What about the rest?” Gold asked.

“Rest?” Carol said. “There’s more?”

“The quote goes on to say, ‘the rest is commentary; go learn it.’”

Bart knew the famous maxim. Knew that finding the exact same passage on a world thousands of light-years from Earth was implausible. But here it was.

“Wong,” Gold said to the helm. “Let’s see if we can get this ship to Asario a little faster.”

The flummoxed linguist looked down at the computer’s translation. Go learn it, indeed. Apparently, we’re on our way to do just that.

Chapter 4

The Asarion system nearly paralleled the Terran system in its size and structure. Eight planets orbited a single sun. Asario was the fifth planet. Rich blues and fluffy whites decorated the shimmering sphere.

From orbit, Pattie scanned the surface and found several more city ruins, evidence of the planet’s former inhabitants. These sites were all aboveground, where Corlis said the present active excavation was being carried out.

The U.S.S. da Vinci passed the terminator into night, less than twenty hours since the Asarion distress call.

No lights glittered from the surface, evidence of the planet’s troubles.

After a brief communication with the orbiting Mercury, Gold gathered the away team and established an unstable link with Corlis. The image wavered and blurred at regular intervals, but Bart was sure he saw red hair and bright, bright green eyes.

Chief Engineer Nancy Conlon and Transporter Chief Poynter assured Gold and Gomez that the transporters weren’t affected by whatever it was that was now keeping the planet on low-level power. With a final reassurance, Poynter beamed down Gomez, Tev, Pattie, Soloman, Corsi, Carol, Fabian, Vinx, and Bart.

The room they found themselves in was circular and shadowed from small octagonal lanterns placed along the floor and on tables against the wall. Couches of muted dark colors lined the walls. It looked like a reception area.

Bart wished he could see the colors and textures of the walls around him, but the light wasn’t bright enough.

Corlis met the group first, flanked by two other females. She was of medium height and slightly built. Her fiery red hair was back in what Bart would call a severe bun. The way it pulled at her face reminded him of Ms. Hutchins in primary school. Bart had always assumed the woman had pulled her hair tight just to smooth away the wrinkles.

It hadn't helped.

Gomez took care of the introductions, referring to herself only as the leader of the away team and not as an engineer in her own right. However, Bart noted only a slight hesitation in Corlis's demeanor at the mention of Bart's position as linguist and Corsi's as security chief. He could almost see the woman readjusting her own paradigm to fit the situation.

Good. Adaptable. But I guess they have to be, seeing as how half of her life was spent as a man.

"It's wonderful to have you here, Dr. Faulwell. We're in desperate need of your expertise." She shifted her attention to Gomez. "We've been able to move shuttles on low power at extremely slow speeds. I've arranged for one of these to take you immediately to the excavation site."

"We'll do our best, ma'am," Gomez said. "Maybe it would be better if we transported them there."

"We've already tried. It's impossible to get a lock on the site perimeter from here." Corlis sighed before continuing. "I'll apologize for the duration of the trip in advance. Our own cryptographer is still at the site. Jewlan Omi. I'd like for you to meet with her and learn her exact movements in the last two days. Find out exactly what it was she did."

Something in Corlis's tone alarmed Bart. "Ma'am—Corlis—we're here to lend a hand with deciphering text and symbols at the site. You want us to investigate her actions? You believe your cryptographer was the one that triggered the blackout?"

The Asarion leader gave Bart a half smirk. "Who else?"

It wasn't a question. Bart wasn't sure how to respond to it either. Apparently there was a sardonic side to the Asarion leader. And obviously Jewlan Omi brought it out of her.

Corlis waved her hand in front of her. "Never mind. Please forgive me. I'm afraid my Alpha State is near and I'm usually cranky the week prior. Just be cautious. Jewlan's accident ratio is higher than most. I've made sure to leave a supervisor there to monitor her work."

She turned to one of the other females and retrieved two palm devices much like Bart's padd. She handed one to Bart and one to Carol. "This contains all the information we have on the site, as well as anything we've noticed or monitored since the blackout."

"You're still sure the reason for the power decrease originates at the site?" Soloman said as he turned to Gomez. "Perhaps we should accompany them to the site. It is always better to solve the problem, not treat the symptom."

But Gomez shook her head. "Right now, getting partial power up and running in key areas is primary. Let's get that done and diagnose what kind of effect this is having on the fusion reactor itself. It might give us clues as to what to look for at the site."

Soloman nodded.

"You are a Bynar, are you not? Is it true your species matches up in gender-opposite pairs?" Corlis's eyes had widened and she reminded Bart of a small child investigating a bug.

“And you are an Asarion. Is it also true that you will soon inhabit a male body?”

Bart smiled. Soloman had been developing quite a dry wit lately.

Corlis narrowed her eyes at Soloman. “I like you.” With a sigh she looked at Pattie. “Now you’re something I’ve never met before.”

“And you’ll never meet a better one,” the Nasat piped up. She leaned forward on her many legs and offered her two front pincers in the Asarion greeting. To Corlis’s credit, the leader didn’t miss a beat and returned the gesture in kind.

“We should really get started,” Bart said, somehow sensing a long, witty banter was about to commence. “Could we get to the site?”

The Asarion leader smiled. “Of course. Please, follow Myaa,” and she nodded to the smaller of the two women.

Myaa had yellow hair and wore a look of curiosity as she stepped forward. “Please, follow me.”

The shuttle was comfortable with soft couches, side desks, and footrests. Carol found an Asarion counterpart to a Starfleet replicator when she commented about wanting water. A purple light appeared in a small alcove to her right and a clear glass of water materialized. Bart wanted something a little stronger and found a button that projected a holographic menu. He checked several of the selections against his sparse knowledge of the Asarion language and ordered what he thought was coffee and sat down to read.

There wasn’t much more in the notes than he’d already seen, save for sidebars on the four discovered chambers. There had also been a fifth chamber, which had puzzled the author, a Doren Hazar, in its differences in comparison to the first four chambers.

After half an hour, Bart finally remembered the coffee sitting on the shelf beside him and tasted it. The flavor was interesting—somewhere between licorice and peppermint. It numbed the back of his tongue but he took several more sips before setting the cup down.

The numbness spread to the back of his neck and down his throat as the coffee settled into his stomach. Abruptly the numbness became a smoldering heat. He felt flushed and set the Asarion device on the seat beside him. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with the index finger and thumb of his right hand.

Uh...oh. I’m not feeling so good anymore. He leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes.

“Bart?”

Keeping his eyes closed, he answered Carol. “Headache. I think maybe I’m...dehydrated.”

He heard her moving over the cushions, and felt her cool hand on his forehead. “Dehydrated? You’re very warm. Can you...Bart...Bart? Can you hear me...?”

* * *

“...advisable to give him that sort of thing? We may resemble each other on the outside, but human and

Asarion physiologies are very different.”

“I agree. I’ve studied some human biology. Which is why I believe the stimulant was worth the risk. He could have been unconscious much longer.”

“I think we should have called for Dr. Lense.”

Bart winced at the bright light behind his eyelids. Why was Carol arguing about stimulants? And who was she arguing with?

And why does my head hurt so bad?

“He’s waking.”

That was a new voice. Bart cautiously opened his right eye—to test the waters. Something moved in front of him, blocking out the light; he could make out shoulders, and a vaguely outlined face.

“C-Carol?” his voice was thick, and his enunciation slurred. Damn... I sound drunk.

“She’s over there,” said the new voice and Bart realized the person leaning over him and pulling his eyelids open wasn’t Carol. The light around the silhouette was still too bright and he batted at this person’s hands, commanding with his feeble whacking for them to cease and desist.

“Bart, can you hear me?”

Okay, now that was Carol.

“Yeah...” Bart said in a low voice. “Just stop yelling.”

“I’m not yelling. Can you sit up?”

I wasn’t aware that I wasn’t.

He felt hands grab at his arms and shoulders and gently pull him into a seated position. As soon as he was perpendicular, he wished he wasn’t. The pounding in his head only increased in volume and intensity and he pressed both palms of his hands into his eyes. “Did anyone... get the name of the shuttle driver that hit me?”

“No shuttle, Bart,” Corsi’s less than sympathetic voice broke in. In fact, she actually sounded amused. Ah, the new and improved Domenica Corsi. “It was something you drank.”

Drank. Bart tried to remember what he’d drunk in the past forty-eight hours. He managed to open both eyes and found four women staring at him. He focused on the smaller of the unfamiliar women, as her face was in the middle. “I drank coffee.”

“No,” Carol shook her head. She was to his right, beside the smaller woman. “You drank,” she held up her hands and wiggled the index finger and middle finger of both hands in quotation marks, “spirit water.”

“Spirit?” Bart tried to look at Carol, but his attention continually moved back to the bright eyes in front of him. This woman was an Asarion. “As in disembodied ghost?”

“No.” Corsi sighed. “As in firewater. As in cocktail, brew, hooch.”

Bart squinted at the tall, statuesque security chief. “You mean as in alcohol?”

“More like the equivalent of pure grain alcohol,” Carol said. “You went down like a house of cards.”

The Asarion woman turned a curious expression to Carol. “What an interesting analogy. May I borrow it?”

Carol smiled. Shaking her head she said, “Jewlan, it’s not mine. I don’t own the phrase. It’s just a common metaphor where I come from.”

Jewlan Omi. Ah. Bart nodded inwardly—doing so outwardly could cause great pain. He offered the young woman his hand. “Bartholomew Faulwell, cryptographer and linguist.” He managed a lopsided grin. “And sometime drunk, obviously.”

Jewlan took his hand in hers, then took his other one and molded them into the same greeting Corlis had used with Vinx. “Greetings and well met, Bartholomew Faulwell.”

“Bart.” Ouch. “Just call me Bart.” He looked at their surroundings. “I take it we’re here.” He winced.

“You’ll be fine until the stimulant wears off,” the other woman said. She wasn’t as young or as attractive as Jewlan. In fact, she had a pinched look over her nose, as if she smelled something bad. All the time. “My name is Riz Shedd. I’m the supervisor of this excavation.”

Jewlan rose and moved away. Bart was a bit taken by her sometimes fluid, then jerky movements, as if her body were very much two different types. She appeared to be his height (that is, if he dared to stand at the moment), and her hair was dark, cut much shorter than Carol’s, and stuck out and up at the crown. Her face was delicate with high cheekbones framing those bright Asarion eyes. Her skin was as smooth and nearly poreless as carved marble, which was something he noticed about Corlis as well. Another Asarion difference.

Riz looked just like her name sounded. Rigid.

Jewlan caught Bart’s expression and smiled. He tried to return the gesture, thinking somehow she knew what he’d been thinking about her coworker.

Ow. Even moving facial muscles hurt a little. Now he remembered all the reasons he’d stuck to synthanol. Carol was also being oddly nice.

Bart waved at Carol. “How long?”

“How long what?”

“Have I been unconscious?”

“You were passed out,” Corsi said, a slight pull at the corner of her mouth.

Oh, great. She’s enjoying this, and once Fabian gets wind of it, there’ll be no end to the drunk jokes.

“You snore.”

Bart pointed at Corsi. "That's enough. According to Fabe, you're not exactly a peaceful sleeper."

Corsi's smirk vanished. Bart knew he'd hit a nerve, and with "Core-Breach," that wasn't exactly a smart thing to do. The security chief was also several centimeters taller than he, and perhaps antagonizing her wasn't such a bold move. And it certainly wasn't something he'd have done normally.

Must be the effects of that coffee. Or whatever the hell it was I drank.

"Is the stimulant working?" Carol said, moving to stand beside Riz.

"Yeah. I'm awake." He looked around. "And we're still in the shuttle."

Jewlan nodded. "We thought it was better you stay here. You're going to be a bit off balance for a day or so."

"You mean I'm going to fall down a lot?"

"Noooo..." She frowned. "You're not going to be yourself. Riz gave you a stimulant to combat the effects of Poplin. It's really more of an aphrodisiac to my people than a beverage consumed to get drunk."

"Aphrodisiac?" Corsi let a snicker escape her. "Bart took an aphrodisiac? Of all the things you could order on that replicator menu, you chose a sexual stimulant?"

"I'm sure Jewlan means they drink it much like we drink wine or beer in order to loosen up, so to speak." Carol glared at Corsi before looking back to Jewlan. "To get in the mood. I wonder..." She looked at Bart. "You think I should take some of that stuff back with me so Vance and I can try it? Maybe lose ourselves in our lack of inhibitions?"

"No." Bart shook his head. "If you remember, the only thing I lost was consciousness." And though Bart really wasn't interested in what went on behind closed doors between Carol and Vance Hawkins, he was sure the two would not want to share the ultimate hangover banging about in his head.

Though taking a bit of the drink home to Fabian for those nights the tactical specialist decided to practice Tellarite might give Bart an easier night's sleep. Slip a little into hisraktajino ?

"Good point." Carol put her hands together.

"To be honest, Dr. Faulwell," Riz said, clasping her hands in front of her, "if you'd ingested the real Poplin, and not the synthesized version, it would have stopped your heart."

Carol blinked. "Well. That's nice." She looked down at Bart. "Are you ready to get started? Jewlan and Riz are ready to give us a tour of what's been found and where the problem is."

Bart nodded and stood.

And sat right back down.

Jewlan leaned in close to him and gently laced a thin but strong arm under his left shoulder. He caught the whiff of what he thought was jasmine as she leaned into him.

“That smell—what perfume is it?”

“No perfume,” Jewlan said as she tugged at him to stand up. “Wow...you’re a tall man.”

“I smell something,” Bart insisted. “Like flowers.”

“Oh, that.” Jewlan gave a light, if not pleasant laugh. “I’ve been writing. That always happens when I write. Okay, here we go.”

Bart wanted to ask more questions about the scent, but his concentration was shaken when he was practically lifted off his feet. The Asarion was indeed a lot stronger than she looked. The two stood together, Jewlan cautioning him to take it slowly. “See? You’re just going to have to depend on me for the day. Remember, just take it slow and you should be fine.”

The linguist nodded, though he kept a firm hold on the Asarion’s shoulder. The smell of jasmine was fading. But the memories the perfume brought back to him of the garden he’d had on Earth, before the Dominion War, lingered.

He hadn’t thought of that house or that garden in years. Why? Why was I remembering my life before before the S.C.E.?

Before Anthony.

“Ready?” Riz was watching Jewlan and Bart. “Now, let’s see if we can straighten out this mess Jewlan’s made.”

Chapter 5

Communication with the other S.C.E. team was sketchy when it worked at all. Whatever was preventing full power restoration appeared to be stronger during the day. Jewlan had a niggling suspicion that by entering the wrong combination she’d inadvertently triggered some sort of protective dampening field.

Jewlan didn’t believe she’d entered anything really wrong; it was right for activating the defense of—something. Only it was wrong because it wasn’t the key to open the door. Doren’s notes were specific; she’d tried several combinations on the other doors in private, and hadn’t triggered anything like this. So—either I lucked onto the “on” combination, or this door opens into something that needed protecting.

Something dangerous, perhaps?

All these things ran amok in her head. Theories, ideas, suppositions—but she kept silent. As a linguist Jewlan wasn’t allowed to speculate as to the mechanism’s purpose. That would be for her Beta State, when and if it arrived.

Just not yet. Not yet. With Riz present, if she shifted, there was a chance her Beta job of mechanic wouldn’t be allowed by the supervisor. And Jewlan was sure both Riz and Corlis wanted any excuse to bring her back.

Riz had already let her know several times how upset the Primary Conclave was at her actions. In fact, Jewlan was sure she'd counted the supervisor's account of the meeting seven times. And, how it had been she—Riz Shedd—who had protected Jewlan's position and prevented her from being recalled immediately.

That much was pure fiction. Jewlan knew the only reason Riz had stood up for anyone was because she liked being out at the site so she could drink more tea.

The thought of tea made her look at the linguist again. He seemed different than the two women. Forget the fact he was a man studying language and symbolism. Jewlan had encountered other species before that were gender-locked. There was something else about him—something deeper. He seemed almost lost, distracted.

But about what?

It still worried her that Bart had completely lost consciousness. He seemed okay now, if not a bit off balance from the stimulant. He'd been very pale, and very still when she'd stepped into the shuttle and found the small brunette female kneeling over him.

The fusion generators brought by the S.C.E. team brought light back into the excavated chambers. There wasn't enough power to run any cooling units, and the heat index during the day would be uncomfortable.

Riz pointed this out during their walk to the site entrance. And as the sun rose, so did the temperature in the first two chambers, making work inside the site uncomfortable, but not impossible.

Carol, Bart, and Corsi used their handheld lights to focus their combined illumination on the path ahead. Jewlan stayed close to Bart, watching him as well as the Starfleet team's reaction to their discovery. Her attention was split between making sure the linguist didn't fall down, and her own enjoyment at their excitement.

The first thing Carol noticed about the chambers, other than their impressive size and artistic nuance, was their ascending levels in technological development. The First Chamber was built to resemble a cave, carved from bare rock, though preliminary tests showed it wasn't the same rock indigenous to the geological area surrounding the front door.

Pictographic images decorated the walls, none of which resembled any other paintings found in other sites. Neither Bart nor Carol could make out any discernible informational value to them. The other furnishings were sparse. Chairs carved from stone. Pots and urns were arranged on either side of the door as if they had, at one time, given offering to some deity.

"That was our first thought," Jewlan said, conferring with Carol. "Only what culture cements the decorations in place?"

"Cements them?" Carol knelt beside them and attempted to pick up one of the colorfully painted bowls. It wouldn't budge. She straightened. "Now that's odd."

The Second Chamber was much smoother, the walls more even and less jagged. Instead of pictures painted directly onto the walls, tapestries of strange creatures hung from modern hooks, each depicting a woodland scene. High-backed chairs flanked this chamber door.

Bart looked at Jewlan. “Is that running water?”

But it was Riz who answered. “Behind the left chair is a small running stream. Very small. The water is artesian. We analyzed it.”

Jewlan smiled at Bart. He winked, and she knew at that moment he was as bored with Riz as she was.

Bart took several careful steps closer and ran his right hand over the armrest of the chair on the right. Jewlan noticed his fingers were long and thin. An artist’s hands. She also noticed a dark smudge on the tip of the middle finger of that hand. Jewlan glanced down at a dark smudge on her left hand and gave a slight smile.

Soft, fine-woven fabric covered each of the seats. Bart looked over at Carol. “Thrones? King and Queen? Renaissance?”

“That was my first thought. It’s like Earth history—but it isn’t. This just keeps getting weirder.”

Bart nodded. “It’s like each chamber is some throwback to a time period. Very much like Earth’s. If the first chamber were prehistoric humanity, and this chamber is more Renaissance or Middle Ages...” He let the sentence trail as Jewlan opened the door to the Third Chamber.

“Then I’d say this one is more along early twentieth century,” Carol said as they stepped through. “Earth’s pre-outer-exploration age. Before Zefram Cochrane created warp drive.”

The walls of the Third Chamber were also smooth, polished wood. There were no seats in front of this door or cemented bowls. The pathway was clear with only a wood podium to one side.

Carol stood in front of it with her tricorder and shook her head. “Pulpit?”

Bart shrugged. “I have no idea. I’m just along for the ride at this point.”

“Oh, it gets even better.” Jewlan went to the door beside the podium and pressed the symbols in sequence.

Light spilled from the opening door. Jewlan muttered a slight curse when Bart stepped unsteadily back, wincing at the light. She reached out and grabbed his left shoulder to steady him. She knew his present condition was an aftereffect of the stimulant. She’d seen the same behavior in Riz when she used the stimulants. It was making him light-sensitive and she could only imagine how it affected his headache.

He reached out and took her arm as well and squinted at her. “Well, I guess whatever’s causing the blackout hadn’t had any effect in here.”

“None,” Jewlan said. She waited for his eyes to adjust to the light before leading them into the Fourth Chamber.

“This is the only chamber that came with its own lighting,” Riz commented as she moved to stand at Bart’s opposite side. He was now flanked by Jewlan and Riz.

Carol made a long, drawn-out whistling sound. The light emanated from the walls themselves. The floor was polished smooth, and there was a subtle hum surrounding them. Every time Jewlan stepped into this

chamber she felt as if she were going to be transported to a distant world at any moment.

There were no other furnishings in the room. No pictures. It was completely sterile. The light was almost deafening.

“Lovely,” Bart muttered and moved to the next door, his boot heels clicking on the floor.

Jewlan stood beside him, watching him in a sideways glance. He was an attractive man. Slight of build, but tall. And he carried himself with a grace and elegance very common to her own people. “Each combination to enter the next chamber is made up of four of these symbols. But they have to be pressed in the right order.”

“How did you figure out the order?”

“Luck, I thought. I figured out the first one—having seen these symbols at a site miles from here. There’s a temple there, or what we assume is a temple. We found scrolls of this language in a room behind the main altar.”

“And you discovered the Rosetta Stone in there as well?”

She frowned at him even though the left side of her mouth pulled up in a half smile. His eyes lit with an inner fire when he spoke, and she wondered offhandedly what he looked like without the beard. “The what?”

“Sorry—an old Earth term. You found the key. The dictionary, so to speak, of how to read the language.”

“Oh—the basis text. Yes. There are five base symbols, each corresponding to fundamental elements.”

“You mean like water, fire, earth, and air?”

Jewlan’s grin broadened. It was so refreshing to talk to someone who understood the basics of communication. “Yes, but not limited to just those universals. They refer to a great number of elements and their combinations.”

“Periodic table,” Carol chimed in.

Jewlan belatedly smiled at the small brunette. She’d almost forgotten the two S.C.E. women were there.

Bart nodded and touched Jewlan’s arm. The cryptographer felt a light chill ripple up her arm. “Jewlan, in the notes I read on these keys, you used a set of rules to open each chamber.”

“Well, not so much as rules as laws to live by. They’re called the Laws of Life, and there are four. The first one is light, which corresponded to fire, then motion, which corresponded to water; the third was stillness, which referred to earth, and this one,” she held her arms out at her sides, palms up, the “Law of Unity.”

“Unity?” Bart looked around at the room behind them. “Well, maybe. If a society based its belief on unity being nonindividuality, I could see it. Wouldn’t want to live in it.”

She nodded in agreement. “Then maybe you can definitely be of assistance in this next chamber.” Jewlan

pressed the symbols in their order of Unity. Air.

The Fifth Chamber—and the bane of Jewlan’s present predicament—spread out before them.

“This room’s twice the size of the first four.” Carol moved past Jewlan and Bart as did the tall, quiet blonde. “It’s also as well lit as the Fourth Chamber.”

The room was filled with things, unlike the sparseness of the previous chambers. Furniture, pots, trunks of both wood and stone, rusted, mechanical items that even Jewlan’s people were at a loss to discover their functions.

“This place looks like a junkroom,” Carol said as she held up her tricorder. “I’ve got one of these in my house back on Earth.”

“Does your junk room have pieces from every era on Earth?” Bart asked. “Because that’s what I’m seeing in here. It’s like someone cleaned out the first four rooms and stuffed it all in here to make way for guests.”

“We were getting ready to catalog and clear this room out when Doren went into Beta State,” Jewlan said, though she kept an eye on Bart, who’d moved several steps away to one of the less cluttered walls. The walls in this chamber were also self-illuminating.

“What makes this door different?” Bart said.

Jewlan moved forward into the ceiling-high stacks of objects to a barely visible pathway. “We’ve been stalled in this room for weeks,” she called back to them.

The light was dimmer through the path. A place had been cleared around the door where Jewlan had set up her worktable to the right. Her papers, both synthetic and pulp, were scattered about, along with scrolls from the temple site and several containers of pens.

She wasn’t surprised when Bart stepped past her to the table. He tentatively touched one of the scrolls. Riz started to move toward him, but Jewlan put a hand out. Trust him, she hoped her gesture said.

The chamber door to the table’s left caught his attention before he lifted any of the scrolls. He moved his hand and took several steps toward it.

Carol moved up beside him, the hum of her analyzing device the only other sound in the chamber. Corsi came to stand beside Jewlan.

“This is the door that won’t open?” the blonde asked.

Jewlan nodded, but kept her attention on the other two. Her gaze tracked the way the female touched Bart’s elbow to get his attention. The way her fingers lingered on his as he took the device from her hands and looked at the information displayed as the female pointed it out.

She hadn’t noticed it before, and scolded herself for being less observant than she should have, but there appeared to be a close bond between the two. Jewlan should have realized this when Bart had been ill—the way the female had worried and tried to contact their people.

Obviously the two were mates.

Jewlan wasn't prepared for the blow to her gut that came with this realization. How was it possible that she could develop such a liking for a gender-bound humanoid such as Bart?

Unless it was that very uniqueness about him that had spurred the attraction.

"Jewlan?" Carol called out to her. "Can you come here?"

Masking any emotion that might be apparent on her face, the Asarion linguist moved toward them, and out of respect for their bond, stood beside Carol, even though Bart held the device.

Her heart skipped a beat as he moved closer to her. His shoulder pressed against hers as he held the device where she could see the screen. He smelled of musk and ink. "Jewlan, we picked up a piggybacked message along a subspace pulse that we believe is the reason for your planet's blackout. When we translated it, this was the message."

Jewlan read the sentence. "That sounds like one of our own lay texts."

Bart's eyebrows arched. "Lay texts?"

"My people have their own love of history—preserving it, mostly—since our flight from the Borg a century ago. So many of our scholars have dedicated their lives to preserving the doctrine and rituals of as many of my people's religious and social beliefs as possible." She shook her head. "Not all of us practice Layism, though I personally think it's a fascinating doctrine, but we know the basics because we used them to build our society here."

"Sort of like having the Ten Commandments," Carol said as she looked at Bart. "Some humans still follow the teachings espoused in that ancient religion, but nearly all of us follow those commandments, with basics set such as 'thou shall not kill,' 'thou shall not steal'..."

Jewlan nodded. "Very much the same principle. Here." She stepped to the table and picked up a small, flat pad.

"What is that?" Bart asked. "What do you call it? I looked at one on the shuttle ride here."

"The manufacturer has some long, drawn-out name for it. We call it a palm-pad. It's basically a minicomputer, complete with its own language database and input speaker. Bart, you already found the base alphabet?"

"A good sixty percent. Haven't indexed vowels as clearly—it's like the language didn't use many."

Jewlan nodded. "That was our assessment as well. Transmit your alphabet and I'll add it to my own."

Almost immediately the palm-pad came to life when it sensed the signal. It began running through the database to find the closest word translation. "I was right. It translated into: 'A cut upon another's arm infects the heart of the one who wields the weapon.'"

Carol grinned. "Bart, I'd say this proves the translator simply looked through the database on the *Theda Vinci* and chose the most appropriate translation, same as Jewlan's just did."

"I'm afraid the captain's going to be disappointed. No long-lost Jewish settlers here. Though I am

curious why it didn't just pick out standard metaphors like 'Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you?'"

That was the moment the floor moved in a really big way.

Chapter 6

The lights went out.

When the dust had settled and the floor no longer moved Bart took a quick inventory of all moving parts. Everything appeared to be working—except his nerves, which seemed to be on permanent edge.

"Everyone okay?" Carol called from the darkness.

"I...I think so," came Jewlan's voice. She was near Bart and he reached out in the direction of her voice. He brushed against something soft. Bart found her hand and clasped it. "Bart, are you all right?"

"I'm okay. Was it something I said?"

"Shhh..." Carol said. "Do you hear that?"

"All I hear is a hum—sort of like on a ship."

"Exactly. That sound wasn't there before the quake."

The lighted walls abruptly flickered back on. Jewlan stood to his left, his left hand in her right.

"What the hell was that?" Corsi asked, her phaser drawn and ready. She looked at Jewlan. "You didn't say anything about this place being unstable."

"Because it wasn't until yesterday," Riz said. She glanced at the table to make sure nothing had fallen. "Those quakes started up about twenty hours after the blackout. That was the third, and the strongest."

"Gold to Abramowitz."

Carol tapped her combadge. "Abramowitz here. We read you very clear, Captain. I couldn't reach you earlier."

"Oh? Was something wrong?"

Carol glanced at Bart. He shook his head and gave her his meanest frown, which of course turned into a wince. His head still rang. "Not anymore. We handled it."

"Conlon was able to punch through whatever's holding full power hostage. Apparently its range doesn't extend into space. It's easier to establish a link from spacetoyou, instead of the other way around. You people all right? We registered a significant quake with your position as the epicenter."

They looked at one another. Carol spoke, "We're okay. Has the other team been able to establish what

it is that's causing the problem?"

"Gomez and Tev are disagreeing. One believes it's something within the planet's core."

"That would be Tev."

"And Gomez thinks it's artificial. Stevens is having a harder time discovering the source, which he believes will shed some light on things. Whatever it is, it's apparently working as a blanket over the entire planet."

Jewlan frowned. "For something to work like your captain is saying, it'd either have to generate an enormous amount of power, or it's working through relay points—" Her eyes widened abruptly and she yanked her hand from Bart's and stepped back.

Riz took a step toward Jewlan, her eyes narrowed.

Bart looked from Riz to Jewlan. Was Ms. Grumpy Jewlan's watchdog? What was wrong?

"Whoever that was just echoed Stevens's assessment. He lost twelve of the fusion reactors after that last quake. Those particular ones were working at a higher field rate than the others." Gold paused. "Apparently whatever's zapping power detected the increased power output and successfully eliminated them. We don't have any more generators to spare and the increase of demand on those in use is going to reach a critical mass."

Carol ran her right hand through her close-cropped hair. "Captain, is there any way we can evacuate the sick and injured to the *Vinci*? In case we can't find the source and shut it off?"

"Lense is heading up that contingency plan. One of the wrenches that got thrown into it is the *Vinci* isn't big enough to hold the number of people L'Olan quoted us, but the *Mercury* might be able to clear room. She's only a small cargo ship."

Corsi spoke up. "L'Olan, sir?"

"Corlis's replacement. She Beta-shifted about an hour ago."

"Which means she's now a he, right?"

"Right. And no longer able to help us." Gold sounded irritated. "She—he—wouldn't even update L'Olan on what's happened so far. So we had to waste a good half hour doing a recap. Oy, this is insane."

Bart noticed Jewlan retreat another step. She held her hands out in front of her, studying them. Is this it? Was she about to shift herself? I hope not—I need her knowledge here with me. And is there a way to get rid of the old life of the party over there?

"Faulwell, have you made any progress down there?"

"Not yet, sir. We're at the final chamber where we believe the problems started. I'll give you an update as soon as we find something."

"Good. Any more Jewish maxims?"

“None, sir. I’m afraid that first one was only a fluke.”

“Well, Rachel will be disappointed. Is there anything else we can do from our end?”

“Captain,” Carol said as she held up her device. “Have Ensign Haznedl do a geothermal scan of this area as well. I want her to dig as deep as the ship’s sensors can go.”

“You have that scary tone in your voice, Abramowitz. Does it have something to do with your cultural findings?”

“No,” she looked around and up at the high ceiling. “But it has everything to do with what I’m hearing right now. Abramowitz out.”

Bart narrowed his eyes at Carol. “Care to let us in on your scary tone?”

“Not yet. I’m going to take Corsi and do a bit more looking about at the artifacts here. I think you and Jewlan should continue with trying to open that door.”

“I’ll go with you,” Riz said.

With a glare in Jewlan’s direction, the older Asarion followed Carol and Corsi from the chamber.

Bart shook his head, a slight smile on his lips, and turned to look at Jewlan. She’d moved into the shadows. “Nice lady. She the talk at parties?”

She shook her head and smiled. “Riz is okay. She’s just doing her job keeping me straight. But I’m afraid I might not have much time left.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you in Alpha State right now?”

Jewlan nodded again. “I’m—I’m a random shifter. Most people know when they’re going to shift, down to the minute. They don’t always prepare, which drives me nuts. I mean, to have that luxury and not use it.” She stopped talking as if she were afraid she’d said too much. “My shifts come suddenly, and I’m overdue for one. I’ve been in Alpha State for over three years.”

“What do you do for a living in Beta State?”

“Mechanic.”

“Mechanic—like an engineer?”

She nodded.

If he understood Carol’s briefing earlier, it meant that Jewlan also had the skill of an engineer.

There was just one problem. “It’s my understanding that once you shift, you’re no longer allowed to use the skills held by the other state?”

Jewlan nodded.

Bart wasn’t going to profess to understand this cultural limit, but he would abide by it. For now. He

hoped her Beta State didn't impose too quickly, though he was curious what she would look like in male form. He liked Jewlan's easygoing attitude. She was fun to talk to—and she listened. Very much like Anthony.

He gave her a smile both to ease her obvious worry and to wipe away any evidence on his face of the surprise he'd just given himself at such thoughts. Why had he compared her to Anthony? "What you said is true—about the power output needed. That either there is an incredible storage of power being used or there are relays all over this world. And our people will find out which it is. For now, let's look at this door, okay?"

Bart turned and gave the door a narrow look as well as the symbols. They followed the same straight-line pattern as the other doors, but there were six of them instead of four. He absently rubbed at his beard. "How far in the translation have you gotten with these?"

Jewlan stepped forward. She pointed to the four left-side symbols without touching them. "I haven't seen these other two before, and they're not on any of the scrolls we brought from the temple site."

"Did you try to press a combination and that's when the blackout occurred?" Bart said.

Jewlan chewed on her lower lip. "You've been talking to Corlis."

"Then it's true," Bart said. "You triggered it. What did you do?"

"I was upset. I was frustrated. I know it was stupid. But I wanted so much to prove to them I could do this—that I didn't have to wait for a new partner to be brought from the city."

Bart reached out with his right hand and gripped her shoulder. There was something disarming about Jewlan that touched him. Something very innocent and yet intelligent. He'd also noticed the smudge on the middle finger of her left hand.

Same as his own. Opposite hands.

Opposite sex.

For now.

He continued to give her shoulder a slight squeeze, locking his gaze with her own in the dim light. Her eyes were the colors of the Mediterranean Sea. A deep, blue green. "Jewlan, I understand frustration. Lately I seem to be drowning in it to the point of impotency. Okay—that was oversharing. You have that effect on me. But just tell me what you did so we don't make the same mistake again. I'm not here to judge you, but I am here to help."

She expected him to be angry. He read that in her expression. Everyone else had been angry with her. Bart made sure he didn't look angry; he probably looked pretty damned awful if he judged that on how he felt—but he wouldn't look angry.

"I pressed the symbols in order of their relevance to the other chambers." She nodded to the door. "And then I pressed the two remaining ones in order."

"And that set off the blackout."

She nodded. “I think that’s when I triggered some sort of defense protocol, which I’m sure is being powered by something behind that door.”

He stared at her. “A what?”

Jewlan chewed on her lower lip. “Defense protocol. You’ve never encountered one? If this building, structure, whatever, was something of value to the indigenous race, then what better way to ensure no attacks than to simply put up a nullifying field? At least with powered weapons—but to throw up a planetwide dampening field?”

He stared at her as he reached out and touched a hand to each shoulder. “Jewlan, that’s it. Of course that’s it! It’s so obvious—I mean, even Starfleet Academy has dampening fields on campus, for the students’ protection. Why haven’t you said something before now?”

“Because Riz was watching me,” she said, putting her hands over Bart’s. “Bart, I’m a random shifter. We’re different. We’re loose cannons, for lack of a better term. I share my Beta State’s knowledge sometimes. Most of my people don’t.”

“You don’t? Our information says you retain your Alpha or Beta State memories.”

“No.” Jewlan smiled. “Not as much anymore. Before the Borg, we were mostly randoms, like me. But we adapt and change, and one started to forget the life of the other. But what I said about the dampening field—Bart, that’s Jolen’s field of expertise, not mine.”

“That doesn’t matter.” He smiled at her. “Not to me.”

Jewlan slid her fingers between his. “I like that. I like that a great deal. I can be... me, and it doesn’t matter if I’m a man or a woman.” She moved closer. The aroma of jasmine filled his senses and his head swam. “I like you, Bartholomew Faulwell—a great deal.”

Okay, that last statement made him uncomfortable, but not too terribly so. It was becoming obvious to him that Jewlan had developed a crush—and he could see where it was an easy thing to do. He found himself attracted to her as well, on a more intellectual level. They shared the same love of words, of language; she obviously wrote in longhand, evidenced by the smudge on her finger. He’d found himself occasionally attracted to the opposite sex during his long life—mostly on superficial levels.

And those attractions had ended up as good friends. Which he hoped Jewlan would be.

So maybe now was the best time to bring her back to reality and possibly quell any more possible romantic thoughts. They needed to get to work. “Jewlan... I’m not really in the habit of sharing my personal life with other people, but I think you should know that I have a partner.”

To his surprise, she nodded, though her expression remained peaceful. Jewlan removed her hands from his and stepped back. “I know.”

“You do? Who told you?”

“No one. It is very obvious the way you and Carol Abramowitz work together. You are very close. And you are very lucky that your professions complement each other.”

He could hear Fabian’s laughter ringing on the wind even now. Bart could also see the jovial laughter

coming from Vance Hawkins as well upon hearing his lover was having an affair with the linguist.

“Jewlan...” he shook his head. “Ah, Carol and I are just good friends. You’re right in that we do work together a lot because of our professions, but she’s only a friend.” A very talkative friend, but a friend nonetheless.

The look of relief that opened up Jewlan’s face made Bart take a step back. “Then you are not taken?”

“No, I mean yes, I am taken. I have a lover. He works on a starbase.”

Jewlan’s expression fell. “You have a lover...someone locked to your soul and heart—but you are not together?”

“No. Anthony’s job takes him to a different place.”

She reached out to touch his arm and her expression as well as her tone were full of concern. “I do apologize. I didn’t know you were married.”

“I’m not married.” His teeth ached as he tried not to clench them.

“Do you not have marriages in your culture?”

“Yes.” Bart stopped himself from snapping at Jewlan. It did no good to be angry with her. She had no idea of what had been plaguing him the past few weeks. “But Anthony and I aren’t.”

“Do you not love one another?”

“Yes...we do. Look, Jewlan...it’s a lot more complicated than just loving one another.”

She frowned. “Do you risk social taboos?”

“No.”

“Are there cultural differences that prevent marriage?”

“No. Look, Jewlan—”

“Ah, perhaps Anthony isn’t ready for marriage.” She smiled at this.

Bart put his hands over his face. Is screaming okay? ’Cause I could use a really good primordial wail right about now.

“Bart?” Her touch was light on his left wrist. “What is wrong? Do you miss him so very much?”

He moved his hands down, aware of the headache he still wore from his brush with the Poplin. Or was it the stimulant? “Jewlan, let’s say I’m not ready for marriage and leave it at that, okay? We’ve got a lot of work to do even though this subject is just rousingly stimulating.” He blanched at his own words. “If you have a state-shift coming, we’re racing a clock.”

He didn’t know what he expected from Jewlan. Maybe another round of questions about his and Anthony’s relationship. What he didn’t expect was for her to step forward and kiss his forehead. That’s

when he noticed she was slightly taller than he was.

No, that's not right. Jewlan had been shorter before. Carol's height. This comparison made him curious if a state-shift happened instantaneously, or slowly.

"Let's get to work on that door." Jewlan turned and walked to the table full of scrolls.

Chapter

7

"How is it possible that Bartholomew came up with a defense theory? Was it something they found in the ruins?" Tev stood just inside the front glass doors of the reactor plant. The sky overhead had muted from brilliant blue to shades of lavender and yellow as the sun set over the horizon. The temperature had cooled considerably since mid-afternoon.

Stevens had wanted to use one of the portable reactors to power at least one of the building's cooling units, but Tev had been against such an action. It would have been a useless expenditure of power.

Gold's voice filtered through the combadge on Tev's uniform. "He said Jewlan had suspected it ever since the blackout. I can't believe we never found it before this."

Tev blanched. It wasn't that he hadn't thought of a planetwide dampening field that irked him. It was that with all his wasted brilliance they hadn't seen the answer from the start. They had been looking at the situation from the standpoint of coincidence. Tev suspected the dampening field keeping things running at a minimum had to be because of a fault in the Asarion's system and not that of an exterior caustic anomaly.

"The dampening field—if that is what it truly is, though I highly doubt the word of a linguist—isn't operating on a normal modulation," Tev said. "Most dampening fields work on a continual, low-emission power output. Single modulation. The ones running on the grounds at Starfleet Academy put out enough power to nullify phaser weapons."

Stevens emerged from the reactor's inner doors at that moment, wiping his brow across his forehead. Vinx stepped out just behind him, yawning. Sweat darkened the collars on both men's uniforms. Stevens whistled at the setting sun. "Beautiful."

"Is that Stevens?" Gold asked.

Stevens tapped his combadge. "Here, Captain. Did Tev tell you this dampening field, or whatever it is, runs in pulses, very much like small EMP bursts?"

"I was getting to that point," the Tellarite said.

The captain said, "But it's not a continual output?"

Stevens shook his head. "No, and the pulses aren't evenly spaced. It's more like the thing waits till something rebuilds power and then it zaps it again."

"So it has a sophisticated sensor array somewhere."

Tev spoke up. “Yes, sir. But I’ve been unable to pinpoint where these sensors are. If I—we—can’t find the source of the field, perhaps we can damage a sensor or rewrite its prime directive to shut down the dampening field instead of empower it.”

“Or maybe we’ll stumble on a booby-trap and blow the whole thing up.” Stevens sighed. “It’s annoying to get the reactor back online only to have it zapped again. What’s even more disturbing is what Soloman just discovered; the pulses are gaining in strength.”

“Gaining strength? The EMPs?”

“Yes. Another fifteen hours or so and these small fusion generators won’t even work.”

“Is there any threat to the da Vinci?”

“Not sure at this point. The range isn’t extending, only the strength of the pulses sent to keep the planet in a lingering blackout. What’s got me stumped is the purpose.” Stevens knelt in the increasing shade of the building. “Why build a defense system that keeps everybody neutral? No one benefits from it.”

“Well,” Vinx said hesitantly as he glanced at Tev, “beggin’ your pardon, boss, but I was thinkin’ this here thing ain’t built as no defense system. Seems to me this kinda situation is made for one reason—invasion.”

Tev shook his head. “Preposterous.”

But Stevens shook his head. “I’m not so sure Makk’s not on to something. The only question remaining is, invasion from outside, or invasion from inside.”

“My guts tell me it’s outside.” Vinx shrugged and gave a palms’-up gesture. “Black out the entire planet, knock out its defenses, ba-dah-boom, ba-da-bing, you can slip in and take over.”

Stevens nodded. “What about the invading force’s weapons? Wouldn’t any weapon with a power signature be shut off?”

“Heaters, yeah. But not your old-timey weapons.”

““Old-timey’?” Tev said with a sniff.

“Y’know, swords, clubs, sticks, stones, daggers.” The Iotian winked. “Works for them Klingon mooks. Hell, a good rifle’d work fine, too.”

Stevens smiled. “Yeah, yeah—I get the point. Not sure about the Klingon analogy, though—seems like a cowardly way to press in.”

“Aw, no. Less muss. No fuss. And,” he held up the index finger of his right hand, “not so many bodies for the coppers to clean up.”

“Interesting theory, Vinx.” Gold spoke over the combadges.

“Sir?” came a familiar voice behind them. They turned to see Gomez and Soloman standing at the inner door to the reactor controls. “We’ve pinpointed the dampener’s point of origin.”

Stevens said, "I'll lay ten-to-one odds it's the excavation site."

The Bynar tilted his head to his thin right shoulder. "Then you would win."

"Why am I not surprised? You copy that, Captain?"

"Yes, I did. I'll contact Corsi, see if they've found anything."

Gomez said, "Sir, I'd like to go help them out, try to find the power source and shut it down. That would solve most of our problems."

"Good idea. Later on, we can worry about the whys and what-fors. Gold out."

Tev nodded to Gomez. "I'll contact L'Olan and request a shuttle." He looked at Stevens and Soloman. "Specialists, I suggest we get back to solving this world's power problems."

Stevens frowned. "What for? We've already proven no matter what we do to get the fusion reactor going that dampening field is going to just zap it back out."

Tev straightened his posture. Because Stevens remained on his knees, his back against the building's wall, he towered over the noncom. Otherwise he would have had to strain his neck to look the officer in the eye. "Our assignment is to help these people get their systems back online. We will not give up on them, even if the odds are difficult. Is that understood?"

Stevens stood and smiled. "Yes, sir." He, Soloman, and Vinx headed to the reactor room.

Gomez smiled at Tev. "Nicely done." She headed off toward the administration building.

Tev gave the setting sun a final glance. The crew was finally starting to adjust to his leadership. He was pleased.

* * *

Bart tossed the pen onto the table and rubbed at his face. Fatigue pressed down on his shoulders—that and hunger. His stomach wouldn't accept much of anything to eat, thanks to the remaining effects of the stimulant. His hands shook and his vision blurred every now and then.

I need a nap. Jewlan and I've been working for six hours straight on this. He looked up at the small corridor made of stacked obstacles and wondered if the sun had set. He'd assumed so because of the drop in temperature. Earlier he'd removed his outer jacket and draped it over Jewlan's chair. Now he thought maybe he was going to need to put it back on to avoid the night chill.

He also wondered where Jewlan had wandered off to. He'd not seen her or Carol or Corsi in nearly three hours. Together they'd deciphered the fifth symbol as a representation of spirit, or life.

As for the sixth, they still stumbled in the dark.

He heard a footstep behind him. Bart started to rise, to turn and look at who had entered. Hands pushed down with gentle firmness on his shoulders, then squeezed with just the right amount of pressure. Massaging away tension he didn't know he had.

Carol sometimes rubbed his shoulders, though she tended to use the motion as a way to think out loud. Bart enjoyed it from time to time, only not when she got excited as she conveyed to him her idea, whatever it might be at the time. That was usually when he cried “uncle” from the floor.

Bart sighed. “Oh, that feels nice... a little lower.”

His masseur pressed harder, lower on his back. The grip was strong and warm.

“How does this feel?”

That wasn’t Carol’s voice. Nor was it Corsi’s. Or Jewlan’s...

Bart moved to his right and turned, twisting out from beneath the nice hands. His hip bumped the table and several scrolls moved to the side.

A tall, dark-haired male Asarion moved quickly, preventing the precious parchments from dropping to the floor.

Bart froze as he watched the man set the scrolls back on the table. The movements—even the slight hesitation when he smiled—they all belonged to Jewlan.

But this wasn’t Jewlan.

The male dipped his head and smiled. “Hi, Bart.” He then offered the linguist his arms, bent at the elbow, his hands palms up. “Please, I know this is going to be a shock for you, so I figure an introduction is right.”

Bart could only stare at the outstretched hands. He looked up into the face. Everything was different, but similar. This could be Jewlan’s brother—not a twin—but a close match. His hair was close-cropped as Jewlan’s had been. High cheekbones sloped down to a strong, firm, squared chin.

And his eyes.

Those were Jewlan’s. Bright, and very blue.

“Bart?”

“Uh...” The linguist stepped forward and hesitantly placed his hands over his. “Sorry. I’m just a bit floored.”

“As you should be. In this form, I’m called Jolen.”

“Nice to meet you, Jolen.”

“I’m afraid we don’t really have as much in common like this,” he said, and then held up his left hand. Bart noticed the smudge was still there. “I can still write, and I do every day.”

“Well, nothing inside has really changed,” Bart said, and realized his left arm and Jolen’s right were still interlocked. He pulled his hand back and rubbed at his beard. “I mean, you’re still Jewlan. Inside. Just not on the outside.”

“Bart!”

He jerked at the sound of his name. Frustration flared for a brief second. It felt as if he’d been interrupted at a first contact moment. “Yeah, back here.”

Carol and Corsi appeared around the corner. Carol nodded to Jolen before speaking. “I see you two have re-met?”

“You already knew this had happened?” He frowned at Carol, and then at Corsi.

“You were busy. We watched.” A slight quiver pulled at the security chief’s full mouth. “Fascinating.”

“Where’s Riz?” Bart looked about the room.

“She’s sleeping off her latest stimulant,” Jolen said. When Bart and Carol looked wide-eyed at him, he put up a hand. “I’ll explain later about Riz’s little Poplin addiction.”

“Which is what has me worried about you,” Carol interrupted, fixing Bart with a concerned stare. “Evidently when the stimulant ends there is a crash point. So—maybe you’d better go lay down in the shuttle.”

Bart waved at her. “I’m fine.”

Carol nodded slowly. “Okay...but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Jolen said.

She raised an eyebrow at the Asarion. “Uh-huh. Anyway, Gold called. Gomez is coming out to help us shut down the dampening field.”

“Then I was right?” Jolen’s eyes lit up. Brighter than usual.

“Apparently so,” Carol said. “The dampening effect is originating here and pulsing out using a very well-hidden array of sensors all over the planet. The only thing I’m afraid of is that the control panel for such a device is probably through that door.” She pointed to the chamber door.

Jolen shook his head. “Actually, I think I know exactly where it is. I found it when I was exploring the day before the blackout.”

“You knew?” Bart said. The other two looked at the tall Asarion with the same expression of incredulity. “And you didn’t say anything?”

“I couldn’t.” Jolen raised his shoulders and gave a palms’-up. “I wasn’t Jolen. Riz was watching me.”

“Oh, this is nuts,” Corsi muttered. “Well, Jolen, can you show us where this panel is located?”

“Yes, I’d love to. I’ve been wanting to open it and check it out for two days.” He turned to Bart. “Are you coming?”

The linguist hesitated. “Well, I...” He really needed a break.

“Please? I’d like for you to come and see too.”

His presence wasn’t really required, but Bart found himself wanting to join Jolen, even if he was a bit annoyed with him. He was sifting through a few confusing feelings of discomfort at Jolen’s presence. He knew inside it was still the cryptographer. Jolen had the same easygoing attitude as Jewlan, and the same smile and dimple. There was even a similar cadence to his speech pattern.

Jolen also gave him the same pixieish smile Jewlan had on several occasions. Only it looked different on Jolen.

On Jolen it looked nice, much like the coy look Anthony gave him when he wanted to do something Bart didn’t want to.

“I need a break.” Bart grabbed the outer jacket of his uniform and slipped it on. “Let’s go.”

Bart caught the furtive glance Carol gave him and hung back for a moment as Corsi followed Jolen out of the Fourth Chamber. “What?”

“You okay? You’re awfully pale—and you’ve got dark circles under your eyes.”

“I’m fine,” Bart snapped, unable to control his abrupt irritableness. His head had started to pound again behind his eyes.

Carol narrowed her eyes. “I’m not sure I’ve seen you this tense in a while—not since the wedding. You thinking of Anthony or is it Jolen?”

Bart glared at her. “What kind of question is that? Why would my thinking of either them make me tense?”

“Bart—I’m not blind. Neither is Corsi. It’s obvious Jewlan has a crush on you, and I think in a fashion you like her. And when she’s in Alpha State, female, you’re safe. You can’t tell me you didn’t feel that inside.” Carol frowned, the smooth skin between her eyebrows pinched. “Those safeties are off now, Bart. Jolen is quite an attractive man. And you’re here, on a planet far away from Anthony, from whom you feel estranged.”

“Anthony and I are not estranged.” Fury churned in the pit of Bart’s stomach. He was shaking. “I’m just not—” He licked his lips. “This isn’t really the time to discuss this, Carol.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you angry at me, Bart? You have to be careful here—just for your own personal conduct. Jewlan and Jolen are the same person, understand?”

“Why are you harping at me about this? I told her about myself and Anthony. She—uhm, he—knows I love Anthony. I’m a bit insulted that you think that little of me, Carol. That I would sacrifice what I have with Anthony for a pretty face?”

“Jolen’s not just a pretty face, Bart. It’s still Jewlan on the inside. It’s just become more complicated now that she’s a he, hasn’t it?”

“Complicated?”

“Jolen would still carry the same feelings as Jewlan. Only Jolen isn’t asking something from you—like marriage.”

Bart marched around her, heading through the passage.

“Bart, please,” Carol called out. “I wouldn’t blame you. And I’m not judging you.”

He stopped where he was but didn’t turn to face her.

“I’m just worried, that’s all. You don’t seem yourself since your blackout with that drink, and in a close situation like this things can get pretty...intense. Just watch what you’re doing.”

Bart opened his mouth to speak but this time the words crowded in on the tip of his tongue, so many that he closed his mouth instead and continued down the path to the chamber door.

What bothered him more was that she was right.

* * *

The panel was located behind a tapestry in the Second Chamber, closest to the door to the Third Chamber, just on the other side of the running water. After pressure-releasing the door, Jolen studied the internal switches for a few seconds before pulling his palm-pad from his back pocket.

“Do you know how to operate it?” Corsi stood just to his left, peering in at the glowing mechanism inside.

Jolen shook his head. “Not at the moment. Just give me five seconds. Most electrical technology works the same, only the engineering of it is sometimes different. Ah...there it is.”

“Are you sure?” Corsi said. “You know, last time you pressed buttons, there was a worldwide blackout. Maybe we should wait for Gomez to get here.”

Jolen leaned out and gave the tall blonde a scathing look. She was right, but he didn’t want to admit that just yet.

And this time, he was certain he knew what he was doing.

Jolen moved back behind the panel’s door and gave up a silent prayer. He hoped he knew what he was doing and pressed a simultaneous pattern of buttons.

Nothing happened. But then—nothing had happened before.

One of the Starfleet combadges beeped. “Gold to Corsi.”

Corsi tapped her badge as Jolen moved from behind the panel. He looked for Bart and saw the linguist standing a few feet away.

“Corsi here, Captain. Any change?”

“I’ll say. The dampening field’s gone. Did Gomez arrive?”

“Not yet. It was Jolen who shut it down.”

Carol smiled at Jolen. “Sir, this is Abramowitz. Did you have Haznedl run those tests?”

“Yes, and she just finished with the results. I’ll have her download them to your tricorder. I think you’ll find her results pretty enlightening. Tev is heading up a detail to help L’Olan get things back in order. I’ll divert Gomez back to the city.”

Bart spoke up. “Captain, we still haven’t opened up the final chamber.”

“Go ahead and get it open. It might shed some light on who built that defense system and why. Just don’t cause another blackout, please. Gold out.”

Jolen moved from behind the panel and stood beside Carol. He watched the data as it rolled across her screen. His first suspicions since triggering the dampening field were right. Things he’d known he was right about but hadn’t been able to discuss.

It was a suspicion he’d had ever since finding the Fourth Chamber.

“This is a ship, isn’t it?” Jolen looked at Carol as she looked up at him.

She nodded. “Yes. And it’s deep into the ground. Though I’m unsure how these chambers fit in.” The cultural specialist shook her head. “According to the readings I had Haznedl take, the area around the ship doesn’t show any geological stress.”

“Any what?” Jolen said.

Bart took a step forward. “She means this ship didn’t crash-land in this spot, damaging the platelets around the area.”

Corsi spoke up. “Were there any signs of geothermal damage? Like molten rock in the case of thrusters as evidence of a landing?”

“Some. But not enough as evidence that a ship this size landed.”

Frowning, Corsi then asked, “Was it built here?”

“That’s always a possibility.” Bart rubbed at his beard. “The Asarions don’t really know much about the previous civilization, save for a few sites such as this one. It would be quite a find if all of them turned out to be downed ships of some kind.”

“Or maybe the previous inhabitants built them for a mass exodus?”

Jolen shook his head, though he kept his attention focused on Bart. Is he avoiding me? He hasn’t looked at me at all. “Why would a race build such a weapon as this?” He gestured to the panel with a nod. “For an evacuation of this world? I’m more inclined to believe this ship was part of an invasion. Only something went wrong.”

“Why do you say that?” Corsi said.

“Well, most of the sites we’ve excavated are little more than rubble, save for a few temples that all

resemble this one. One of our leading archaeologists discovered a set of scrolls forty kilometers from the first temple site whose writing doesn't match anything we've ever found. So we have to ask ourselves; Is that the only evidence we have of the previous inhabitants? And this..." He held his hands up to indicate the chamber. "This is all that is left of the invading force?"

"I think we'll know more once we get the Fifth Chamber open." Bart started to turn and leave. He paused and looked back at Jolen. "Is there anything else you haven't mentioned? Any other panels or secret passages that didn't fall into your gender-specific role?"

"Bart!" Carol called out, lowering her padd. "That was uncalled for."

"No, it wasn't." The linguist took a tense step forward and pointed at Jolen. "You've known all this time, maybe even before we arrived, how to turn off that dampening field, and you didn't. Why? Because your gender-specific role was wrong for the task? Do you realize how many sick and injured could have died because of the lack of power? Do you realize how many of those injured were injured because of the blackout?"

"That's enough, Bart." Corsi moved to stand in front of him. "You're exhausted. I can see it in your eyes. Not to mention you're shaking. We still don't know what that drink did to you. Get some rest—now that the field's off we have time."

"Do we?" Bart ran a hand through his hair.

Jolen saw that Bart was indeed shaking. He was coming down off that damned stimulant. He needed food. When Jewlan had gone through her Beta-shift, she and the females had shared some fruit and water, but Bart had been hard at work on the door's symbols.

Bart waved Corsi away and turned to leave. He stumbled.

He's going to fall. Jolen moved past Carol and even beat Corsi to the linguist as the slight man stumbled forward. Jolen caught him under his shoulders, amazed at how light he was, and lifted him in both arms.

"Get him to the shuttle," Corsi said as she and Carol followed Jolen out of the Second Chamber.

Jolen glanced down at Bart. His skin was pale against his beard and his eyes were closed. He knew the stimulant had finally worn off. And I was so blinded by my brilliant discovery that I hadn't been watching him. If anything bad happens to him, I'll never forgive myself.

Chapter 8

Bart felt bad, but he wasn't sure why. And it wasn't an emotional feel-bad as much as a physical one. His stomach felt tight, as if it had crunched up like a fist.

And he was cold.

"Bart, you're going to have to open your eyes and sit up. Otherwise I'm going to pour this down your throat by force."

What? Who was that? It wasn't Carol, or even Corsi, though it had the brute force of Domenica.

He opened one eye, then the other. The light from a lamp behind someone's head was a bit blinding. "Oh... déjà vu here. I've had this dream before." He stared up into the smiling face of Dr. Elizabeth Lense. Behind her was Carol, and to the side was Corsi. "Uhm... and you were there, and you were there," he smiled at the security chief. "And even you as the cowardly lion."

"Oh, he's fine," Carol said and moved away.

"What was that I heard about pouring something down my throat?" Bart gave Elizabeth a weak smile. "I assure you I'm not so old as to not drink without dribbling."

"Here," she handed him a cup of something warm and he managed to sit up.

They were back inside the shuttle and he was again prone on the same couch he'd passed out on before. Why is it this trip I seem to be spending more time on my back than upright? He sniffed the drink. "Smells like chicken soup."

"It is." Lense picked up her small scanner and ran it along Bart's body before checking her tricorder. "Your system's recovering from some sort of shock."

"Poplin," Bart said and sipped the soup. It tasted good and salty in his mouth and he felt his stomach unclench and rumble.

"Actually it was the stimulant Riz gave you. It wore off." Lense closed her tricorder. "I think you'll be okay, but I'd like to run a full set of tests on you in sickbay. I think you should return to the *Vinci* with me and convalesce there."

He smiled at her, and for a brief second, he believed she understood his need to remain on the planet. "I have a door to open."

"Jolen's already working on the mechanics of it. He hopes to open it without the need to decipher the combination." Carol put her hand over her mouth to stifle a yawn of her own. "You've been asleep for nearly four hours, you know."

Bart gulped down more of the broth, ignoring the burn on his tongue as he moved himself into a sitting position. "Has Jolen been at it long?"

"Not really," Carol said, a slight smile on the edge of her lips. "He stayed in here with you until Elizabeth said you were going to be all right. He was really scared."

Lense's right eyebrow arched. "I noticed that too. You have an admirer, Bart. And a handsome one at that."

Bart bit back a reply and stood. This time he didn't sit down again as he had before, though he came close to it. He grabbed a nearby handrail and steadied himself. "I need to get back to work. With the way that Asarion's luck runs, he'll trigger another blackout by monkeying about with the internal systems. Better if we go through language and symbols."

"Bart." Carol put a hand on his shoulder as Lense moved away. "Don't be angry with Jolen. As Jewlan, she had no choice but to steer away from the knowledge that Jolen afforded her. Her society's norms are

very different than our own.”

“They’re stupid, Carol. I’ve been with you on countless worlds and I’ve seen things that would normally curl my beard, but this...” He shook his head. “This edges on plain stupidity. Aren’t lives more important than societal norms?”

“Not always,” Carol said and her voice was sad. “And you know that. Just don’t be too harsh on him, okay? He was worried sick until Elizabeth pronounced you healthy. I’d say you were more grumpy.”

“I am not grumpy.”

“Bart, you’ve been a grump ever since the wedding. And don’t think I don’t know why, because you told me. And now you’re even grumpier because there’s another man in the situation, a man in that cave who likes you and admires you, same as Anthony.”

“Wait, what have I missed here?” Lense paused while repacking her medical bag. “Bart, are you and Anthony having problems?”

“Yes.” Bart closed his eyes. “No. Look, I don’t know. I’m just not... ahhhh...” He set the cup of broth on a side counter and rubbed at the back of his neck. “Look, it’s just complicated, all right?”

“What, that Jolen was a woman first?” Carol said.

Lense frowned. “Wait—that was a woman?”

Bart leaned forward. He was half fascinated with Carol’s outburst as much as angered by it. “No, and yes. Complicated meaning me, my life, my past. I just can’t...” He straightened and closed his eyes. Two deep breaths. “I can’t risk that kind of commitment—not again.”

“And with Jolen, there is no commitment.” Carol took a step forward. “You like him, Bart. And that’s eating at you. With Anthony you were safe. He’s slotted into his time, his place in your life. Neat and orderly. But Jolen is here. And he’s not neat, and he’s not orderly. And he won’t stay. Jolen is not in the Alpha State. And for the first time someone else has turned your head.”

Lense’s eyes widened and Bart noticed the shadows had vanished, for a moment. “Bart, what about Anthony? Do you care about that young man? The one that was just in here?”

“He cares for Jewlan, which means he cares for Jolen.”

“Stop it.” Bart put up his hands. “I do not care for Jewlan, or Jolen, in any romantic or physical way. I’m going back to work.” He moved to the shuttle’s doorway.

“Do too,” came Carol’s soft reply.

Bart held his tongue as he walked out into the brisk night toward the cave’s entrance. The stars were bright and twinkling—a spattering of diamonds over a black velvet surface.

He passed through each chamber, ignoring the first one, his attention drawn by the second one and then halted by the Third Chamber. Since they’d walked through the chambers the first time, something nagged at him about them. He was no culturalist, but he’d been around Carol enough to know that each ascending period in this ship did not match the one before.

Cultures moved along specific patterns, with similarities in pottery, art, and sometimes design. There was no such progression in each of the chambers. If these chambers were meant to be displays of these people's history, then it was a mishmash of styles and culture.

But what if each chamber worked in a ranking order? What if the former inhabitants of this ship kept their people in specific roles. From primitive, perhaps the laborers, and then on up to artisans, and then leaders?

Bart came around the corner of the Fourth Chamber's slight pathway to the door. Jolen sat at the table, a piece of parchment spread out before him. He was drawing something with a tipped pen.

"Are you sure that's such a good idea?"

The tall Asarion popped up from the chair like a buoy submerged in a sea. His face paled before a smile cracked the surface and warmth flooded his cheeks. "Bart...you're okay?"

"I'm fine. Just a slight bad reaction to that stimulant. But I'll live." He looked up at Jolen, again caught by the intense blue within his bright eyes. They were Jewlan's eyes, of that he had no doubt. "Look, about what I said. I was angry—and I spoke out of turn."

"No, no." Jolen set his tools on the table, carefully avoiding touching the scrolls. "You were right. For you, that is. For me, speaking such suspicions to my own people—though they were the right course and saved lives—well, I was already in enough trouble."

"But did you know about the field and the panel all along?"

"Not in so many words." Jolen took a step closer to Bart. "I didn't put things together until I watched and listened to you and Carol. Then it all made sense and I was free to do what needed to be done."

Bart rubbed at his beard as he moved away from Jolen to the table. "Still...from now on, when you have any thoughts on something, feel free to tell me, okay?"

"Sure. I can do that." He ducked his head and smiled. "I'm glad you're okay, Bart."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine." He nodded to the drawing. "That's very good. What is it?"

"It's a schematic of the panel I found." Jolen nodded toward the door.

Bart turned and saw an exposed area of wires and glowing circuits. "Nice. Made any progress?"

"Not yet." Jolen sat back down. "I'm still working on the mechanism."

"Well." Bart picked up one of the parchments he'd been working on before Jolen's Beta-shift and then spread it out beside Jolen's drawing. "I found the reference for the fifth symbol here, in the fifth scroll from the temple. Now, I can cross-reference the meanings back to my own people's histories when they too believed that the four basic elements needed the fifth element for creation. That fifth element is spirit. Or, taking a lead from your own palm-pad, love."

When he looked up from his sketches he was surprised at the wide-eyed look of horror on Jolen's face. His mouth was pulled tight in a thin line and his hands, resting atop the table, balled into fists.

Bart frowned. “What is it? Are you ill?”

“No, I can’t—” Jolen stood, the chair scraping against the tile floor. “I can’t look at this. It’s not my work, Bart. I can’t help you with the language anymore. I must work on opening the door a different way.”

Something snapped somewhere inside of Bart. He’d been patient through all of this nonsense, and the Prime Directive be damned. He slammed his fist down as hard as he could on the table, rattling the inkwells and sending the scrolls tumbling to the floor.

Jolen immediately lunged to retrieve them but Bart reached out and took his arm, pulling him back. “Oh, no you don’t. This is bullshit. Don’t you dare tell me in one breath that you can’t work with me on language anymore, that you no longer care about symbols and meanings and then you try and protect those scrolls.”

The Asarion paused and then stood, looking at Bart. The two were close in height, with Jolen only a centimeter higher. “I—they should be protected.”

“Why? They’re not a part of your mechanic’s profession. They’re scrolls with words on them, Jolen. Just words. Why would you try and protect them?”

The dark-haired man blinked several times. “I—I have to protect them.”

“Because it’s your job? No, because you love them, Jolen. Because you still have the same love of words and paper and meaning and symbols that Jewlan has. Because it’s a part of you, and no shift in gender is going to change that. It never will.”

Jolen looked down at the scrolls. “Please, let me pick them up.”

Bart realized he still had a firm hold on Jolen’s arm and released it. The tall Asarion immediately bent down and started gathering up scrolls.

Well, that went well, you arrogant nit. With a sigh, Bart moved to the other side of the table and knelt down facing Jolen. He picked up a scroll and heard Jolen sniff. “Jolen, I’m sorry. I’m just—this is frustrating for me. I don’t come from a society that has gender-based rules—well not anymore. It did once. But we got past that. And I still have this headache from the stimulant.”

“You miss him, and yet you are angry with him.”

Jolen’s words cut through the awkward situation and brought his attention up sharply. He stared at Jolen, who had fixed him with a piercing blue stare. “What? Who? What do you mean?”

“Anthony. You are angry with him. Is it because you are not married?”

Oh, man, not this again. How did we go from gender-based stupidity to being married? Bart lowered his shoulders. “Jolen, there are just some things I’m not comfortable with. And talking about marriage, or even the thought of it, is one of them.”

“Why?”

How many times had he asked himself that question? And how many times had he avoided the answer? Was it because he was afraid of commitment? Could be. Or was it because he felt he'd limit his options by being tied down to one person?

"I don't think you're going to resolve your conflicts with Anthony until you resolve them within yourself." Jolen shifted from his knees and sat down beneath the table. "For my people, marriage means a lifelong commitment. This is because when one of us decides to have children, the very act of childbirth ends all shifting for the rest of our lives."

Bart nodded. "Carol had said as much."

"But did you know only female Alpha States can do this? And only a male Alpha State can seed a female Alpha State? The great escape from the Borg drastically cut our population to nearly an eighth of what it was, Bart. Before their invasion of our world, we had only a few conclaves that practiced gender-specific roles. What is the first priority when settling a new world?"

This was easy. "Procreation. To continue the species."

"Yes. We were female-Alpha-State heavy in those early decades, because so many of them gave birth, locking themselves into female-only roles, until the balance between states tipped the other way, and our male Alphas became too few. We decided then to limit ourselves and the gender-specific roles came into play again. We've kept a precarious balance between science and defense in this manner. The only midpoint is medicine. It is shared by both genders."

"I see." Bart shook his head. "No I don't see. Why must roles in life be gender-specific at all?"

"When the Borg came, our men and women fought bravely. And they died. The lucky ones did. Those that were assimilated—we have no idea what their lives became afterward. But it depleted our birth-giving females. Many of our surviving leaders believed this was because we'd allowed them to fight." He looked away, his eyes unfocused as he remembered another time, another world. "We weren't perfect, Bart. Far from it. Men had taken the role of leadership because of their aggressive natures. Especially Alpha States. We had wars, fought on our own soil. And some of those battles were over our way of life." He refocused on Bart. "There had always been those that believed in freedom of choice, and those that believed in roles."

Bart searched the man's face. What he saw was sadness, and some regret. "Those that believed in roles had a greater argument, didn't they? They had the leverage of survival with them."

"Yes."

"Maybe I can see that point. A little."

Jolen leaned his head to his right shoulder. "Do you, Bart? To give birth is a miracle in our society. And to do so, both parties must proclaim a lifetime of love, because both states make the commitment, on both sides. Family is very important to us." He swallowed. "My own mother died before I had my first shift. I was two years overdue, and she was worried about my acceptance in society. They tried to have another child, but she died in childbirth, and my sibling died with her."

Something hung in Bart's throat at Jolen's mention of having a sibling. He was swept back along the chain of his own memories, to a moment in his childhood. There had been a door at the end of the hall. The smells of coppery death filled the house as the doctors worked on the destroyed cells.

And beyond that door there had been screams.

Terrible, pain-riddled screams.

His father had stepped from that door, his face a mask of torment. He had looked down at his frail son, a boy born so sickly they hadn't predicted him to live more than a month at best.

Little Bartholomew had proven them all wrong. He had lived.

But from the look on his father's face, his sister had not.

“Bart?”

The linguist blinked. He was back again beneath the table in the Fourth Chamber of a mystery ship. There were no longer smells of death in the air, but the musty scents of old ghosts. He took in a breath, his body shuddering. “I—I was remembering the day my sister died. My father was an archaeologist. My mother was a cultural specialist like Carol. We were on a Federation world, checking out some ruins. I had been fascinated by the writing I'd found in one of the caves. And I...”

Bart paused. The memories of that afternoon came crashing back. How long had he hidden them away? How long had he shoved them to the back of his life?

He felt a strong hand cover his own. Bart looked at Jolen. Really looked at him. He saw a man. Not a species. But a caring, feeling individual. “What happened?” Jolen's voice was soft. Easy to listen to.

Bart swallowed. “I found the warnings—too late. The cave wasn't a temple as we'd thought. It was a place of punishment, where the wicked were sent to die.”

He could see it all again. Oh God, no...

She'd been standing by the monster's head, the carved, stone image of what Bart had thought was a lion, but later learned was the representation of law.

Of punishment.

And of death.

Their father had been near the side, examining a panel discovered the day before.

Bart had just translated the basic consonants and vowels of the language and was in the ship, applying what he'd learned to the writings on the temple's walls. He'd believed the site was a temple. It was safe for them to go inside.

“Bart, you're shaking.” Jolen reached out and took the linguist by the arm. “Bart?”

He'd heard the screams then, and learned what had happened to her.

“Acid,” Bart stammered, his voice low. “Corrosive to anything and everything. It covered her. Ignited her skin. Burned her alive. There was nothing the doctors could do.”

Jolen touched Bart's cheek with his hand. His hand was warm and Jolen smelled faintly of jasmine. "Bart—you didn't know. Not even your parents knew."

"But I should have. I translated it wrong!"

The Asarion looked stricken. "You did?"

"I'm the one who told them it was a religious temple. I told them it was safe inside—even when I couldn't go in myself."

"Couldn't go? You weren't allowed inside the temple?"

"No. I—I wasn't a very healthy child. My kidneys started failing early on in childhood and I was bedridden most of the time. The Federation's medicine couldn't even regenerate new organs. I'm allergic to the compounds used in Retlax Five. Nothing could stop my organs' deterioration. I was dying."

Bart felt his own hand squeeze harder. And he wondered if he did this because he wanted Jolen to hurt just as he was hurting. How dare he force these memories back to the surface.

How dare he dismiss them.

"Bart, what happened? Why do you push those who care for you away? Is it because she died?"

"No," he looked directly into Jolen's bright eyes. "I live because she died. They transplanted her kidneys, Jolen. And for over forty years I've always suspected I stole her life."

The Asarion gave Bart a furrowed brow. "There's something else you're not telling me."

Bart tried to pull away, but Jolen held his arm and put a warming hand on his shoulder. He didn't want to remember. He didn't want to tell this complete stranger his childhood horrors.

The pain in his heart.

But somehow, it felt right to pour his soul out to Jolen. "I think on a subliminal level, my parents never forgave me—or so I believed. After the operation, I was sent off to Starfleet Academy. My parents disappeared not long afterward—they'd rented another explorer ship and returned to the planet. Supposedly to bury their daughter."

"Bart, I'm sorry."

"I was eighteen when they left. And I dropped out of the Academy. I focused my education solely on cryptography, and languages, on alien symbols and linguistics. I became the best I could be." He smiled. "I even fell in love. I didn't want to...but it happened."

"Why didn't you want to?"

Bart ignored the question, not ready to give his answer just yet. "His name was Kyle Levington. He was a Starfleet officer. Fresh out of the Academy and had a year before his first assignment onboard the U.S.S. Nemits. He wanted to know where my parents had gone. I'd met him, and he wanted to see mine. I arranged for a ship to take us back to the world my parents had returned to."

He started to shake at the memory. No, no... I don't want to remember this. I can't remember this.

But he did.

They'd found his parents' ship, but it had been abandoned so long ago. Bart had never told Kyle about what the temple had done to his sister. About what had happened.

"I stayed in the ship, looking at the what they'd left behind. There was no trace of their bodies, and I'd mentioned the temple. I wasn't paying attention to where Kyle had wandered off to."

Jolen's skin paled. He tried to hold on to Bart, but the linguist moved away. He stood and took two hesitant steps to the door, facing the opened panel. "He'd gone into the temple. I heard him call out for me. And then I heard his screams. But it was too late. I saw him..."

The memories came fast. Faster.

Too fast.

The room tilted on Bart and he reached out for the wall. He touched a warm body instead and felt himself being folded within Jolen's arms. He heard the Asarion's heart beating.

He heard someone crying.

Bart didn't realize the muffled sobs belonged to Jolen.

"You want to deny yourself happiness." Jolen spoke softly, and gave Bart a soft kiss on his brow.

"I—I didn't want to fall in love, because I had her life. It was all borrowed time. Somehow, I felt I should dedicate my life to a greater good. She would never know love, never find happiness in the arms of another—so why should I?"

"And you believed—and still do—that Kyle's death was a punishment."

And there it was. So simple. A classic textbook case of self-denial by guilt. He nodded. His shoulders shook. No one had ever seen him this way.

No one.

Not even Anthony. These were the things he should be telling Anthony. Those important if not painful moments that shaped who and what he was.

Jolen pulled him close. "Shhhh... I am here, Bart. I am here."

Chapter 9

Jolen sat on the floor, comforting Bart. It had been a horrible story—and one the linguist had buried deep.

And though it pained him to see Bart in agony, Jolen felt honored that he would share those memories with him.

With me. He stroked the sleeping man's thick, gray and black hair. He wondered again what Bart would look like without the beard. Younger perhaps. Less worried? It didn't matter. A small seed of sadness germinated within his own soul. They would find the key to opening the door. All would be well. And Bart would leave.

And Jolen would be alone, again.

It did not matter. Not really. And he made a promise to himself, and the dozing linguist, that he would be there for him.

Always.

“Oh.”

Jolen looked up from Bart's face and saw the doctor. She stood just inside the cleared area, her hand to her mouth, her eyes wide. “Greetings, Dr. Lense. Please, come in.”

She gave a tight smile and took a step closer. “I'm sorry—I was checking on Bart.”

“He's resting. I do apologize again for Riz giving him that stimulant. I shouldn't have allowed it.”

Lense's smile became a chuckle as she knelt down beside the two of them. “Well, after my own brief encounter with her, I'm not sure if you'd have been able to stop her. I'm not even sure Corsi could have.” She pulled a small device from her bag, the one Jolen had seen her use earlier, and passed it over Bart. “Endorphins, adrenaline levels all appear to be normal.” She frowned as she tilted her head to her right shoulder. “He looks awfully peaceful. I'm not sure I've seen him that relaxed in a while.”

“He—” Jolen stopped himself. He'd been about to say that Bart had shared a great burden with him, but thought better of it. No, those memories were between the two of them. If Bart wished them shared, then he would have to do it himself. “He still seemed tired. So I offered him a place to rest.”

“Yeah.” Lense's right eyebrow arched high. “I noticed.”

Jolen smiled and felt the heat rise from his chin to his face. He noticed too the way Lense often put her hand over her abdomen, and remembered hers and Bart's conversation. “I hear you are with child?”

The Asarion wasn't sure how to read the expression that crossed the doctor's face. It appeared to be a mixture of hesitation and sadness. “Yes... I'm pregnant.”

“You're not happy about this?” Jolen shook his head.

The doctor absently rubbed her abdomen again. “I—well—I'm not sure yet. And I guess in a way I'm a bit tired of that question, you know?”

“I think I might. Is the father happy?”

This time Elizabeth's face darkened, though not in anger, but in infinite sadness, and he reached out to touch her shoulder. “That—well—that's complicated, Jolen. He's dead, and yet I think if he knew, he

would be very happy.” Lense suddenly got a faraway expression in her eyes.

Again Jolen frowned at her. “Something wrong?”

“Oh, no, no. It’s just that after my recent experiences, I’ve sort of gotten pretty good at seeing a train wreck before it happens.” She lowered her hands. “And this one looks like it might be a doozy.”

“Train? Like in shuttle? Do you suspect there is something wrong with the shuttle outside?”

“No, no...never mind.” She looked around the floor and picked up one of Bart’s worksheets. “What’s this?”

“Bart discovered the fifth symbol as love, or spirit in your culture. But we’re still stumped on the sixth. Four known elements and a theory. I was trying to apply the science of building toward the science of communication to come up with the answer. Nothing.”

She frowned. “Earth, air, fire, and water, the four basics. And you said love, or life or spirit.”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m no linguist, but it seems to me the outcome of all of those things would be death.”

Silence hung thick in the air between them as the two stared at each other.

“That’s it!” Jolen moved so quickly Bart nearly fell from his lap.

Lense moved at the last minute to stop the linguist’s head from hitting the hard floor. Jolen blushed and shook Bart’s shoulder. “Bart? Wake up—we have it. We have it!”

“Hmm...?” The bearded linguist stirred and then opened his eyes. He looked up into the face of Elizabeth and was obviously embarrassed. “What happened? Did I have another episode?”

“No, no.” Jolen pulled at his shoulder until Bart was in a sitting position. “Your doctor here solved it.” He set the paper in Bart’s lap. “Six symbols. Earth. Air. Fire. Water. Spirit or love. What comes from the elements of life?”

“Life?” Bart rubbed at his eyes. “I’m not sure I’m following.”

Jolen hesitated. “Think of the story you told me, about you.” He glared at Bart, not wanting to divulge anything he wasn’t supposed to. Bart’s eyes widened slightly and he nodded. “What came out of death?”

The linguist blinked. “Life. My life.” Bart’s expression lit up. “That’s it!” He turned to Lense. “You’re a genius.”

“No, not really. I’m just—mmgrphh!” was the doctor’s response as Bart reached out and kissed her.

He pulled away and smiled. “Sorry—I’m just excited.”

“Oh, yay.” Lense wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “And sweaty. First Anthony at the wedding, then you. I think I’m gonna stay away from both of you from now on.” She rose and moved toward the exit. “I’ll tell the others we’re going to give this a try, all right?”

Bart set the paper to the side beneath the table. “What can I do to help you?”

“This.” Jolen knew it was wrong, and he knew he had no right to intrude on Bart. But he couldn’t help his own feelings. He reached out and with a hand behind the linguist’s head, pulled him close, and pressed his lips to Bart’s.

The beard prickled against his upper lip, and he knew the linguist remained unmoving because he had not expected Jolen’s action. For an instant, Jolen felt Bart return the kiss.

Until he felt the man’s hands pressing on his arms, pushing him away.

With a sigh, Jolen released Bart and dipped his head, embarrassed. “I’m sorry, Bart. I just—I don’t think I’ve seen you that happy since you arrived. And it’s...” He shrugged. “I’m sorry. And I promise I won’t tell anyone else the things you told me.”

He watched carefully as Bart put a hand to his lips and nodded, if not a bit slowly. “Sh-ure. I just...” Bart swallowed and stood. He turned and straightened his outer jacket. “Please don’t do that again.”

Jolen had expected this reaction and accepted it. It was enough that Bart had felt close enough to share his tragic past with him. And if that was all he would ever receive from the linguist, then it would be enough.

After standing, the Asarion shook his head. “I’m afraid I can’t promise that.”

Working together, the two of them were able to draw up a readable schematic for the workings of the door mechanics. Once Jolen was confident he could open the door by simply triggering the mechanism itself, just in case the symbols didn’t work, Bart called Corsi, Carol, and Lense and explained what they were going to do.

“Is there any protocol in place for safety?” Corsi said.

Jolen gave the female a broad grin. “I’ve mapped out the mechanism and I’m confident I can open it, in case something goes wrong.”

“Eh.” Carol put up her finger. “Don’t say that.”

Jolen stepped up to the door, his finger hovering over the keypad. “Everyone ready?”

“Wait.” Corsi pulled out her phaser and set it for stun. “Ready.”

“I don’t think we’ll need that.”

“Bully for you.” She moved in front of Carol and Lense. “Ready.”

Jolen looked at Bart, who nodded, and then winked.

That small gesture seemed to smooth things over. A little bit. Maybe Bart would forgive his indiscretion. After taking a deep breath, Jolen pressed the combination. Earth, Air, Fire, Water, Spirit, Death.

At first nothing happened.

Then...

A loudchunk noise interrupted the silence. The party looked up and around them.

“That didn’t sound healthy,” Lense said. “Was it?”

Bart held up his right hand. “Wait...”

Anotherchunk noise and the door began to move into the door to the right. Stale, warm air rushed out of the opening and the others coughed. Jolen moved back fastest and held on to Lense’s outstretched hand.

When the grinding noises ceased, no one moved. The darkness inside resembled a matte, black curtain. No light filtered in or out.

Carol looked at Bart. “Anything happen?”

Bart tapped his combadge. “Faulwell toda Vinci .”

No response.

He tapped it again and repeated the call.

Still no response.

Something crashed several times in succession outside of the room. Corsi’s eyes widened. “Those were the chamber doors.” She turned and took off at a dead run.

Jolen looked at Bart. “This isn’t sounding very good. You think we made a mistake?”

Bart tried hailing Gomez, Tev, Stevens, and Pattie. There was no response. Corsi came barreling back around the corner of the path’s entrance. “The Fourth Chamber door is shut tight. The code doesn’t open it.”

“And I think we can assume those other crashes were the secondary chamber doors closing as well.” Jolen gave a long, frustrated sigh.

“We’re trapped,” Corsi said.

“I only hope the dampening field isn’t back up,” Bart said and looked directly at Jolen, though the look wasn’t an accusatory one. “Because right now, we can’t get back to the Second Chamber panel to shut it off.”

Chapter 10

Captain Gold was on his way to the bridge when something hit the starboard side of the Vinci . He made it to the bridge doorway before the ship was rocked again.

“Report!” he barked as he nearly fell through the door.

“We’re experiencing a bombardment of some kind,” Anthony Shabalala said from his position at tactical. “We’ve got systems shutting down all over the ship!”

“Captain!” Lieutenant Nancy Conlon’s voice filtered over the bridge’s speaker. “We’ve got to move the da Vincinow!”

“What’s going on?”

“We’re being hit by regular magnetic pulses, sir. They’re increasing in strength regularly—as if whoever is tossing them our way is reading damage and then increasing exponentially.”

Gold’s artificial hand gripped the back of the chair and nearly crushed the hard plastic beneath the upholstered back. He pulled himself into it and turned to face the front viewscreen. “Wong, you heard Conlon. Move us out of the range of that thing.”

“Aye, sir.”

The captain then turned to operations. “Haznedl—any word from the surface before this happened?”

The operations officer shook her head. “None sir. We’ve lost all contact with the surface.”

“Gevalt,” Gold muttered and looked back to the front viewscreen. As the ship moved farther away from the planet, the less it tossed and swayed in space.

Once the bombardment stopped, the captain contacted Conlon in engineering. “Damage?”

“Some major systems are down—warp core isn’t, though. Coolant safeties are nominal. Don’t order us into warp too soon.”

“Any chance of a transport?”

“Negative. Sir, we get anywhere close to that planet again as long as those EMPs are shooting out and we’ll be dead in the water.”

Gold disconnected and looked back to Haznedl. “Get me one of the away teams. I don’t care which one. And I don’t care how. Just find a link to our people.”

“Sir?” Wong said. “I’m picking up some sort of...countdown.”

“Countdown?” Gold stood and moved to stand behind Wong. “How are you receiving a countdown?”

“It’s on the same frequency modulation the maxim message was on, transmitted on subspace.” He looked up and over his shoulder at the captain. “It’s definitely a countdown.”

Gold stood and looked at the viewer at the aft view of the planet. “But a countdown to what?”

* * *

“I donot believe this,” Stevens said as Gomez, Tev, Vinx, and Soloman moved into the darkness of the

control room of the fusion generator. Gomez focused her light on Stevens. The temperature had remained at a pleasant level, though to Gomez, Stevens appeared to be more than a little hot under the collar. “We just got the damned thing powered up.”

“Well, we’ve also lost all contact with the *Vinci*,” Gomez said as Tev came to stand beside her. “All the power’s gone. The city’s under full blackout, again.”

“What did they do out there this time?” Stevens rubbed his eyes with the base of his palms. “I have never felt so useless.”

“None of us have,” Gomez said. “This blackout is more powerful than the first one. Nothing is working except low-power-emitting flashlights such as these.” She held up the light in her hand. “For right now, we’ll have to wait it out and see. Maybe Jolen can shut the dampeners off again.”

“Maybe,” Stevens said and looked up at the darkened cavern where the fusion reactor sat. Silent. “Maybe.”

* * *

Ten minutes after the chamber doors shut, the lights came on in the Sixth Chamber.

Bart reached out and touched Jolen’s arm for support. Nothing in his long life had prepared him for the majesty of what the light revealed to them. Not even the pyramids of Regolas IV could rival the extent of the inner cavern.

Carol spoke, her voice echoing throughout the cavern. “Well, this was definitely an attack vessel.”

“You think?” Bart couldn’t control the sarcasm in his voice. Rows and rows of machines of mass destruction were laid out before them. All of it was coated in a thick layer of dust. The crew of the *Vinci*, plus the *Asarion*, were dwarfed by the sheer size of some of the tallest of them. “What—what are half of these?”

Corsi stepped forward, her phaser still drawn. “I’d say the majority are tanks—on leg-stalks. There are gunnery vehicles as well. Shuttles. Over there.” She pointed with her free hand to a row of dust-coated spheres. “I’d say those are water vehicles.”

“It would take centuries just to pick through this,” Jolen said as he took several steps forward.

Bart reached out for him. “Careful—we don’t know if there are any more booby traps in here.”

“You think we just triggered one?” Lense asked. She sounded small in the chamber.

Bart heard something other than their breathing and held up his hand. “Listen.” The sound came from somewhere to their immediate right. He turned to see a door a meter away and moved quickly to it.

Jolen was right on his heels, as was Corsi. A quick study of the door and the inset symbols and Bart recognized the same code that opened the Second Chamber, where the shutoff for the dampening field had been. He relayed this to the others.

With a glance at Jolen, Bart depressed the keys. The doors opened with an old, grinding noise, as if the mechanism hadn’t been used in centuries.

And from the looks of things, it hadn't.

Yet there was still power—and loads of it.

The room's interior lit when Bart stepped through the door. It was a sparse room, not covered in dust as was the larger cavern. He guessed it to be a control room. Waist-high to ceiling screens lit up with snow, one at a time around the room until they were all active. A central console the shape of a boomerang sat in the center. Its controls lit up as Bart neared.

Jolen came to stand beside him. "Do you recognize the symbols?"

Bart nodded. "So do you—so don't even pretend with me that you don't." He examined the console and noticed a line of moving symbols. Frowning, he pointed to it. "I'm no computer expert, Jolen, but does that look like a countdown to you?"

The Asarion moved closer to the console. He rubbed his hands together and started pressing keys. After a few seconds he looked up at one of the center viewscreens.

Bart looked up as well as Carol, Corsi, and Lense entered the room as the moving symbols showed on the screen.

"Is that a countdown?" Corsi asked.

"I'm afraid so." Jolen continued to depress keys.

Bart watched him, amazed at his skill. Jewlan's skill. A skill they could have used when all this began.

"Oh, no," Jolen said softly. "This ship—and it's definitely a ship—this ship's counting down to what I can only compare to a warp core breach."

"A what?" Corsi took several steps toward them. "This ship's warp core is still active?"

"Well, the power to send out that dampening field came from somewhere. It's my guess that we triggered a self-destruct." Bart looked at the console. "So if it's a self-destruct, then there has to be a way to shut it off."

"Where?" Jolen glanced around the panel. "I don't see one."

"How long?" Corsi asked.

"How long?" Bart looked at the counting symbols. "Oh, ten minutes, give or take a second or two."

"The dampening field is also up and running again," Jolen said. He pressed a few keys. "Apparently this command area isn't affected by the field, which I might add, now has a range that could reach your ship."

"Captain would've gotten the *Vinci* out of range in that case," Corsi said. "What exactly is going to happen once that counter hits zero?"

Jolen looked up at the security chief through a furrowed brow. "Boom?"

“Great.” Bart continued studying the console. “Jolen, I can read this stuff but I can’t make heads or tails of the mechanics of it. There has to be a command switch—some sort of failsafe.”

“Bart, I can’t start to—”

“Come off it!” the linguist exploded. “Just help me here. Your social morals be damned. You can read this language as well as read the science. You worked with me to open that damned door in the first place. Now make a choice and stick with it. Be both Jewlan and Jolen. Dammit man, be who you are!”

“Bart,” Carol said in a warning tone. “You can’t force him to do things that are against his culture.”

“Don’t tell me you of all people are spouting Prime Directive rhetoric at me when we’re about to explode.” Bart rubbed at his chin. “Don’t you want to see Vance again? And what about Elizabeth and her baby?”

She looked injured at that moment and Bart made a mental note to buy her something nice when this was all over with. Maybe whatever it was she’d wanted to get Vance for his birthday.

“Wait,” Jolen said. “I’ll do it. I will—only I’m not really sure what the code is.”

“Code?” Bart looked back to the engineer.

He punched a few buttons and the flying numbers were replaced by a set of six dashes. Jolen pointed at them. “As far as I can tell that is the stop code. The abort sequence. But I have no idea what it would be.”

“You can’t shut down the reaction without it?”

“Nope. I’m locked out unless this single barrier is knocked out of the way. And I don’t care how good a linguist or cryptographer I am, male or female, I don’t know what it would be.”

“I might,” Bart ran his fingers through his hair. “Let’s try the six symbols. The ones that opened that door.”

“Hell, why not? How much worse can it get?”

Bart held up a finger. “Never—ever—say that. Now, I think we triggered something when you opened it manually. Just from the little we’ve learned of this ship and the chambers outside. We have four of them, each representing what looks like a period of time. It’s evolution, Jolen. This culture was a conquering people, but they did so with the reason of technological dangers.” Bart wasn’t sure where this sudden insight came from. Maybe it was the effect of the Poplin. Maybe he was just so damned tired. But the pieces seemed to be falling into place.

“Carol, think of it. Classes. This ship was built on the classes of their society. They start out primitive and then become stagnant, unified as having no characteristics. But then there’s the chamber filled with so many things. So many accomplishments as pieces of all times. We start in the beginning as earth, which is the first. The second is air, then fire and then water. The fifth is spirit, or love. Which is where they wanted the conquered races to stop in their growth.”

Carol took up the analysis. “But like most species, they go beyond. They fall backward.”

“Into death,” Jolen said finally. “And by using death, they start over again as earth.”

“Precisely.” Bart pointed to the console. “I’m thinking this isn’t a ship that came to conquer, I’m thinking this is a ship this world built to conquer. Conquer other worlds. Only their own technological advances destroyed them. Notice how we’ve only seen these ruins. These cultural clues?”

Carol nodded. “They zapped themselves.”

“Yes, and it was here they met death. They never went to war, which is why this ship is still full of the weapons. It was buried for all time.”

“Until we found it, and activated it.” Jolen smiled. “It makes so much more sense now.”

“Look, this is great and all, but we have five minutes left,” Corsi said. “Would one of you just stop it?”

“Oh. Right.” Bart looked at Jolen. “You want to enter the code? Go backward. Start with death. It is technically still an engineering problem.”

Jolen nodded. “Just remember the last time I did this—what happened?”

“Stop. Don’t think of that.” Bart reached out and touched Jolen’s shoulder. “Just do it.”

After taking a deep breath and holding it, Jolen entered the symbols in order.

Death, love, water, fire, air, and then earth.

This time there was a loud cranking noise and the ground shook beneath them.

“Oh, this isn’t good. Did it not work?” Carol yelled over the heaving metal.

“Just the opposite. I think it worked fine,” Bart said and reached out to support himself against the console. “But I think the ship isn’t going to survive.”

“Damn.” Corsi yelled, “All of you! Back to the chamber! Let’s hope those doors are open now.”

Just as Jolen turned to move a heavy vent fell from above and struck his upper torso. He slumped forward against the console and then fell to the ground.

“Jolen!” Bart called out. When the man didn’t move, he knelt beside him and checked for a pulse. There was one. He was only unconscious. With a grunt he bent down and moved Jolen around.

Corsi appeared next to him and heaved Jolen over her shoulder in a firefighter’s carry. Once he was secured, the two moved together through the control room’s door.

Great tanks shook in their moorings and began to collapse onto themselves as the ship shook in its death throes. They ran out of the Sixth Chamber, through the Fifth and to the door of the Fourth. All the doors were open.

Bart ran as fast as he could. He was still weak, and was grateful that Corsi came back to carry Jolen’s weight—he could never have handled it. He was barely able to carry his own weight. As they made their way into the First Chamber, he stumbled. Something painful jabbed at his left ankle and he yelled out as

he fell.

Hands grabbed at Bart's shoulders and pulled him out of the way. As he was dragged out of the First Chamber and into the cool, dark Asarion night, he cried, "Jolen!" before the ancient ship collapsed.

Chapter 11

Bart took in a long, deep breath before setting his mostly healed ankle and foot onto the floor of his room in the Asarion hospital. It hurt, but not too terribly. He didn't plan on staying on it too much. His plans were to speak at the Conclave with Captain Gold on Jolen's behalf and then spend a nice quiet rest in his quarters aboard the *Vinci*.

After walking around the room—reassured he wasn't somehow permanently impaired—Bart returned to the edge of the bed and sat back down.

A knock at the door brought his gaze up from his foot.

Jolen stood just outside, his forehead marred by an ugly set of bruises and several sutures. He was dressed less formal in a pair of soft, beige-colored slacks and a white, button-down shirt with a high collar, the top of which just brushed the edges of his dark hair.

He was beautiful.

"Are you okay?" Jolen's voice was light.

"Yes. I'm fine. Please, come on in." Bart pushed himself back onto his bed and smiled at Jolen as he stepped in. The engineer held a thin box in his hand. "I'm going to call this my accident-prone assignment. Seems I spent a lot of time on my back—and not in the fun way."

Hmm. Oversharing.

But Jolen only smiled. "I'm sorry so much happened to you. Especially the Poplin."

"No, that was the stimulant that disagreed with me, and I'm not sure I'm sorry anything happened to me at all. It's been a growing experience for me." He chuckled. "Even at my age."

"I'm glad."

Bart nodded to the box. "What's that?"

Jolen held it out to Bart. "A thank-you. From me to you. For all you've done. And for being a friend to me."

Bart held the box in his hands. "I'm not sure what to say."

"Say nothing. Just open it. Please." Jolen sat on the bed beside Bart. Their shoulders touched.

He pulled at the twine ribbon and opened the box carefully. Inside was a ream of perhaps two-hundred

and fifty sheets of soft, clothlike paper. Bart pressed his hands against it and felt of the texture. So much like silk.

“It’s Poplin paper, made from the same tree the drink is made from.” He smiled. “It won’t have the same effect, so don’t worry. But before my world was destroyed, the Poplin was the tree of friendship. And the tree of attraction. As the drink was used to relax inhibitions, the paper was used to write letters of endearment to the one you care most for.” He shrugged. “I figured you might want to write Anthony letters on this paper.”

Bart wasn’t sure what to say. He turned his head and looked deep into Jolen’s beautiful, bright eyes. This close, he could see what made them appear so bright. It was the dark pupils that almost retained their full round shape even in the light.

“Thank you.”

Jolen smiled. “Have you ever considered shaving your beard?”

“No.”

Jolen nodded and continued to stare.

Bart knew what Jolen intended to do.

And this time he allowed himself to enjoy the kiss.

* * *

The ship was under way from Asario and on to the nearest starbase for a diagnostic. The coolant system still wasn’t working up to “before-blast-from-planet standards” in engineering and Gomez and Conlon both insisted on the side trip.

Bart was given a few days leave for convalescence and he intended on maximizing it to its fullest.

He stared at the round puddle of white cream in his left hand. It had the consistency of whipped cream. He brought it up to his nose and inhaled the pungent, minty aroma. With a look at his reflection in the mirror, Bart carefully smeared the cream over the lower half of his face.

Rinsing his hands, the linguist took up the razor he’d carefully replicated. He placed it firmly but gently against the top of his beard over the right cheek, and with a firm even stroke, pulled it down and under his chin. The crackle of his beard hairs falling like tiny soldiers in battle resounded in his ear. At first, he hesitated, but then plowed on, so to speak.

Once he was finished, Bart rinsed his face in cold water and studied his reflection. He’d never worried about looking older. Not even now was that the catalyst for shaving. He’d intended to take a picture of himself without the beard and send it to Jolen before growing it back again. But as he turned his face to the left, and then the right, Bart considered leaving it bare and smooth for a while.

He could just see the gaping face of Fabian later in the day when his roommate got off shift.

After toweling his face, Bart lightly limped over to his desk and retrieved his finest nibbed pen from the sonic cleaner. As he set the pen in its stand, Bart looked at the stack of eight pages he’d written Anthony

that morning. He'd told him everything, from his sister's death, to his life, and then of Kyle's death. He told Anthony exactly why he feared marriage, that in the back of his mind he felt he didn't deserve to be happy, and that he knew it was stupid. Ridiculous. Still, it was how he felt.

They sat in their stack, these pages, unread into the recorder. Flat. Untouched.

Would he send them?

Bart picked them up and limped to the recycler. With a sigh, he held them just over the top. These pages hold the words to me. And somehow, if I destroy them, will I be destroying a part of myself? Maybe. With a sigh, he deactivated the recycler and neatly folded the pages in half and then in half again. He slid them into an envelope and sealed it, and then tucked the package away.

Maybe one day he'd send them to Anthony. No preamble. No subspace recording.

One day. But not today.

He then pulled a single sheet of the new Poplin paper from the wooden box and wrote the first words, My dearest...

The scent of jasmine filled the small cabin and he paused, his thoughts returning to Jewlan. To Jolen. And the kiss.

"My dearest Jolen, just a brief note..."

About the Author

PHAEDRA M. WELDON is a writer whose meager beginning started with a chance meeting with Dean Wesley Smith in 1997, where she first learned about the upcoming Star Trek anthology, Strange New Worlds. After writing no less than six stories and finally only submitting two of them, her story "The Lights in the Sky" got the third-place prize in the initial volume. Her other short fiction includes "Who Cries for Prometheus?" in Strange New Worlds V, "By the Rules" in Gateways, "The Light of Ra" in Hags, Witches, and Other Bad Girls, and three Classic BattleTech universe stories, "En Passant," "Personal Best," and "Be Not Afraid of Greatness," all published on the BattleCorps Web site. She also created and is writing the cannon-character-based BattleCorps serial, The Moral Law. Currently, she is working on a two-book fantasy-noir-mystery for Penguin/Ace. Phaedra lives with her geneticist husband and precocious daughter in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia. She can be found online most mornings at 4A.M. writing her daily pages on original work, and at night pounding the keyboards for other universes. If there is one thing she's learned, it's that there are three constants in the universe: Death, Taxes, and Star Trek.

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by Robert T. Jeschonek

During the Dominion War, the Miradorn—ninety percent of whom are telepathically linked twins—allied themselves with the Dominion. Now, in the wake of the Federation’s victory in that war, the Miradorn are eager to improve their relationship with the Federation, especially in light of the numerous dangerous devices the Dominion left behind.

One of those devices has killed a Miradorn scientist named Or-Lin. Now, the S.C.E. team on the U.S.S. da Vinci must deactivate the devices before they become responsible for wiping out the entire Miradorn species—but the only one who can help them is Or-Lin’s twin, Em-Lin, who is still devastated by the death of her sister...

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