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THE CLEANUP

Robert T. Jeschonek



POCKET BOOKS
New York London Toronto Sydney

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An Original Publication of POCKET BOOKS



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1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY
10020

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ISBN: 1-4165-2044-9

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For Wendy, Mom, and Dad,

for all their love and support.

Chapter

1

Just before the Jem'Hadar booby trap killed Or-Lin, her twin sister, Em-Lin, told her to shut up or she would come down and make her shut up.

Em-Lin thought the message to her, actually, communicating via the telepathic link that the two Miradorn women shared. The thought was so filled with anger that Em-Lin would have felt guilty about sending it, given the fact that her sister died right after receiving it—if Em-Lin had not been so completely brain-fried by the experience of having her linked twin die, for all intents and purposes, in Em-Lin's head.

It was the most devastating experience of Em-Lin's life. Nothing in her thirty-two years of existence had prepared her for the moment of Or-Lin's death.

When the two of them had returned to the work site that morning, Em-Lin had not expected any trouble. She had been in a good mood, looking forward to the week's vacation that she and Or-Lin were set to begin the next day. As much as Em-Lin loved her work, restoring the ancient shrine of Ho'nig in the caves of Mirada's moon, Zasharu, she was ready for some relaxation back home on Mirada.

Soon, though, she and Or-Lin were going at it. Though they, like all Miradorn twins, considered themselves two halves of the same self, those halves were sometimes at war with each other.

I'm marrying Sil-Vo, Or-Lin had said in Em-Lin's mind from the opposite end of the huge shrine. When we go home for vacation, I'm staying there with him.

Em-Lin was lying on her back atop a scaffolding four stories above the stone floor, cleaning a mural on the vaulted ceiling. After receiving Or-Lin's thoughts, Em-Lin dropped the tool she was working with,

and it clattered down the scaffolding on the long trip to the floor.

What?Em-Lin's thoughts were in a whirl. Miradorn twins almost never separated from each other; if Or-Lin planned to stay on Mirada, she planned for Em-Lin to stay there, too. You can't be serious.

Sil-Vo's twin, Qua-Vo, will accept you as his wife,said Or-Lin, this latest thought rippling with hopefulness.

I can't believe this,thought Em-Lin. And she truly couldn't. Miradorn twins—in other words, ninety-eight percent of all Miradorn—shared everything. At that very moment, for example, even as Em-Lin stared up at the ceiling mural that she had been cleaning, she saw Or-Lin's work in her mind's eye, watching as Or-Lin polished the bas-relief gold floor plates near the entrance to the shrine.

It was rare for one twin to manage to hide something from the other—not impossible, but rare. Apparently, Or-Lin had done just that, concealing her intentions toward Sil-Vo and masking certain events, like Sil-Vo's proposal of marriage, from Em-Lin's attention.

How did you keep this from me?thought Em-Lin. She felt betrayed, offended, confused—and dizzy, which was not a good thing to feel on top of a scaffolding four stories above a stone floor.

Or-Lin let out the telepathic equivalent of a deep sigh.I didn't want you to know until it was definite.

Definite?Em-Lin felt her hurt (and dizziness) dissolving into raw, churning rage.Since when is this definite?

In her mind's eye, Em-Lin saw Or-Lin's reflection in the gold floor plate that she was polishing. Her bright white hair swept back from a sharp peak on her forehead, flowing down over her shoulders all the way to her waist. Her face had a roughly triangular shape, with a broad forehead tapering down to a small, rounded chin. Her eyes had softly glowing white irises set against black sclera, the result of a rare genetic condition that the Miradorn people had nicknamed “star eyes.”

In other words, she was the spitting image of her twin, Em-Lin.

I love Sil-Vo,said Or-Lin, looking her reflection in the eyes as a way of defiantly meeting her sister's gaze.Come or don't come. It's all the same to me.

Again, Em-Lin was stunned. She pulled her mind back a little from Or-Lin's, hoping that she had misunderstood.

You don't mean...Division, do you?She floated the thought tentatively, scared to find out the answer to the question but needing to know it more than anything.

Maybe it won't come to that.Or-Lin was trying to be conciliatory.Like I said, Qua-Vo is interested in you.

So there it was, laid out between them like giant, fiery letters burning in midair. Or-Lin was on the floor, and Em-Lin was four stories up on her back atop a scaffold...but a far greater separation was in store for them if Em-Lin opposed the marriage.

Division.Short of death, it was considered the most awful thing that could happen to Miradorn twins.

When twins were divided, the Priests of Duality put up a psychic wall between them, partitioning the thoughts and senses of one twin from another for the rest of their lives.

To Miradorn twins, Division was like taking one person and cutting her in half. The fact that Or-Lin could even consider it boggled Em-Lin's mind.

Not only that, but there were other obligations involved. The thought of abandoning them was equally mind-boggling to Em-Lin.

What about the promise we made? Em-Lin gazed up at the mural on the ceiling but saw only Or-Lin's chilly stare reflected in the gold floor plate. If we leave here, we break that promise.

I'm tired of keeping the promise, thought Or-Lin. I just don't care about it anymore.

Em-Lin was aghast. How can you say that?

Thanks to that stupid promise, we're throwing ourselves away for something that won't even happen in our lifetimes! Or our children's lifetimes, or our children's children's lifetimes, probably!

You didn't feel that way three years ago, thought Em-Lin. I was naïve. I believed that this was all I could want out of life, but I was wrong. I've changed.

Em-Lin cast her mind back to the time when she and her twin had made the promise. The people to whom they had made the promise had made them feel like heroes.

Coincidentally enough, just as she thought of those people, she saw a trace of them again—the first trace that she had seen in many months.

She saw it through Or-Lin's eyes, though she didn't recognize it at first. It was a symbol drawn in what looked like black ink on a corner of the gold plate that Or-Lin was polishing. The symbol represented a letter from the alphabet of the people to whom Em-Lin and Or-Lin had made their promise.

Em-Lin first noticed it three minutes before Or-Lin exploded. She didn't understand it, however, until thirty seconds before the explosion.

Much later, Em-Lin would blame herself for not paying more attention to that symbol sooner, but the truth was, she overlooked it with good reason. Even as her mind's eye brushed over the symbol (seen through Or-Lin's eyes), Em-Lin was distracted by the argument with her twin sister.

We can't leave here, said Em-Lin, casting her thoughts over the link with renewed strength. After letting Or-Lin surprise her repeatedly, she was determined to regain a dominant posture. Our work is vital to our people's future.

Thanks for reminding me! Or-Lin's words were heavy with sarcasm. You've just changed my mind again! I really do want to stay here with you!

So you don't care about anyone but yourself, right? Through the link, Em-Lin watched her twin's hand polishing the gold plate, working the specially treated chamois cloth closer to the symbol inked in the corner.

All I know is, I want a life. Or-Lin moved the chamois closer to the symbol. If that means breaking a

meaningless promise, I'll do it.

Meaningless? Em-Lin's thoughts were so super-heated that they practically smoked on their way across the link. The Vorta didn't think it was meaningless!

Or-Lin rubbed the symbol on the plate. She checked her work, saw that the symbol was still there, and rubbed again, harder. He really brainwashed you, didn't he? I can't even stand listening to you anymore. I think I want Division whether you want to go with me or not.

You're lucky I'm not down there right now. Em-Lin was furious. You're lucky I can't slap you right across the face for that. You just can't stand it that I'm right. Or-Lin was still rubbing the symbol.

Shut up! Shut up, or I swear, I'll come down there and make you shut up!

Just then, she made the connection. At that moment, she realized the significance of the symbol that she was seeing on the gold plate through Or-Lin's eyes.

Get away from there! Em-Lin shot out the screaming thought like a spear on fire, volume all the way up, punching straight into Or-Lin's mind. At the same time, she tried with all her might to will Or-Lin's hand to pull back from the symbol on the plate.

But that was one of the things that a Miradorn twin could never do. She could see through her twin's eyes, feel what her twin was feeling, send and receive thoughts to and from her twin...

But she could never control her twin. Not even to save her life.

What? Or-Lin stopped rubbing but did not move her hand from the symbol. Get away why?

Booby trap! Em-Lin rolled off her back and climbed down the scaffolding as fast as she could.

Through her sister's eyes, Em-Lin watched as Or-Lin lifted the chamois away from the symbol, which was glowing with rapidly increasing intensity.

Get away!

But even as Em-Lin flashed warning after urgent warning into her sister's head, she knew that it was too late.

The symbol flared with blinding brilliance. Em-Lin had an impression of Or-Lin's arms swinging up in front of her face to block the light.

Then, because one twin could feel what the other was feeling, especially in times of great stress, Em-Lin felt the explosion hit Or-Lin. A burst of force erupted up and out from the gold plate in the floor, ripping through Or-Lin's body in a single, blazing instant.

Em-Lin's scream echoed through the vast central chamber of the shrine. In shock, she released her grip on the scaffolding and fell.

Instead of dropping the full four stories, Em-Lin landed on a platform one story down. She lay there on her back for what seemed like hours, her starry eyes staring blindly upward, one arm hanging over the edge of the platform.

Much later, she would be surprised to learn that her sister, not Em-Lin herself, had been the one blown to pieces. This, Em-Lin only accepted as truth after extensive convincing by hospital personnel and the injection of several large doses of sedatives.

Even then, when Em-Lin realized that she was still alive, she knew that she would never be right again.

Chapter 2

Commander Sonya Gomez was having a hell of a time paying attention to her tricorder as she scanned the breathtaking interior of the shrine of Ho'nig.

The shrine had been built in an enormous natural cavern. The walls, ceiling, and floor were cut from native stone, a kind of gold-veined ruby marble that had been polished to a smooth finish.

The place was vast and filled with treasures, so many that every time Gomez thought she'd seen them all, she spotted another one. Statues carved from massive gemstones of many colors perched on marble pedestals, gleaming in the light of worklamps positioned throughout the chamber. Altars, pillars, pulpits, and alcoves were adorned with multitudes of gold, silver, and crystal relics.

It was a huge and beautiful place. The fact that it was dedicated to Ho'nig, a religious figure with whom Gomez had some familiarity, served to increase her interest in it even more.

That was why she had to force herself to focus on the tricorder scans and doing her job.

Reviewing some results that she had missed while gawking, Gomez nodded for the benefit of those who were watching her. "There are even more booby traps in here than your people detected, and those are just the ones that aren't cloaked."

Pika Ven-Sa, the old high priest who was showing Gomez's team around the shrine, snorted and shook his head. "Thanks a lot, Dominion!" he said to the ceiling. "So glad we gave that wholealliance thing a whirl!"

Fabian Stevens, who was working alongside Gomez, elbowed her in the side. "I like this guy," he said with a grin. "He's gotspunk ."

Gomez kept scanning with the tricorder. "You did the right thing, not trying to defuse them yourselves," she said, glancing at Ven-Sa. "Let's just say there're some nasty surprises around here."

"We only regret that one life was lost before the traps were discovered," said Ven-Sa's grimmer twin, Chi-Sa. Chi-Sa wore the same gray Pika priest robes as Ven-Sa, but he wore them with stark gravity instead of sardonic attitude. "We are grateful for Starfleet's assistance in this matter."

"Nowthat was an easy call to make," said Ven-Sa.

" 'Hello, Starfleet? Sorry about that whole teaming-up-with-your-worst-enemies-in-the-big-war thing. Any chance you might stop over and knock out a couple Jem'Hadar booby traps in the holy shrine in the caves under the surface of our moon?' "

“Don’t forget the part about the big pilgrimage to the shrine in two days,” Stevens said with a smirk.

“Just to make it more interesting,” said Ven-Sa, “theChala Ho’nig, a pilgrimage of beings from a host of spacefaring species in the Alpha Quadrant, is converging on the very same moon.”

“Remember our many converts in the Gamma Quadrant, as well,” Chi-Sa said solemnly. “The word of Ho’nig has spread like lightning beyond the wormhole.”

“Like I said, that was a tough call to make,” said Ven-Sa. “Good thing you Federationists don’t hold grudges.”

Gomez flashed Ven-Sa a smile, but she knew that relations between the Federation and the Miradorn were not all sweetness and light. The pain of the Dominion War was still pretty fresh in the Federation’s little corner of the Alpha Quadrant. The Miradorn had aided the Dominion in noncombat roles, serving chiefly in logistics support, but the fact remained: help of whatever kind from anyone, including the Miradorn, had fueled the war machine that had taken so many lives and nearly brought down the entire Federation.

Gomez personally held no grudge, though. Her only concern was the success of the mission. “It’s in our mutual best interest to clear out these booby traps,” she said. “And I think we’d all like some answers about why they’re here.”

“Good question,” said Stevens. “There’s some major ordnance planted around this shrine. What are the traps protecting?”

Ven-Sa snorted. “Or are they just a farewell gift from our former allies? They’re not really known for leaving showers of candy and flowers when they pull out, are they?”

“Just look what they did to Cardassia,” said Chi-Sa.

“I think I have an answer for you.” The high-pitched, tinkling voice of P8 Blue, the insectoid Nasat structural systems specialist, drew everyone’s attention to the rim of the blast crater in the middle of the entryway floor. “Is there supposed to be a massive chamber underneath the shrine of Ho’nig?”

Ven-Sa and Chi-Sa looked at each other and answered simultaneously. “No.”

“Well, there is now,” said P8 Blue, known affectionately as Pattie to her teammates. “The explosion opened a pinprick hole in its shielding.” Pattie returned her attention to the screen of her tricorder, adjusting several controls with her pincerlike digits.

Gomez walked over to stand alongside Pattie and directed her own tricorder into the heart of the crater. “How big is the chamber?” she said.

“If I had to guess,” said Pattie. “I’d say it’s bigger than the shrine itself.”

For a moment, Gomez watched data flickering across the screen of her tricorder. Familiar energy signatures and trace elements told the story. “It’s a Dominion facility,” she said, “and it’s functioning.”

“Functioning?” said Ven-Sa. “Functioning how?”

“I can’t tell yet,” said Gomez. “We need to get down there.”

“And to do that, we have to clean up the booby traps.” Stevens blew out his breath and looked around the shrine. “Booby traps set by the Jem’Hadar, no less.”

“Without damaging the shrine of Ho’nig,” said Ven-Sa, “if at all possible.”

“Don’t worry,” said Gomez. “We came prepared.” She waved in the direction of two of the four security personnel who had accompanied the team to the shrine. “Hawkins and Soan have more than a little experience with demolitions.”

Deputy Chief of Security Vance Hawkins coolly met Gomez’s gaze. For reasons unknown to Gomez, he did not seem to be in a particularly good mood today. “We’ll do our best,” he said.

Beside Hawkins, the diminutive Bajoran Lauoc Soan simply nodded in agreement.

“What can we do to help?” said Ven-Sa.

“We could use a guide,” said Gomez. “Someone who knows this shrine and the surrounding caves inside and out.”

“Done,” said Ven-Sa. “No one knows this place better than Em-Lin. She and her sister were spearheading restoration efforts here at the shrine.”

“Em-Lin’s sister died in the explosion,” said Chi-Sa.

Gomez frowned. “Will Em-Lin still be fit to work here then?”

Ven-Sa shrugged. “If it means saving the shrine. This place is her passion, that’s for sure.”

“All right then,” said Gomez. “We’d better get busy. We only have two days until the pilgrims get here.”

“If we’re lucky,” said Chi-Sa. “They seem to show up earlier every year.”

“‘It is better to be one year early than one minute late,’ ” said Gomez.

Ven-Sa brightened. “You are familiar with the teachings of Ho’nig?”

Gomez pinched her thumb and index finger close together. “Just a little.” She had met a Bolian follower of Ho’nig during her mission to Sarindar. The Bolian, whose name was Zilder, had left her a copy of the Se’rbeg, the holy book of Ho’nig, when he was killed by the murderousshii .

Ven-Sa bowed. “Perhaps you and I can speak further of his teachings,” he said.

Gomez shrugged. The truth was, she thought she might enjoy talking about Ho’nig with the priest. For reasons that she could not quite put her finger on, she had found parts of the Se’rbeg inspirational. She almost hated to admit it, because Zilder had gotten on her nerves while trying to convert her, but she sometimes felt drawn to the teachings of Ho’nig.

“Maybe later,” Gomez said to Ven-Sa. “First things first. Could you find our guide while we bring down some equipment from the da Vinci?”

“Consider it done,” said Ven-Sa. “Please be patient with Em-Lin, however. Losing her sister was very traumatic for her, and she’s not really been herself lately.”

“I can only imagine,” said Gomez. “Each set of twins functions as a single being, right?”

“That’s something of an oversimplification,” said Chi-Sa, “but that’s more or less it.”

Ven-Sa cleared his throat. “Let’s just say that when a Miradorn loses her twin, the . . . attachment . . . doesn’t end overnight.”

“Especially when the loss is traumatic,” said Chi-Sa. “There can be a . . . continuation.”

“What your people might call a haunting,” said Ven-Sa. “This is what Em-Lin is going through.”

“Thanks for the heads-up,” said Gomez, trying to imagine what a Miradorn haunting might be like. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Chapter 3

“Vance,” said Commander Gomez. “Will you work with the local security personnel to establish a perimeter around the shrine?”

Four men—two sets of Miradorn twins in blue-and-silver-uniforms—stepped forward, and Vance Hawkins nodded. “I’m on it,” he said without hesitation.

Inside, though, as he looked at the four Miradorn with their familiar widow’s peaks and pasty skin, Vance thought of Jomej VII and felt a chill.

“Shall we?” he said, waving toward a spot to one side of the plaza in the cave outside the shrine. As the four Miradorn walked toward the place that he had indicated, Vance summoned the rest of the security team from the *theda Vinci* with a bob of his head.

Everyone gathered in the plaza. Vance introduced Soan, Tomozuka Kim, and T’Mandra. The Miradorn introduced themselves as Boz-Nu, Yet-Nu, Saf-Lig, and Gre-Lig. It was all very businesslike but perfectly friendly.

Vance shook hands with all four of the Miradorn, and he was no less professional than always—but underneath it all, deep underneath, he was crackling with tension.

One instance of abusive behavior by a handful of people did not mean that an entire species was no good. Vance knew that. In time of war, people often did things that they normally would never do. Vance knew that, too.

Still, he was not comfortable around the Miradorn.

“We have twelve men on shrine detail,” said Boz-Nu. “We have another thirty-six from surrounding precincts on call for the pilgrimage. How about if we bring them all in early?”

“Sounds good,” said Vance. “I’d like to see a map of these caves.”

Saf-Lig drew a disc-shaped holoprojector from a pouch at his hip. As he raised the projector, his hand brushed past a holster slung at his side. The black grip of a handheld weapon stuck out of the holster, curved and padded for comfort.

Vance had seen weapons like that on Jomej VII.

At the touch of a button, a glowing blue map leaped out of the holoprojector, rippling in midair in the middle of the group. “This is the shrine of Ho’nig,” said Saf-Lig, stirring his finger in a large block of space in the center of the three-dimensional map. “I suggest we set our perimeter in a dome configuration, securing the caverns above the shrine as well as the ring of caverns fanning out on the same level as the shrine.”

Vance nodded, staring intently at the map—though, actually, he was looking right through it at the holstered device strapped to Saf-Lig’s side.

It was a Miradorn “puppet gun,” the ultimate in personnel control devices. Why bind a prisoner or opponent with physical restraints when the puppet gun can inhibit his actions by manipulating nerve clusters in his brain?

The puppet gun enabled its user to take complete control of a target’s body. A user could make an attacker freeze in his tracks, make a one-hundred-eighty-degree turn, and waltz right into a waiting cell.

A user could make a target do other things, too. Things like turn against his own allies or sabotage his own handiwork.

Or degrade himself in humiliating ways in front of other people. That was how Vance had seen the puppet gun used by the Miradorn at Jomej VII.

“The real challenge comes when the pilgrims start pouring in,” said Saf-Lig. “It will be difficult keeping them away from the shrine.”

“I’m hoping the da Vinci can solve that problem by holding off any landings or beam-downs until we’re done,” said Vance.

“That will be a challenge,” said Yet-Nu. “There are multiple landing sites and access points in this region of Zasharu. If I may illustrate.” Yet-Nu adjusted a control on the holoprojector in Saf-Lig’s hand, causing the view to zoom out to include a bigger wedge of the moon.

As Yet-Nu said his piece, Vance listened and nodded, but his mind still swam with dark memories.

He remembered Miradorn guards with puppet guns in the prison camp on Jomej VII during the Dominion War. Federation and Klingon prisoners forced to perform in degrading ways for an audience of interrogators. Vance, part of the team sent to liberate the camp, was himself taken over and manipulated until reinforcements arrived and freed him.

Until that day, Vance had not known what it felt like to have control of his own body taken away from him. Afterward, back aboard the Prometheus-class U.S.S. Shiva, he found that he could not get that terrible feeling out of his mind.

And he never did. He never really got over it.

That was why he was having trouble relating to the Miradorn in a buddy-buddy way. That was why his heart just wasn't in it as he listened to the Miradorn talking about local security opportunities.

The Miradorn might have worked only in noncombat roles for the enemy, they might have had a reputation as the least malevolent of Dominion allies, and they might now be bending over backward to get in good with the Federation, even to the extent of renaming their homeworld "New Mirada"...but Vance would never forget that day on Jomej VII. He would never forget the red-haired Miradorn man who directed the puppet gun at him, and how the Miradorn's twin giggled as Vance was made to crawl on all fours like an animal.

And how he was made to do other things before it was all over. Screaming screamingscreaming inside the whole time.

"Do you find these arrangements acceptable?" said Boz-Nu, snapping off the holoprojector image of the shrine's surroundings.

"Absolutely," Vance said with a sharp nod.

But he did not return Boz-Nu's smile. And when Gre-Lig reached out in his direction, Vance did not shake his hand.

Chapter 4

The huge, hairy Miradorn threw his arms around S.C.E. cultural specialist Carol Abramowitz and hugged her tightly against him. His name was Brag-Ret, and his jolliness was rather overwhelming.

"Welcome to New Mirada!" His voice was deep and resonant as the notes from a tuba. "Already your presence has made this a brighter and more beautiful world!"

"Thanks," said Carol as Brag-Ret rolled her from side to side over his great, spongy gut. She winced at his cologne and the wiry bloom of blue-green hair tickling her face and neck; the hair seemed to be part beard and part chest hair bursting from the wide open collar of his purple and pink striped shirt.

Brag-Ret held on to Carol for one moment more than she thought was absolutely necessary, then unclamped his beefy arms from around her. "And as if fate had not blessed us enough already," he said, turning toward the Vinci Chief of Security Domenica Corsi, "another extraordinary beauty walks among us this glorious day!"

As Brag-Ret opened his arms wide for another embrace and took a step toward Corsi, she fired a warning glare in his direction. Brag-Ret hesitated, cocking his head appraisingly to one side.

Fortunately, Carol was able to catch Corsi's eye before an interplanetary incident ensued. Carol gave Corsi her best "please-just-let-the-big-smelly-man-hug-you" look, raising her eyebrows and nodding emphatically.

It was enough, though Corsi shot Carol a dark “I’ll-get-you-for-this” look over Brag-Ret’s shoulder as he hugged her.

Carol shrugged in reply. She had beamed to the surface of New Mirada with Corsi and Betazoid security officer Rennan Konya to take the temperature of pro-Federation efforts among the Miradorn. Starfleet was intensely interested in how the onetime Dominion allies were shaping up, especially given their world’s strategic importance. Why alienate the big, hairy welcome wagon in the first five minutes of the visit? Brag-Ret could yet provide valuable insight into recent developments on New Mirada, in which case the hugs from hell were a small price to pay.

Still, when Brag-Ret’s female twin, Sog-Ret, lumbered into the room and headed straight for Carol with arms spread wide, Carol had second thoughts. She suddenly decided that she would rather be on New Mirada’s moon, Zasharu, helping Gomez defuse deadly Jem’Hadar booby traps.

“Welcome, travelers!” said Sog-Ret, her voice shrill and sharp like the caw of a crow. “Wedelight in your magnificent presence!”

As she wrapped her thick arms around Carol and hugged the breath right out of her, Carol noticed two things about Sog-Ret.

One, her perfume was even stronger and more sickening than Brag-Ret’s cologne.

Two, her beard and chest hair were thicker than Brag-Ret’s.

Interesting choices for the welcome wagon, thought Carol, turning her head away from Sog-Ret to try to catch a breath.

It was then, as Sog-Ret bounced her up and down over her monstrous breasts and stomach, that it occurred to Carol that perhaps Brag-Ret and Sog-Ret did not represent the welcome wagon after all.

Chapter 5

Just as Em-Lin walked through the arched doorway leading into the shrine, her feet left the floor. A startled gasp escaped her as she floated upward, drifting toward the distant, vaulted ceiling.

Instinctively, she twisted and fumbled for a handhold or foothold, finally hooking the toe of her work-boot under a sconce alongside the doorway. Swinging around, she clamped both hands onto a statue of Yolo, the Phylosian disciple of Ho’nig, which was mounted on the wall.

It was only then, as she hugged Yolo tightly and had a look around, that Em-Lin realized that she was not the only person floating in the shrine. Several beings in Starfleet uniforms and two Miradorn priests had also left the floor. Like Em-Lin, the Starfleeters stayed in one place by hanging on to something, but the priests drifted upward with no sign of stopping.

“Little help, anyone?” said Pika Ven-Sa, who was one of the ones not holding on to anything. His gray robes billowed around him as he slowly ascended, revealing the bright yellow garment underneath.

“Why don’t we just beam out of here?”

Near Ven-Sa, a Starfleet male with dark skin crouched on a stone railing, holding on with both hands. “The Dominion shielding is disrupting our transporters,” he said, watching the rising priest.

“Yet another wonderful booby trap,” said another man in a Starfleet uniform. This man had lighter skin than the other man and dark hair. He clung to one of the sixteen pillars ringing the altar in the center of the shrine, pillars representing the sixteen Hearts and Holy Worlds of Ho’nig. “Nothing like an antigravity field to give you a lift.”

“And a drop when it runs out of juice,” said a black-haired Starfleet woman who was clinging to another of the pillars.

Em-Lin tightened her grip on the statue of Yolo. The thought of gravity suddenly returning and dragging her down hard made her acutely uncomfortable.

So did the sight of so many Starfleet uniforms, actually. Em-Lin knew it was politically incorrect, but her time in the service of the Dominion had left her with lingering dislike and distrust of Starfleet and the Federation. They had been the enemy during the war, after all, and she and her world had been poisoned against them. In addition, Em-Lin knew people who had suffered because of Starfleet actions during the war—and she herself, though strictly a noncombatant, had seen firsthand what Starfleet personnel could be capable of, at least in time of war. She knew that she would never forget her experience at the Rasha Nom depot, a Starfleet attack that had left her and Or-Lin as two of only three survivors out of twenty-four Miradorn.

Em-Lin would have to work with these Starfleeters, and she would find a way to act professional at all times when dealing with them, but she knew in her heart that she could not truly embrace them. In that way, she was on the same wavelength as the rest of her people, contrary to the overblown displays of Federation love designed to bring much needed aid to the depressed economy of New Mirada and Zasharu.

“How long will the effect last?” said the black-haired Starfleet woman on the pillar, directing the question to the two figures working in the altar space below her.

A diminutive, pale-skinned Starfleeter with a high, bald head worked in a rectangle of blinking circuitry set into the silver altar. “Two-and-a-half more minutes,” said the little man, his hands flying over the flickering circuits. “The effect will steadily intensify, then cut out completely at the end of that time.”

“Not good!” said Ven-Sa, still drifting upward. “Not exactly what I wanted to hear!”

“Any chance of a more gradual letdown?” said the black-haired woman.

“Working on it,” said the little man. He shifted to one side, and Em-Lin saw a blue, multilegged shape beneath him. At first, she thought that it was his lower body, but as she continued to watch, she realized that the shape was not part of him at all. In fact, the little man was actually sitting on top of what looked like some kind of device or creature. It was hard to tell from a distance. His legs were wrapped around it, and it seemed to be keeping him from floating away.

A flutter of movement caught Em-Lin’s eye, and she turned her head to see Pika Chi-Sa falling up against the ceiling of a side chamber not far from her. The ceiling was about five meters above the floor, and Chi-Sa ended up stuck flat against it.

“Just for the record,” said Chi-Sa, his voice echoing through the shrine, “I never wanted to join the Dominion to begin with.”

“Not what you said at the time,” Ven-Sa said curtly. Em-Lin noticed an edge of panic in his voice as he continued to climb toward the peak of the main chamber’s ceiling.

Suddenly, then, Ven-Sa gasped as he dropped ten meters and stopped. In the side chamber across the shrine, Chi-Sa also fell the same distance and froze in midair.

“What’s up, Soloman?” said the black-haired woman on the pillar.

“Or down, as the case may be,” said the Starfleeter with the light skin and dark hair.

“A... ‘hiccup’ in the system,” said the little bald man at the altar panel. Apparently, his name was “Soloman.” “I’m trying to reprogram the device to let everyone down gently, but it’s not being very cooperative.”

“Why should this one be any easier to deal with than the first five?” said the dark-haired man. “My favorite so far was number three, the heat-seeking, flying buzzsaw.”

“We’re just lucky no one’s been killed yet,” said the black-haired woman. “That buzzsaw came pretty close to lopping your head off, Fabian.”

“For such a one-track-minded bunch of sourpusses, the Dominion sure get creative with their booby traps,” said Fabian, the dark-haired man.

“I’ll try to warn you next time the...hiccup!” said Soloman.

Suddenly, Ven-Sa and Chi-Sa dropped three more meters, then shot straight up again. Chi-Sa’s climb stopped when he slammed into the ceiling of the side chamber. Em-Lin heard a loud crack, and Chi-Sa howled in pain.

Ven-Sa stopped when he hit the ceiling, too, but his ceiling was four stories up, at the highest point of the shrine. He was pinned there, looking straight down, his back stuck against the very mural that Em-Lin had been in the process of restoring when all this began.

In other words, when Or-Lin died.

As if the mere thought of Or-Lin had been enough to conjure her from the dead, Em-Lin heard her voice in her right ear at that moment. It sounded as clear as day, as clear as it had every time her dead twin sister had spoken to her since the explosion.

Let go, said Or-Lin’s voice. I love you and I will protect you.

Em-Lin shivered and held on more tightly to the statue of Yolo. She knew that her dead twin’s advice was no good. She knew further that the Or-Lin who kept appearing to her, speaking to her, and touching her—but never two of those at the same time—was adugo tenya, or trauma-induced hallucination.

Still, the voice unhinged her. As much as she knew intellectually that it belonged to a phantom, she could not quell her emotional response of intense, unreasoning fear.

And longing. Longing to reunite with the one whom she had lost.

More accurately, the half of herself that she had lost.

Please let go, said Or-Lin. I love you and I miss you.

“I miss you, too,” whispered Em-Lin, but she did not release her hold on the statue.

Fortunately, then, she was distracted by the voices of the others in the shrine. The living others.

“How much time till the device deactivates?” said the black-haired woman clinging to the pillar.

“Thirty seconds,” said Soloman. Em-Lin noticed that in spite of the stress that he must be under, his voice remained calm and matter-of-fact. “But I have an idea. I’m going to try a different approach.”

“Please make it a quick one!” Ven-Sa shouted from the distant ceiling of the chamber.

“This circuitry is morphic,” said Soloman, “and so is the programming. It continually changes to circumvent attempted disruptions.” His fingers danced so fast across the flickering panel that Em-Lin could not follow their movements. “I need to insert my own changeling applet and fool the system into thinking the new program is from the same parent as itself.”

“You can do that?” said Chi-Sa.

“Either I can,” said Soloman, “or I can’t.”

“He can,” said Fabian. “You better believe he can.”

Soloman’s fingers continued to fly. “Wait!” he said, leaning closer to the open panel. “I was in a sandbox the whole time!”

“Sandbox?” said Chi-Sa.

“A subsystem partitioned from the main program,” said Soloman. “Firewalled all around and completely nonfunctional...but I’m tunneling through to the real system, and...everybody hold on tight!”

“Hold on to what?” said Ven-Sa, his voice high and wild with panic.

Em-Lin felt herself grow slightly heavier. Far above, Ven-Sa slowly fell away from the ceiling and drifted downward as if he barely weighed more than the air around him.

“It’s working!” said Chi-Sa, also floating down from his high perch.

“I told you he could do it,” said Fabian.

“Great job, Soloman,” said the black-haired woman.

“Actually, Commander Gomez,” said Soloman, “I have some bad news.”

“What is it?” said Gomez.

“I seem to have triggered some kind of failsafe,” said Soloman. He turned, and Em-Lin realized for the first time that the blue, multilegged shape underneath him had a face. “Once this applet has run its course, I believe that all the remaining booby traps in and around the shrine of Ho’ning will activate at the same time.”

“This ought to make life interesting,” said Fabian.

“To say the least,” said the blue creature under Soloman. Its voice was high and bright and echoed through the shrine like tinkling bells rung by Pika priests during a holy ceremony.

“Vance,” said Gomez. “Call in Soan. In fact, bring in your whole team. Miradorn security will have to maintain the perimeter.”

“Yes, sir,” said Vance, the dark-skinned man on the stone railing.

“Everybody stay sharp,” said Gomez. “All hell is about to break loose.”

“Again,” said Fabian.

“I hope you won’t mind if I excuse myself,” said Ven-Sa, who was midway to the floor by now. “I just remembered, I have an important appointment in a few minutes.”

“Coincidentally,” said Chi-Sa, “so do I.”

Chapter 6

“Here we are,” Brag-Ret said calmly, though he had just raced the hovercar at top speed in a heart-stop-ping slalom through the city and slammed it into a parking dock so hard that Carol justknew she had thrown her back out. “Let’s see how the children atthis school celebrate Federation Day!”

Carol looked at Corsi, who rolled her eyes. They both knew that it was no accident that their visit to New Mirada happened to coincide with the first annual Federation Day. In fact, Carol would not have been surprised to learn that it was Federation Day every time a Federation official dropped by New Mirada.

Sog-Ret burst from the hovercar and dragged Rennan out after her by the elbow. “Let’s go, guys!” she said. “We only have fifteenriglis till we have to be back across town again!”

Carol slumped in her seat and watched miserably as Brag-Ret hustled Corsi out onto the moving walkway. She felt like a child herself, being hurried between tourist attractions on vacation by overzealous parents.

Truly, Brag-Ret and Sog-Ret brought new meaning to the term “overscheduling.” In the two hours since beaming to the surface, Carol, Corsi, and Rennan had been propelled on a nonstop tour of the capital city of New Mirada, a capital that the Miradorn had renamed “Federation City” since the end of the Dominion War.

Already, in just two hours, the away team had visited three grade schools, two retirement homes, two

hospitals, and a shopping complex, never spending more than fifteen minutes at each one. Though no one but Brag-Ret and Sog-Ret had access to the actual schedule, Carol got the impression, from hints that her guides had dropped, that the rest of the day would be at least as jam-packed as the first half had been.

And about as helpful, no doubt. Carol had seen quite enough staged imaging opportunities for one planet, thank you very much. The only thing she learned from all the pep rallies and key-to-the-city/student artwork/home-baked pastry presentations was that the New Mirada chamber of commerce was trying way too hard to make an impression.

Plus which, all the high-speed hoopla made her wonder what exactly the Mirador didn't want her to see. The thicker they laid it on, the more suspicious she became.

Case in point. "Oh my!" said Brag-Ret, gasping as he helped her from the hovercar. "The sunlight serves to enhance your beauty even more. I would not have thought it possible, but your loveliness grows with each passing moment."

Carol thanked him dutifully as the moving walkway carried her into the building. Yes, she realized, it was possible to hear how beautiful she was too many times in a single day. She resolved never to share this intelligence with Vance Hawkins.

As the ruckus of excited Mirador children reached her from the open double doors up ahead, Carol made a decision. The way things were going would have been absolutely fine if she were on a simple goodwill tour, but her assignment was to dig in and assess the true state of mind of the Mirador people vis-à-vis the Federation. She wouldn't be doing that if she kept glad-handing and small-talking for the rest of her visit.

Clearly, it was time to revise the itinerary.

When the walkway had deposited her in the noisy auditorium, Carol strolled past Sog-Ret to stand alongside Corsi.

"Hey, Domenica," said Carol, whispering in Corsi's ear. "I've got an idea."

"Me, too," said Corsi, glaring at the mob of young Mirador children fidgeting and jabbering in the rows of seats before them. "Does yours involve settling these kids down with a wide beam phaser set on stun?"

"My idea is more along the lines of making a run for it," said Carol.

"That works, too," said Corsi.

Rennan, who was standing on the other side of Corsi, leaned in with a grin. "Count me in."

Carol sighed. "Why do we bother whispering with a Betazoid around?"

"Who said we were going to invite you?" Corsi said sternly.

"You need my superior fighting skills," said Rennan.

Corsi snorted. "I dare you to read my mind right this minute."

Rennan stared at her for a moment, then grimaced. “Now that’s harassment, Lieutenant Commander.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Corsi, and then she turned back to Carol. “So when do you want to run for it?”

“Good question.” Carol looked around the auditorium. She saw Brag-Ret and Sog-Ret standing near the door, talking to a woman in a businesslike navy blue outfit who looked like she might be a school official. “I say there’s no time like the present.”

“So how do we make this happen?” said Rannan.

“Leave that to me,” Corsi said with a nod. “Stay here until you get the signal. Then make a run for the hovercar.”

With that, Corsi walked over to the school official and asked a question. Smiling, the official answered, after which Corsi nodded and marched out the door.

“I wonder what she said?” said Carol.

“She asked for directions to the ladies’ room,” Rannan said with a smirk.

Three minutes later, just as the school official had introduced Carol and Rannan, and the children were stomping their feet in applause, a piercing whine blasted through the auditorium.

All at once, every child in the room got up and marched in an orderly fashion for the exits positioned in the middle of each of the four walls. The adults, including the school official, observed the evacuation and shouted occasional instructions to the children.

Rannan elbowed Carol’s arm. “I’d say this must be our signal.”

“Good guess,” said Carol, and then the two of them darted out the nearest door. They made it out just ahead of a double-file formation of Miradorn children.

Brag-Ret and Sog-Ret were not so lucky. Though not far behind Carol and Rannan, the bombastic, bearded twins were stuck in the auditorium, hemmed in by columns of children.

Once out in the hallway, Carol and Rannan broke into a run. When they got to the dock, they found Corsi behind the wheel of the hovercar, revving the engine.

“Nice work,” said Carol as she jumped in beside Corsi. “You really know how to stage a diversion.”

“Nothing like a good, old-fashioned fire drill,” said Corsi, whipping the hovercar away from the dock the second Rannan’s posterior hit the backseat. “Provided you can find the right switch to pull.”

Chapter

7

Just as Soloman leaped away from the altar in the shrine of Ho’nig, sixteen beams of destructive white

energy punched down from the circle of sixteen columns and pulverized the altar into a swirling cloud of dust.

Vance raced toward Soloman, dodging a flying grenade and a shower of sparks along the way, only to be stopped in midstep by an arm that broke off a bejeweled statue and slammed into his chest. Vance went over backward, collapsing to the stone floor with a jarring impact. It was just as well, as it turned out. As he lay there, looking up, a sheet of bright green energy slid across the space above him, crackling as it lopped off the backs of pews and the top half of a statue of a pious-looking Brikar.

Just before the statue's head and shoulders dropped, Vance threw off the stone arm that had knocked him down and hastily rolled out of the way. A heartbeat later, the top of the Brikar crashed onto the spot that Vance's lower body had just occupied, breaking into chunks of rubble and sending up a puff of dust.

It was his ninth or tenth superclose call in the five minutes since the Dominion failsafe had triggered every remaining booby trap in the shrine at once. At the rate he was going, Vance thought it was pretty unlikely that he would walk out of the shrine alive, especially given the fact that he had used up all of his nine lives on S.C.E. missions long ago.

Somewhere in the middle of the mayhem, Commander Gomez was shouting orders, trying to coordinate the team's efforts to deflect and deactivate the multiple threats. So far, Vance had been having enough trouble just dodging deathtraps to be much help disabling them.

"Soloman?" said Gomez. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Commander," Soloman said from not far away, "but the altar access terminal has been destroyed."

"Then go help Pattie at the west wall terminal," said Gomez. "See if you can implement a flash-purge from there."

"On my way, Commander," said Soloman.

"And be careful!" said Gomez.

"Understood," said Soloman. Watching from the floor, Vance could see the dim outline of the Bynar hurrying past through the drifting clouds of smoke.

Vance sat up and smacked the combadge on his chest. "Lauoc!" he said. "Report!"

"So far, so bad," Lauoc said over the combadge, shouting over the deafening whines of nearby weapons fire. "Kim and T'Mandra are pinned down. I made it to an access panel, but this morph tech is giving me the granddaddy of all headaches. Every time I think I've disabled something, the morphic system reconfigures to work around what I did."

"What's your location?" said Vance, cautiously getting to his feet.

"I'm at an access point in the back wall," said Lauoc, "trying to shut down a heat-seeking missile launcher...no, wait. It's reconfiguring again." As noisy as the place was, Lauoc's disgusted curse came in loud and clear over the combadge. "Now it's a quantum bomb set to go off in... threeminutes. It's big enough to bring down the shrine and the entire city sector around it."

Vance was moving before Lauoc's last word, charging toward the back wall of the shrine. As he ran, he heard projectiles whistling and the beams of energy weapons wailing around him, but he did not slow down or look around. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted something big swinging toward him, and he kicked up his pace enough to get out of the way just in time.

A second later, he heard a woman scream behind him, and he whipped around. By the light of an overhead explosion, Vance saw a white-haired woman pinned to the wall between the prongs of what looked like the head of a giant pitchfork. From a distance, Vance could not tell if the prongs had pierced the woman's body.

Even as the countdown in his head ticked away the seconds until the quantum bomb would go off, Vance ran toward the woman instead of Lauoc. As he got closer, the first thing he noticed was that one of the prongs had indeed drawn blood from the woman's side.

The second thing he noticed was that the woman was a Miradorn. The pearlescent skin and sharp peak of hair drawn all the way down to a spot between her eyebrows were dead giveaways.

Vance charged up to the woman and immediately grabbed hold of the fork. He pulled back on it with all his strength, but it would not budge.

The woman gasped in pain, and her eyes shot wide open. For the first time, Vance got a clear look at them.

Even in the midst of the crisis, he was struck by how strange and beautiful they were. Except for the irises, the eyes were black, flecked with gold glitter; the irises themselves were glowing white rings suspended in the darkness.

"Please hurry," said the woman, clamping her eyes shut against the pain.

"Done and done," said Vance, bracing a foot against the wall and giving the fork another yank. This time, it came free, and he tossed it aside.

"Gotta go," he said, his mental countdown swiftly approaching zero.

Gasping, the woman followed him. "My name is Em-Lin," she said. "I think I can help."

Chapter 8

"Please let me take a look," Em-Lin said a second time, louder and more firmly than the first. "Unless either of you has a better idea right now." Ever since she had followed Vance to the access panel for the quantum bomb system, he and Lauoc had blocked her view of the controls.

Now that Em-Lin had gotten their attention, Vance and Lauoc looked at her, then at each other, then back at her. Em-Lin saw naked and abundant skepticism in their eyes, but that was okay. She did not much care what the Starfleeters' opinions of her might be, as long as she was confident that she could do the job.

Lauoc was the first to step aside. "We have less than a minute before the quantum bomb goes off," he

said, raising his voice over the latest round of weapons fire.

“It’s a morphic system,” said Vance. When he jabbed a finger into the circuitry, glowing wires slithered away from his touch and reformed a connection several centimeters beyond his fingertip. “Shape-shifting technology.”

Em-Lin nodded and pushed forward to the open access panel in the wall. By her reckoning, the bomb would detonate in thirty-five seconds.

There was no time for explanations, and they were unnecessary anyway. Em-Lin knew all about morphic circuitry.

The Dominion had taught her well.

Gritting her teeth against the latest surge of pain from the wound in her side, Em-Lin thrust her hand into the hip pocket of her burgundy coveralls and found the tool that she needed. It felt like a metal rod at first, but came to life when she touched it. As her fingers wrapped around it, the tool wrapped around her fingers, twisting and twining like a fast-growing vine.

She drew the device from her pocket and focused her thoughts on it, reaching out with her mind just as she had always done with Or-Lin. She felt the tool waiting, its tiny, fuzzy brain vibrating softly with the simple question that was the sum total of its desires:

What do you want me to do?

Em-Lin sent back the answer: Turn off the bomb.

As soon as she thought it, Em-Lin felt the tool reshaping itself for the task ahead, growing dozens of tiny, silver tentacles around its tip. When she raised it toward the open access panel, the tentacles fluttered excitedly, reaching straight out for the maze of flashing circuitry inside the opening. The tool itself grabbed hold and pulled itself the rest of the way into the gap.

“Whatis that thing?” said Vance.

Em-Lin silenced him with a wave and continued to focus her mind on the tool. At this point, the slightest distraction could mean complete disaster.

Inside the access point, the tool’s tentacles grew and branched and flowed along circuitry pathways like liquid. Em-Lin felt the circuitry reacting, realigning itself to escape the intruder and preserve functionality...but the tool sensed every change and shifted the shape and qualities of its extrusions to compensate.

In the end, the tool was smarter and more agile than the bomb system. The bomb’s control program tried one last surprise maneuver, attempting to use the tool itself to trigger detonation, but the tool caught on fast and shuffled the corrupted code into final deactivation commands.

With fewer than ten seconds left until the scheduled explosion, the quantum bomb system went permanently offline.

“All clear,” said Em-Lin.

Vance kept looking from her to the tool and back.

“What I want to know, is where can I get one of those?”

“Me, too,” Lauoc said.

“Pretty sure we’re going to want to buy ’em in bulk,” said Vance.

Em-Lin’s smile turned into a grimace as the pain in her side flared up. She sagged, releasing her grip on the tool, and Vance automatically wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

“You need to see our doctor,” said Vance.

Em-Lin shook her head and reached for the shape-shifting tool. Deactivate all booby traps, she told it with her mind as soon as her hand made contact and the gelatinous substance of the device wrapped around it.

The answer flashed right back to her: Cannot . The tool showed her why with a series of images flickering over the link.

Disengage, Em-Lin told the tool, and then, though she didn’t think it would understand, she sent it this, too: Thank you . Always be nice to your tools, her father had taught her.

“We can’t shut down the other booby traps from here,” said Em-Lin. “After activation, each trap operates independent of the overarching system. We’ll have to work on one device at a time.”

“If by working on the devices, you mean getting medical treatment for your injury,” said Vance, “then great.”

Em-Lin tried not to let Vance or Lauoc see her wince at the pain in her side, but she did not think that she hid it very well. “Do we have to get across the shrine anyway?” she said. “To get to the medical care, I mean.”

“We do,” said Lauoc.

“Then if we’re already going in that direction,” said Em-Lin, “it won’t matter if we make some stops along the way, will it?”

Something exploded nearby, and Vance shook his head. “All right,” he said. “But we’re running you right out of here if you start getting worse.”

“Fair enough,” said Em-Lin. “Where’s the next terminal?”

It was then, just as she slowly started forward, supported on either side by Vance and Lauoc, that Em-Lin heard Or-Lin’s giggling voice in her ear once more.

I have an idea, said Or-Lin. Why not set off the next bomb? Why not come join me, and bring the Starfleeties with you?

Em-Lin did not dignify Or-Lin’s questions with an answer. She was not about to get into an argument with adugo tenya, and she certainly had no intention of doing its bidding.

Even though it wasn't like she didn't have any Starfleet blood on her hands already.

Chapter

9

"You can buy us as many drinks as you want," said the surly, scrawny Miradorn man. "It won't change the fact that we don't like the Federation!"

"Fair enough, fair enough," said Carol, raising her hands in a gesture of surrender. "I can accept that, Ti-Lat. All I want to know is, what do you like the least about the Federation?"

With a wide grin plastered across his face, Ti-Lat looked around at the mob of Miradorn drunks crowding Carol, Corsi, and Rennan at the bar. "Where to begin?" said Ti-Lat, and everyone in the room roared with laughter.

Finally, thought Carol. Some honest answers. The kind you don't get at a grade-school assembly.

"Excuse me," said another male Miradorn bar patron, tapping Carol on the shoulder. "I seem to have run dry."

The man's female twin tapped Carol's other shoulder, raised an empty glass, and turned it over. Only a single drop ran out. "This mysterious dry spell seems to have affected me as well."

Smiling, Carol waved at the bartender. "Another round for everyone," she said, "and it's on Starfleet!"

Every Miradorn in the barroom groaned and groused at once. Corsi looked alarmed, scanning the discontented crowd for signs of impending violence, but Carol wasn't worried. As long as Rennan, with his Betazoid sensitivities, looked relaxed—which he did—Carol knew that the danger was minimal.

Meanwhile, the information that she was getting was worth every Miradorn credit that she spent in Pash-Ta's Place. Where better to find out what people really thought than at a bar? Carol was growing happier with each passing minute that she had insisted on finding a place like this immediately after she and her team had escaped from Brag-Ret and Sog-Ret at the grade school.

With a fresh round in the offing, Ti-Lat downed his remaining half glass of lavender-colored liquid and slammed the glass down on the bar for a refill. "So what do I like the least about the Federation, huh?" he said gruffly, which was how he said everything. "I've got one word for ya: synthehol!"

The crowd in the bar erupted in laughter and shouts of agreement. "How do you people drink that swill?" hollered someone. "You can't even get an honest hangover!" said someone else.

Corsi looked alarmed again, but Rennan stayed cool. "I can't argue with you on that one," Carol said with a rueful nod. "So what else don't you like?"

A disheveled Miradorn woman who had a crazy look in her eye and smelled like she hadn't bathed in a long time stumbled in front of Ti-Lat. "Tellarites!" she said, her toxic breath blasting Carol square in the face.

“What an obnoxious bunch!” someone said from the crowd. “It doesn’t say much for your Federation, having them as members!”

“I say cut ’em loose!” said the crazy-eyed woman, giving Carol another blast of rancid breath.

Carol smiled as she thought of Tev. “I’ll pass it along,” she said. “What else don’t you like?”

“The Prime Directive!” someone shouted.

Everyone roared in agreement. “Ooo, look at me,” Ti-Lat said in a high-pitched voice. “I’m too good to interfere in the affairs of primitive species, even though they’re the ones who need my help the most!”

“Too good?” hollered a man from the back of the room. “How about too greedy? They don’t want to share what they’ve got!”

“And the Miradorn made a name for themselves without them!” said Ti-Lat. “When the Federation turned us down a hundred years ago, we managed to find other friends to help us!”

Rennan leaned past Corsi to catch Carol’s eye. “The Prime Directive was applied here?” he said to her.

Carol nodded. “Long story,” she said, hoping Rennan would read her mind or at least her expression and catch on that now was not the best time to go into it.

As always, Rennan got the message. He closed his mouth and leaned back without further comment.

“Primitive?” said Ti-Lat. “They called the Miradorn primitive?”

“We’re superior!” said the crazy-eyed woman.

“Why, the Federation’s nothing but a bunch of pugla yort,” said Ti-Lat.

“‘Half-mades,’” Carol said quietly in answer to Corsi’s questioning look.

Ti-Lat caught the exchange and nosed in close to Corsi. “You’re incomplete,” he said, wobbling a bit from the intoxicants he’d been drinking. “Well, except for the relatively small percentage of twins you put out.”

“Small compared to us!” said the crazy-eyed woman. “We’re practically all twins!”

“You’re only half there!” said a huge, bald Miradorn man with glittering tattoos on his scalp and arms.

“How can you expect us to respect you if you’re only half as good as we are?”

Carol nodded solemnly, taking in what was going around. Ti-Lat and the others were giving her valuable insights; though she had been aware of Miradorn prejudice toward nontwin Miradorn, she had not known that it extended to other species, and she had not known that it was as deep-seated as it seemed to be among the bar patrons. It was a fascinating contrast to the rah-rah attitudes that Carol’s handlers had treated her to in the string of staged pro-Federation events.

The big question now was, were these resentments typical of the general population of New Mirada? And if they were, how might they manifest themselves in future dealings with the Federation?

Carol had a feeling that Brag-Ret and Sog-Ret would have simultaneous strokes if they knew what the Federation visitors were hearing right now.

“Anyway,” said Ti-Lat, slapping Carol on the back. “No hard feelings, right? I mean, this is all between friends, of course.”

“Of course,” Carol said with a smile. “We’re all friends here.”

“Make no mistake,” said Ti-Lat. “We might not be crazy about the Federation, but we sure need you ever since the Dominion left us high and dry.”

Corsi raised an eyebrow. “You need us for what?”

Ti-Lat drained the last drops of lavender liquid from his glass and turned it upside down. “We’re broke,” he said with a cockeyed grin. “We liked the Dominion, we really did, but they cleaned us out.”

“We don’t wanna marry you,” said a man in the back, “but we sure could use a little Federation aid right now.”

“So what you’re saying is, you don’t like the Federation,” said Carol.

“That’s exactly right!” shouted someone.

“Not a bit!” said someone else.

“You don’t like our synthehol or our Prime Directive,” said Carol, “and you think we’re inferiorpugla yort.”

Ti-Lat nodded thoughtfully. “I’d say that about sums it up.”

“But you want assistance from the Federation,” said Carol, “because the Dominion, whom you did like, plundered Mirada’s treasury.”

“Yes,” said Ti-Lat. “That’s right.”

“Don’t forget how we need another round of drinks,” said the crazy-eyed woman, waving a glass in Corsi’s face.

“Gee,” said Corsi. “You people sure make it hard to say no.”

Carol just grinned. Strangely enough, she was glad to hear that the Miradorn didn’t like the Federation.

More accurately, she was glad to hear the truth, because she had sensed it all along.

“Another round it is,” she said. “And we’ll start it with a toast. To the United Federation of Planets!”

As Carol raised her glass high, every Miradorn in the room jeered and groaned... which just made her smile widen.

Chapter 10

In addition to her skills as a restorationist, and apparently a changeling technology whiz, Em-Lin had a special talent that was becoming increasingly evident: she was great at rubbing Sonya Gomez the wrong way.

This talent began to show up shortly after the booby traps in the shrine of Ho'nig were shut down. Em-Lin had deactivated most of them with her handy changeling multitool, and Soloman had cleaned up the rest with a morphic computer virus that he'd whipped up on the fly.

As the dust settled, Dr. Elizabeth Lense treated Em-Lin's side, patching the wound left behind by the flying pitchfork. Lense had been outside the shrine during the booby trap barrage, which Gomez knew was a good thing; Lense was pregnant, the result of a relationship she'd had while shipwrecked on a dangerous planet in an alternate universe. We really need to get her an assistant, Gomez thought, not for the first time. However, when she brought it up with Elizabeth, the doctor brushed the notion off.

Pressed for time because of the approaching pilgrimage, Gomez debriefed Em-Lin while Lense ran the dermal regenerator over the wound site. It was the first time Gomez had had a chance to talk to Em-Lin. It only took nine words for Em-Lin to get on Gomez's bad side.

"I thought you were supposed to preserve the shrine." Those were the nine magic words with which Em-Lin managed to get off on the wrong foot with Gomez.

Though Gomez had been predisposed to think well of Em-Lin after the way she'd helped end the booby trap crisis, Em-Lin had pretty much thrown all her goodwill out the window in one heave. "That was never our primary objective," said Gomez, "but we certainly did our best to achieve it."

"Right." Em-Lin took a long, meaningful look around the shrine. "This is your best."

If a big cartoon thermometer were measuring Gomez's rising temper at that moment, the tip of the thermometer would have been throbbing red, radiating rippling heat lines, just about ready to explode.

"No one died," Gomez said tightly. "Given the level of difficulty involved, I'd say that's best enough for me."

Em-Lin shook her head and kept looking around at the damage, of which there was plenty. Gomez followed her gaze, further annoyed because she could understand why Em-Lin was so unhappy with what she saw.

The massive chamber was scarred and charred from one end to the other. The altar had been obliterated, and eight of the sixteen columns around it had been toppled. The floor was littered with debris from shattered statues and smashed reliquaries. The wildly colorful and intricate mural spanning the vaulted ceiling had been smudged by clouds of smoke and dust.

"Two years," said Em-Lin. "My sister and I worked two years to restore this place. She died restoring this place. Now all that work is gone."

Because of the Dominion, thought Gomez. Because your people joined the Dominion and gave the

Dominion the run of the place. Don't forget that part.

At the same time she thought it, though, Gomez felt sorry for Em-Lin. It wasn't like she personally had forged the alliance with the Dominion. However Em-Lin looked at it, she was the victim of circumstances beyond her control.

Gomez shifted gears to focus Em-Lin away from what had been lost. "Thanks to you, the damage wasn't as bad as it could have been," she said. "That changeling device of yours was extremely effective in interacting with the morphic systems."

Em-Lin patted the hip pocket of her burgundy coveralls, as if to reassure herself that the device was still there. Suddenly, then, she cocked her head to one side, as if she were listening to something that Gomez could not hear.

"What is it?" said Gomez.

Em-Lin shook her head. "Nothing."

Gomez cleared her throat. "You saved some lives here today. If that quantum bomb had gone off, we'd all be dead right now."

Em-Lin had a distracted look on her face. She looked away, then back, then away from Gomez again. "I was trying to save the shrine," she said. "That's all."

In other words, our lives don't matter to you. Gomez sighed. I get it.

Lense, who was medicating Em-Lin's side via hypospray, looked up from her work and rolled her eyes for Gomez's benefit.

All right then, thought Gomez. No more niceties. You want strictly business, you've got it.

"The changeling device," she said. "It's a leftover from the Dominion?"

"No," said Em-Lin. "Our scientists based it on Dominion morphic tech, but it's strictly Miradorn design."

That piece of information gave Gomez new respect for the Miradorn scientists. "Our team's setting up to break through into the lower chamber. We've detected signs of functioning Dominion equipment there. Any ideas what we might find?"

Em-Lin shrugged. "I didn't even know the chamber existed until today." Her eyes drifted away from Gomez, and she resumed staring into space.

"Given the knowledge you seem to have of Dominion technology, we can use your help," said Gomez. "Whatever's down there could be a hazard to the pilgrims."

"I'm sure the pilgrims will have the best Chala Ho'nig yet," said Em-Lin, "what with the shrine in ruins and all."

"Not exactly ruins," said Gomez.

"Not yet, maybe," said Em-Lin.

The cartoon thermometer was now straining to burst. “Let’s just see if we can prevent anyone else from dying. How does that grab you?”

Em-Lin did not answer. She was too busy staring into space. Her eyes slid from side to side as if she were following the movements of something invisible to Gomez and Lense.

Pika Ven-Sa had mentioned earlier that Em-Lin was haunted after the death of her twin. Was that what Em-Lin kept staring at—the ghost of her sister?

Gomez could not quite suppress a shiver as Em-Lin’s eyes slid closer and closer, as if whatever they were following was moving over to stand right next to Gomez herself.

Whatever or whoever.

Clapping her hands together, Gomez said, “Okay then. What’s the good word, Elizabeth?” When Lense didn’t respond, Gomez repeated her name.

“Hm? Oh, sorry, Commander.” Lense closed her medkit and nodded. “She’s good to go.”

I am definitely having that conversation about an assistant with Elizabeth again—maybe this time with the captain in the room. “Follow me, Em-Lin,” said Gomez, taking a quick step away from the spot where she had been standing. “Let’s find out what’s down below.”

On her way past the space that Em-Lin had been watching, Gomez felt another shiver, though she knew that she had much more to fear from a functioning Dominion facility than any supposed ghost.

Chapter 11

“Andfire !” said Pattie, watching as the blinding golden beam of the phaser drill punched straight down into the crater in the floor of the shrine. The beam stabbed at the tiny hole in the obsidian-like shielding, sending up showers of sparks.

This was the same spot where Em-Lin’s sister had been killed by an exploding booby trap; even after all the other explosions and weapons fire in the shrine, this was still the only site where the Dominion shielding under the floor had been breached.

The job now was to turn a pinhole into a hatchway through which people and equipment could pass. The good news was, according to Pattie’s analysis, the shielding was practically impenetrable, a smart changeling tech product that could reshape itself to prevent penetration, but the section of shielding around the pinhole had been effectively “killed” by the explosion. The shielding’s reformative capabilities had been negated.

Now, it was just a matter of applying the proper force to the right points around the pinhole. Done correctly, the procedure could cut a good-size hole in the shielding without sending the ceiling crashing down on whatever was in the chamber below it.

Pattie, of course, knew no other way to do the job other than correctly.

She had ordered the phaser drill from the *Vinci* and retrieved it from a beam-down site outside the zone of interference around the shrine. With help from Fabian, she had set it up on a tripod over the crater.

So long as she wasn't about to set off some undetected last-ditch booby trap, everything would work out fine.

As Pattie continued to steer the drill and watch the readouts on her tricorder, she heard someone walk up behind her. "What's our status?" said Commander Gomez, raising her voice over the loud whine of the drill.

Turning, Pattie saw that Gomez was accompanied by the Miradorn woman, Em-Lin. Pattie could see that Em-Lin was in a terrible mood—not that she could blame her, after what had happened to her sister and the shrine.

"We've punched through several points in the weakened section of the shield," said Pattie. "Time to connect the dots."

Pattie tweaked the drill's control panel, and the phaser beam slowly traced a wide arc around the circle of pinholes that she had cut. Sparks and smoke leaped out of the crater as the beam sliced through the obsidian shielding, leaving a fiery red track in the black material.

"Even without its changeling properties, this is still tough stuff," said Pattie. "Its tolerances are unbelievably high. I'd say it's a good thing the Dominion didn't deploy it during the war."

"We didn't see any of this changeling tech during the war," said Gomez. "I wonder if the Dominion was holding back, or if it was just a late development?"

Gomez had directed her question at Em-Lin but got no response. In fact, Em-Lin was turned away from Gomez, gazing at something that Pattie could not see.

Pattie had been around enough to know that just because she couldn't see it, that didn't mean that something wasn't there. Grabbing her tricorder, she quickly recalibrated it and aimed it in the general direction of the space at which Em-Lin was staring.

But according to the tricorder, there was nothing more in the empty space than met Pattie's eyes. If, as the priest had suggested, Em-Lin was being haunted, the ghost was undetectable by conventional sensors.

"Too bad there's no one here who used to work for the Dominion," Gomez said loudly, staring hard at Em-Lin. "Maybe they could answer our questions about changeling tech."

In addition to ignoring Gomez's comments, Em-Lin walked away without explanation.

Gomez shook her head and blew out her breath in frustration. She hiked a thumb in the direction of Em-Lin, who was still walking away. "This is the same woman who shut down half the Jem'Hadar booby traps and saved all our lives an hour ago."

"I get the impression her tolerances aren't quite as high as the Dominion shielding's," said Pattie, wiggling her antennae for emphasis.

Gomez sighed. "Let me know when you're done here," she said, starting after Em-Lin.

"Commander," said Pattie. "Something just occurred to me."

Gomez stopped. "What's that?"

"What if the Dominion wasn't holding back the changeling tech because it could help them win the war?" said Pattie. "What if they abandoned it because it's somehow too dangerous to use?"

"And we might be about to encounter great peril because of it?" said Gomez.

"Exactly," said Pattie.

"Then I'd say that would be pretty much par for the course, wouldn't you?" said Gomez, shooting Pattie a wink before scooting off after Em-Lin.

Pattie made the tinkling sound that was her equivalent of human laughter and turned back to the controls of the phaser drill.

Chapter 12

So maybe the truth isn't always such a great thing, thought Carol Abramowitz as the burly, curly-haired Miradorn male tied her to a chair. Maybe I was better off not knowing just how much the Miradorn dislike the Federation.

While Carol was being strapped to the chair, she watched the Miradorn's twin shackle the unconscious Corsi to an overhead metal beam in the dungeonlike basement. Rennan already hung alongside her, also out cold, his face bruised and swollen and his uniform torn.

As outcomes went, this was the opposite of optimal. Thanks to the magic of twenty-twenty hindsight, Carol realized that it had also been highly avoidable.

If only she had not bought that one last round of drinks back at Pash-Ta's. She should have known, as rowdy as the crowd had gotten, that she was pushing her luck. Sure enough, one drink too many per discontented Miradorn, and the gang had turned ugly. Rennan had sensed it coming, but by then, the first glass was already flying across the room toward Corsi's head.

Sadly, the turn for the worse had not ended with a beating at the hands of a bunch of drunken Miradorn. It just so happened that a pair of lowlife opportunists had been lurking among the crowd, and they had quickly seized the chance to capture the away team for their own purposes—which only now were becoming clear to Carol.

There was just one problem.

"There's no money in the Federation!" she said when one of the burly Miradorn finally removed the gag from her mouth.

The man, whose name was Zhik-Wu, sneered at Carol. "Everybody knows the Federation's rich," he said. "They'll pay to get you back!"

"You don't understand," said Carol, fighting to keep the exasperation she felt from slipping into her voice. "We have a cashless society. No money to pay ransoms with."

"You can't bluff us," said Zhik-Wu's twin brother, Pre-Wu, from across the room. The only visible difference between the twins was that Pre-Wu's blond hair was long and straight, while Zhik-Wu's was curly. "The cash'll turn up when they see we have a couple of Starfleets for sale."

Carol watched with morbid interest as Pre-Wu set up a video camera on a tripod in front of Corsi and Rennan. As Carol realized what the consequences of her little miscalculation in Pash-Ta's would be, her heart not only sank, it plunged right through one side of the planet and out the other.

The Wu brothers were going to transmit images of the away team to Starfleet to support their ransom demands.

It would be a long time before any of the captured teammates lived down this embarrassment. . . especially Corsi, whose reputation as "Core-Breach" was fueled by legends of her prowess in battle. Her hardcore rep would not exactly get a boost from shots of her shackled in a basement, not to mention stories of how she had ended up there after a mere barroom brawl.

And it was all because Carol had wanted to find out what the Miradorn really thought about the Federation.

"So," she said. "Are you going to shoot some holos for your diary?"

"Just showing off the merchandise," said Pre-Wu, tapping commands into a handheld computing device. "We're going to broadcast direct to Starfleet Command."

Carol rolled her eyes and let her head slump, chin touching her chest. Please, not Starfleet Command, she thought. We will never live this down.

"What do you think?" Zhik-Wu said to his brother. "A million bars of gold-pressed latinum per hostage?"

"We can do better," said Pre-Wu. "How about a million and a half?"

Carol raised her head from her chest. "Did I mention that the Federation's a cashless society?" she said.

"Why not ask for two million apiece?" said Zhik-Wu. "It can't hurt to ask, can it?"

"Then I say three," Pre-Wu said with a greedy grin that exposed the worst dental care that Carol had yet seen on New Mirada. "I think that's good."

"I think that's our magic number," said Zhik-Wu, reaching out to shake Pre-Wu's hand.

"For the last time," said Carol, "the Federation has no currency. When you make your ransom demand, that is exactly what they will tell you."

Zhik-Wu stared at Carol with a bemused expression on his face, then looked up at the ceiling. "Hey!" he

hollered, directing his voice upward. “They’re trying to tell us the Federation has no money!”

“Lies!” said a voice from upstairs, what sounded like the voice of an old woman. “The Federation is loaded !”

“There.” Zhik-Wu smirked smugly at Carol. “You see?”

“Who was that?” said Carol, looking up at the ceiling.

“Mother,” said Pre-Wu. “She knows everything.”

Carol felt like she was trapped in a truly bizarre nightmare. “That’s good,” she said, “because in that case, I’ve got a few questions for her.”

“You’re lucky you were lying,” said Zhik-Wu, adjusting some controls on his handheld computer.

“Why is that?” said Carol.

Suddenly, the old woman’s voice again shouted down from above. “Because if we aren’t paid by the deadline,” she said, “we’ll have to start killing hostages.”

“That’s our ultimatum,” said Pre-Wu.

“So it’s a good thing the Federation’s loaded,” said Zhik-Wu.

Carol looked up, wondering just how good the old bat’s hearing was. Then, she looked down, wondering if a day that had started out so harmlessly could possibly end with her or one of her teammates stone-cold dead at the hands of a couple of Miradorn morons.

Chapter 13

Thank you for coming down here, sister,said Or-Lin’s voice in Em-Lin’s head.This place will be your tomb, and we will be together forever in death.

Em-Lin stood frozen as the others continued ahead of her, fanning out in the dark Dominion chamber under the shrine of Ho’nig. Or-Lin’s voice had become stronger and clearer than ever, as if Or-Lin herself were becoming more real.

Do not be afraid. I will be with you every step of the way as you die.

Em-Lin took a deep breath and tried to steady herself. The beam from the wrist beacon on her right arm shook in time with the shivers rippling through her body.

It was getting harder for her to hold herself together, which she knew was not a good thing right now. She had accompanied the Starfleet team and their Miradorn security escort in descending through the hatchway that Pattie had cut into the secret Dominion chamber, and who knew what fresh dangers lurked around her.

Em-Lin turned slowly in a half circle, casting the light from her wrist beacon at the banks of dormant equipment lining the walls. She wondered where Or-Lin would appear next and what thedugo tenya would say when next she whispered in Em-Lin's ear.

She wondered also how Or-Lin could possibly be growing stronger and more real. Typically, adugo tenya faded away as time passed, completely disappearing after days, weeks, or months, depending on the nature of the traumatic death and the force of the twins' original bond.

To Em-Lin's mind, the strengthening of Or-Lin'sdugo tenya could mean one of three things: Em-Lin was losing her mind; Or-Lin was not a figment of Em-Lin's mind at all, but a genuine ghost (though Em-Lin had never believed in such things before); or...

Or Or-Lin was not the dead one, and Em-Lin was the one who was fading away.

Suddenly, someone touched Em-Lin's shoulder. With a cry of surprise, she leaped away from the contact, heart thundering as if it had enlarged to fill her entire chest.

Whipping the wrist beacon around, Em-Lin caught a face in the bright circle of light. It was a familiar face, but not the one that she had expected to see, not Or-Lin's.

It was Vance Hawkins of Starfleet.

"Sorry if I spooked you," he said. "You probably shouldn't separate from the group down here."

"Oh...no, that's..." Em-Lin's breathing was fast, and her pulse raced. She pressed her hand to her chest, trying to regain control of herself. "No problem."

Em-Lin saw an unmistakable glint of concern in Vance's eyes. "Are you sure you're all right?" he said, squinting against the beam of the beacon. "I can send you back up to the shrine with Kim or T'Mandra until we get the lights on down here."

"No...thank you. I'm fine." Em-Lin swung the beacon away from him. Just as she did so, she thought she saw something behind him. Something or someone.

A shape at the edge of the light. Something or someone in the darkness, less than a meter away.

Em-Lin swung the beacon back around to Vance, but the shape was no longer behind him. Instead of relief, however, Em-Lin felt more anxious than before, wondering where exactly the shape had gone and what it had been.

Vance threw up an arm to shield his eyes from the light. "How about if we catch up with the others?"

"Sure," said Em-Lin, her voice shaking as she peered into the darkness around her. She heard a rustling noise then, and she spun, cutting the shadows with her wrist-beacon. The light caught just the tail end of something moving fast, flickering past.

"Em-Lin?" said Vance, taking hold of her right arm.

You will not leave this place alive,said Or-Lin's voice, whispering in Em-Lin's left ear, after which Or-Lin giggled softly.

Em-Lin's skin crawled, and she threw herself at Vance, anchoring herself to the one living person she could find in the darkness.

It was just then that the chamber filled with light.

Immediately, Em-Lin looked all around for a sign of the dugo tenya . She found nothing.

"Excuse me," said Vance, gently freeing himself from her grip. "All clear, ma'am."

Em-Lin pulled away and straightened her burgundy coveralls. She felt embarrassed, but just a little. Her fear of the lurking dugo tenya, be it a figment of her traumatized mind or an actual haunting spirit, was still her foremost emotion.

"Shall we?" said Vance, gesturing toward the rest of his teammates, who were gathered around a huge, glowing tank filled with liquid in the middle of the massive chamber. "I don't want to miss anything."

Em-Lin nodded. She even managed a small, quick smile. As little as she cared for Starfleeters after her experience at the Rasha Nom depot during the war, there was something about Vance that she liked, something that impressed her even in the thick of her conflict with the dugo tenya .

"Me either," she said, starting forward, listening as she walked for a set of following footsteps that did not belong to Vance: the footsteps of her dead twin sister.

Chapter 14

"It looks like a lava lamp," said Fabian, gazing appreciatively into the transparent, red-tinted tank in the heart of the vast chamber under the shrine. "Only a lot bigger."

The tank was several meters in diameter and extended high overhead, almost to the ceiling. It fattened as it descended toward a bulge at the base, resembling a laboratory flask.

A ring of instrumentation encircled the base, complete with control panels, monitors, and sensor prods extending into the tank itself. Clumps of some kind of protoplasmic substance were suspended in the liquid inside the tank, constantly oozing together and flowing apart to form new configurations.

"What's a lava lamp?" said Gomez.

"A late-twentieth-century tabletop lighting device," said Fabian, "as you would know if you ever accepted the invitation to join me in my Disco Kung Fu Superstar '76 holo-program."

"What's disco?" said Pattie.

"Never mind," Fabian said with an exasperated wave. Something told him that instead of trying to explain disco to a Nasat, he should quit while he was ahead. "So what's it supposed to do?"

Soloman sat at one of the control terminals mounted at the base of the giant tank. "Unknown at this time," he said, a trace of annoyance in his voice. "The morphic systems down here are incredibly robust. They are resisting my efforts to crack the programming or database."

“Guesses, anyone?” said Gomez, slowly walking around the base of the tank.

“No guess yet, but I have information,” said Pattie, standing up on her hind legs and aiming her tricorder at the tank. “The clumps in the tank are similar in composition to Em-Lin’s changeling multitool, which in turn bears a strong resemblance to Founder physiology.”

“Could it be a Founder nursery, maybe?” said Fabian, reaching out to touch the surface of the tank. A jolt of static electricity snapped the tip of his finger as he made contact. The tank’s surface felt warm and surprisingly rough to the touch, like gritty sandpaper.

“There’s biochemical activity,” said Lense, scanning the tank with a tricorder on the opposite side from Pattie. “I’m reading neuroelectric activity as well, but no cellular mitosis. No cell division. The organic clusters could be fetal life-forms in some sort of cryogenic suspension, but they’re not growing and developing right now.”

“Maybe it’s some kind of supercomputer,” said Fabian, “utilizing cultured changeling material to process information the way we use bioneural gel-packs.”

“Whatever it is,” said Gomez, “I think it might be a prototype. An experimental construct. I’ve never seen or read about anything quite like it being used by the Dominion.”

“There we go.” Soloman lifted his hands away from the keyboard that they had been battering. “I think I just about have it. I should be inside the secure shell in a matter of minutes.”

“Great,” said Gomez, and then she turned to Em-Lin, who was standing off to one side with Vance. As usual, Em-Lin looked thoroughly distracted, staring off into space with a troubled frown knotting her features. “Em-Lin.” Gomez raised her voice to cut through whatever vision was holding the Miradorn’s attention. “Em-Lin. You’ve had experience with changeling technology. Any thoughts on this device?”

When Em-Lin did not respond, Vance gently elbowed her in the side. Em-Lin’s focus swung back to everyone else’s shared reality instead of whatever was going on in her head, though she was confused enough that Gomez had to repeat her question.

Back on track, Em-Lin stepped closer to the giant tank. She gazed up at it, the glow from within suffusing her pearly skin with a red tint.

“I don’t have a clue,” she said, “but I’m not really qualified to judge. I was basically a menial laborer.”

Fabian shot Gomez a look, frowning at what he considered to be an obvious lie. Shutting down all those Jem’Hadar booby traps had not been the work of a menial laborer.

Gomez nodded in agreement. “A menial laborer who can manipulate sophisticated Dominion technology with ease. What exactly was the nature of this ‘menial labor,’ anyway?”

Fabian watched Em-Lin for a reaction, but he was disappointed. Her attention had already drifted to whatever invisible distraction lay on the floor at her feet.

“Em-Lin?” said Gomez. “Hello?”

“Good timing on the zone-out,” said Fabian. “I’m starting to wonder if she really sees anything there

after all.”

“Coincidentally, I was just wondering the same thing,” said Gomez, glowering at Em-Lin.

It was just then, after Gomez spoke, that four things happened in a row. They happened so close together that Fabian immediately decided they were connected.

The first thing that happened was that Soloman got up from his chair at the control panel and said, “I’m in. I’m through the shell.”

The second thing that happened was that the giant red tank suddenly changed color, shifting to bright yellow, and started to rotate. Inside the tank, the protoplasmic clumps began to spin, swirling in circles and accelerating the speed at which they merged and split apart.

The third thing that happened was that the Miradorn security personnel, Yet-Nu and Boz-Nu, started screaming hysterically. Yet-Nu dropped to the floor, and Boz-Nu bounced his head repeatedly against the side of the tank.

The fourth thing that happened was this: Em-Lin also screamed and fell to the floor. “Get away from me!” she said, throwing her hands protectively over her head and looking up in terror as if someone were standing over her. “Leave me alone!”

As Vance rushed to Em-Lin’s side and Soloman leaped back into his chair and resumed attacking the keyboard, Fabian shrugged. “I’m pretty sure we’re about to find out what this thing is supposed to do. What do you want to bet it’s extremely dangerous and nearly unstoppable?”

Chapter 15

“Since you have failed to meet our ransom demands,” said Zhik-Wu, “we must kill our first hostage. Which one will it be?”

Slowly, Zhik-Wu turned in a circle, pointing the tip of the long, jagged blade at Corsi, then continuing on to Rennan.

He stopped at Carol. “I choose this one,” he said, shaking the knife in Carol’s direction. “No one can save her! She dies now, and her death will be on your head, Federation!”

As Zhik-Wu took a step toward her, Carol shook her head. “Too over the top. And since you insist on going with the line about the Federation’s head, I’d at least make it ‘heads,’ okay?”

“She’s right!” said Mother Wu from upstairs. “Make it ‘heads’!”

“All right, all right.” Zhik-Wu looked sick and tired of being told what to do. He ruffled the heap of curly blond hair atop his head and shuffled over to Pre-Wu, who stood behind the camera.

“You know what I think? I think you’re ready to go live.” Pre-Wu grinned and slapped Zhik-Wu on the back. “You’re gonna make us rich, brother!”

Carol's heart beat faster as she realized that Zhik-Wu was done rehearsing his part. At her urging, he had practiced for the last hour or so, running through what he would say during each broadcast—from the initial demands to the killing of the hostages. She had done her best to drag things out, making as many suggestions as she dared and delaying the first broadcast to Starfleet—until now.

Any minute now, the Wu brothers would shoot images of their prisoners to Starfleet Command. Everyone would know that Carol had made a dumb mistake, and that Corsi and Rennan had been caught flat-footed in a bar fight.

At least it wouldn't matter for long, once the Wu brothers killed their hostages, which, inevitably, they would do when the cashless society of the Federation failed to pay the ransom.

So there was a silver lining to this whole mess after all, Carol supposed.

"Do I look okay?" Zhik-Wu asked his brother.

Pre-Wu brushed a stray curl back from Zhik-Wu's forehead and nodded proudly. "Just relax. Reach across the link to me if you get nervous."

"What are you waiting for down there?" shouted Mother Wu. "Do you want me to call Starfleet myself?"

"No, Mother," Zhik-Wu and Pre-Wu said at the same time.

"Then let's go!" said Mother Wu. "I'm getting bored!"

The brothers looked up at the ceiling and shook their heads, then smiled at each other.

"I've got a good feeling about this," said Zhik-Wu, walking over to stand in front of the camera.

"You're going to knock 'em dead," said Pre-Wu, giving his brother a big thumbs-up sign.

It was just then, at that exact moment, that the Wu brothers started screaming.

They fell to the floor at the same time, writhing and clutching at their heads. Zhik-Wu knocked over the camera, which crashed down on Pre-Wu, but Pre-Wu was so completely caught up in his own agony that he didn't seem to notice.

Whatever affected the brothers, however, did not seem to have touched Mother Wu. "What's going on down there? Boys? Are you all right?"

Carol watched the twins thrashing on the floor in front of her. Just moments ago, they had been talking about killing her and her teammates, but she still felt compelled to try to help them.

"They're in pain," she said, shouting over the twins' screaming to reach Mother Wu. "It seemed to hit them both at the same time."

"I'll be right down!" Mother Wu sounded intensely annoyed instead of deeply worried about her sons. "And I will warn you right now—I'm ready for you, Starfleetie!"

"What does she think you're going to do?" said Corsi. "Talk her into hurting herself?"

Surprised, Carol looked in the direction of her shackled teammates. Sure enough, Corsi's eyes were wide open and staring back at her.

"Domenica!" said Carol, glad that her friend was awake, if not especially mobile. "If you're about done hanging around over there, we could use a foolproof escape plan right about now."

"Looks like we've already got a distraction," said Corsi, nodding toward the screaming Miradorn twins on the floor. "Just throw me a phaser rifle, and I'll get us out of here in nothing flat."

"It's a deal," said Carol, "just as soon as you cut through my bonds and set me free."

Corsi smirked. "I'll take care of that in a minute, just as soon as I figure out what story I'm going to write up in my mission report instead of the actual truth."

At that moment, a shrill voice cut through the commotion. "What did you do to my boys?" Following the harsh sound of that voice, Carol looked over and up, spotting the voice's possessor as she cautiously descended a spiral stairway in a corner of the basement.

Carol immediately recognized the voice as belonging to Mother Wu. She did not, however, connect the real Mother Wu with the image of the ancient, wrinkled, hunchbacked hag that she had built up in her mind to go with that sharp voice. Mother Wu, as it turned out, was pretty, petite, and much younger than Carol had imagined. Her hair was long and black and glossy, without a trace of gray, and her skin was smooth as a peach. She looked too young, in fact, to have two grown sons like Zhik-Wu and Pre-Wu.

She did not look out of place, however, handling the double-barreled Jem'Hadar disruptor rifle that she was keeping trained on Carol.

"Do I look like I could do anything to your boys?" said Carol, straining against her bonds for emphasis. "I was hoping that you could tell me what happened. They both started screaming and dropped to the floor at the same time."

As Mother Wu crossed the room, she narrowed her eyes at Carol, sizing her up. Without shifting the rifle's aim away from Carol, she swung her attention to Zhik-Wu and Pre-Wu on the floor.

As Zhik-Wu screamed and twisted at her feet, Mother Wu stared down at him. "What's wrong with you?" she said, loud enough to be heard over his cries. "Tell me what's wrong!"

Zhik-Wu kept screaming hysterically with eyes clamped shut and fingers clawing at his skull.

"Do these look like the symptoms of any Miradorn illness you know of?" Carol said to Mother Wu.

"Brain fever, maybe," said Mother Wu, "but their skin hasn't turned orange yet."

"Maybe you should get a doctor," said Carol.

"I don't trust doctors," said Mother Wu.

"Then maybe you should untie me and let me help," said Carol.

"I'll call a doctor," said Mother Wu, and then she went back upstairs.

Five minutes later, she returned to the basement. The expression on her face was equal parts mystified and highly irritated.

“What?” said Carol. “What is it?”

“I can’t find a doctor,” said Mother Wu. “I can’t find anyone to help.”

“Why?” said Carol.

“Everyone in the city has come down with the same thing that Zhik and Pre have,” said Mother Wu. “According to the news broadcasts, the whole world seems to be coming down with it.”

Chapter 16

Now, now, said Or-Lin as she bent down over Em-Lin. Try to calm down, sister. It isn’t the end of the world, is it?

Em-Lin shivered, staring up wide-eyed from the floor of the Dominion chamber. Somehow, Or-Lin had become more real, manifesting for the first time since her death so that Em-Lin could perceive her with multiple senses at once. Em-Lin could hear her, see her, and feel her touch all at the same time, as if she were still alive right there in the room with her.

This, to Em-Lin, was not a welcome change. Her resurrected sister had the same twisted edge that she had been flaunting since the explosion that had killed her.

Death isn’t what it used to be, apparently. Especially down here. Or-Lin smiled as she looked around the chamber, her gaze lingering on the giant tank at its heart. Ironic, isn’t it? If that bomb hadn’t blown me up, no one would have found this place and come down here. You wouldn’t have brought me here, and I wouldn’t have gotten such a big post-life recharge.

“Em-Lin?” Another voice broke through then, a voice that Em-Lin recognized as Vance’s. “Can you hear me?” She tried to focus on that voice and block out Or-Lin’s, but she felt sluggish and had trouble tuning out her sister.

“Go away!” said Em-Lin, but Or-Lin continued to smile down at her. For his part, Vance looked uncertain as to whether or not he was the one Em-Lin was telling to leave.

Slowly, Or-Lin shook her head. I’m not going anywhere, big sister. Thanks to the Vorta’s device and the little Bynar, I’ll be with you all the time now.

“What?” Em-Lin’s heart raced at the thought of the dugo tenya becoming a permanent part of her life. She had loved her sister when she was alive—except at the end, when Or-Lin had threatened her with Division—and she did not wish her ill now that she was dead, but she knew that going through life with a dugo tenya would be enough to drive her out of her mind.

The little Bynar hasn’t mastered changeling programming yet, said Or-Lin. He accidentally ramped up the system’s output far ahead of schedule. The good news is, the power boost made me more real than ever.

The bad news is, the system is out of control and will pretty much wipe out the Miradorn species.

“Em-Lin?” said Vance, his voice sounding very far away. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

I want us to get off on the right foot for our new arrangement,said Or-Lin.That’s why I’m going to help you fix the Founder’s device and save the day.

“I don’t want to fix it,” said Em-Lin.

Why not? After all, you helped build it in the first place.

* * *

“I’ve given them a mild sedative,” said Lense, withdrawing the hypo from Boz-Nu’s arm. “It’s limiting the expression of the seizures but not stopping them.”

“What’s causing them?” said Gomez, staring down at Boz-Nu and Yet-Nu on the floor. The two men squirmed and groaned fitfully, grimacing in agony as they clawed at their skulls.

“I’m still working it out,” said Lense. “The seizures originate in the overlobe, the part of the Miradorn cerebral cortex that governs the extrasensory linkage between twins. In both men, neural activity in the overlobe has exceeded all normal levels and become highly erratic. Em-Lin’s different, though.”

Gomez looked across the chamber to where Em-Lin sat back against a wall, talking to thin air while Vance tried to press a bottle of water into her hand.

“In what way?” said Gomez.

“A different region of her brain has been hyper-stimulated,” said Lense. “A lobe associated primarily with functions related to REM sleep and dreaming.”

“What’s the prognosis?” said Gomez.

“With Em-Lin, I have no idea,” said Lense. “The men, I believe, will eventually suffer permanent damage from the seizures. Perhaps fatal damage.” Lense let out a long breath.

“Are you okay, Elizabeth?” Gomez asked. The doctor looked a bit ashen and very fatigued.

“I’m fine. Just need to sit down for a second.”

Gomez didn’t buy that in the least, but there were more pressing issues. While Lense found a chair, Gomez walked to the control panels at the base of the tank and asked Soloman and Fabian, “Any idea how widespread the effect might be?”

“We’re still trying to figure out what the effectis,” Fabian said without turning from his work.

Better safe than sorry,thought Gomez. She touched the combadge on her chest. “Saf-Lig?” she said, calling the Miradorn security officer whose team was protecting the shrine above. She planned to instruct him to evacuate the entire local quadrant of the surrounding city in case the effect spread outward from the Dominion facility.

That was what she would have told him to do if he had answered her call, at least. She tried to reach him a total of five times before she gave up on him; she tried his twin brother, Gre-Lig, but got the same result.

It was then that she knew, even before she contacted theda Vinci, that the Miradorn seizure effect had done more damage than had been immediately apparent from the isolation of the Dominion facility.

Chapter 17

The street outside Mother Wu's house was filled with screaming Miradorn of all ages. Flames and smoke billowed out of the windows of nearby homes. In the distance, Carol saw a hovercar shoot from the sky at a steep angle and plunge toward the ground, its crash landing marked by an explosion.

"It's usually a quieter neighborhood than this," said Mother Wu. "I've never seen it like this before."

Carol nodded. She had a feeling of terrible awe at the chaos around her, amplified by the awareness that the same scene was taking place all over the planet of New Mirada at the same moment.

It was overwhelming. Carol was filled with the primal urge to run, to get away before whatever was destroying these people turned on her, too. At the same time, she felt torn in a thousand different directions because there were too many suffering people just in that one small area and she could never hope to help them all.

When the familiar shimmer of the transporter effect appeared in front of her, Carol immediately felt relieved. Four of her shipmates materialized, bringing with them the hope that even this apocalyptic disaster could somehow be averted.

Without waiting for introductions, Mother Wu pushed in front of Carol and eyed the new arrivals. "Which one's the doctor?" she said. "You?" She pointed the barrel of the disruptor rifle at the chest of Ellec Krotine, one of the two security guards who accompanied the medical team.

"Uh, no," the Boslic woman said quickly.

"Our doctor's on Zasharu," said Carol. Stepping forward, she gestured at the human woman standing beside Krotine. "Nurse Wetzal will do what she can for your boys."

Mother Wu looked disgusted, but she lowered the rifle. Carol had lived up to her end of the deal, summoning medical assistance from theda Vinci in return for being freed from her bonds in the basement.

Now it was time for Mother Wu to complete the bargain. "Why don't you show Nurse Wetzal where your sons are?" said Carol. "And while you're at it, unshackle my friends."

"All right, all right," said Mother Wu, heading back into the house. "Follow me." Sandy Wetzal fell into step behind her.

"How about that gun?" Carol shouted after them. Mother Wu blew out her breath and stomped back to Carol. "I expect it back," she said, tossing the rifle into Carol's arms.

It was the last provision of the deal between them. “Thanks,” said Carol. “And good luck with your boys.” Carol thought that was a pretty generous thing to say, considering the “boys” had kidnapped her and her team and threatened to kill them, but Mother Wu seemed unimpressed and marched away without another word.

“Such a sweet woman,” said Krotine dryly. “Why isn’t she screaming her lungs out and rolling around on the ground like all the other Miradorn out here?”

“I don’t know,” said Carol. “Maybe because she doesn’t have a twin? I haven’t seen one, anyway. It’s just a guess. Have the engineers been able to figure out what’s causing this?” She spread her arms wide to encompass the screaming madness all around them.

The other security guard, Madeleine Robins, said, “Whatever’s happening, it’s hit Zasharu, too. Apparently there’s some tech device in the old Dominion facility there. Tev’s taking a team down there to try to figure it out.”

Just then, a little girl with short brown hair hurled herself to the street in front of Carol, screaming and twitching. Not far away, her twin lay silent and still on the pavement, eyes and mouth gaping at the sky.

Dantas Falcão, the medical technician who had beamed down with the team at Carol’s request, ran to aid the twin. Carol was right behind her.

Chapter 18

“You want to know what’s causing the seizures?” said Fabian. “Everything.”

“Everything?” said Gomez.

“Everything,” said Fabian. “In a manner of speaking.”

“But not all at once,” said Soloman.

Gomez stood behind the two, watching as they worked at the control panels around the base of the tank. “Consider my curiosity aroused,” she said. “Tell me more.”

“This device is a transmitter,” said Fabian, thumping the transparent tank with his fist. “It’s broadcasting the signal that’s affecting the Miradorn’s overlobes and triggering the seizures.”

“We experienced difficulty isolating the signal,” said Soloman, “because it is a morphic signal. A changeling signal.”

“The type of transmission is constantly changing,” said Fabian. “It might start out as a subspace radio wave, then switch to an X-ray or ultraviolet light or electromagnetic radiation or a stream of tachyons or chronitons. While in transit, the signal cycles randomly through a multitude of types and frequencies of transmittable waves or particles.”

“Wow,” said Gomez. “How is that even possible?”

Fabian shrugged. "We haven't figured that out yet."

"But we know what happens when the signal is received by a Miradorn brain," Lense said from the floor, where she was treating Yet-Nu and Boz-Nu. "The signal turns the Miradorn's own linking abilities against them. The overlobe, which is already capable of sending and receiving neuroelectric signals, opens the floodgates. The overlobe goes into overdrive. It fires off bursts of neuroelectric energy in all directions like a porcupine firing quills, only continuously. It blasts other Miradorn minds and opens itself up to identical blasts from those other minds in turn."

Gomez thought for a moment. "But Miradorn should only be able to link with their twins, right?"

"Yes," said Lense. "This device effectively links much larger groups, though it does so in a destructive fashion."

"Larger," said Gomez. "How large? Do we know the range yet?"

Pattie spoke up from a control board on the opposite side of the tank. She was standing on her hind legs, manipulating controls with the pincers on her forelegs. "The entire moon," she said. "The signal strength from this transmitter is enough to reach all Miradorn on Zasharu."

"But not beyond?" said Gomez.

"Not beyond," said Pattie.

"But the same phenomenon is blanketing New Mirada," said Gomez. "Therefore..." She touched her combadge. "Gomez to Tev."

"Tev here." The huge, hysterical crowd in the background sounded even more hysterical than before.

"There's a second transmitter," said Gomez. "It must be on the surface of New Mirada."

"I suspected as much," said Tev.

Of course you did, thought Gomez. "Contact the da Vinci and initiate a search from orbit," she said.

"Leave it to those crazy Founders," said Fabian. "They set up twin transmitters to fry the minds of the Miradorn people, who are predominantly twins."

"For those who like a little irony with the suffering they inflict," said Gomez.

"You just described the Founders, all right," said Fabian.

"We'll continue to work with the Zasharu device," Gomez told Tev, "and we'll notify you of our progress."

"We will do the same," said Tev, his voice nearly drowned out by the commotion surrounding him. "In the meantime, Corsi, Abramowitz, Wetzel, and Falcão are mounting a triage effort."

"Is a security detail with them beyond Domenica?" Gomez asked.

"Affirmative. Robins, Konya, and Krotine are there as well. Bartholomew and I will attempt to do

something useful.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Gomez snapped.

“Simply that medical efforts are fruitless as long as we are unable to halt the established progression of the attacks.”

“Then we’d best stop talking and start—”

“Commander!” said Dr. Lense.

Gomez spun toward Lense. The first thing Gomez noticed was that Boz-Nu was convulsing and wailing on the floor, but Yet-Nu was not.

“Yet-Nu is dead,” said Lense. “I don’t think his brother will be far behind.”

Chapter 19

“I wish you would die again,” said Em-Lin, talking to the empty space to the right of Vance Hawkins’s head. “I wish you would die and stay dead this time.”

Vance got up from crouching in front of Em-Lin and rubbed the back of his neck. No matter what he said or did, he could not seem to get through to her. She was lost in the depths of the haunting vision that had completely superimposed itself over reality since the Dominion transmitter had kicked into high gear.

It figured. The only Miradorn he could stomach, a Miradorn who had earned his respect by single-handedly defusing a quantum bomb booby trap and saving many lives, and she was locked up tight in a world of her own with the ghost of her dead twin sister. He had listened to her talking to her sister, Or-Lin, long enough to know that it was not a pleasant world to inhabit.

Maybe it was time for him to stop trying to bring her out of it. If she had been any other Miradorn, in fact, he would not have tried as long as he had already. It wasn’t his job, anyway; Lense, not the deputy chief of security, was responsible for treating nonresponsive victims of trauma.

So why was he even now trying to think of a way to break through to Em-Lin?

She had proven herself to him by saving lives, but the truth was, she had worked for the Dominion. For all he knew, she could have contributed, directly or indirectly, to the prison camp operation on Jomej VII.

Still, he had a gut feeling that she deserved to be rescued from the private hell in which she was suffering. In addition, Vance hoped that her expertise with changeling technology might help to deactivate the Dominion transmitter and save the Miradorn on Zasharu.

He crouched down in front of her again. Maybe, he thought, it was time to try something more creative. If this didn’t work, he could always summon T’Mandra from patrolling the shrine above and ask her to try a Vulcan mind-meld as a last-ditch effort.

Vance activated his wrist beacon and aimed its beam directly into Em-Lin's eyes. At first, Em-Lin continued to look off to one side, watching her invisible tormentor. Then, Vance moved the beacon into the space that she was watching, fixing it right on her eyes, and when he slid it away, her gaze followed it.

Before Em-Lin's eyes could drift back to the empty space into which they had been staring, Vance spoke. This time, however, was different from all the other times when he had tried to reach her by talking.

For one thing, he was shouting in her face. For another thing, his words were not actually directed at Em-Lin.

"Or-Lin," he said, holding the light from his beacon steady in Em-Lin's eyes. "I need to talk to your sister. Please, let her talk to me."

Em-Lin's eyes flicked to one side, then back, then away again. She did not say a word.

"It's an emergency," said Vance. "Dominion devices are killing the people of New Mirada and Zasharu. I believe Em-Lin can help deactivate them."

Em-Lin's eyes returned to focus on the light from Vance's beacon... then slid back to the empty space again. Her mouth opened, but still she said nothing.

"Please, Or-Lin," said Vance. "Let her talk to me. I only want to save your people."

"She's here all the time now," Em-Lin said suddenly, her eyes returning to the light. "Before, it was only some of the time."

Vance switched off his wrist beacon.

"To me, she's like a living, breathing person," said Em-Lin. "I can see her, hear her, and touch her all at once. Not that that's a good thing. We weren't exactly getting along before she died, and our relationship hasn't improved since then."

"Thank you for letting your sister talk to me, Or-Lin," said Vance.

"You both want the same thing," said Em-Lin. "You want me to help repair the Dominion transmitter."

"Can you do it?" said Vance. "You know your way around changeling technology better than any of us."

"I can do some of it," said Em-Lin, "but I'm not familiar with all the components. You'll need someone else to do the rest."

"Do you have someone in mind?" said Vance.

"Or-Lin," said Em-Lin. "My dead twin sister says to tell you she'll be happy to help."

Chapter 20

Carol threw back her head and screamed as loud as she could. Even then, she was drowned out by the sea of screaming Miradorn all around her.

But it helped her to keep going, and that in itself was pretty amazing.

Falcão was so overwhelmed by the ongoing chaos that she didn't seem to notice Carol's outburst. Of the rest of the triage team, only Corsi looked in her direction, and then only briefly. As for Rennan, it was impossible to tell if he had dismissed the scream with his telepathic abilities as not signaling danger, or if he was just too distracted by the mob of shrieking children who were clawing at him, too distracted to pay any attention.

Every last one of them was in hell—the triage team and the Miradorn children and grown-ups and old-timers—so why not scream? Those who weren't screaming on the surface of New Mirada were in a tiny minority today.

The same for those who were trying, in the face of utter hopelessness, to lessen the suffering. Carol's triage team of four was outnumbered by the thousands out there in the street in front of Mother Wu's house.

And every single victim of Overlobe Syndrome whom they tried to assist ended up comatose and dead. So far, Carol had not met a single survivor.

Just now, in fact, right before Carol's own screaming fit, twin infants had died in her arms. Two tears ran down her face, one for each of the babies, as she caught Corsi's eye.

Without a word, Corsi pushed her way through the crowd and took the babies from Carol. She disappeared in the screaming horde, taking the tiny bodies to the same place where she had been delivering all the dead. Carol did not know where that place was, and she had absolutely no desire to see it.

Moments after she gave up the infants, Carol found two more children, no more than toddlers, screaming in the middle of the street. One of them, a boy, had a bloody head wound that clearly required immediate treatment.

Carol turned to call for Falcão—and caught her breath. The barrel of a very large gun was aimed right at her, less than a meter from her face.

A tall Miradorn man with patchy silver hair held the gun with one hand. The other hand clawed at his head, and his features were contorted in an agonized grimace.

He was shaking, and he looked unsteady on his feet. "Make it stop," he said, his voice breaking. "Make it stop make it stop make it stop!"

"I'll do what I can," said Carol, extending a hand. "Please give me the gun."

Suddenly, the man released a shuddering howl. His eyes clamped shut, and his finger squeezed the trigger.

Before Carol could react, she felt something slam into her and knock her to one side. She heard the piercing, oscillating whine of a disruptor beam blast by as she toppled onto the writhing bodies of afflicted Miradorn on the pavement.

Looking up, Carol saw someone trying to wrestle the gun away from the man. It was a Miradorn woman, and Carol instantly recognized her as soon as she caught the briefest glimpse of her face.

The woman was petite and pretty, with glossy black hair and smooth skin. Though she was older than she looked, she overpowered the gunman in a flash, wrenching away his weapon and knocking him unconscious with a single chop to the side of his throat.

Carol knew her as Mother Wu.

“I’m back,” said Mother Wu, stuffing the gun in a pants pocket and reaching out to help Carol to her feet.

“Thank you,” said Carol. “Thank you for the rescue.”

“I’m here to help,” said Mother Wu. “What do you need me to do?”

Carol hesitated before asking the question on her mind, but then she asked it anyway. “What about your boys?” she said.

“Nurse Wetzel couldn’t do anything for them,” said Mother Wu. Her voice was matter-of-fact. “They’re both dead.”

Carol looked at her, strangely filled with pity for Mother Wu and her “boys.” They had kidnapped her, but she felt only sympathy and sadness for them now.

It was the same way she felt about the whole planet, she realized. The Miradorn had helped the Dominion bring death and destruction to the Federation, and hard feelings remained on both sides, but now that the Miradorn were suffering and dying, nothing that had happened before seemed to matter.

All that was left was the sympathy of one creature of flesh and blood for another. In the end, that was what all life boiled down to.

A single tear traced its way down Carol’s cheek. As the world continued to scream around her, she lunged forward and wrapped her arms around Mother Wu, hugging her tightly.

Mother Wu was stiff against her and never relaxed. Eventually, though, she reached around and patted Carol’s back as if to comfort her.

As if Carol were the one who needed comforting.

Chapter 21

The King of Half the Known Universe exhaled his last, rattling breath in the arms of Lieutenant Commander Mor glasch Tev.

The king, whose name was Ag-Liv, had thrown himself on Tev as soon as Tev had opened the door to the throne room. Screaming in pain, Ag-Liv had begged Tev to do something to make it stop, but Tev

had not been able to help him.

Jo-Liv, the King of the Other Half of the Known Universe, lay nearby, shrieking and tearing his hair out and rolling around on the floor.

Even the Kings of the Known Universe were helpless in the face of Overlobe Syndrome. True, they were largely figureheads in a constitutional monarchy, their titles symbolic holdovers from the days before contact with other species, when the Miradorn had fancied themselves the center of the universe. Still, it said a lot about the state of affairs on New Mirada that two of the most powerful, well-protected men on the planet were as defenseless against Overlobe Syndrome as the lowliest Miradorn living in a gutter.

“Here, boss,” said Makk Vinx, the Iotian security guard who had beamed to the royal palace with Tev and Bartholomew Faulwell. Vinx reached out and took the weight of King Ag-Liv from Tev. “Lemme get this for you.”

As Vinx carried the king across the room and lowered him onto a throne, Tev snorted, trying to clear the scent of death from his sensitive Tellarite nostrils. Between the mayhem in the streets and the overabundance of dead in the halls of the palace itself, Tev had inhaled far too much of that terrible scent for one day.

Scanning the room with his tricorder, he found the changeling signal that he had been following. From orbit, Ensign Haznedl at ops had located three possible sources of the signal. After beaming to the other two sites, Tev had finally found the location of the Dominion transmitter on New Mirada, the ironic “twin” of the device on the moon of Zasharu.

Now that he had found it, Tev thought that he should have guessed the correct site in the first place. As on Zasharu, the transmitter had been hidden under a long-standing locus of power—political this time instead of spiritual. As the shrine and the royal palace were not likely to be disturbed by demolition or new construction, both sites were quite safe for secret underground installations. Tev really should have known.

Not that he would ever admit that to anyone for as long as he lived.

“The Dominion transmitter is directly beneath this room,” said Tev, continuing to watch the readouts on his tricorder. “I am literally standing on top of it.”

“Scuse me,” said Vinx. “This other bigwig over here’s about to kick the bucket.”

“The only way we can help him is by rendering the transmitter inoperative,” said Tev. “Assuming we can get to it, of course.”

“There’s a problem?” said Bart Faulwell, who was examining an intricate, sculpted emblem like a coat of arms on the wall behind the thrones.

“As on Zasharu, the underground transmitter chamber is heavily shielded,” said Tev. “It is also protected by a plethora of Jem’Hadar booby traps.”

“And here we are without a changeling multitool or an expert on Dominion technology,” said Faulwell. “And more Miradorn are dying every minute.”

Tev paced the floor of the throne room and thought for a moment. One solution came to mind, but it

relied on the use of experimental technology. Given more time, he would prefer a traditional approach to the situation, one involving tested and more predictable techniques, but time was in short supply. The Miradorn crisis was quickly becoming an extinction-level event.

Tev needed to do what was necessary to end this disaster as fast as possible. He needed to take a chance on his unproven creation and hope for the best.

He touched his combadge. “Tev toda Vinci,” he said. “There’s an equipment case labeled UNCERTAINTY on a rack in my quarters. Please retrieve that case and beam it down to me immediately.”

Chapter 22

“So what Em-Lin’s saying is,” said Fabian, “we don’t stand a ghost of a chance of stopping the changeling transmitter without her dead sister’s help.”

Vance winced at the pun. “Not in so many words, but yeah.” He looked around at his teammates, who had gathered to discuss the offer of help that Em-Lin—and Or-Lin—had made to him.

“The question is, can she deliver the goods?” said Fabian.

“The part about her sister,” said Gomez, looking directly at Lense. “Could there be any truth to it?”

Lense glanced over her shoulder to be sure that Em-Lin was still out of earshot, resting against a wall on the far side of the chamber. “It’s possible,” she said when she turned back to the group. “Em-Lin herself might possess the full knowledge, and she prolongs the fantasy that Or-Lin has survived by claiming to channel the knowledge from her.”

Vance shook his head. “I’ve spent time with Em-Lin,” he said. “If the dead sister is nothing but a fantasy, she must be onehell of a fantasy.”

“I tend to agree,” said Lense. “There might be something at work here that isn’t under Em-Lin’s control.”

“Then whose control is it under?” said Fabian.

“Its own, maybe,” said Lense. “Instead of a vivid fantasy or memory construct, it could be similar to the Vulcankatra passed on before death—a copy of a person’s consciousness imprinted on a host’s brain. Em-Lin might be dealing with a lingering remnant of Or-Lin’s mind, one with access to all of Or-Lin’s specialized knowledge and skills.”

“In which case, Em-Lin’s making her offer in good faith,” said Gomez. “The dead sister’s consciousness really would be helping her work on the transmitter.”

“How wonderful,” said Soloman. “To have a departed companion continue to guide you after death.”

Although Vance knew that Soloman would have loved to still hear the thoughts of his deceased bond-mate 111—he had gone to extreme lengths just to talk to an alternate-universe version of her not

too long ago—he knew there was no joy in this. “I bet Em-Lin wouldn’t agree, and that worries me. As badly shaken up as Em-Lin has been, I don’t think Or-Lin’s been treating her very well lately.”

“That suggests another possibility to explain Or-Lin’s influence,” said Lense. “What if Or-Lin is akatra or a fantasy or some other kind of echo of consciousness, and she’s been twisted by the effects of the Dominion transmitter? Who knows what her real intentions might be?”

“Sounds like just the kind of ghost we don’t want anywhere near that transmitter,” said Fabian.

“Or-Lin’s presence has definitely gotten stronger since we came down here.” Vance looked up at the huge yellow-tinted tank as it continued to turn, the protoplasmic clumps melding and dividing and spinning in the fluid inside it. “Em-Lin went from zoning out periodically to zoning out all the time. After a while, I had a hell of a time just getting through to her. Even then, I had to talk to Or-Lin first.”

“She didn’t answer you, did she?” said Fabian.

“Not directly,” said Vance.

“That you know of,” said Soloman. “What if Or-Lin has taken over?”

Vance looked across the chamber at Em-Lin, and he felt uneasy. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“All right,” said Gomez, raising her voice just enough to command her teammates’ full attention. “We could speculate all day about this, but people are dying every minute we stand here and talk. The bottom line is, do we need Em-Lin’s help?”

“As I said earlier, this system is far more robust than the Dominion systems we encountered in the shrine.” A flicker of annoyance crossed Soloman’s features. “I have attempted to apply a variation of the morphic virus that I used on the booby traps, but without success.”

“This is some kind of hyper-changeling tech down here,” said Fabian. “It’s so good at staying a step ahead of us, I’ve been wondering if it can see the future.”

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes,’ ” said Gomez. “We need her. Let’s take her up on her offer.”

“And hope the dead sister isn’t thinking some dead Starfleeters might be fun to hang around with,” said Fabian.

“We’ll watch her carefully,” said Gomez.

“I do not know if we could tell if she does anything wrong,” said Soloman.

“My invisible friend isn’t sure he can keep the invisible ghost in line, either,” said Fabian.

“We’ll just have to do our best,” said Gomez. “Vance, please tell Em-Lin that we accept her and her sister’s offer. We’d like them to start working on the transmitter immediately.”

Vance turned in Em-Lin’s direction. “Yes, sir,” he said, feeling sorry for Em-Lin and at the same time worried that she might destroy him and his shipmates when she got her hands on the Dominion device.

And at the same time as all of that, he felt something that he had never expected to feel for a Miradorn

after that terrible day on Jomej VII.

The concern of one friend for another.

Chapter 23

“Just keep that thing away from me,” said Bart, taking a step back from the polished, milky-white sphere in Tev’s hands. “I can’t believe you built something based on a device that actually killed me once!”

Tev scrolled a fingertip over the surface of the bowling-ball-sized sphere, adjusting the fluidic controls sandwiched between the layers of the device’s smooth skin. “You have nothing to worry about, Bartholomew,” he said, though he wasn’t entirely sure that was true. “The Luck Pulse generates a limited and precisely calibrated probability effect.”

“Which has never been tested in the field,” said Bart.

Tev shrugged. “A technicality.”

“And it’s never been tested in the lab, either,” said Bart.

“But the holosimulations have had impressive results,” said Tev. That much, at least, was true, though holosimulations were of course a completely different animal from real-world builds.

“So help me, Tev,” said Bart, pacing nervously back and forth. “If that thing kills me like the other one did, I will haunt you for all eternity.”

Tev nodded and continued adjusting the sphere’s controls. He understood Bart’s reaction, given the source of the tech that had gone into the new device.

Tev had based the Luck Pulse on elements of the Uncertainty Drive, a probability-warping propulsion system found onboard an ancient derelict starship called the *Minstrel’s Whisper*. The malfunctioning Uncertainty Drive had deluged the crew of the *Vinci* with distorted luck, one aspect of which was the death of Bart Faulwell. Bart had been returned to life after Solomon convinced the drive to deactivate, but it was natural that he would be apprehensive about a device with similar properties.

“Seriously, Tev,” said Bart. “Remember how unpredictable the Uncertainty Drive was.”

“Because its systems had degraded over millions of years,” said Tev. “And keep in mind, the drive was a lot more complicated than the Luck Pulse. The simpler the system, the less prone it is to breakdown.”

“Yeah, but remember the part about how it killed me?” Bart shook his head. “I mean, the drive did. The drive killed me.”

Tev got along well with Bartholomew and took no pleasure in making him uncomfortable, but it was time to take action. “If this works, we could knock out the booby traps all at once.” Tev made a final adjustment to the sphere’s fluidic controls and cradled it in his hands. “Frankly, if I did not think it would work, I would not waste my valuable time trying it. Similarly, if I thought it was likely to do you harm, I would not have this device anywhere near you.”

Bart did not seem to be convinced of the Luck Pulse's harmlessness. Halfheartedly, he smiled and raised a shaky thumbs-up gesture. "All right then," he said, backing away from Tev and the device. "Good luck with that."

Tev pressed the red activation whorl on the skin of the sphere. In ten seconds, the device was set to emit a pulse lasting thirty seconds, after which it would automatically deactivate.

If, of course, the device's probability-altering field did not create a malfunction in its own timing mechanism. That was one of the factors that Tev still wasn't a hundred percent sure about yet.

He drew the sphere back and up with one hand. Then he took three steps, swinging the sphere forward, and released it to roll across the floor of the palace throne room.

Tev hurried out of the huge chamber, from which everyone else had already been evacuated. Just as he turned to watch from the other side of the doorway, the Luck Pulse sphere flared with blinding white light.

Within seconds, deadly-looking Jem'Hadar booby traps began falling from hiding places in the walls and ceiling, clattering to the floor without firing a single projectile or energy beam or explosive. The thrones themselves fell to pieces, both at the same time, revealing hidden gun emplacements that sparked and smoked and burst apart with loud pops.

Tev felt a surge of satisfaction as he looked back and forth between the readouts on his tricorder and the visible effects in the throne room. "It's working," he said. "The booby traps are spontaneously self-destructing."

"Now that's the way to do a job," said Vinx. "You never gotta get your hands dirty."

Just then, with ten seconds remaining on the duration of the Luck Pulse, an unexpected movement in the throne room caught Tev's eye. Peering into the dim far corners of the room, he glimpsed a dark figure ducking behind a fat pillar. He continued to watch closely.

The next thing he knew, he was stumbling backward, heart racing, as a fierce-looking creature leaped out from behind the pillar. Tev saw black fur, a long snout, and a foaming muzzle packed with jagged, gleaming fangs.

The creature was bipedal and stood at least twice as tall as Tev. As it scanned the chamber with bulging, bloodshot eyes, Tev recognized its similarity to certain canine species native to Earth. Its features were exaggerated and unnatural, but it resembled a Terran animal that Tev had seen images of in the past.

Specifically, it looked like a wolf.

When the creature caught sight of Tev, it charged straight for him. Terrified, Tev tripped over his own feet as he tried to run and fell to the floor. The creature continued to charge.

That was when the entire royal palace collapsed. As debris blasted down from above, crushing the creature in mid-lunge, the Luck Pulse sphere stopped glowing, its thirty seconds of operation finally expiring.

Chapter

24

“I’m pleased to report that thanks to my admittedly unorthodox solution, all booby traps installed in the royal palace have been eliminated,” Tev said over Gomez’s combadge. “Also, a hole has spontaneously opened into the underground transmitter chamber, so we do not have to cut through the shielding.”

Gomez frowned. Since contacting Tev a moment ago for a status report, she had been getting a suspicious vibe. Though his report was glowing, she wondered about the actual state of affairs on his end of the call. “What’s that I hear in the background? Some kind of crumbling sound?”

“It’s just dust settling,” said Tev. “Some...shifting...occurred during the deactivation process.”

“Shifting.” Gomez no longer had any doubt that Tev was glossing over the truth. She did not, however, have time to explore the subject further. “I’m glad your ‘unorthodox solution,’ whatever it was, proved to be so effective.”

“Thank you,” said Tev. “However, I cannot, at this time, recommend using the Luck Pulse on the changeling transmitter.”

“The what pulse?” said Gomez. Conveniently, Tev had left out the minor detail that he had used something called a Luck Pulse to deactivate the booby traps.

“The unpredictability factor associated with the Pulse’s effects is much higher than I had originally anticipated,” said Tev. “There is simply too much uncertainty involved.”

The mention of the word “uncertainty” got Gomez’s attention, reminding her of another device that dispensed its own brand of luck, but she received another call over her combadge and could not pursue the questioning further.

“I’ll get back to you,” she told Tev, and then she touched the combadge to switch to the second call.

“Go ahead.”

“Whatever you’re planning to do, Gomez, do it now,” said Captain David Gold over the combadge link. “The situation is deteriorating fast.”

“How could it get any worse?” said Fabian, listening in as he and Vance led Em-Lin to the transmitter’s control console.

“The progress of the syndrome has accelerated,” said Gold, “both on New Mirada and Zasharu. The death rate is skyrocketing.”

“How long do we have?” said Gomez.

“If the death toll continues to climb at its current rate,” said Gold, “the Miradorn species will be nearly extinct within two hours.”

Gomez watched Em-Lin settle into a chair at the console. Em-Lin’s lips were moving, but she clearly

wasn't speaking to Vance or Fabian. Her eyes were fixed on the empty space to her right.

Gomez was not exactly overflowing with confidence that the fate of an entire species rested in the hands of a woman who did most of her talking to someone who existed only in her head.

"We're taking steps, sir," said Gomez. "Our Miradorn guide claims to have specific and detailed knowledge of this particular device."

"Then I won't keep you any longer," said Gold. His voice was tight. "Good luck, Gomez."

"Thank you, sir. Gomez out." As the connection severed, Gomez closed her eyes for a moment and cradled her face in her hands.

A sentient species was on the verge of depopulation so sweeping that it might as well be called extinction. The Miradorn who were left when it was all over, a relative handful of nontwins who did not contract Overlobe Syndrome, would be so few that the task of repopulating their species would take ages.

And everything was riding on one woman with an attitude problem and her personal ghost.

At the touch of a hand on her shoulder, Gomez looked up and to the left. Lense looked back at her, a grim expression etched onto her features.

More bad news, thought Gomez, and she was right...not that it was much of a deductive leap given the way things were going.

"Boz-Nu just died," said Lense.

Gomez sighed. "They're going fast," she said. "Pretty harsh treatment if you ask me, especially since the Miradorn never crossed the Dominion."

"Scorched earth, maybe?" said Lense. "Leave nothing and no one that could benefit your enemies?"

Gomez shrugged. "Maybe it's just another case of revenge against the Solids."

"Complete with poetic justice," said Lense. "Twin devices use the Miradorn twins' own linking abilities against them."

"To kill them," said Gomez.

"No." Em-Lin spoke up suddenly from her seat at the control panel several meters away. Gomez and Lense both looked in her direction. "That's not what this device was meant to do."

Neither Gomez nor Lense had been speaking loudly. Gomez was surprised that Em-Lin had overheard any of their conversation from so far away. Maybe the ghost was closer to us than Em-Lin, she thought.

"How do you know?" said Gomez.

Em-Lin ran her fingers lovingly over the rows of glowing, multicolored controls. With practiced precision, she pressed a sequence of buttons in rapid succession.

When she finished, the giant tank changed instantly from a reddish glow to a bright blue one. The tank's rotation slowed, and the clumps suspended inside it reversed the direction of their spin.

"I know," said Em-Lin, "because my sister and I helped build it."

Chapter 25

Em-Lin had a very special medal. It was permanently attached to her body, on a spot just below her left clavicle. It shifted shapes, camouflaging itself against her skin when anyone but Em-Lin set eyes on it.

It was a changeling medal, affixed to her chest by one of the Vorta. Or-Lin had received one, too.

Em-Lin remembered the ceremony well. It had been the proudest day of her life.

"Em-Lin," the Vorta had said solemnly, holding out the crystalline medal before him. "In recognition of your extraordinary service to the Dominion, I bestow upon you the Order of the Gods."

Em-Lin's heart had pounded like a giant drum. A tear had descended her face as the Vorta tugged her top down just enough to expose the skin below her clavicle.

"Your efforts and those of your sister have helped to ensure the future glory of the Miradorn people." Slowly, the Vorta had pressed the medal against Em-Lin's bare skin. "The Fuser that the two of you have built will bless your people with a unity and divine fulfillment that few species have ever experienced."

As the medal melted into her flesh, Em-Lin had felt a sharp, burning pain. She had clenched her teeth to keep from crying out.

She felt a similar pain today as she pushed her hands through the smooth, shape-shifting casing of the huge tank, immersing them in the hot, thick liquid inside.

* * *

"You helped build this thing?" said Gomez.

Shut up, lady! said Or-Lin, who was standing close to Em-Lin at the base of the tank. Can't you see she's trying to concentrate?

Em-Lin caught one of the floating clumps inside the tank. She kneaded the clump with her bare hands, feeling the fizzing of a static electric charge in the gritty, claylike mass.

"My sister and I were psycho-engineers," said Em-Lin. "The Dominion put us to work in a weapons lab at Rasha Nom."

"Starfleet knocked out Rasha Nom early in the war," said Stevens. Like Gomez, he stood nearby and watched Em-Lin's every move as she worked on the Fuser.

Em-Lin nodded. "Twenty-three Miradorn died in that attack," she said. "All of them noncombatants."

“Noncombatants building a cannon that fired killer nightmares,” said Stevens.

Em-Lin ignored his remark. “After the attack on Rasha Nom, my sister and I were glad to be transferred home to Mirada to work on the Fuser.”

“Is that what this is?” said Gomez. “A ‘fuser’?”

Or-Lin slammed her hand down on the control panel. As always, Em-Lin was the only one who heard her do it. Tell these people to shut up! Tell them to leave us alone if they want us to fix this thing!

“It’s a gift from the Vorta to the Miradorn,” said Em-Lin, “and yes, it’s called a Fuser.”

“Some gift,” said Stevens. “It’s wiping out your entire species.”

“Shut up,” said Em-Lin. “Just shut up.”

* * *

Sometimes, Em-Lin still thought about the day when they had added the final ingredient to the Fuser.

It had happened on the last day of the war. According to the Jem’Hadar, a Starfleet strike force was on its way to liberate Mirada. Never mind that the Miradorn hadn’t wanted to be liberated.

The Vorta who had supervised the construction of the Fuser had stared up at the device alongside Em-Lin and Or-Lin. All that was left to do was to add the morphic plasma in which the processor meat would be suspended.

“Time to make history,” the Vorta had said. “We have to switch it on and seal it in before Starfleet gets here.”

“The Fuser on Mirada has already been activated and sealed off,” Or-Lin had said. “The process has begun.”

The Vorta had nodded. “Low power transmissions will lay the groundwork. Then, the system will gradually boost its output. The self-determining AI will monitor conditions and take appropriate action. Someday, when the AI decides that the time is right, the system will connect every Miradorn mind in a new Great Link.”

“I only wish that we could live to see it,” Em-Lin had said.

“We will see to it that you are remembered for your role in this great leap forward,” the Vorta had said. “When the day of final joining arrives, your story will be fed to all minds in the Miradorn Great Link. All will know that you built this device and that you watched over it by tending the shrine above after the Dominion’s departure.”

“I still wish that we could see it,” said Em-Lin, “but I guess it’s enough to know that we’re helping to make our world a better place.”

“As their reward for loyalty to the Dominion,” the Vorta had said, “your people will know the ecstatic, never-ending joy of complete unity.”

“What a time that will be,” Em-Lin had said, “and the Miradorn will have you to thank for it.”

“Your people always had it within them,” the Vorta had said. “The telepathic links between Miradorn twins would have eventually evolved into a specieswide network without our help. We’re just accelerating the process.”

Or-Lin had sighed. “I guess we’d better add the morphic plasma and get the Fuser online.”

“No,” the Vorta said. “No plasma.”

“I don’t understand,” Em-Lin had said. “The Fuser won’t work without the plasma.”

“I have a substitute,” the Vorta had said. “Something even better.”

“This is the first you’ve mentioned it,” Or-Lin had said. “What is this substitute exactly?”

With that, the Vorta had simply smiled.

* * *

I miss him, too,said Or-Lin, resting a hand on Em-Lin’s shoulder. These Starfleeties will never understand.

Em-Lin nodded and kept working.

But still...

Or-Lin cleared her throat. You missed a node, she said. X-7 on the dark side.

Em-Lin realized that her sister was right. “Thanks,” she said, mashing a nub on the bottom of the clump that she was handling, then pressing it through to the top and folding the clump around it. “I got it.”

Just then, after several moments of silence, Gomez spoke up. “Any idea how much longer you’ll be? We still have to deal with the device on New Mirada.”

Em-Lin did not answer her. She was not feeling particularly charitable toward Starfleet personnel at that moment.

Do you wonder if the Vorta can still feel us?said Or-Lin, resting a hand against the tank. Do you wonder if he knows we’re working with the enemy?

“I hope not,” said Em-Lin, releasing one claylike clump inside the tank and grabbing another. “He was like a father to us.”

“Father to who?” said Gomez. “All I asked was how much longer you’ll be.”

Or-Lin went on talking as if she couldn’t hear Gomez, as if Gomez were the silent and unseendugo tenya .I know what the Vorta would want us to do here, she said.

“No you don’t,” said Em-Lin. “Times have changed.”

Yes, I do,said Or-Lin.One of the advantages of being dead is that I get to talk to other dead people.

Em-Lin turned, but the only dead person she saw was Or-Lin. “He’s here?” she said.

“Who’s here?” said Gomez.

You can’t see him, but yes,said Or-Lin.He’s here. He wants you to save our people...and turn the Starfleeties into carriers.

“Carriers of what?” said Em-Lin.

Or-Lin crouched alongside her and tugged her hands free of the tank.A killer psycho-virus, said Or-Lin, beaming with beatific delight and wrapping Em-Lin’s hands in her own.A virus that will obliterate every sentient mind in the Federation of Planets.

Chapter 26

Em-Lin stared silently at her sister for a long moment. “The Fuser can do that?” she said.

Or-Lin nodded.It’s one of the functions I worked on. One last booby trap for an occasion like this.

Em-Lin frowned. Apparently, Or-Lin had been even better at hiding things from the link between them than Em-Lin had known.

And the Vorta, their beloved Vorta, had not been solely motivated by altruistic impulses. Even if hisdugo tenya were not speaking through Or-Lin right now—and Em-Lin tended to think that it was not—he must have approved the addition of the viral option to the Fuser’s systems.

Either that, or Or-Lin had devised the viral option herself—but Em-Lin had a hard time believing that Or-Lin, alive or dead, would want anything to do with massacring the Federation. Or-Lin had been difficult from time to time, and at the end of her life, she had threatened to seek Division from her sister, but Em-Lin could not believe that she was a mass murderer.

Suddenly, another possibility occurred to Em-Lin. She realized that she should have thought of it before, but she had been so traumatized by recent events that she had readily accepted certain things at face value.

Things like thedugo tenya .

Well?said Or-Lin, still beaming and clasping her twin’s hands.Shall we follow the Vorta once more, my beloved sister?

It could not have been more obvious, now that Em-Lin had finally managed to see through her own veil of shock. Why had Or-Lin gone from,I think I want Division whether you want to go with me or not to calling Em-Lin herbeloved sister ?

“Let’s do it,” said Em-Lin. It would be better to play along until the time was right. For now, it was enough that Em-Lin had regained a measure of awareness and self-control.

Or-Lin released Em-Lin's hands and leaped up to give her a quick hug. Oh, sister, I just knew you'd do the right thing!

Em-Lin nodded. In the distance, she heard Gomez's voice calling to her, and she tuned it out. The only voice that mattered now was Or-Lin's—but not because Or-Lin was a *dugo tenya*.

It was because she was something else altogether—yet another application of changeling technology.

All right then, said Or-Lin, swiping a tear from her eye. You need to reconnect with the plasma matrix.

Em-Lin pushed her hands through the morphic skin of the tank and back into the hot, fizzing plasma.

Let's reconfigure the Fuser to reduce the transmission levels, said Or-Lin. Go to Polyp L3.

"Wait," said Em-Lin. "First, tell me which polyp controls the viral option. I don't want to risk activating it by accident."

Or-Lin leaned close and pointed a finger at a crescent-shaped clump floating upward in the convex tank. "Right there. Polyp Q90. We'll engage it when we've finished resetting the transmitter and eliminated the threat to our people."

"Thanks," said Em-Lin, and then she grabbed hold of the Q90 polyp with both hands.

Em-Lin, let go of that for now. I just told you, it controls the viral option.

"I know what you told me," said Em-Lin. She plunged her thumbs into the claylike meat of the polyp. Immediately, its resident intelligence pinged her mind with fuzzy-feeling thoughts like those of the changeling multitool that she had used to deactivate the quantum bomb.

What do you want me to do? said the polyp.

Em-Lin! Or-Lin's voice became loud and angry. I said leave that alone and reset the transmitter!

Hello, Em-Lin said to the polyp, remembering her father's advice.

What do you want me to do? said the polyp.

Stop it, Em-Lin! shouted Or-Lin, her voice boiling with rage. Do what I tell you!

The louder her sister got, the more Em-Lin knew that her theory was right—and the more she knew exactly what she wanted the polyp to do.

Please deactivate the Fuser, she thought.

The Fuser on Zasharu or the Fuser on Mirada? thought Polyp Q90.

Em-Lin had not expected to be given a choice, but she was grateful for it. The sooner the two devices went offline, the greater the number of Miradorn lives she would save.

Both, thought Em-Lin.

No!said Or-Lin, shaking Em-Lin by the shoulders.Stop it or I'll killyou!

“Shut up,” said Em-Lin. “Just shut up.”

She smiled to herself as she felt Polyp Q90 shut down the system. She had been right about Or-Lin.

Or-Lin was not a truedugo tenya . She was not a remnant of Em-Lin's dead twin, and she was not a trauma-induced hallucination or dream.

She was the Fuser's last defense. She was a booby trap.

“The self-determining AI will monitor conditions and take appropriate action.” That was what the Vorta had said.

Em-Lin now knew that that was exactly what the Fuser's AI had done. Created with adaptive changeling technology, sophisticated enough to manage an accelerated planetary psychic evolutionary process, the Fuser's AI had been equipped to defend itself against any threat.

Even the threat of Em-Lin herself.

It had conjured the image of her dead sister to distract, confuse, and mislead her. How else to stop someone who had helped build the device from shutting it down? Em-Lin's guilt at not soon enough recognizing the trap that had killed her sister had given the image more than enough power to twist her.

And in the end, to prevent her from finding the “off” switch, the AI had lied to her, telling her that it was the one thing that it thought she would never touch: the controls of a psychic virus that would murder trillions.

But Em-Lin had seen through the deception.

The Fuser on Zasharu and the Fuser on Mirada have been deactivated,said Polyp Q90.

Thank you,Em-Lin said with her mind. It wasn't easy to concentrate with Or-Lin shaking her by the shoulders and then beating on her back with her fists, but Em-Lin managed to send another message to the polyp.

Are you capable of permanently deactivating the Or-Lin simulacrum? she said.

Yes,said Polyp Q90.

Stand by,said Em-Lin, and then she yanked her hands out of the plasma matrix. Whirling around, she grabbed Or-Lin's hands, stopping the pounding on her back.

Or-Lin shivered and sobbed in her grip, her face twisted in an expression of mixed fury and agony. She looked like someone who had lost everything, someone who was completely and irreversibly shattered.

Em-Lin knew that she was not her sister, that she was not anyone at all and never had been. But she looked like Or-Lin, and she sounded like Or-Lin, and she felt like Or-Lin. It was enough for now.

Em-Lin released one of Or-Lin's hands and reached up to stroke the side of her face. “I'm sorry that I

didn't always do the right thing," she said. "I'm sorry that I didn't notice the trap that killed you sooner."

Or-Lin choked on a sob and shook her head wildly. Don't do it, she said. Don't do it don't do it don't do it.

"I forgive you for hurting me," said Em-Lin. "I will miss you and love you forever."

No, please, whimpered Or-Lin. Don't do it.

Then, though the woman before her was nothing but an illusion, Em-Lin leaned forward and pulled Or-Lin into her arms. As she hugged her, Em-Lin shut her eyes tight and began to cry, too.

"Good-bye, my sister," said Em-Lin.

Then, she cast her thoughts to Polyp Q90: Please permanently deactivate the Or-Lin simulacrum.

Done, said Polyp Q90.

"Done," said Em-Lin, opening her eyes to see Gomez and the other Starfleeters staring back at her. "I'm all done."

Chapter 27

Tev welcomed ten pilgrims to the shrine of Ho'nig before the first near-fistfight broke out over his bad manners, which was a lot better than Vance had expected. Vance was impressed that the Tellarite had exercised such admirable restraint in honor of the official start of the Chala Ho'nig festival.

Nevertheless, Vance tipped off Gomez, and Gomez substituted Lense for Tev. No use starting an interstellar holy war if it could be avoided.

Especially after the ordeal of the last two days. Everyone on the Starfleet team was thoroughly exhausted after dealing with the toys that the Dominion had left behind after the war—and their hands were still so full dealing with the aftermath that Vance thought they would be hard-pressed to handle any more surprises. Indeed, it seemed like that—even though the war had ended over a year ago—that they kept having to clean up after it. Kharzh'ulla, Luaran, Coroticus, Sachem II, and now this...

Right now, in fact, even as pilgrims arrived for the Chala Ho'nig, S.C.E. teammates and the Vinci crew members worked alongside Miradorn volunteers to repair damage to the shrine. Even Captain Gold was among the cleanup crew, sleeves rolled up and sweat beading his forehead as he helped to clear debris from the altar area.

Vance and Lauoc pitched in here and there as they patrolled the crowd, looking for lapses in civility among the diverse and pious pilgrims. So far, as disruptive to prayer and meditation as the cleanup crew must have been, not one pilgrim complained or caused a problem.

Not a single pilgrim failed to pitch in and help, either. Miradorn, Brikar, Damiani, Phylosians, Benzites, Xindi, and members of many other species worked side by side to restore the place they revered to its original state.

And as they worked, the pilgrims sang a beautiful and complex hymn they created on the spot. Vance had never heard anything like it in his life.

He was actually slightly irritated when someone interrupted his enjoyment of the singing by tapping on his shoulder.

“Excuse me.” Vance turned to see Pika Ven-Sa looking back at him. The Miradorn priest, once so snarky and vigorous, looked downcast and defeated—with good reason. His twin brother, Chi-Sa, had died during the Overlobe Syndrome outbreak less than a day ago, just minutes before Em-Lin had deactivated the Fusers.

“I’m looking for Commander Gomez,” said Ven-Sa. He looked about ten years older than he had a day ago.

Vance nodded. He felt sorry for Ven-Sa. “Right this way, sir,” he said, and then he led Ven-Sa across the shrine to Gomez.

Gomez was removing the smudges of smoke damage from a statue at the subatomic level with a quantum distiller. When Vance and Ven-Sa approached, she switched off the pulsing, bright blue beam and raised the yellow-tinted goggles to her forehead.

“Pika Ven-Sa,” she said, her voice and expression somber. “I was sorry to hear about your brother.”

Ven-Sa sighed and nodded. “This has been a most difficult day,” he said.

Gomez put the distiller in a tray on her tool cart. “I was glad we didn’t lose you, as well,” she said, removing her goggles.

“I cannot say that I feel the same right now,” said Ven-Sa. “I am only half here, you see. Half of me—Chi-Sa—is dead.”

“It must be terrible,” said Gomez.

“I console myself by remembering that the universe often conceives joy from pain,” said Ven-Sa. “Chi-Sa is dead, but I believe that the disaster that took his life has begun a change in the attitudes of the Miradorn toward Starfleet and the Federation. Seeing your people struggle to help ours, both here and on New Mirada, seems to have changed some minds.”

Gomez nodded. When she glanced at her tool cart, she seemed to get an idea. “Are you in a hurry?” she said to Ven-Sa.

Ven-Sa shrugged. “Why do you ask?”

“I could use a hand here, actually.” Gomez picked up the quantum distiller and pointed it at the statue on which she’d been working.

“I’m afraid I don’t know much about restoration work,” said Ven-Sa.

Gomez grinned. “Well, you will soon,” she said. “And maybe we can talk a little about theSe’rbeg while we’re at it.”

Ven-Sa rubbed the back of his neck and looked at the floor...then looked up at Gomez and nodded. "All right," he said. "I can spare a few minutes, I suppose."

Gomez flashed Vance a quick wink, and he smiled and turned away. It was then that he noticed that a crowd of pilgrims had gathered at the far side of the shrine.

Immediately, Vance rushed over to find out what had drawn the pilgrims' attention. He pushed his way through to the middle of the crowd, which was where he saw what all the fuss was about.

The center attraction was Em-Lin.

As soon as she saw Vance push through the crowd, her face lit up. "Chief Hawkins! Is it already time for our meeting?"

Vance caught on fast. "You're late, actually. Please come with me."

"Wait a minute," said a towering, snake-headed Selay in yellow pilgrim's robes. "We have a few more questions. We hope to determine if the Savior of the Temple has interacted with Ho'nig while speaking to the dead."

Em-Lin sighed with exasperation. "I already told you. I never spoke to the dead. The ghost of my dead sister was an illusion created by the Fuser's defense systems."

"That's what you think," said an orange-furred, fierce-looking Chalnoth. "Ho'nig's message might be hidden in your memories."

"Yes," said a Tamarian, member of a species that spoke only in cultural metaphors. "Haglis eating a uvod! Tyro and Bumpas climbing a revlok in the prelva desert before Creshlipa! Yaffa cheating the Vrellig!"

When the Tamarian had finished, everyone stared at him for a moment. Then, a human asked, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Theon breaking the Numoprax?" said the Tamarian, shrugging apologetically.

"All right, all right," said Vance, taking Em-Lin by the hand. "Excuse us, please. We have an important meeting to attend."

For an instant, the Selay and Chalnoth blocked Vance's path. He met their vaguely hostile gazes with a doubly dark glare of his own, and they stepped aside.

Once clear of the crowd, Vance led Em-Lin to a secluded alcove off the far end of the shrine.

"How are you doing?" said Vance as he let go of her hand.

"Fine," said Em-Lin. Relief was evident in her voice and expression. "I wish they wouldn't be so persistent." She gestured in the direction of the pilgrims. "I mean, I have nothing to offer them."

Vance grinned. "Maybe you should make something up," he said. "Like, 'Ho'nig promises eternal ecstasy in the next life to anyone who provides constant comfort in this life to his servant, Em-Lin.'"

Em-Lin smiled. “Don’t tempt me. How about if I point them in your direction and tell them you’re the chosen one? What would you ask for?”

Vance thought for a moment. “A few days ago, I would’ve asked for the addresses of the Miradorn who tortured me during the war. Now, I think I’ll settle for the address of the Miradorn who saved my life, in case I’m ever in the neighborhood.”

Em-Lin’s smile disappeared, and she stared at the floor. “If my sister and I hadn’t built the Fuser, your life wouldn’t have been at risk to begin with. And three million Miradorn would still be alive.”

“If you hadn’t built it, the Vorta would have gotten someone else to do the work,” said Vance. “And anyway, the Fuser wasn’t meant to harm anyone.”

“I wonder if the tribunal at my trial will agree with you,” said Em-Lin.

“They’re going to try you?” said Vance.

Em-Lin nodded. “For being an accomplice to mass murder. They’ll try the Vorta and my sister in absentia.”

Vance was stunned. “But you didn’t activate the Fuser,” he said. “You stopped it. You saved billions of lives on Zasharu and New Mirada. Hell, they’re erecting a statue in honor of you for saving the shrine of Ho’nig!”

Em-Lin shrugged. “Someone has to take the blame.”

“Why aren’t you in custody now?” said Vance.

“There’s a waiting period before a trial,” said Em-Lin. “It’s called the hastanoj . During the hastanoj, enough time is allowed to pass that the facts of a case blur, and public opinion shifts. Also, the defendant has time to exercise other options and . . . remove the burden of punishment from the courts. Hastanoj literally means ‘do it yourself.’ ”

Vance stared at her, absorbing what she had told him. Not long ago, he would not have worried much about her plight or that of any Miradorn. Even a “Starfleeter” raised to respect and appreciate diversity in all its forms could still sometimes find his heart hardened by bitter experience.

But today was a different story. Memories of the puppet-gun-wielding Miradorn of Jomej VII had been dimmed by memories of a Miradorn woman who had saved the lives of Vance, his teammates, and billions of others.

Reaching out, he folded her hands between his own. Her pearlescent skin shimmered in bright contrast to his rich, dark brown.

“When the hastanoj ends, contact me,” he said. “I’ll testify on your behalf.”

Em-Lin blinked, white irises glowing against the space-black sclera of her “star eyes.” “You’d do that for me?” she said.

Vance shrugged and grinned. “Sure—if I don’t have anything better to do that day, anyway.”

A look of intense vulnerability and gratitude flowed onto Em-Lin's face. She blinked quickly, as if tears were on the way, and took a step toward Vance. He thought that she was going to hug him.

Then, she caught herself. She rubbed her eyes hard with the heels of her hands, and the vulnerable look was gone. Em-Lin was back to her normal self (normal when she wasn't seeing ghosts, anyway), complete with sharp edges.

"I guess maybe you Starfleeties aren't all bad after all," she said gruffly.

"Not half as bad as some people say," said Vance.

About the Author

ROBERT T. JESCHONEK wrote "The Secret Heart of Zolaluz" for *Star Trek: Voyager: Distant Shores*. His Burgoyne adventure, "Oil and Water," appeared in *Star Trek: New Frontier: No Limits*. Robert's story, "Our Million-Year Mission," won the grand prize in *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds VI*. His other credits include the prize-winning "Whatever You Do, Don't Read This Story" in *Strange New Worlds III*, "The Shoulders of Giants" in *Strange New Worlds V*, and original fiction in publications ranging from *Abyss & Apex* to *ScienceFictionFantasyHorror.com* and *The Loyalhanna Review*. Robert's work can also be found in comic books, including *War and Silent Screams* from Saddle Tramp Press and the humor anthology *Commercial Suicide*. Currently based in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, Robert spent over a decade as a television producer/director. His wife, Wendy, helps make his fiction writing possible by supplying inspiration, encouragement, and editing support. Visit his website at www.robertjeschonek.com.

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