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STAR TREK™

S.C.E.

#64

DISTANT EARLY WARNING (*What's Past Book 4*)

Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore



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The
Taurus Reach
2265

Chapter 1

Stardate 1256.9

Turning from where he knelt next to an open access panel that revealed a maze of circuitry and conduits hidden behind the nondescript gray bulkhead, Lieutenant Mahmud al-Khaled rose to his feet and dashed toward the row of consoles lining the opposite wall of the environmental control substation. The room, like its nine counterparts scattered throughout the massive space station, was crammed full of computer workstations and display monitors as well as banks of gauges, dials, and switches.

“Try it now!”

Lieutenant Isaiah Farber, one of the more talented members of al-Khaled’s team, tapped several buttons arranged in multicolored rows across the console’s polished black surface, the controls looking almost tiny beneath his massive hands. Muscled and broad-shouldered, Farber appeared on the verge of ripping through the gold uniform tunic stretching across his chest and back.

Looking up at one of the display monitors set into the bulkhead just above eye level, Farber grimaced. “Nothing. We’re still locked out of everything.”

“Damn it,” al-Khaled snapped. “This doesn’t make any sense.” According to every diagnostic conducted by him and his team, the environmental control system should have been operating within acceptable parameters. There was no reason for it not to be, as it, along with everything else aboard Starbase 47, was practically brand-new.

“Report!” said Lieutenant Curtis Ballard, the station’s chief engineer, from where he worked at another station. “Is that section sealed off yet?”

From an adjacent console, a female ensign nodded, her own face a mask of anxiety. “Yes, sir,” replied the young Asian woman, who al-Khaled remembered was named Tamishiro. “Ventilation ducts and all hatches leading to those areas are locked down.”

Ballard nodded, and al-Khaled saw the sweat running down the side of the man’s face. The report was short and terse, but al-Khaled knew, as did everyone else in the room, what it meant. Anyone still occupying those sections was now trapped, unable to escape the poison rapidly taking the place of breathable atmosphere.

“Environmental control’s treating it like it would any section of the station with differing atmosphere requirements,” al-Khaled said. “It won’t let us just open a door without an adjacent section configured to act as an airlock.” Shaking his head, he added, “Trouble is, it won’t let us do that, either.”

“Get computer control on that lockout,” Ballard ordered, slapping the console with the heel of his hand as he continued to work. “How many people are still in that section?”

It took several seconds for Tamishiro to call up the relevant data from the station’s internal sensor network. “Thirty-six, sir.”

Pointing to another of the display monitors, Ballard said, “Tell the maintenance teams to start cutting through the doors. We’ll force them open manually and seal off adjacent sections once we get those people out of there.” With the sleeves of his gold tunic pushed up above his elbows and smudges of some unidentified substance dirtying his otherwise pale, unremarkable features, the man looked every bit like a harried mechanic frustrated with his inability to understand why the machines under his care were refusing to cooperate.

Al-Khaled sympathized with his fellow engineer, particularly in light of the current situation. Of course, the dilemma they now faced was only the latest in a string of problems that had plagued Ballard and his staff for weeks as they struggled to ready for operation Starfleet’s newest deep space outpost, designated Starbase 47, or its more colloquial name, Vanguard.

For reasons currently surpassing understanding, systems across the mammoth Watchtower-class station were beset by irregular yet frequent malfunctions. Sensors, communications, life support, computer interfaces, and their related components all had fallen victim to such troubles, sometimes two or three times within the same twenty-four-hour period, each time requiring repeated readjustment, realignment, or retuning. In short, none of the station’s more sensitive systems had worked properly with any consistency since their activation. The spate of anomalies had tested Starbase 47’s talented cadre of engineers to the point that the base’s commanding officer, Commodore Diego Reyes, had called for assistance in the form of Starfleet’s Corps of Engineers, specifically, Lieutenant Al-Khaled and his team assigned to the U.S.S. Lovell .

Before today, the malfunctions had been merely annoying—all while evading resolution with relentless determination. Now, for the first time, they were proving to be life-threatening.

“Atmosphere mixture continuing,” Tamishiro reported, shaking her head. “Methane concentration increasing. Ambient temperature three hundred eight degrees Kelvin and rising.”

It had happened without warning, the first sign of trouble coming as someone reported a foul odor permeating the air on one level of the station’s civilian residential district. Environmental sensors designed to detect such anomalies had not caught the problem, at least not until the strange pollutant began to spread throughout the section. The quick actions of a station maintenance worker had prevented other

decks from becoming contaminated, with the affected area now completely sealed off from the rest of the station. Only then was the cause identified: internal environmental sensors—for reasons as yet unknown—had determined that the normal Class-M atmosphere which supported most humanoid life-forms in that section of the residential zone needed to be replaced with one similar to that found on Class-Y planets.

“Unless everybody up there has suddenly turned into a Tholian,” Ballard had commented as the situation continued to worsen, “we’re in big trouble.” Anyone trapped in the affected section would be cooked alive, assuming they survived the toxic atmosphere currently replacing the oxygen-nitrogen mix favored by those living on that deck.

“Sir,” al-Khaled heard Tamishiro call out, the ensign turning from her workstation to regard him and Ballard, “Lieutenant Soral reports they’ve begun cutting through the hatches. The hospital’s been alerted and medical teams are on standby.”

Even as he listened to the report, al-Khaled’s attention was drawn to one of the monitors dominating the young woman’s station. It displayed an image of at least a dozen men and women grouped near a hatch that remained stubbornly locked. Even though the picture was somewhat obscured by the gray haze that had begun to permeate the air in that section, he still could see some of the people pounding on the door with their fists. Audio pickups transmitted the sounds of flesh beating against metal, as well as the calls for help as the victims shouted at the engineers they doubtless could hear working just on the other side of the barrier.

“Even with cutting lasers,” Farber said from where he stood to Ballard’s right, “it’ll take too much time, Lieutenant.” Looking to al-Khaled, he added, “We could try an emergency site-to-site transport.”

His brow furrowing in concern, al-Khaled shook his head. On the face of it, the notion was not altogether outlandish, though there would be no room for error, and the operation would require the transporter system to be properly calibrated to exacting specifications. He doubted that the station’s transporters had been so balanced, not if the condition of many other onboard systems was any indication.

As if confirming his suspicions, Ballard said, “On any other day, Lieutenant, I’d jump on that suggestion in a heartbeat, but given everything we’ve dealt with to this point, I’m not ready to trust the transporters.”

“We’re running out of time for being cautious,” al-Khaled pressed, feeling his jaw tightening as he remembered he was addressing the individual in charge of engineering duties aboard the space station. Given the sheer magnitude of the responsibilities with which Ballard had been shouldered while trying to get Starbase 47 to full operational capability on what could only have been a tremendously accelerated schedule, it was doubtful the man was accustomed to people coming into his realm and telling him what to do.

His frustration mounting, al-Khaled looked back to the one viewer, which with cold dispassion displayed the alarming image of those still trapped in the affected section. The haze lingering about the corridor was denser now, and the engineer could see at least six people lying on the floor, having already succumbed to the toxic atmosphere from which they could not escape. Others were holding towels or pieces of clothing over their faces in feeble attempts to filter out the poisonous gases collecting around them. There was no mistaking the victims’ labored attempts to draw increasingly tortured breaths, and al-Khaled felt his own respiration increasing and his pulse quickening as the stress of the situation continued to weigh on him.

Find the answer!

The demand echoing in his mind, al-Khaled forced his gaze from the scene and returned his attention to the monitors of the adjacent workstation, all of which were collaborating to give him the current status of the station's recalcitrant environmental control systems. There had to be something here they were overlooking, he decided, something that could be reconfigured, rewired, or simply hijacked long enough to help them: an idea outside the box, beyond the boundaries of normal problem resolution, outlandish in theory and perhaps even reckless in practice.

Where is it?

Then, as if heeding his silent pleas, the jumble of information cascading past his eyes seemed to ebb and clear, just enough for him to see...

"Purge the atmosphere!"

The words all but exploded from al-Khaled's lips as he moved toward one of the workstations, and both Ballard and Farber turned to regard him with matching expressions of unfettered disbelief.

"Are you out of your mind?" Ballard asked, reaching up to swipe at a lock of sweat-dampened blond hair that had fallen forward into his eyes. "We're trying to save these people, not kill them!"

Ignoring him, al-Khaled tapped a sequence of colored buttons on the control console before pointing to one of the station's display monitors. "Part of the fire suppression system allows for the emergency venting of the atmosphere from targeted areas anywhere aboard the station in extreme situations." It's so simple, he realized, mentally kicking himself. How did I miss it before?

"That takes care of getting rid of bad air," Farber said, frowning. "But it doesn't get those people out of there."

Al-Khaled waved a hand as if to fan away the lieutenant's doubts. "The computer's been kicking us in the teeth, reminding us of how it's on top of the environmental control systems, right?" He pointed to one row of status gauges. "The internal sensors are still online in that section, so the computer knows there are living humanoids there. If we vent the atmosphere from that section, the computer should interpret that as a hull breach or other failure and automatically initiate emergency protocols."

"That means sealing the section," Ballard added, "which the computer already did, and restoring internal atmospheric conditions to their designated norms." His scowl deepening, the engineer shook his head. "That's assuming the system is working correctly."

Fingers already moving across the control console, al-Khaled paused only long enough to wipe sweat from his forehead. "We're out of options. I'm initiating the venting now." Even as he spoke the words, he knew the quite understandable reaction they would provoke.

"Now hang on, Lieutenant," Ballard said, stepping forward. "What if this doesn't work?"

Pausing for only a moment, al-Khaled turned until he locked eyes with his fellow engineer. "You know what it means, but they're dead anyway if we don't try," he said before returning to the console.

Ballard looked away long enough to regard the scene playing out on the display monitor. Returning his gaze to al-Khaled, he swallowed nervously before slowly shaking his head. "Damn it, Lieutenant," he

hissed through gritted teeth, “I hope you’re right about this.”

His hand slamming down on the control that would initiate the emergency venting procedure, al-Khaled hoped he was right, as well.

Chapter 2

“Your man got lucky.”

There was no mistaking the disapproving tone in Commodore Diego Reyes’s voice. Fortunately for Captain Daniel Okagawa, he was long past the point in his Starfleet career where the stern words of a superior officer alone could intimidate him. He also had, long ago, overcome the inclination to erupt in hearty laughter when confronted by someone unfamiliar with the capabilities of the men and women attached to the Corps of Engineers—particularly those assigned to his crew.

Instead, seated as he was across from Reyes in the commodore’s office, itself situated high atop the command tower of Starbase 47, Okagawa merely chuckled.

“Not sure I see the humor in this, Captain,” Reyes said, the words coming out more a growl than actual speech. His scowl deepening, he added, “I can appreciate unorthodox thinking and pulling miraculous solutions out of thin air in the nick of time. I just don’t like them employed when the safety of my people is on the line.”

“Lieutenant al-Khaled isn’t some sort of show-off, I assure you,” Okagawa replied, letting his smile fade. “In addition to being one hell of a gifted engineer, he’s also one of the most thoughtful and dedicated people I’ve ever met. He purged the atmosphere only when it became his last, best option, and it worked just as he thought it would.”

“I’m thankful it did, don’t get me wrong,” Reyes said, “but I don’t need a stunt show next time.”

As the commodore emitted a deep, irritated sigh, Okagawa could not help but note the similarities as well as the stark differences between them. Reyes was a bit older, with only a few more years of service to Starfleet. Physically, the two were matched in their salt-and-pepper hair that boasted closely cropped regulation styles, but where the shorter, stocky Okagawa had kept much of his round, boyish face, Reyes’s lean, muscular body and somewhat weathered visage seemed as put-upon as the man’s attitude. There was no mistaking at first glance that Diego Reyes was all business, and Okagawa’s nature just could not prevent him from verbally jousting with the commodore, if only slightly, in spite of that observation.

“Sir,” the captain said, “I get this feeling that you’re not upset so much about al-Khaled’s irregular approach to problem solving as you are to my people needing to be here in the first place.”

Cocking his head, Reyes narrowed his eyes. “Quite the judge of character, Captain. Were you a psychiatrist before taking the command track?”

Okagawa chuckled again. “More like I skipped the class on nurturing my control issues.” Seeing renewed irritation in the commodore’s eyes, he added, “Sir, I know you’ve got a lot going on out here. I don’t know all the specifics, but it doesn’t take much to figure that it must be important to put a project

as big as this station on the fast track to completion. I'm not here to get on your nerves, Commodore. I just want to do my job, which in this case is bringing my people in to assist your crew to get this place up and running so that you can do your job, whatever the hell it is. Once that's done, we're off to another glorious assignment carving a tunnel through an asteroid or fixing the toilets on some remote outpost."

He had come to enjoy the act of disarming superior officers. Such situations almost always began in much the same manner as his meeting with Reyes, with the other officer giving him the same combination of raised brows and suspicious frown that the commodore displayed. A lot of them also folded their arms across their chests and regarded him warily even as they began to sway to Okagawa's side of the table.

Leaning back in his chair, Reyes now regarded him in just that fashion.

"I'm not unappreciative," the commodore said. "It's obvious that your people know their jobs. I knew that even before you got here." He waved a hand in Okagawa's direction. "That repair and salvage job you did at Outpost Five near the Neutral Zone was a very nice piece of work. But, you're right that I'm not thrilled with the idea of your crew running around my station and putting out our fires. We should be able to do that ourselves."

"Never thought otherwise," Okagawa replied, settling back into his own seat. Since the Lovell's arrival at Starbase 47 the previous day, nearly every member of his engineering staff had been involved with the numerous systemic problems afflicting the station. He had reviewed status reports from his first officer as funneled upward from the engineering teams and so was well aware of the proficiency and effectiveness of the station's own complement of engineers. "The ability of anyone—from either team—to carry out their respective responsibilities isn't the problem here, I think."

Reyes offered a tired, humorless chuckle of his own. "The problems are pretty simple: Nothing works."

Lacing his fingers together, Okagawa replied, "Ah, but nothing works all at once. You've read the reports from your own chief engineer and his staff. While they started out hammering away at individual issues as soon as they cropped up, it didn't take them long to figure out that they were only treating symptoms. You don't have hundreds of problems, Commodore, you have one. We need to concentrate on finding the overall cause."

Reyes nodded, listening to the observations. "Not seeing the forest for the trees, you mean?"

Shrugging, Okagawa said, "Well, you're in the middle of a lot of trees here."

The commodore reached up to rub the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes as if mounting a futile attempt to ward off an onrushing headache. "You have no idea." After a moment, he exhaled loudly. "I'm sorry, Captain. Operational security, need to know. I'm sure you understand."

Okagawa already knew enough about Reyes to dissuade himself from requesting too many details about Starfleet's intensifying interest in the Taurus Reach. Starbase 47's sheer size and commensurate command of resources and personnel was an unquestioned asset to the Federation's colonization and exploration efforts in this region. Still, Okagawa had to wonder: Why now, and with so much apparent verve? Though he had seen the official reports detailing the station's construction and its accelerated schedule, they offered no insights as to the reasons behind the initiative.

Curiouser and curiouser.

"I imagine it's a handful," he offered with more than a hint of sympathy.

Reyes sighed. "Let's just say that I know I've got problems when the easiest thing I have to deal with at the moment is theft from a couple of my cargo bays." Shaking his head, he added, "Seems that either the station's civilian population is harboring a criminal element, or I've got at least one member of my crew who's gone missing and maybe even looking to score a few extra credits by selling Starfleet materiel on the black market, or a combination of the two."

Such petty crime was commonplace on border outposts and remote colony worlds, Okagawa knew, particularly those located adjacent to neutral territory such as that traveled by vessels of the notorious Orion Syndicate or the incongruously named Merchant's Guild operating on and near the nonaligned planet Arcturus. It was no surprise that Reyes would be dealing with similar problems out here, far from the Federation's typical security and protection. That a Starfleet officer might be involved was surprising, of course, though unfortunately not completely unprecedented.

"You should consider yourself lucky," Reyes added after a moment. "Right now, I think there are worse career options than traveling from outpost to colony to starbase, trying to keep that rattletrap ship of yours from blowing apart at the seams." For the first time, there was a hint of good-natured ribbing in his expression.

Okagawa offered a mock salute. "Quite right, sir. The Lovell's an awfully tempting target for comics and pundits alike, but at least her onboard systems are working." Naturally, he at first had been horrified upon learning the particulars of his newest command. It, like its two counterparts currently attached to the Corps of Engineers, were without exception relics from a bygone era. According to Starfleet records, the last Daedalus-class vessel had officially been retired from service nearly seventy years previously.

"I understand those Daedalus ships are all Starfleet would give the Corps," Reyes said.

Okagawa replied, "Not exactly. They didn't give anything except permission to scrounge around a few storage depots for whatever the engineering teams thought would work best for hauling their equipment from place to place. It was decided that the Lovell and two other Daedalus tubs best fit the bill from what was available. Still, with a crew of engineers tinkering their little hearts out between assignments, you can be sure the Lovell is about as close to its original specs as you and I are compared to our Academy portraits." He wiggled his eyebrows mischievously. "I'd be happy to give you the two-credit tour, Commodore."

When Reyes laughed this time, it was with genuine humor. "Fix my station and loan me an environmental suit while I'm there and maybe we have a deal."

"You seem pretty worried for someone who served on an old Drexler-class frigate," Okagawa said. "Those weren't too far removed from their Daedalus predecessors, and I'm sure Captain Matuzas would choke on his Dramian weed tea to hear you speak ill of the Helios."

His brow furrowing in confusion, Reyes regarded him with renewed interest. "Seems you've done your homework, digging up that old posting of mine."

"Didn't have to do much," Okagawa replied. "You and I were posted to the Helios at the same time." Shrugging, he added, "Of course, our tours overlapped for a grand total of twelve days. You were a short-timer when I arrived, on your way to the... Belleau Wood, if I recall correctly."

"You do," Reyes said, nodding in appreciation. "I'll be damned. Another graduate of the Matuzas School of Starship Command. That's interesting to know."

Okagawa laughed. “We’ll have to trade some stories. I guess his command style rubbed off on me.”

Reyes narrowed his eyes. “Afraid I can’t say the same.”

Well, that does make a lot of sense, Okagawa admitted to himself. Captain Matuzas’s very relaxed approach to command had run contrary to just about everything in every Starfleet rulebook Okagawa had ever come across, a character trait that had given many superior officers cause for concern. Still, the man had gotten results, had produced numerous officers who in turn had gone on to outstanding careers of their own, and his record of accomplishments was such that there had never been any real justification for taking issue with his leadership approach.

For his part, Okagawa had thrived under those conditions while serving on the *Helios*, but he wondered whether Reyes—given his own distinct demeanor—might have found such an atmosphere discomfiting during his early career and as a result sought a transfer all those years ago to another starship with a more traditional captain.

Another bit of “need-to-know” information, I’m sure.

What had become an uncomfortable silence between the two men abruptly was broken by the whistle of the internal communications system. “Cooper to Commodore Reyes,” said a voice from the intercom unit set into the top of Reyes’s desk.

“My exec,” the commodore said as he reached across the polished surface and pressed the control to activate the unit. “Reyes here.”

“I’m down in sensor control, sir,” the station’s first officer said. “We’ve just lost alignment on the lateral sensor array again. Long-range telemetry and processing are offline, and short-range is twitchy, too.”

“Damn,” Reyes growled as he rubbed his temples. “Same thing as before?”

“Affirmative,” Cooper replied. “One minute they were fine, the next they were out. It’s like someone flipped a switch. I’ve already issued a hold on all scheduled incoming and outbound traffic.”

Reyes shook his head, his expression one of disgust. “Keep me updated. Reyes out.” Terminating the connection, the commodore turned to look at Okagawa. “Your crew just got a new ‘job one’ on the shopping list, Captain. I need that sensor array up and running yesterday. Everything else is secondary priority.”

Sensing he was about to be dismissed anyway, Okagawa rose from his chair. “I’ll notify Lieutenant al-Khaled and have him report directly to Commander Cooper. By the time my people are done, this station will be running like a top, and those sensors will be able to read the hull number of a starship two sectors away.” It was a flagrant boast, he knew, but one he did not mind making. When it came to solving any manner of technical problem or anomaly, he would stack al-Khaled and his team against any engineers in Starfleet.

No sooner did the words leave his mouth than the overhead illumination in Reyes’s office flickered before going out altogether. He and the commodore stood in near darkness as the emergency lighting mounted over the door activated, casting the room in muted ruby shadows. For the first time since his arrival, Okagawa became aware of the gentle whirl of the ventilation system.

Reyes's laugh echoed in the darkened office. "An omen, of course."

"Oh, of course," Okagawa replied.

Chapter 3

"Now this is my kind of place."

Lieutenant Jessica Diamond looked over to see Commander Araev zh'Rhun actually slap her hands together as she made the comment, her eyes wide as she took in their new surroundings. It was atypical behavior on the part of the Lovell's Andorian executive officer, who in Diamond's experience normally maintained a reserved demeanor. In all the time she had known zh'Rhun, the commander's only professional lapses had come as presented by her understated, deadpan sense of humor, which she often used to scathing effect. Seeing her now, her expression one of near wanton amusement, was a refreshing change in Diamond's eyes.

In contrast, the weapons officer struggled to keep her own expression neutral as she surveyed the gambling deck of the Omari-Ekon, an Orion merchant ship and one of a handful Starfleet and civilian vessels currently making use of Starbase 47's external docking ports. Unlike even the liveliest of the establishments the two women had visited during their tour of Stars Landing, the station's commercial, entertainment, and residential district, the current surroundings appeared to be all but consumed by a festive atmosphere.

Music filled the room, complementing rather than drowning out the chorus of electronic gaming machines and those who played them. A haze of smoke lingered in the air, a combination of various tobaccos—some faint and pleasant, others thick and noxious. Diamond's eyes moved about the expansive parlor, studying the people gathered around tables and playing or watching assorted games of chance. She heard both the laughter and celebration of the winners and the groans of disappointment and frustration of the losers. Scattered among the crowd of revelers were several scantily clad females—most of them Orion, though Diamond thought at least one or two might be human—fawning mostly over male customers but also more than a few of the female clientele as well.

"Disgusting," she said, mindful to keep her voice low lest her criticism carry to unwelcome ears. Still, the idea of anyone—male or female—objectifying themselves in the name of entertaining a client was not something that normally sat well with her.

Glancing sideways at her, zh'Rhun offered a sly smile, her white teeth contrasting with her powder-blue skin. The look of mischief was only enhanced by the slow, curving decline of the twin antennae sticking out from beneath her pallid hair. "Why, Lieutenant, you never struck me as a prude."

"I'm not," Diamond replied, to her ears perhaps a bit too quickly. "If all involved parties are consenting, I'm all for anything." She nodded toward where one sultry Orion woman sat in the lap of a burly Tellarite, with only a single strap and perhaps a rogue gravity flux keeping her wisp of a dress attached to her toned, taut body. "Those women aren't doing this because they want to."

Her frown deepened when she heard zh'Rhun laugh. "Lieutenant, if you really believe that, then you've got a lot to learn about Orion society and social mores." Looking around for a moment before apparently seeing whatever it was she sought, the Andorian touched Diamond on the arm. "This way."

“It also occurs to me,” Diamond said as she followed the commander deeper into the room, “that we’re the only Starfleet personnel here.” Indeed, she had scanned the room for signs of familiar uniforms, but found none. Only Commander zh’Rhun and herself, both dressed in regulation gold tunics and black trousers, appeared to be representing Starfleet within the confines of this establishment on this particular evening.

For her part, zh’Rhun shrugged. “It’s early, yet. Maybe things will pick up after the shift change. It’s not as though this establishment is off limits.”

Diamond nodded, reaching up to push a lock of her shoulder-length brown hair from her eyes. Before departing the Lovell, she had reviewed Starbase 47’s regulations regarding the various civilian establishments and seen no notices preventing Starfleet personnel from visiting any of them. Likewise, there had been no restrictions on any of the vessels currently docked at the station.

“Besides,” the commander said, indicating the gaming parlor with a nod of her head and another impish smile, “it just means we’ve got the place to ourselves for a while.”

Looking in the specified direction, Diamond almost did a double take. Reclined atop a pile of cushions and pillows was a humanoid female, someone of obvious wealth or importance—or both—who at the moment was the focus of attention of four large Orion males, all of whom were shirtless and with an assortment of tattoos and piercings accentuating their well-defined physiques. Two of the men flanked the woman on the cushions, one holding a plate of fruit while the other rubbed her feet with some kind of oil. The remaining two Orions stood to either side of her, one holding a silver goblet while the other carried a tray atop which sat a pair of towels and a small basin.

“All right,” Diamond said, shrugging as she took in the scene. “I could probably get used to that.”

As they moved past the woman and her consorts, zh’Rhun laughed again. “Relax, Lieutenant. One of the disadvantages of being assigned to a ship staffed by engineers is that when there’s a mission that requires only the engineers, the rest of us have to find something interesting to do. How often does a situation like that come along and we get a chance to do nothing but enjoy ourselves?”

Nearing the bar situated at the center of the parlor, they found space between two disparate groups of customers—some human and others not, but all taking full advantage of the gambling deck’s joyous ambiance. After placing an order with the Arcturian working behind the bar, zh’Rhun turned to look at Diamond, leaning close so she could be heard over the boisterous patrons around them. “Enjoy yourself, Jessica. This’ll be fun. Besides, you’ve more than earned a bit of downtime.”

Diamond was forced to admit that the commander had a point. Most of the Lovell’s staff of engineering specialists currently was assisting station personnel to complete the plethora of tasks still remaining before Starbase 47 could be deemed “fully operational,” as well as helping to identify and resolve the rash of heretofore unexplained problems with various onboard systems. Those few members of the ship’s complement who were not otherwise engaged had been granted shore leave by Captain Okagawa. While Commander zh’Rhun was receiving regular reports from the ship’s department heads via her communicator, Jessica Diamond found herself in the unusual position of having nothing “important” to do at the moment.

Okay, okay, she mused. I’ll take the hint .

The Arcturian bartender placed atop the bar two squat glasses with thick bases and each filled with what

Diamond saw was an almost luminescent yellow liquid. Taking one of the glasses, zh'Rhun turned and offered the other to her.

“What is it?” Diamond asked, her brow furrowing as she took the proffered drink.

“It’s called gredlahr,” the commander replied, “from Andor. Similar to rum, though sweeter.” Wagging her eyebrows as her antennae moved to point toward Diamond, she smiled again. “You’ll love—”

The sentence was cut off as zh'Rhun stood almost ramrod straight, and Diamond watched her expression morph from shock to puzzlement to annoyance within the space of only a few heartbeats. A scowl crossed her features and she turned to glare behind her at the group of four human males, all of whom seemed to be making a point of not looking at zh'Rhun. Only the man standing nearest to her—big, bald, and with an imposing physique highlighted by the material of the dark shirt stretching across his broad chest—cocked his head in her direction and offered a sly smile.

“Did he just grab your—?” Diamond began.

“Yes,” zh'Rhun replied, her expression stern as the commander turned back to face her. “Yes, he did.” Shaking her head, she placed her glass back on the bar. “Watch that for me.”

You have got to be kidding me. The thought screamed in Diamond’s mind as zh'Rhun spun on her heel, turned, and grabbed the bald man’s right arm. Diamond had only an instant to register his look of surprise before the commander twisted his arm up and behind his back, pulling him around and slamming him face-first into the bar. He emitted a single low grunt of pain before sagging like a limp doll and falling to the floor at her feet.

The effect was immediate. Nearby conversations ceased and dozens of patrons turned to regard the disturbance in their midst. Despite that, Diamond still heard the sounds of gaming and partying taking place elsewhere in the parlor, the majority of the gambling deck’s clientele blissfully unaware of the happenings at the bar.

“Uh-oh,” she whispered, setting her own drink down on the bar and stepping away from the press of people, suddenly wishing she were carrying a phaser as the rest of the bald man’s party—recovering from the shock of zh'Rhun’s sudden and effective attack on their friend—turned to face the Andorian with matching looks of growing menace that did not quite hide the obvious effects of intoxication reddening their eyes.

“Not smart, Starfleet,” said one of the men, his words slurred and the corners of his mouth curled into a snarl that was almost concealed beneath his thick beard.

Stepping away from the bar to give herself some room, zh'Rhun affected a dismissive shrug. “Your friend should watch where he puts his hands.”

Diamond noted that two of the men wore dark green coveralls with the insignia of a civilian freight service contracted to deliver supplies to the different colonies that were being established throughout the Taurus Reach.

Wonderful, she thought. Probably their first night back after a long haul. After who knew how many weeks at low warp, the men had arrived at the station with money to spend and energy to burn. Combined with the alcohol they had no doubt already consumed, it was a recipe for trouble.

The man who had spoken to zh'Rhun moved forward, his hands low and away from his body and his intent evident. He managed only two steps before the commander reacted, lunging forward and closing the gap even before the man could bring his hands up. Lashing out, she struck his chin with the palm of her right hand. The man's head snapped up and he staggered backward a few steps, one hand moving to cradle his wounded jaw. The other two men stepped forward, and Diamond's eyes darted to each of their hands, checking for any sign of a weapon.

For her part, zh'Rhun seemed disinterested in that notion one way or another as she turned to face the new threats, the two remaining men separating in an attempt to flank her with the obvious intent of ganging up on the Andorian. It was obvious that awareness of their surroundings had been as dulled by intoxication as their reflexes, given that the movements of one man brought him almost alongside Diamond.

Idiot, she mused in the instant before the man tried to make his move. He caught sight of her out of the corner of his eye, and Diamond imagined she detected comprehension finally coalescing in his alcohol-dulled mind. Reading his body language, she saw him tense and decided she had no choice even as the man raised an arm in a pitifully slow attempt to lash out at her. Diamond intercepted the arm with no effort, twisting it down and away from her and pulling the man off balance. He crashed to the floor in a disjointed heap, leaving her to look up in time to see zh'Rhun still facing off with the remaining man, who was looking for his opening.

"That's enough."

The words, though spoken in a conversational tone, seemed to carry forth across the gambling deck and draw the simultaneous attention of everyone standing within earshot. Diamond turned to see the crowd behind her part to reveal a hulking, bald Orion male dressed in what looked to be a maroon toga. An array of gold piercings decorated both of his ears as well as the right side of his nose. His thick brow was furrowed in obvious irritation as he took in the scene.

Flanking him was another Orion male—this one of much slimmer build—and a Nalori. While the Orion was dressed in simple woven trousers and shirt and looked every bit the part of a muscled enforcer, the Nalori sported a precisely tailored dark suit and matching shoes that reflected the parlor's low lighting even better than his shiny black skin or the bottomless pools that served as his eyes.

Just looking at him made the hairs on the back of Diamond's neck stand up.

Pointing toward the man still facing off against zh'Rhun, the large Orion said, "Jaeq, Zett, show these gentlemen the door." As the other Orion moved to carry out his instructions, his boss added, "Make sure they've paid their tab first." The near-deadpan delivery almost made Diamond laugh.

She moved to stand beside zh'Rhun as the Orion's two henchmen set about gathering up the wayward quartet of drunken or unconscious freight haulers, both women turning to face their unexpected benefactor. "Thank you," Diamond offered.

"Sorry about the fight," zh'Rhun added. "It wasn't our intention to cause trouble."

The Orion bowed his head, his expression relaxing only the slightest bit. "It is I who should apologize. I don't normally tolerate that sort of conduct aboard my ship."

"Your ship?" Diamond blurted. "You're the captain?"

“In a manner of speaking,” the Orion replied. “My name is Ganz, and I’m the proprietor of the Omari-Ekon as well as this gaming establishment.”

Along with your role in weapons trafficking, Diamond thought, assorted smuggling, and slave trading, and prostitution, and who knows what else. While she was not familiar with Ganz’s dossier, if he owned this ship, it was probable he had his hand in a variety of illicit interests. Those freight runners might just be heading for the nearest airlock.

“We don’t typically have fights in here,” Ganz continued. “My staff is usually on top of such matters before they can escalate. Unfortunately, not all of my customers are fans of Starfleet.”

“An odd attitude to take,” zh’Rhun said, “considering they’re docking at this station and making use of Starfleet facilities.”

Ganz shrugged. “Irony comes in many forms, Commander.”

As he spoke the words, the lights throughout the gambling deck flickered, and Diamond even heard a skip in the music being piped through the room’s sound system. It was momentary, but still enough to make several of the patrons look around in confusion and cause Ganz’s brow to furrow even deeper.

He turned to his Orion companion. “Jaeq, tell the engineers that I’m getting tired of these problems. If they can’t figure out what’s causing them and fix it...” He let his voice trail off as he regarded Diamond and zh’Rhun, as though considering what he was about to say for the benefit of his current audience. “Tell them to fix it, or I’ll be unhappy. Are we clear?”

Jaeq nodded. “Understood, Mr. Ganz,” he answered before turning and heading off to deliver the message.

They’re having tech problems too? Diamond mulled that. Interesting. Were the Orion merchant’s issues related to whatever was affecting the station’s systems? She would have to inform Lieutenant al-Khaled and see what he thought about that.

Returning his attention to the Starfleet officers, Ganz took a deep breath before nodding in their direction. “Now, as I was about to say, ladies, you might wish to consider seeking entertainment elsewhere.”

“You’re kicking us out?” Diamond asked, feeling her features tighten into a scowl. “The only thing we did was try to buy drinks.”

“Remain as long as you wish,” Ganz replied. “Your drinks—and anything else you might want for the remainder of your stay—are complimentary.” He paused, giving Diamond a frank visual inspection from head to feet. “Despite my policies, however, I can’t guarantee that another of the patrons might not...misplace his hands.”

Stepping forward, zh’Rhun said, “We can handle that.”

“Of that I have no doubt,” Ganz said, smiling for the first time. “Suit yourself. Inform my staff if you need anything. Enjoy the rest of your evening, ladies.” With that, the enormous Orion turned and walked away, the gaggle of onlookers once again parting to facilitate his sojourn deeper into the gaming parlor.

As the crowd returned to normal and the festive atmosphere resumed on the gambling deck, Diamond

could not resist offering a playful smile to zh'Rhun as both women reached for their drinks, which still sat atop the bar.

“You’re right, Commander,” she said as she sipped hergedlahr . “This is fun.”

Chapter 4

After just a few hours aboard Starbase 47, Lieutenant Isaiah Farber had come to a single conclusion: The station was, in a word, incredible.

He had taken in as much of the starbase’s numerous aesthetic features as his duties had allowed, typically while passing from one problematic point to another either via the network of turbolifts or the tram tube that skirted the periphery of Vanguard’s massive primary hull. The tram in particular offered the young engineer captivating views of the station’s terrestrial enclosure—an unhindered panorama stretching more than eight hundred meters—complete with rolling hills, a pond, and even a small forested area. Across the enclosure, the view was dominated by the “skyline” of Stars Landing, the station’s high-rise complex of civilian residences and support facilities, which Farber had been told were worth visiting if for nothing else than for the collection of restaurants offering cuisines from across the Federation.

Despite all of that, it was not until he got his first look at the main control center for the station’s primary sensor array that Farber could admit to being truly impressed.

“Now we’re talking my language,” he said as he stepped from the turbolift into the room. Located near the bottom of the station’s long, cylindrical secondary hull, the control center sat immediately atop the oversized multispectrum sensor array and was awash in activity. Technicians moved among the thirty workstations ringing the chamber’s perimeter, each console sporting multiple computer interface terminals and situational display monitors. The chamber reminded Farber of the upper deck of a starship’s bridge, complete with a circle of red railing at the room’s center. Inside the railing, secured by a series of force-field emitters, hung a massive duranium support arm for the rotating antenna dish, which extended beyond the deck beneath their feet from the bottom of the station’s hull.

Taking in the scene and relishing every detail, Farber nodded in satisfaction. “This place is amazing!”

“This place is a wreck,” said a voice from behind him, “and it’ll stay that way if we spend all day standing in the turbolift.”

Realizing he had stopped on the lift’s threshold, Farber turned and offered a sheepish grin. “Sorry, Ghrex.” He stepped aside, allowing his Denobulan shipmate passage into the control room. Like him, the ensign was dressed in normal Starfleet gold tunic and black trousers and carried a standard-issue engineer’s tool satchel slung over her shoulder.

Walking farther into the room, Farber could hear several conversations echoing through the room at once, all accompanied by a steady stream of computer tones and indicators. He could only imagine the sheer amounts of data that would be processed by this control center and channeled to the station’s computer core when the sensor array was functioning at top capacity.

Of course, right now it was operating far below that level, which was why he and Ghrex were here. Sent

here by Lieutenants al-Khaled and Ballard, the engineers were tasked with assisting in the diagnostics on the sensor array as well as figuring out a means of realignment that would not be compromised inside of a day, as had been the case at irregular intervals since the array first had come online. There was no undervaluing the necessity of functioning sensors, situated as the station was far outside Federation territory and on the doorsteps of both the Klingon Empire and the Tholian Assembly.

“As I understand it,” Ghrex said as she followed after him, “both the long-range sensors and the lateral arrays are malfunctioning.”

Farber nodded. According to Ballard’s situation report, given to him by al-Khaled during their hasty, succinct briefing, both systems had failed within moments of one another, and with no apparent crossover feedback. It was not a case of cascading failures, with one malfunction overburdening and finally overcoming subordinate systems.

“Ballard and his people already ruled out malfunctions in the station’s power and data network that might be overloading the array,” he said, “along with negative effects from ambient radiation or some other stellar phenomenon in this part of space. So, basically, that narrows it down to—” He paused for dramatic effect. “—something inside the station, or something outside the station.”

Frowning, Ghrex hitched her tool satchel up higher onto her shoulder. “Sounds like a simple enough problem to solve.”

Farber regarded her with a smirk. “It was a joke, Ensign. Just trying to get a smile out of you.”

“You’re like my second husband’s third wife,” the Denobulan replied, shaking her head. “Just because we’re facing a complex problem to solve doesn’t require you to boost my spirits. I’m typically a very upbeat and positive person, after all.”

“Oh, absolutely,” Farber said, trying not to laugh. “I never thought otherwise, not for a second.”

Turning away from Ghrex, he looked about the room until his eyes caught sight of the officer who he guessed was in charge here in the control center, an uncharacteristically slender Tellarite male dressed in a blue tunic sporting lieutenant commander’s insignia.

“Briv,” the commander said by way of introduction, the single word coming out almost as a belch rather than actual speech. “You’ve arrived just in time, it seems.”

“We’re here to help, sir,” Farber replied. “Where do you want us?”

Offering a terse nod, Briv said, “I’ve ordered a new set of diagnostics on the array, but I doubt they’ll be any more helpful in finding a cause than the previous half-dozen tests we’ve run. The rest of our time has been spent making manual recalibrations and adjustments.” He shook his head, and Farber read his expression of disgust. “You never realize how much you rely on automation until it’s not available.”

Farber grinned. “The story of our lives, Commander.”

Standing beside him, Ghrex said, “I have an idea, sir. I’d like to take a look at the previous sets of diagnostics results. If the problem is internal, I might find a pattern to the malfunctions that I can trace back to a source.”

“I’ve already had people do that,” Briv replied, “but a fresh perspective might just be what’s in order.”

He indicated an empty console. “You can work at that station.”

Farber nodded. “Sounds like a plan. In the meantime, I can run a scan of the main data hubs and routers leading from here and feeding the primary data network. If there’s a breach or some other form of defect, it could go all but undetected in the kilometers of wiring and circuitry filling the innards of this station.” Looking around, he asked, “The schematics showed service lifts accessing the data network conduits?”

Briv shook his head. “Engineering service turbolifts are offline for safety reasons until we get the problems resolved.” He pointed over Farber’s shoulder. “We have Jefferies tubes that will get you there, though.” His gruff expression morphing into a mischievous grin, he added, “They should be big enough for you to fit.”

Wonderful.

Crawling around the access conduits aboard a starship—even one as small as the Lovell—was one thing. Doing the same aboard a Watchtower-class space station would be something else entirely.

Guess I won’t need the gym today, he mused as he made a quick check to see that his tool satchel’s flap was secure. Or tomorrow, for that matter.

After first activating his tricorder and adjusting its scan field to search for fluctuations in the data processing network, Farber entered the Jefferies tube and found a familiar-looking orange, tri-sided service ladder. The ever-present hum of the station’s massive power generators was very audible in the shaft’s narrow confines, though it was not enough to drown out the low-pitched whine of his tricorder or even the sounds of his boots on the ladder rungs as he climbed.

While he often traversed the comparable crawlways on the Lovell as a means of exercise—doing so as fast as he could, of course—on this occasion he moved at a more leisurely pace so that the tricorder could conduct its scans. The going was slow and mundane, with Farber splitting his focus between the tricorder’s miniaturized display screen and the access conduit itself. Service platforms were installed at regular intervals on each side of the ladder, and horizontal ducts intersected with the shaft in correlation to each deck within the station’s secondary hull. Farber tried not to pay too much attention to the markings on the shaft’s bulkheads at each juncture, as they only served to remind him that he was climbing ever higher and ever farther from the sensor control room. He was now ten decks up from the sensor array, past the station’s immense primary energy reactors and moving upward toward the areas designated for cargo storage and maintenance facilities.

He was almost to the next deck when he saw it.

A trio of dark lines of varying thickness, running down the wall and contrasting with the light gray of the bulkhead to his left, standing out even in the shaft’s reduced illumination. Following the streaks with his eyes, he saw that they ended at the bottom edge of a rectangular grille for one of the station’s uncounted ventilation ducts, situated on the bulkhead a meter above a service platform. It only barely reflected the shaft’s subdued lighting, at first glance appearing to be leakage from some kind of coolant or perhaps a hydraulic seal.

Stepping off the platform, Farber reached into his tool satchel and extracted a work light. When he directed its bright beam onto the wall, he knew without question that he was not looking at a lubricant leak.

Blood?

He ducked down in order to see through the grill, moving the work light so that it could shine through the thin grating, and froze when the light washed across familiar gold material and reflected off gleaming braid.

“Oh my god,” he breathed as he looked upon the body of a dead human male. The man’s throat had been slit, and congealed blood stained his neck, uniform, and the bottom of the ventilation duct into which his body had been unceremoniously shoved. A pungent aroma of dull copper assailed his nostrils, the scent of death. How long had the man been here?

Casting frantic glances around the shaft to ensure he was still alone while trying not to drop his work light or stumble from the service platform, Farber reached with one shaking hand for the communicator clipped to his waist.

* * *

More than an hour later, Farber sat in a small, almost claustrophobic office. Before him was a utilitarian gray desk, the undecorated room’s most prominent furnishing. Other than the standard-issue computer interface terminal, the top of the desk was free of papers, data slates, clutter, or personal possessions of any kind. He could not even detect a faded ring from where a coffee cup might once have rested. Everything about the office indicated that its current owner made a supreme effort to spend as much time as possible away from these uninviting surroundings.

Though he had washed his face and hands after his initial interview with the station’s security chief, Lieutenant Haniff Jackson, Farber realized he once again was rubbing his hands as though trying to clean them. He had caught himself doing it several times since his grisly discovery, even though he had not touched so much as a drop of blood from the unfortunate soul he had found.

The door behind him slid aside, allowing Jackson to enter. He was a stout man, like Farber himself, well-muscled and moving with the confidence Farber had always found to be typical behavior for security personnel. Dark skin contrasted starkly with his gold tunic, the ribbed collar of which stretched around his thick neck. He was bald, though he sported a mustache and a small patch of facial hair just beneath his lower lip.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Lieutenant,” Jackson said as he maneuvered his compact, barrel-chested frame behind the desk and settled into the office’s only other chair. He carried a data slate in his thick left hand, which he laid upon the desk before directing his attention to Farber. “I don’t suppose you have anything to add to your original statement?”

Farber shook his head. “No,” he said, recalling what little he was able to offer in the way of information during Jackson’s first interview, conducted down in sensor control. Beyond his discovery of the body itself, he of course could offer nothing else. “I guess he and I weren’t all that different,” he added. “Just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“One way of looking at it,” Jackson countered. “Ensign Malhotra was last reported conducting an inventory in Cargo Bay Nineteen, but he’s been missing since yesterday. At first we thought he might have been involved in some thefts we’ve experienced.” Shaking his head, the security officer sighed. “It looks like he might have been, at that.”

“I wondered about that,” Farber said, only realizing after he heard the words that he had said them

aloud.

His eyes narrowing, Jackson leaned forward in his seat. “What do you know about that?”

Farber cleared his throat as he adjusted his position in his own chair. “I’m sorry, Lieutenant. I didn’t mean to muddy the waters with that comment. It’s just that I noticed that bay’s cargo manifest was the last thing accessed on the computer station located inside that room. You didn’t know?”

Obviously still confused, Jackson shook his head. “So far as we could determine, the manifests look completely legitimate, even though we know they had to have been altered by someone who knew what they were doing. Why were you reviewing them?”

Reaching for the tricorder still slung from his shoulder, Farber replied, “As I said earlier, I was making scans of the main data conduits as well as the transfer hubs and interface terminals while moving through that access shaft. It wasn’t until after I’d found Ensign Malhotra and climbed back down to sensor control that I realized that my tricorder was still activated. While I was waiting to be interviewed, I went over the scans, and noticed the discrepancy.”

“Let me see that,” Jackson said, reaching for the tricorder, and Farber watched as he spent several moments studying the information stored within its suite of removable data discs.

“Wait a minute,” the lieutenant finally said when he finished his review. “Whoever altered the manifest did an exceptional job covering their tracks, but your scans show the modifications in the database as though they were painted on the bulkhead. How did you find this?”

“I’ll admit they were good,” Farber said, unable to resist a smug smile, “but I’m better. Add to that the fact that my tricorder isn’t exactly standard issue, as I’ve made several modifications to its scanning diodes.” He shrugged. “Consider it an occupational habit.”

Leaning back in his seat, Jackson chuckled. “I’ve heard that about you Corps of Engineers types.” He indicated the tricorder with a nod. “I’d appreciate a copy of that data as soon as you can get it to me.” Then he smiled. “After that, I might ask you to tinker with some of our tricorders.”

“Anything I can do to help, Lieutenant,” Farber replied.

Jackson drew a deep breath. “For what it’s worth, you may have helped to narrow the list of suspects quite a bit. Lots of people can steal from a cargo bay, but I’m betting only a handful can make those kinds of subtle database alterations, and fewer than that are currently running around this station.” He nodded in satisfaction. “When this is over, if you’re still here, remind me that I owe you a drink.”

“Fair enough,” Farber said. “It’s rare for me to turn down such offers.” As he spoke the words, both men looked up in response to a rapid flickering in the overhead lighting.

“Of course,” the engineer amended, “that assumes we can ever fix your station.”

Chapter 5

Unlike the main engineering room aboard the Lovell, one thing al-Khaled noticed most about Starbase

47's primary engineering control center was the near lack of background noise generated by engines. Whereas his ship's massive power plant was located in proximity to the work spaces inhabited by the small, fragile beings tasked with caring for it, the low thrum of Vanguard's power generators—ensconced as they were deep in the bowels of the station—was all but concealed by internal dampening systems.

He still was able to sense the reverberations, of course, as would any decent engineer.

The other thing al-Khaled observed about his current surroundings was that, considering the sheer size of Starbase 47, the station's main engineering center was downright claustrophobic.

"You'd think your fellow engineers would have looked out for you when designing this place," al-Khaled said, turning in his seat as Curtis Ballard walked toward him.

Vanguard's chief engineer shrugged. "They made up for it. This is the main hub, but there are five auxiliary control rooms spread across the station. Even if something happens here, we can oversee every onboard system from any of those locations. All six stations also have direct turbolifts and Jefferies tube access to the station's power grid."

Al-Khaled nodded. The design approach was but one of several innovations incorporated into the Watchtower-class stations, making them the most technologically advanced model of autonomous, self-sustaining space-based habitats. Once operational, Vanguard would be capable of supporting itself and its crew of twelve hundred for a decade without outside aid, and in addition to its ship-maintenance and repair facilities the station boasted formidable weapons and defensive systems that would allow it to face any threat that might present itself. It was an important consideration out here in the Taurus Reach, light-years from normal Starfleet patrol routes.

The only problem with that plan, of course, was that it required the station in question actually to have onboard systems that worked .

Settling into a chair at a console adjacent to the one al-Khaled occupied, Ballard rubbed his eyes before running both hands through his disheveled blond hair. "You know, I hate staff meetings on the best of days."

Al-Khaled offered a sympathetic nod. "Lieutenant Farber told me about the crew member they found. I was sorry to hear about that." While death in the line of duty was a possibility faced by every Starfleet officer, that normally did not extend to being murdered while carrying out regular, even mundane assignments within the supposed safety of one's own starship—or starbase, as the case may be—and while living and working among one's own trusted colleagues.

"Not something you expect, that's for sure," Ballard replied. "If I know Lieutenant Jackson and his security team, though, they'll tear this station apart to find who's responsible." Shaking his head, he turned to his workstation. "In the meantime, I've got my hands full here." As he spoke the words, he cast a wry, humorless grin toward al-Khaled. "Sorry, I meant we've got our hands full."

"No offense taken," al-Khaled replied. At first, he was concerned that Ballard might take issue with outside engineers being brought in to help him resolve the station's problems, but the lieutenant had not batted an eye at Commodore Reyes's decision. A consummate professional, Ballard knew that deploying fresh minds and eyes against a problem was an effective means of finding a solution.

"You know, Mahmud," the engineer said after a moment, "I've been in Starfleet for seven years. I've been on shakedown cruises for three different star-ships, and I was part of the team that got Station K-5

up and running when Starfleet needed it operational six months ahead of schedule.” He shook his head. “That was a host of headaches, let me tell you, but it was nothing compared to the ulcers this place is giving me. I’ve never run into anything like the problems we’ve been facing here.”

Repeated inspections of the hardware and software components that comprised those systems experiencing the irregular and unexplained malfunctions—sensors, the internal communications and computer network, power distribution grids—had found nothing. Even prior to the Lovell’s arrival, Ballard and his team had been working with the theory that something external to the station must be responsible, but scans of the surrounding region revealed nothing—natural or artificial—that might be the cause.

That hypothesis gained credibility when personnel still on duty aboard the Lovell began reporting isolated odd happenings with the ship’s systems, though nothing as extensive as whatever plagued the station. Then al-Khaled received a surprise when Lieutenant Diamond contacted him with news about the odd power fluctuations aboard the Orion merchant ship, the only other vessel currently docked at Vanguard.

“I’ve never fully shaken the idea that the Klingons or Tholians might be covertly jamming us,” Ballard said as he leaned back in his chair. “It would make sense, especially given what’s happening aboard the Lovell and that Orion ship, but we haven’t found a single shred of evidence to support the idea.”

Al-Khaled frowned. “Even if they were capable of doing something like that without us finding it, they’ve got their own people on board. You’d think they’d want measures in place to protect their own communications and computer access.”

As part of Vanguard’s mission to safeguard diplomatic relations between the Klingon Empire and Tholian Assembly as the Federation continued its push into the Taurus Reach, the station also played home to embassies from all three governments. Both the Klingon and Tholian ambassadors were supported by a staff of attachés and aides, all of whom were in regular contact with their respective home-worlds and appropriate political entities.

“Their communications and computers have been having the same problems as the rest of the station,” Ballard replied. “Of course, any such protection would be pretty obvious once we started looking for the cause. I’d like to think we had the edge on Klingon technology, but as for the Tholians...” He shrugged. “Hell, nobody really knows about them, do they?”

The door to the control center swooshed open to admit Isaiah Farber, who entered at a run, and al-Khaled swore he could feel the deck plates vibrating beneath his feet in response to the muscled lieutenant’s heavy footfalls.

“I think I know what’s going on,” Farber said by way of greeting. “Remember Buquair III?”

* * *

Al-Khaled could tell that Commodore Reyes, while doubtless an intelligent and articulate man, preferred to concentrate on the larger, grander picture while leaving the trivial details to those he commanded.

It also was obvious that the commodore was not a man of great patience when it came to having to listen to such details.

“What about this colony?” Reyes asked from where he sat behind his desk as he reached for the coffee cup near his left hand.

From where he sat next to the commodore's intelligence officer, Lieutenant Commander T'Prynn, Captain Okagawa replied, "Two years ago, the Lovell was one of several ships sent to Buquair III after an underwater earthquake generated a tsunami and it slammed into the Glassner Colony established by the Federation."

Farber said, "While we were helping out with repair and reconstruction efforts, we discovered a very subtle power reading coming from somewhere just offshore. It turned out to be the wreck of an alien spacecraft that had crashed and sunk there decades earlier, and was buried beneath ocean silt."

"The earthquake unburied it, Commodore," al-Khaled added, "and we picked up the distress signal it was still transmitting, though it was on a frequency so low that normal communications channels couldn't detect it. We picked up the power readings well enough, but we had to recalibrate our ship's sensors before we could lock on to the signal."

Holding up his tricorder, its black exterior practically swallowed by his meaty left hand, Farber said, "I was recalibrating this after replacing its power cell when I picked up an odd reading. I had our people on the Lovell retune the ship's sensors in a manner similar to what we did at the colony, and that's when we found it."

Turning in her seat, T'Prynn asked, "You are alleging that something comparable to what you discovered on Buquair III is occurring here?" She shifted her gaze—stern and unwavering in typical Vulcan fashion—between al-Khaled and Farber, and for an odd moment al-Khaled found himself realizing that he found her quite attractive. She was dressed in the female officer's version of the standard Starfleet gold tunic, with its high, thick collar almost but not quite concealing her long, thin neck. Her dark hair was piled atop her head in a regulation hairstyle that left her small, pointed ears exposed while seeming exotic as it framed her lean features.

Clearing his throat as he returned his attention to the matter at hand, al-Khaled nodded. "Yes, Commander." Crossing the commodore's office to the viewer mounted on the bulkhead to Reyes's right, he added, "This is what our sensors picked up."

He touched the control pad set into the wall next to the viewer, and the screen activated to display a computer-generated silhouette of Vanguard station superimposed over a starfield. Dominating the image was a series of blue lines, uneven and rippling as they expanded from one edge of the star map toward the station.

"We're calling it a 'carrier wave' for now," al-Khaled said, pointing to different lines on the screen. "It's definitely an artificial occurrence, transmitting on a frequency so low that sensors in their normal configuration would never register it."

Reyes frowned. "But my people retuned the station's sensor arrays looking for something like this even before you arrived." Looking to where Ballard stood near the bulkhead opposite the viewscreen, he asked, "I'm not misremembering anything, am I, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir," the engineer replied. "We didn't pick up so much as a twitch."

Stepping closer to al-Khaled, Farber said, "The sensors aboard the Lovell have been modified with modern components like those aboard newer and larger ships, and our teams have also enhanced them to a significant degree beyond their normal operational limits."

“A consequence of hauling a shipload of engineers traveling from assignment to assignment and looking for ways to pass the time,” Okagawa added. “Welcome to my world, Commodore.”

Nodding, Reyes even smiled a bit at that. “Nice card to have in your deck, though.”

“Even with our sensors,” al-Khaled said, “we detected nothing until we made additional recalibrations, and then we only just barely picked up the signal.”

“And you believe this to be the source of our technical problems?” T’Prynn asked. The thin eyebrow over her right eye arched as if to punctuate her question. Not waiting for a response, she turned to Reyes. “An interesting hypothesis.”

“I don’t understand,” the commodore said, leaning forward in his chair and clasping his hands together as he rested forearms atop his desk. “If this signal, wave, or whatever you want to call it is so weak, how can it be causing all of this trouble, not only to my station but also the Lovell, that damned Orion’s ship, and anybody else wandering through this area?”

Al-Khaled replied, “We’re only just starting our analysis, Commodore, but our preliminary theory is that this carrier wave is like a hailing frequency, intended to be received and processed through a device operating along specific parameters similar to that of the carrier wave’s source. The signal is cyclic, repeating approximately every twenty-four minutes, but it lacks any real complexity. Based on what we’ve learned so far, it seems that sensitive equipment such as computer interfaces, sensor arrays, and communications networks are susceptible to minor disruption.”

“In some respects,” Farber added, “it’s not unlike the distress signals utilized by civilian transport ships several decades ago, which were designed to interfere with the navigational systems of passing ships and attract attention in the event the signal itself was too weak to be interpreted by proper communications systems.”

As his colleague provided his analysis, al-Khaled glanced toward T’Prynn and saw that the Vulcan’s attention appeared focused on the viewscreen and its representation of the carrier wave.

She noticed his scrutiny and cocked her head in his direction before asking, “Lieutenant, have you been able to locate the carrier wave’s origin point?”

“No, Commander.” Al-Khaled pointed to the image on the screen. “So far, all we’ve been able to determine is that it comes from somewhere in the Taurus Reach. According to the information at our disposal, the area where we believe the signal originates has only been charted by automated probes, and even that was done in the most cursory manner. Our analysis to this point also suggests it may only have been transmitting intermittently during the past several weeks, corresponding to the time you began experiencing stationwide malfunctions. We hope to learn more as we continue our research, of course.”

Sitting back in his seat, Reyes said, “That won’t be necessary, Lieutenant.”

Though taken aback by the abrupt statement, al-Khaled still noticed the quick glance the commodore exchanged with T’Prynn. It was no doubt intended to be subtle, something shared only between them, but there was no mistaking the look that flashed only briefly in Reyes’s eyes.

We just stumbled onto something interesting.

“Commodore,” Okagawa said, “I don’t understand. It seems my people are into the middle of

something here.” Though the statement did not reveal anything, al-Khaled was familiar enough with his captain’s mannerisms and thought processes to know that he must have caught the look between the Vanguard officers as well, and was doing some fishing of his own.

“Don’t get me wrong, gentlemen,” Reyes said as he rose from his chair. “I appreciate everything you’ve done to this point, including what looks to be finding the source of our problems. What I need from you now is your expertise in figuring out a way for my station to operate in spite of this interference, sooner rather than later. We do have a rather compressed schedule to keep.” He looked to Ballard. “Isn’t that right, Lieutenant?”

“Absolutely, sir,” the engineer replied.

Reyes nodded, then glanced at T’Prynn again before continuing, “As for the signal itself and where it might be coming from, I have a whole staff of scientists I can task with that. Transfer all information you’ve gathered to this point to Commander T’Prynn, and she’ll take it from there.”

The commodore was smooth, al-Khaled decided, so practiced and polished was his delivery that he almost certainly was a consummate poker player. His instructions were of course completely proper and—on the surface, at least—lacking any hint of ulterior motive. Still, there was no denying the swiftness with which he had reassigned responsibility for determining the source and content of the mysterious carrier wave.

What are they worried about?

Rising to his feet, Okagawa nodded. “Understood, Commodore. I’ll have my engineers get back to helping your teams right away.”

After departing Reyes’s office and making their way across the operations center, it was not until al-Khaled, Farber, and Okagawa were in a turbolift heading back toward the docking bays and the core of the station that anyone said anything.

The captain broke the silence. “Is it just me, or did we just get hustled?”

Farber nodded. “Not just you, sir.”

“I’m thinking I’m going to be very busy after dinner this evening,” al-Khaled said. “I want to get another look at the data we’ve collected so far.”

Okagawa held up a hand. “Not so fast, Lieutenant. For now, we play it the commodore’s way. Transfer everything we’ve got on that signal to Commander T’Prynn. You and your team have a job to do. Let’s help get this station up and running the way it’s supposed to be.” Shaking his head, he added, “Besides, after that mess with the environmental control system, I don’t want my ship coming down with any serious troubles of its own.”

Though he acknowledged his captain’s orders and started turning the thoughts running through his mind toward his primary assignment, al-Khaled could not shake loose the feeling that there was much about the mysterious carrier wave in which to be interested.

He also was certain that Commodore Reyes and Commander T’Prynn held similar opinions.

It’s as though they were waiting for something like this to happen.

Chapter

6

Lieutenant T'Laen preferred to work the overnight shift.

It was not that she was antisocial, of course. In fact, and though it was an action she herself would never undertake, she believed that an informal survey of the rest of the Lovell's crew would show that—by Vulcan standards, at least—T'Laen was more than genial toward her shipmates. However, she long ago learned that she preferred to work in relative solitude, freed from as many potential distractions as possible while going about her duties as the ship's primary computer systems specialist.

Gamma shift on the bridge offered her that environment, particularly now with the ship docked within the safe confines of Starbase 47. Captain Okagawa had granted shore leave to all personnel not currently assisting the station's engineering teams to resolve their spate of technical issues, a relative distinction considering that fully two-thirds of the Lovell's forty-two-person crew were involved in that effort, and assorted members from the remaining third had pitched in as helpers and assistants wherever they might be useful.

As a result, the bridge was deserted except for her, with only the omnipresent sounds of workstations set to passive or automated modes to keep her company. With the exception of her station and those displaying vital information about critical onboard systems, even the array of status monitors and viewscreens ringing the ship's nerve center were inactive. T'Laen had volunteered to “mind the store,” as the captain had put it, freeing Commander zh'Rhun and other bridge officers to enjoy some well-deserved shore leave and allowing the lieutenant herself to concentrate on her current task: continued analysis of the mysterious carrier wave emanating from deep within the Taurus Reach.

While Lieutenant al-Khaled had been tasked with figuring out how to nullify the signal's puzzling effects on the Vanguard station as well as the Lovell—which T'Laen had experienced as occasional disruptions in the ship's main computer—she had taken it upon herself to learn as much as possible about the transmission's origin.

Though she had spent several hours seated at the bridge's library computer workstation studying the odd frequency and patterns of the communication, she had gleaned precious little in the way of new information. Breaking down the signal was easy enough, given its relatively simplistic construction. What she had so far been unable to fathom was whether she was dealing with an alien language—one that simply defied even the persistent efforts of the universal translation software—or an elaborate form of encryption.

A thorough search of the Lovell's databanks had found nothing on record as resembling the signal, and her request for a similar search to be conducted through Starfleet Command's larger and far more comprehensive repository of information was still waiting to be processed. If that failed, she had already drafted for the captain's approval a request for computer access to Memory Alpha, the vast storehouse of scientific and cultural information gathered from all of the Federation's member planets. T'Laen did not expect to find anything resembling a match to the carrier wave, but due diligence required following all available avenues of investigation.

“Any luck, Lieutenant?”

It required physical effort on T'Laen's part not to jump at the sound of Okagawa's voice from behind her. Swiveling her chair away from her workstation, the Vulcan saw the captain regarding her with the small, knowing smile that always seemed to highlight his features.

"Excuse me, Captain," she said as she rose from her chair in deference to her commanding officer. "I apparently did not hear your arrival." How had he managed to get on the bridge without her noticing it? She had not heard the turbolift doors or the captain's footsteps as he stepped onto the command center's upper deck. Had her work really been that engrossing? Or was she simply tired?

"I'm stealthy that way," Okagawa said, his smile broadening. "Good to know I haven't lost my touch." Waving her back to her seat, he indicated one of her station's display monitors. "Still chewing on it, I take it?"

It took a moment for T'Laen to comprehend the meaning of the captain's words before she nodded. "I have attempted to augment the computer's translation subroutines to invoke a host of atypical search parameters in the hope of facilitating a conversion matrix. The efforts have yielded some progress."

"Do you still buy Mahmud's idea that it's a hail of some kind?" Okagawa asked.

"In a manner of speaking, sir," the Vulcan replied. "Based on what the translation software has accomplished so far, I believe the signal to be an advisory message of some kind. In other words, a warning."

Okagawa's eyebrows rose at that. "A warning for whom? More importantly, a warning about what?"

Turning back to her station, T'Laen said, "I am afraid that is still unknown, sir. However, there is something else of interest." She entered a string of commands to the library computer via the rows of multicolored controls arrayed across her console, each button press emitting its own telltale sound and the sequence sounding almost lyrical as the computer processed her commands. A moment later, the rightmost of the two screens situated on the upper bulkhead above her station flared to life, displaying a cross section of the Taurus Reach, with Starbase 47 positioned near the upper left corner. A light blue wedge overlaid the map's gridlines, its narrowest point near the lower right corner and expanding upward and toward the computer's representation of the station.

"The carrier wave is not omnidirectional, as first theorized," she reported. "According to our analysis to this point, the transmission was intended for something or someone in this general direction with relation to the origin point, at least at the time the signal was initiated."

"That explains why every ship in the region isn't having problems like the station's," Okagawa said as he began to pace the bridge's upper deck. "But it certainly raises a host of new questions, doesn't it? So far as Starfleet probes have been able to determine, there's never been anything of consequence in this area, unless someone is curious about the station itself."

T'Laen nodded. "An intriguing theory, sir. The station would, of course, be of interest to many parties in this region of space."

Releasing a mild sigh, Okagawa said, "One more mystery for Commodore Reyes and his people to solve, I suppose."

T'Laen nodded. "Indeed." She had heard from al-Khaled about the meeting in the station commander's office, whereby Reyes had all but shut down discussion about the signal's possible origin and purpose,

directing the Lovell crew to continue their efforts at annulling its troublesome effects on the station. She knew that Okagawa had in effect defied orders to leave the investigation to Reyes's own people, but she also understood that the captain was more than capable of handling that matter if and when it became necessary.

Still pacing the perimeter of the bridge, his brow furrowed in concentration and his arms folded across his chest, Okagawa said, "All right then. Assuming your theory's correct, what if we sent back an answer?"

The abrupt suggestion almost caught the Vulcan off guard. "I beg your pardon, sir?"

Okagawa shrugged. "If you and Mahmud are right and the thing's nothing more than some kind of automated transmission, we might get some kind of programmed reaction if we send a response."

"We have no way of knowing what form such a reaction might take, Captain," T'Laen replied. On the surface, the idea seemed to be fraught with recklessness, though she could not deny that it also carried with it a degree of logic. "However, if it is a warning, then a response that the message has been received may well engender a benign reaction, if not one which offers us new insight into the signal's originators."

Smiling again, Okagawa offered an approving nod. "Couldn't have said it better myself. What will it take?"

T'Laen entered a new string of commands to her console, pausing to examine the results of her request on one of her workstation monitors. "I believe I can take what the translator has provided and craft a crude reply which essentially will communicate that we have received the message and are awaiting further instructions. I will also require Lieutenant al-Khaled's assistance to reconfigure our communications array to transmit on the signal's original frequency."

Okagawa clapped his hands together, a gesture the Vulcan recognized as one the captain made when he was satisfied with a proposed plan and was ready to see it put into action. "Excellent. Do it, and let's see what happens."

Nodding, T'Laen nevertheless held reservations. "Sir, you realize that Commodore Reyes will almost certainly express disapproval at your decision."

"Almost?" Okagawa countered. "Don't be silly. The commodore is going to be three kinds of irate with me when he finds out about this." Once more, he smiled. "That's the beauty of commanding the lowliest vessel in Starfleet, Lieutenant. There's no worse place left for me to be transferred."

* * *

"What the hell did you do, Captain?"

For a brief moment, despite his earlier comment and as he regarded Reyes's stern, clouded features, Daniel Okagawa wondered if perhaps he might have underestimated the commodore's response to the report he had just been given.

"It appears," the captain replied, "that my computer specialist has inadvertently solved our respective technical issues." Seated once again in one of the two chairs facing the station commander's desk, Okagawa watched as Reyes's expression seemed to grow even darker as he digested the answer.

Sitting next to him, Lieutenant Commander T'Prynn turned to regard him with cold eyes, her own features fixed and neutral. "Your crew's orders were to leave the study of the transmission to starbase personnel." The statement was delivered in a taciturn manner typical of Vulcans, he knew, but it also was a tone he was unaccustomed to hearing directed at him by a subordinate.

"Actually, Commander," Okagawa said, hearing his voice hardening, "my orders were to turn my people's expertise toward finding a solution for the transmission's effects on starbase systems. Lieutenant T'Laen's areas of proficiency include computer and communications systems, which she employed to arrive at the theory she then executed on my authorization."

"And all she did was create a simple response message?" Reyes asked, his mouth curling into a questioning frown. "As a test?"

Okagawa nodded. "Yes, sir," he said, before explaining in broad strokes the gist of how T'Laen had studied the mystifying signal's syntax and created what she believed to be a short, straightforward reply that essentially communicated, "Message received."

"According to the lieutenant's status report," T'Prynn said, "the Lovell's sensors detected the apparent termination of the original signal seven hours, forty-one minutes, twelve seconds after she transmitted her message. Based on reports subsequently submitted by starbase department heads, no further disruptions in onboard systems have been detected."

"You're welcome," Okagawa replied.

Clasping his hands atop his desk, his face still a scowl, Reyes said, "Your lieutenant's reports said she thought it was a warning of some kind. Now that you've attempted to acknowledge it, has there been any indication that any sort of response to your message is forthcoming?"

"No, sir." The captain had not expected any such reaction. "It's our belief that the original signal is automated, and that our response triggered another preprogrammed reaction." It seemed the likely explanation, given that the message's behavior indicated a predetermined protocol of some kind. Whatever technology was involved, its creators might even be long dead, and it was entirely possible that nothing of any consequence even remained of their civilization.

So, why does Reyes look worried?

The commodore had been vague from the moment he learned of the carrier wave's existence and its apparent point of origin deep in the Taurus Reach. Though Reyes had been subtle in his attempts to steer further study of the signal to his own people, there was no denying that more was going on here than met the eye.

"The big mystery," Reyes said after a moment, "is whether it was supposed to be a warning about something bad happening, or maybe a directive to stay away." He looked up from his desk, and Okagawa sensed that the commodore was reading his curiosity and was weighing his next words with deliberate care. "I know you've got a lot of questions, Captain. Truth is, your people's efforts to this point—while exceptional and most helpful—have also raised several new questions. Unfortunately, even if I had any answers, I couldn't offer them to you, anyway."

Okagawa figured that one was coming. Everything he had seen and heard about this matter had been leading up to the commodore's latest revelation, he decided. It only served to solidify the thought that had been nagging at him since the previous day's meeting in Reyes's office: Vanguard's true purpose

extended far beyond simple establishment of a Federation presence and support of colonization within the Taurus Reach, and its proximity to both the Klingon Empire and the Tholian Assembly was only a factor of that mission.

It made perfect sense, of course, when one considered the station's construction and deployment within a remarkably short time frame, a fact that, so far as Okagawa knew, had not been made public knowledge but had been provided to him and his engineers as part of their briefing to understand the starbase's technical problems. Still, from a tactical perspective, the Taurus Reach appeared to offer precious little to justify the establishment of a Federation foothold in the region while risking the ire of either the Klingons or the Tholians. So what did that leave?

Another question for which Reyes is unlikely to provide an answer, Okagawa mused. But is it that he has no answer, or that he simply can't provide it?

"I understand, Commodore," he said. "If I may, do you intend to continue tracking the signal to its source?"

Reyes replied, "That would be one of those 'need-to-know' type questions, Captain."

I'd call that a yes. What the hell does he think is out here, anyway?

Having served in Starfleet for more than thirty years, Okagawa was more than familiar with the concept of keeping secrets. He also had learned to accept that his position as a captain of a ship that did not patrol the Federation's borders or carry out strictly military missions meant that there was much information to which he never would be privy.

Obviously, this was to be one of those occasions.

Not that it would bother him to any significant degree. Though he naturally was curious as to what might be unfolding in this heretofore unexplored area of space, Okagawa also knew that with the apparent resolution of the station's difficulties, someone else would carry out the investigation that was sure to follow. So far as Commodore Reyes was concerned, the usefulness of the Lovell and her crew of engineers was at an end.

Such is life when on the bottom rung of the Starfleet ladder.

The intercom built into the desk emitted an abrupt, shrill whistle, followed by a voice that Okagawa recognized as belonging to Reyes's administrative aide, Yeoman Greenfield.

"Commodore? Lieutenant Ballard and Lieutenant al-Khaled from the Lovell are requesting to see you and Captain Okagawa. They say it's urgent." Okagawa watched Reyes's eyes widen in surprise, and even saw T'Prynn offer a raised eyebrow at the report.

Punching the button to activate the intercom, Reyes replied, "Send them in."

The bright red doors leading from the commodore's office parted to admit Ballard and al-Khaled, and Okagawa noted their near-matching expressions of concern. The station's chief engineer was carrying a standard-issue data slate in his right hand, while al-Khaled wore a tricorder slung over his left shoulder.

"Apologies for the interruption, sir," Ballard said, crossing the room so that he could offer the data slate to Reyes, "but you need to see this. We've got a security breach."

That got T’Prynn’s attention. “What kind of breach?”

By way of reply, al-Khaled moved to the viewscreen on the far wall and activated it, tapping a long series of commands into the unit’s keypad. “We were running a final set of diagnostics on the sensor suites, to ensure no lingering interference from the carrier wave, when we found this.”

The viewscreen now displayed a technical schematic that to Okagawa appeared as a data stream—highlighted in bright blue—as formatted by a sensor array for transmission to a computer’s memory banks. What he did not understand was the presence of the additional red data stream, weaving in and around the sensor telemetry so closely as to appear like an echo or tracing.

“What the hell is that?” Reyes asked.

“An embedded comm signal,” Ballard replied, “piggy-backed along the sensor feeds. We found similar configurations in five different sensor nodes.”

Pointing to the intertwined data streams, al-Khaled added, “They’re designed to take advantage of the gaps in the scan cycle when the arrays reset after each sweep before transmitting in burst packages.” He turned away from the viewer, and Okagawa noted the worry in the younger man’s eyes. “Whoever put this into play knew what they were doing.”

“A saboteur,” T’Prynn said. “Have you determined who’s receiving these transmissions?”

Al-Khaled nodded. “In all cases, the other parties were civilian merchant vessels.”

Leaning forward in his chair, Reyes looked to T’Prynn. “What do you suppose are the odds that this is connected to the cargo bay thefts and Ensign Malhotra’s murder?”

T’Prynn paused to consider the theory before offering a succinct nod. “That would be a logical hypothesis, Commodore.” She turned to Ballard. “I assume you have compiled a list of the involved vessels?”

The engineer pointed to the data slate lying atop Reyes’s desk. “We’re still following the trails, Commander, but I’ve got a preliminary list ready to go.”

“Excellent work, gentlemen,” Reyes said. Tapping his finger on the hard, polished surface of his desk, he added, “This also means that at least one of the people involved may be responsible for killing a member of my crew.” The commodore’s expression hardened into a determined scowl as he turned to T’Prynn. “Find those people, Commander.”

Chapter

7

The walls were closing in around him.

That was the sensation gripping Isaiah Farber, anyway, as he once again negotiated the narrow confines of yet another of the station’s Jefferies tubes. His muscles felt as though they might seize whenever he passed a shadowy intersection or ventilation duct. Everywhere he looked, he saw the dead, fixed eyes of

Ensign Malhotra. Every instinct told him to turn back or to push through the closest exit from the access crawlway and into the nearest corridor.

Instead, he pressed on.

The crawlway met an intersection, an orange tri-sided ladder at its center, and Farber checked his location against the station schematic he had loaded to his tricorder. Satisfied that this was the junction he wanted, the engineer stepped out onto the ladder and began descending. All the while, the tricorder continued to emit an intermittent series of tones telling him that it was continuing to scan in accordance with the parameters he had programmed, but that it had not yet found what he sought.

Examining one of the five compromised sensor nodes they had discovered, al-Khaled and Ballard were able to determine that the covert communications signals were in fact being routed through the station's comm and data networks. They also had determined that such clandestine measures would require additional modifications to those networks. Someone with the proper expertise would easily have been able to conceal the necessary hardware components among the networks' existing infrastructure.

Scans of the station's interior from sensor control had revealed clues as to the general location of what probably were unauthorized or subversive modifications to the comm network. Pinpointing those components would require proximity scans via tricorder, which meant going over the target area of the network centimeter by centimeter. A slow process, Farber admitted, but a necessary one.

It might even have paid off, he thought as the whine of his active tricorder changed both in tone and speed. Pausing his descent on the ladder, the engineer reached for the unit and studied its small display.

"No hiding from me," he said aloud, looking about the shaft until he found the data conduit access panel several meters below him and to his left.

After reaching the appropriate service platform mounted to the side of the tube's bulkhead, Farber pulled his communicator from the small of his back and flipped it open. "Farber to al-Khaled."

"Al-Khaled here," his friend answered a moment later. "What have you got, Isaiah?"

"I think I've found the data hub we're looking for," Farber answered. Kneeling down so that he could get a better look at the access panel, he set his communicator down on the platform near his left foot before holding his tricorder up to the panel. "Mahmud, reset the array cycle and see if we can't trigger this thing."

"Stand by," al-Khaled replied. "Resetting...now."

In an instant, Farber's tricorder beeped in triumph, displaying the fluctuation in the communications network he wanted to see. "That's it. Hold on while I get this panel open." Deactivating the tricorder, Farber let it hang from his shoulder as he extracted a work light from his tool satchel. He cast its bright beam on the access panel's smooth surface, and his eyes were drawn to a series of small nicks and scratches surrounding the panel's magnetic locking mechanism.

"Somebody forced their way into this junction," he reported. It was the first evidence of sloppy workmanship they had yet encountered during their investigation of the illicit tampering to the communications system. Interesting .

Farber deactivated the work light and returned it to his satchel, exchanging it for his P-38. Though in

reality nothing more than a glorified Starfleet can opener, the small tool emitted focused emissions of light and sound that were ideal for disabling the magnetic seals on doors and—in this case—access panels. Pulling aside the now unlocked panel, Farber peered inside to find the expected collection of wiring, duotronic circuits, and optical cabling that all combined to form the network data hub ensconced within the compartment.

He also saw the single element that was not part of the expected ensemble of components: a palm-sized metallic disc rimmed with muted amber lights.

“Well,” he said to no one in particular, “there you are.”

* * *

After first determining—to the best of his ability, anyway—that the transmitter was not in any way booby-trapped, Farber extracted the device before descending the rest of the way down the Jefferies tube until he met up with al-Khaled and Ballard, who both waited for him inside Cargo Bay 12. Though an immense chamber—one of many aboard the station—the bay seemed almost cramped thanks to the numerous transport containers of varying size and shape stacked throughout the room.

Ballard, unshaven, his uniform wrinkled and his blond hair disheveled—a consequence of having worked almost continuously for the past thirty-six hours—smiled in obvious relief upon seeing Farber emerge from the access shaft.

“I’ll be damned,” the station’s chief engineer said as he held the transmitter in his hand and studied it with a critical eye. “This is Rigelian technology.”

Nodding, al-Khaled said, “I know. I recognized the markings on the base plate, too. Nothing more than a signal pulse scrambler and burst transmitter, designed to relay data fed to it by whatever system it’s hooked into. Pretty common stuff, actually.”

“Which means it’ll be almost impossible to trace,” Farber said, wiping perspiration from his brow. The air in the Jefferies tube had been warm and humid, and he was thankful to be back in the cooler environs of the cargo bay. Though he did not say so aloud, of course, he also was thankful for leaving behind the cramped confines of the crawlways. Along with the image of Ensign Malhotra that still haunted him, an irrational fear of perhaps coming across the person responsible for the man’s death had gnawed at him the entire time he had traversed the access shafts.

Still holding the device in his hand, Ballard crossed the room to where he had left his own tool satchel sitting next to the door. From the satchel he retrieved a small diagnostic scanner. “If I remember correctly, these things carry a data chip that records between twelve and twenty quads of data about the messages it relays. There might be something we can give to Lieutenant Jackson for his investigation.”

A short, sharp tone echoed in the cargo bay, and Farber and al-Khaled turned in Ballard’s direction. Farber saw that a new series of indicator lights had begun to flash across the surface of the transmitter.

“What’s that about?” he asked.

Ballard shook his head as he waved his scanner over the device. “I don’t know. Its receiver just activated,” he said, still scanning as he turned to walk back toward them. “I didn’t think these things worked without being plugged into a network.”

Frowning, Farber replied. "They're not supposed to. Maybe it's been modified."

"It'd have to be," Ballard said. "I'm picking up a power reading."

Then Farber saw his eyes widen in comprehension.

"Curtis!" al-Khaled shouted from behind him an instant before Farber felt his friend pull him backward just as a dazzling red glow flared from the transmitter. A piercing whine filled the air of the cargo bay as the energy flare expanded and washed over Ballard's body, consuming him in a rippling crimson sheath before fading into nothingness, taking the engineer and the transmitter with it.

The only sound Farber heard was his own frantic, rapid breathing. Spots danced in his vision as he stared at the spot where Ballard had stood seconds before. No evidence remained of what had just happened—or that the lieutenant had even existed in the first place.

"Oh my God..." was all he could muster, the words fading as they passed his lips. Then he felt a hand on his arm, al-Khaled's, as his friend helped him to his feet.

"That wasn't a booby trap," al-Khaled said, stepping to where Ballard last had been standing. "You heard what he said. That thing was receiving a transmission." Farber saw the other man's jawline tighten in harnessed anger. "Someone deliberately sent a self-destruct signal."

His hand trembling as he reached for his communicator, Farber nodded. "We have to notify security and Commodore Reyes," he said. "We've got teams out looking for more of those damned things, and whoever did this might trigger those, too." In addition to the obvious potential for further casualties, the transmitters might inflict additional damage to the station's data and communications networks if destroyed while still embedded within other data hubs and transfer points.

"Maybe we can jam any incoming signals," al-Khaled said, reaching up to wipe his brow, and Farber saw that his friend also was rattled by what they had just witnessed. "Or find a way to trace them to a source." Shaking his head, he grimaced in what Farber recognized as mounting frustration and perhaps even a bit of helplessness. "Something, I don't know." Casting glances about the cargo bay, he shook his head. "I need to think."

Giving al-Khaled a moment to compose himself, Farber flipped open his communicator, but as he reached for the switch to activate the unit, he froze in mid-motion.

To his right, a shadow moved among the stacks of cargo containers at the same instant he registered light reflecting from something metallic.

"Mahmud!" Farber shouted as the shadow moved and then the reflective object was sailing through the air. Farber dropped to the deck without thinking even as he felt the rush of displaced air on his face before something struck the container behind him with a dull thud. Rolling to his left, the engineer was able to see the blade and handle of a long, rather nasty-looking knife, still vibrating from where it had embedded itself into the side of the container.

Pulling himself to his feet, Farber turned at the same moment he detected movement in his peripheral vision and nearly flinched in response to the dark-clothed humanoid bearing down on him. He had time only to raise an arm in defense as something hit his chest, pushing him backward and slamming him into another large transport case. Farber exhaled sharply at the impact, scrambling to maintain his balance as the shadowy figure again danced in his vision, but no follow-up attack came.

“Isaiah!” he heard al-Khaled shout from somewhere in front of him.

The assailant, cloaked from head to toe in a one-piece black bodysuit that served to accentuate his muscled physique, turned on his heel and bore down on al-Khaled. The engineer saw the onrushing attacker and tried to backpedal in a desperate attempt to give himself some maneuvering room, but the intruder closed the gap between them with uncanny speed. He was on al-Khaled in scarcely a heartbeat, lashing out with one thick arm to strike the lieutenant in the left temple. Al-Khaled staggered to his left, stunned by the blow and completely vulnerable to the next strike as his attacker kicked him in the chest, sending him falling to the deck.

Farber released a near-maniacal cry of anger and determination as he lunged forward. The outburst had the desired effect, startling the intruder if only for an instant as he turned to confront the onrushing engineer. Trapped between two stacks of cargo containers, he had nowhere to escape. He held his ground and Farber lowered his shoulder and plunged forward, ignoring the glint of light on new metal as he threw his entire body into the attack, catching the cloaked figure just under his chin.

He sensed the swing of his opponent’s knife hand and lashed upward with his left arm, halting the downswing of the blade over his head even as he punched at the intruder with his other arm. Farber heard a satisfying grunt of pain as his fist sank into the soft flesh of the attacker’s lower torso.

Still, the other man was faster, his arms and legs moving with incredible speed as he pushed himself away from Farber. The knife sliced forward again, and this time the engineer winced as hot pain lanced down his left forearm. Instinct pulled him away and he felt a dull throbbing in his arm, in synch with his rapid heartbeat as he looked down to the thin incision from his wrist to his elbow. Blood streamed from the new wound to stain the gold material of his sliced shirt sleeve.

Then he sensed movement toward him and lurched to his right as his assailant jumped toward him again. In a blind grab, Farber managed to catch the attacker’s arm in his own massive hand. With a furious growl he pulled the arm down and around until his opponent was forced to turn his back to him. The knife clattered to the deck and he howled in pain as Farber forced his arm up between his shoulder blades. With his free hand—the one now slick with his own blood—he gripped the back of the other man’s head and pushed him forward to slam his face into the side of a nearby cargo container. The attacker cried out in renewed pain, but the engineer ignored it as he pushed his head forward again, repeating the blow to the intruder’s face.

Despite all of that the assailant was still struggling to free himself, but Farber had him now. Still gripping the other man’s wrist in his right hand, the lieutenant pulled upward until he felt the arm separate from the shoulder socket with a dull pop. The attacker screamed, but the renewed agony only seemed to fuel his own movements. Pushing off from the cargo container, he spun with startling speed and lashed out with his good arm, catching Farber just below his throat. The engineer staggered back before tripping over the edge of a smaller cargo box and crashing to the deck in a clumsy heap.

His vision blurry from the force of the attack, Farber shook his head even as he rolled to his side and back to his feet. Arms out and away from his body in a defensive stance, he tensed for a new attack but instead heard only the sounds of footsteps running away from him. Looking around, he finally caught sight of the attacker dashing through an open doorway at the end of the cargo bay, disappearing into the corridor beyond.

* * *

“You could have gotten yourself killed, you know.”

Farber nodded in agreement as he watched Ezekiel Fisher, the station’s chief medical officer, tend to his wounded left arm. Dressed in the blue tunic of Starfleet’s sciences branch, Fisher was a human male of African descent, perhaps eighty years old, who carried himself with a quiet authority that the engineer instinctively trusted. His black hair and beard were liberally laced with streaks of gray, and his dark brown eyes carried the wealth of professional and personal baggage that Farber would have expected from a man of his years.

Though al-Khaled had applied emergency first aid to treat Farber’s wound, it had required the services of a medical professional. Farber was thankful that the cut, though running nearly the length of his forearm, was not at all deep. No tendons had been severed and the blade had missed hitting a vein. Fisher had made short work of things, cleansing the cut before treating it with a dermal protoplaser. Within twenty-four hours, there would not even be a scar.

Still, it hurt like hell.

“We found two knives,” Lieutenant Jackson said as he stepped around a stack of cargo cases and approached Farber and Fisher, a data slate clipped to his left hip and a canvas carrying bag slung over his right shoulder. Of Farber, he asked, “You didn’t get a good look at him?”

“Good enough to know he was wearing a body suit,” Farber replied, “including a full face mask.”

“A stealth suit,” al-Khaled added as he moved to stand next to Jackson. “Used by Starfleet special operations personnel. They mask body heat to avoid infrared detection.”

Frowning, Jackson replied. “Which would explain why he wasn’t picked up on internal sensors.” He released a tired sigh. “Wonderful.” To the engineers, he said, “He was shadowing you while you searched for the data transmitter. For all we know, he was on his way to get the thing before you beat him to it, and he improvised from there.” Looking back toward the center of the cargo bay, where members of his security staff were at this moment conducting a thorough investigation of the entire scene, he shook his head. “Damn. Ballard was a good guy.”

Farber felt a pang of guilt in his gut as he nodded in agreement. Though he knew he could have done nothing to save Ballard, he was certain that the device would likely have claimed his own life but for sheer timing.

I’m so sorry, Curtis.

“We want to help you find who killed him,” al-Khaled said as though echoing that thought, nodding with a conviction Farber knew only too well. There was no mistaking the set to his friend’s jaw or the look in his eyes. Now, the matter was personal, and he wanted it resolved.

Jackson replied, “I’ll take all the help I can get. Station security is one thing, but murder investigations and forensics are out of my league.” Retrieving his data slate, the security chief activated the unit, using its accompanying stylus to scribble something on the slate’s faceplate.

“I’m transferring the evidence to you, Doctor,” he said as he reached into the shoulder bag and extracted a pair of long, thin blades—each inside its own sealed container. “I’d like to know if a blade like one of these might have been used on Ensign Malhotra.”

Nodding, the doctor replied, "I'll get on it right away, Lieutenant. I should know something in an hour or so."

Everyone in the room looked up as the lights flickered, and for a brief moment Farber felt his stomach lurch—a familiar reaction when moving from one artificial gravity field to another.

Life support's acting up?

"Now what?" Jackson said, squinting his eyes in response to the still-blinking lights. Reaching for his own communicator, he flipped it open. "Jackson to operations. What's going on?"

The voice of Commander Jon Cooper, Vanguard's executive officer, replied, "Cooper here, Jacks. Looks like a batch of new trouble with that alien signal or whatever the hell it is. You still with those engineers from the Lovell?"

"Damn," Farber said, shaking his head in resignation. "I thought we had that thing figured out."

"Apparently not," al-Khaled replied, sighing in irritation.

Nodding, though Cooper could not see it, Jackson said into his communicator, "Yeah, they're still here."

A burst of static met his response before Cooper's voice came back. "Send them to main engineering. Looks like we still need their help." His statement was met with another bout of crackling interference, sure indications that the mysterious carrier wave was meddling with communications now, as well.

Farber's eyes met al-Khaled's as the lieutenant asked, "You up for it?"

"Yeah," the engineer replied, feeling a sense of obligation to assist in the tragic absence of Curtis Ballard. "Let's go."

Chapter 8

The workstation nearest to the door exploded just as al-Khaled entered primary engineering control.

Throwing up his arms to protect his face, the engineer ducked to his right to avoid the worst of the blast, feeling the heat of sparks and bits of plastic composite shrapnel peppering his uniform and exposed skin.

"Mahmud!" Farber called out as he entered the room behind al-Khaled, shouting to be heard over the alarm Klaxon echoing throughout the chamber. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," al-Khaled replied as he brushed still-warm pieces of small shrapnel from his tunic. Noting Farber's torn and still blood-stained left sleeve as well as his somewhat ashen complexion, he asked again, "Are you sure you're up for this?"

Farber nodded. "Don't worry about me. Let's see what we can do to help."

Al-Khaled looked about the control room and quickly found Lieutenant Shepherd, second-in-command of the station's engineering department, bent over a console, her hands moving frenetically over the array

of controls before her. Working at adjacent stations were Ensign Tamishiro, whom al-Khaled remembered from the earlier incident with the environmental control system, and Ensign Ghrex from his own team.

“Supplement power from the auxiliary generators,” Shepherd said, pointing to one display monitor at Tamishiro’s workstation before reaching up to brush sweat-matted auburn hair from her eyes. “I don’t want life support acting up on us again. And shut off that damned alarm!”

Stepping back from the station to consult another cluster of status monitors, the engineer caught sight of al-Khaled and Farber crossing the room toward her, and al-Khaled noted the strain, fatigue, and grief in her eyes. Word about Ballard’s death doubtless had spread throughout the station’s crew with undue haste, and he recognized the look of someone forced to set aside their personal feelings of sadness and loss in order to concentrate on the situation at hand.

“What’s happening this time?” al-Khaled asked as the alert Klaxon faded. Without its blaring report bouncing off the bulkheads, the control center was quiet save for frantic movements and short, terse interactions between the ten or so engineers moving and working about the room.

“That damned signal,” Shepherd replied. “Even worse this time, and it’s not even trying to be subtle anymore. Now it’s pushing and beating its way through everything in its way. If it keeps up, it’ll tear the guts out of this station.”

Farber asked, “But still the same frequency and modulation as before?”

Behind her, Ghrex turned and looked up from her console. “Yes, sir. The only difference now is the intensity. It’s wreaking havoc on every sensitive onboard system simultaneously. Computer access has been compromised, the primary long-range sensor array is offline, and so is the intrastation communications network. Even our portable communicators are experiencing some measure of interference.”

“We’ve got other problems, too,” Shepherd added. “I’ve gotten word that the Lovell’s experiencing fluctuations in her warp engines. One dilithium crystal’s already fractured, and your chief engineer is performing an emergency shutdown in the hopes of preventing more damage.” She shook her head. “Thank God our support ships are all out on assignment, otherwise we might be looking at a quartet of warp engine overloads.” Casting a glance toward Tamishiro, she asked, “What about that Orion ship?”

“Its main engines are offline,” the Asian woman replied without looking up from her station. “Their mechanics aren’t completely incompetent after all, it seems.”

“What about the station’s power generators?” al-Khaled asked. “Aren’t you having problems with them, as well?”

Moving to an adjacent console, Shepherd nodded. “You don’t know the half of it. We’re picking up spikes in both main power plants, and our attitude control system is also starting to act up.” She indicated one display monitor with a wave of her hand. “Maneuvering thrusters are firing at random, and I’ve had to assign three of my people to try and coordinate manual adjustments until we can override the system.”

Al-Khaled pictured an image of the station in his mind, bobbing and weaving through empty space in response to its unruly attitude control thrusters. When overseen properly by designated automated processes, the collection of small thruster ports positioned across the outer hull of the starbase kept it stationary at its assigned coordinates and corrected for drift.

And what happens when they're not looked after?

"What can we do to help?" Farber asked, his attention splitting between Shepherd and the collection of status gauges and monitors behind her, far too many of which were displaying troublesome if not alarming information.

Blowing out a sigh of mounting frustration, Shepherd replied, "If you could pull one of those fancy Corps of Engineers miracles out of your pocket, that'd be great right about now."

As she and Farber moved to a nearby workstation, something groaned beneath al-Khaled's feet, channeling vibrations up through the deck plating and across the bulkheads. To him the sound was all too familiar: that of duranium and trititanium protesting at being pulled and twisted in manners with which they did not agree.

"That can't be good," Farber said, and al-Khaled saw the expression of worry beginning to take hold on the muscled lieutenant's features. Shepherd turned to say something in response, but the words were lost as a renewed alarm Klaxon blared to life, its cacophonous, rolling wail once more filling the room.

Then al-Khaled felt it. Almost imperceptible at first, it took only heartbeats for him to identify the sensation of gravity pulling him in a different direction than normal. Recognition dawned in the instant before he felt the deck shift the barest fraction beneath his feet.

"The thrusters!" he called out even as his stomach registered the shift in his center of gravity. Lunging across the room, he gripped the edge of a console as the angle of the floor continued to increase. All around the control center, other members of the engineering staff were encountering similar difficulty. Those seated at workstations were able to anchor themselves against the increasing slope of the deck, while others like him scrambled and stumbled for something to which they might cling.

"Can't we just shut them off?" Farber shouted from the station he now staffed, sitting in the chair and holding on to the console before him.

Hitting a control to silence the current alarm, Shepherd replied, "Attitude control is unresponsive." She had wedged herself between the edge of one workstation and the narrow service ladder leading up to the room's second deck. "Random thrusters are firing intermittently." As she made the report, al-Khaled felt the deck plating beginning to tilt in a new direction.

Without instructions from the system's self-correcting algorithms, the thrusters, if left unchecked and if they fired in just the right sequence, conceivably could push the station into a frenzied tumble. While structural integrity and inertial damping fields as well as artificial gravity would—for a time, at least—keep Vanguard's inhabitants from suffering the worst effects of such chaotic movement, the truth was that the station simply was not designed to withstand this sort of prolonged stress for any great length of time.

In other words, we have a big problem.

"If this keeps up," Shepherd said through gritted teeth, "the station could tear itself apart."

That would be the problem.

"We're getting calls from all over the station," Tamishiro shouted from where she still clung to her console, a communications receiver inserted into her ear. "Injury and damage reports, the works."

“Forget all of that,” Shepherd ordered. “Find me a way into attitude control, damn it!”

All around him, al-Khaled heard and felt the mounting strain on the very structure of the station, its support frame beginning now to protest with conviction the stresses being placed upon it. Still holding on to the edge of his console, he reached out and managed to enter a command string to request a diagnostic task for the structural integrity system, and was relieved to see that it still appeared to be functioning normally.

How long will that last?

A two-note tone chirped from the communicator clipped to his waistband. Retrieving the device, he flipped its antenna grid open and pressed the activation switch. “Al-Khaled here.”

There was a pause before the connection was completed, and then a hiss of static burst from the communicator’s speaker grille before he got a reply. “Mr. al-Khaled, this is Lieutenant T’Laen.” Though the interference degrading the channel was still audible, it was not enough to drown out the computer specialist’s voice. “I have been analyzing this latest transmission and I believe I have a theory.”

“This really isn’t the time, T’Laen,” al-Khaled said, swiveling his chair toward the control console and planting his feet against the bulkhead underneath as the room began to tilt in yet another direction, though this time the angle and the speed of the shift was not as pronounced.

“I believe this signal to be automated,” the Vulcan said, undeterred by al-Khaled’s discouragement, “much like the original carrier wave. Many of the linguistic algorithms involved appear to be similar, though there are new variables I have not yet been able to study. Still, my preliminary analysis suggests parallels which might—”

“T’Laen!” al-Khaled snapped. “The concise version, if you please.”

“Simply put, Mr. al-Khaled, I believe that the person or technology responsible for sending the original signal received our reply, and that entity is now responding in kind. It is my assertion that we are, in effect, being hailed and that the signal’s origin point is awaiting our reply.”

“Can we skip to the part where this helps us?” Farber shouted from where he sat, two consoles to al-Khaled’s left.

In her typical fashion, T’Laen ignored the emotional outburst. “I am attempting to create a new reply to send in much the same manner as we did earlier.”

“That will take too much time,” al-Khaled said. “The station won’t put up with these erratic positioning corrections long enough to wait for a change in the signal.”

Farber said, “What about—”

“Emergency shutdown!” Shepherd called out, cutting off her fellow engineer.

Nodding excitedly, Farber replied, “Exactly!”

“I don’t understand,” al-Khaled said.

Turning in his seat and bracing himself against his workstation to keep from falling from his chair, Farber replied, “Think about it. The original signal reacted to our message. What if whoever or whatever sent it didn’t just stop, but instead studied T’Laen’s message and composed a reply? They could be looking for someone or something to talk to. If we don’t give it an answer, maybe they’ll stop transmitting their own signal.”

“Not only do we not answer,” Shepherd added, “but we make it look like there’s no one here anymore.” Her attention now was focused on her console and the rapid-fire sequences of commands she was making to the station’s central computer. “Turn everything off and make like a hole in space.”

Skeptical about what he was hearing, al-Khaled asked, “Can we do that? Shut down everything?” So far as he knew, an operational space station never had faced a situation whereby every onboard system was deactivated, especially if—at the time—said station was populated.

“We may not need everything,” Farber said. “Battery power at minimum levels and only used in those areas that absolutely require it should be enough.”

As the lieutenant and Ghrex set to work assisting Shepherd and Tamishiro, al-Khaled communicated the plan to T’Laen, with the recommendation that the Lovell follow similar protocols. That accomplished, and while doing his best to ignore the pitching and bouncing that were reminiscent of sitting in a small boat on the open ocean, the engineer pitched in with what quickly had become a long list of items to check and verify in preparation for Farber and Shepherd’s unorthodox scheme. Al-Khaled himself drew responsibility for ensuring critical systems such as structural integrity and life support as well as the handful of special environmental habitats for the station’s decidedly nonhumanoid contingent.

“All set,” Farber reported, casting a thumbs-up gesture toward Shepherd, and al-Khaled noted that the brawny engineer’s face appeared to have lost most of its color. Was his friend experiencing motion sickness, a condition perhaps exacerbated by his recent injury?

Hang in there, Isaiah.

Shepherd called out. “We’re ready. Mr. al-Khaled?”

“Standing by,” he replied. “I’ve coded bypasses for sickbay, environmental control, this room, and the escape pods.” Both Shepherd and Farber turned to look at him in response to the last item, and he shrugged. “Just in case.” He felt no need to complete the thought aloud, as everyone in the room knew what was at stake. A failure to arrest the station’s increasingly unstable movements would almost certainly require evacuation.

“Here we go, then,” Shepherd said, reaching to her console once more to key the power-down sequence she had just written. Without saying anything more, she pressed the control to activate the newly authored protocol.

The effect was immediate—on the room’s collection of status monitors, at least. Multicolored lines representing power flow, short-range sensor telemetry, the ebb and flow of stationwide communications—one by one, the graphic representation of these functions morphed from spikes and valleys on their respective charts to flat, dull white lines. Far below the engineering deck, the faint yet still perceptible reverberations from the station’s main power generators faded from perception, and the only clue offered when they finally did power down was the row of indicator messages on the monitor in front of al-Khaled going dormant.

Then the control center was plunged into darkness as primary power faded altogether, and even the comforting buzz of the ventilation system dissipated. Battery-backup illumination activated almost instantly, bathing everything in a warm crimson light that stretched and distorted the shadows now dominating the room. Then auxiliary power kicked in, returning the workstations to life.

“Thrusters are deactivated,” Farber called out a moment later. “We’re still drifting, but at least now we’re not being jerked around all over the place. Just a nice, slow roll.”

“Good thing we’re not orbiting a planet,” al-Khaled replied. Looking to Shepherd, he released a small smile. “Otherwise, your doctor would likely be tending to motion sickness for the rest of the day.”

“What do we do now?” Ghrex asked.

Shepherd shrugged. “Now we wait.”

Al-Khaled knew from T’Laen’s earlier report that it could take as long as eight hours for any kind of response to be detected. Of course, such thinking assumed that the transmission possessed sufficient similarity to the original signal for such predictions to be anywhere close to accurate. What if it was substantially different? What did it mean? Were the originators of the mysterious carrier waves really trying to communicate?

All questions worth pondering, he decided as he executed another diagnostic task, which reported that the structural integrity system showed no fluctuations or other signs of trouble. By all accounts, it should be able to hold its own until attitude thruster control could be restored.

Assuming the field holds, or if this idea even works.

Even as the notion crossed his mind, al-Khaled decided that he really would be better off if he ever could learn to stop harboring such negative thoughts.

Chapter 9

Farber’s arm itched.

Seated in a booth adjacent to the front window inside Tom Walker’s place—one of several bars located in Stars Landing—the engineer could not resist pushing back his left sleeve and scratching at the newly healed section of skin that had been treated by Dr. Fisher. It was not the first time Farber had received treatment for lacerations with a dermal protoplaser, and on each previous occasion he had experienced similar discomfort. In fact, his roommate on the Lovell, Lieutenant Paul LeGere, had teased him without mercy for a week following one particularly nasty—and embarrassing—injury.

Farber had gotten even, of course, and though his method of retribution had not been painful, it had eliminated LeGere’s need for a comb for months afterward.

Glancing about the bar’s interior, the engineer took in the cozy atmosphere permeating the room. All around him, conversations and laughter were the order of the day. Uniforms mingled with all manner of other attire, as members of the station’s Starfleet and civilian complements enjoyed a meal and drink, be it after long duty shifts or following a long journey to the station from some far-off location.

Behind the bar, one employee was stocking the shelves lining the back wall, working to replace bottles of liquor and glassware damaged or destroyed during the station's recent bout with mechanical difficulty. Other than that, the tavern lent itself to relaxation, with its subdued lighting, dark wood furnishings, tasty cuisine, and a selection of libations from worlds throughout the Federation.

I could get used to this place, Farber thought.

He was reaching for the pint of beer situated near his left hand when a shadow flickered in his peripheral vision, followed by a hint of Starfleet gold. Looking up, Farber saw the face of Captain Okagawa.

"Good evening, sir," the engineer said, attempting to rise to his feet before Okagawa waved him back to his seat.

"At ease, Lieutenant," the captain said as he slid into the booth across from him. "I was just on my way to meet Commander zh'Rhun for dinner when I saw you through the window. We're eating at Manón's, if you're interested." Smiling, he added, "Commodore Reyes tells me the food is exquisite."

Shaking his head, Farber replied, "I took a look in there earlier, sir. Not really my kind of place." He indicated their surroundings with a wave of his hand. "This is more my style."

"Fair enough." Pointing to Farber's left arm, Okagawa asked, "How's the wing?"

Pulling his sleeve back into place, Farber replied, "Coming along nicely, sir. For a passing shot, it was a pretty nasty cut, but I'll be fine." Frowning, he asked, "How are things shaping up after that last bout of malfunctions?"

"Repairs are under way," the captain said. "Burnouts and overloads all over the station. Some sections are still without power as the priority repairs are addressed first, things like that. Nothing critical, but I hear some of the folks living in the apartment complexes aren't too happy." Rubbing his chin, he added, "As for the carrier wave, that idea you and Lieutenant Shepherd came up with seems to have worked. It stopped transmitting a little over eight hours after everything was shut down, just like the first time around."

Farber nodded. He had read Lieutenant T'Laen's report on the latest version of the signal, including her theory that whatever had transmitted it was performing the equivalent of a confirmation with regard to the first signal. As the station had not communicated anything resembling the reply, the originator of the carrier wave seemed to have lost interest.

For now, at any rate. It had been almost ten hours since full power had been restored to the station, and the mysterious transmission had not returned. There was no way to know if it ever would, or if it would be even more powerful—and damaging—than it had to this point. That, it seemed, would be a puzzle for Vanguard's crew to solve.

"Any word about casualties?" Farber asked.

Leaning against the booth's high seatback, Okagawa said, "Seems we got lucky this time. A few broken bones, some bruises and cuts like yours. Nothing that won't heal."

"A shame we can't say the same about Lieutenant Ballard, or Ensign Malhotra," Farber said, releasing a tired sigh as he reached for his mug and took a long pull of his beer. He grimaced as he swallowed the

brew, which seemed suddenly to have lost its enticing flavor.

Okagawa said, “Everyone has done a fine job helping out the station’s crew with their various troubles, Isaiah, but I have to say I’m particularly impressed with your work since we got here. I know it hasn’t been easy with the . . . added difficulties.”

“You mean my being a material witness in two murder investigations?” Farber asked. “It’s been weighing on my mind a bit, sir, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“Well,” Okagawa said, “you’ll be happy to know there’s some news on that front. The knives recovered from the cargo bay where you were attacked appear to be the same type of blade as that used to kill the ensign. That’s the report from the station’s CMO, at any rate.”

His brow furrowing, Farber said, “So, whoever attacked us likely killed Malhotra, and was probably at least involved in planting those transmitters.”

“Not a certainty, but it’s definitely a working theory,” Okagawa replied. “Search parties found four more of those transmitters, but they’re being left in place for now until a way can be figured out to circumvent the self-destruct mechanism.” Sighing, he added, “As for the transmissions themselves, so far all Commander T’Prynn has been able to determine is that they were routed from different points on the station to various ships that either were embarked at the station or passing in close proximity, including that Orion ship that’s still docked.”

His eyes widening in surprise, Farber said, “I can’t believe Commodore Reyes hasn’t torn that ship apart yet.”

Okagawa shook his head. “Not that simple, I’m afraid. Given the open nature of that gaming facility and other . . . unsavory activities taking place aboard that tub at any hour of the day, anyone could have been on the other end of the communication. There’s no hard proof linking it to the owner of the ship, which is pretty much par for the course when it comes to Orions.”

“That’s an understatement, sir.” Though Farber himself had never had cause to cross paths with any members of the Orion Syndicate, he had heard stories of the sorts of activities for which they were known—slave trading, black marketeering, arms dealing, and so on. One of their infamous hallmarks was their ability to maintain deniability of their involvement in various illicit enterprises, particularly if it involved operating beneath the notice of the various sovereign governments within and bordering Federation space. Though the Orions claimed to be a neutral body when it came to the ever-changing political landscape, they had a habit of turning up wherever it seemed to be to their advantage.

If the captain of the Orion vessel docked at Vanguard indeed was involved in the string of thefts, infiltration of the station’s communications system, and the deaths of Ballard and Malhotra, it meant that he was an especially cunning sort, but also bold almost to the arrogant extreme to carry out such acts and schemes right under the collective noses of more than a thousand Starfleet personnel.

Rising from his seat, Okagawa said, “Well, I don’t wish to keep Commander zh’Rhun waiting. You know how she can be when she doesn’t eat.” He smiled at his own joke, though Farber watched it fade as the captain caught sight of something outside the window. “Speaking of Orions, there’s something you don’t see every day.” He nodded in that direction, and Farber turned to see what had captured his attention.

It was an Orion man, standing near the entrance to another bar next to an Arcturian male. They

appeared to be engaged in conversation, though each of them also was dividing his attention to the comings and goings of various passersby—paying particular attention to the female variety. Tall and slender, the Orion was dressed in a long tan robe that all but concealed everything below his neck. He gestured and pointed with his left hand, his movements slow and subtle, and everything about his body language suggested to Farber that he was doing his level best to remain inconspicuous, all while failing rather badly at the attempt.

“I recognize him,” Okagawa said. “From a picture, anyway. Commander T’Prynn told us about him after zh’Rhun’s little altercation aboard the Orion ship. His name’s Jaeq. Hired muscle, supposedly.”

As Farber watched the Orion and his associate continuing their conversation, the door to the bar abruptly swung outward, pushed open by a staggering, obviously inebriated Tellarite dressed in the dark coveralls of a merchant freighter crew member. The door did not swing with any great degree of force or speed, and when it struck Jaeq in the right arm it did so only lightly.

Despite that, he flinched, and Farber felt the small hairs rise on the back of his neck. With narrowing eyes, the engineer watched as the Orion grimaced in obvious pain as he reached for his shoulder, his right arm hanging limp at his side.

“Call security,” Farber said as he bolted from his seat and navigated his way out of the bar, ignoring Okagawa’s confused reaction to the sudden request. Without trying to appear too anxious, the engineer made his way across the thoroughfare between buildings in this part of Stars Landing’s entertainment district.

He had almost crossed the concourse when Jaeq noticed him, his eyes narrowing in suspicion. Though Jaeq managed to school his features, Farber was sure he caught a hint of recognition on the Orion’s face.

I’ll be damned.

“Excuse me,” the engineer said as he stepped closer, smiling. “Do you have the time?”

Confusion crossed the Orion’s face, just enough for Farber to close the remaining distance. In one quick motion, he reached out and gripped the other man’s right shoulder, and another expression of pain lanced across Jaeq’s features.

“Still tender?” Farber hissed through gritted teeth. There was no mistaking the look of concern and growing panic on the Orion’s face. “I thought we’d finish what we started down in the cargo bay.”

His lips peeling back in a snarl that revealed stark white teeth, Jaeq pushed away and lashed out with his other arm, his fist aiming for Farber’s head. Though the engineer ducked to one side and avoided all but a glancing blow, it was enough to make him move aside and give the Orion an opening. Jaeq kicked with his left leg, catching Farber in the stomach and sending him tumbling to the floor.

People around him scattered as they became aware of the altercation developing in their midst even as Farber pulled himself to his feet. Looking up, he was in time to see the Orion plunging into the throng of people milling about on the concourse.

“Stop him!” Farber shouted even as he set off in pursuit, his eyes tracking the bobbing and weaving of Jaeq’s green head as he ran through the crowd. The lieutenant was only dimly aware of Okagawa’s voice behind him, shouting that security was on the way. There might have been something about not chasing after the Orion, but he ignored it.

He ran as fast as his legs would push him, trying to close the gap Jaeq had opened up between them. The Orion was grabbing at people as he passed them, pushing past them and sometimes tugging them to the deck. Farber tried to dodge the living obstacles, but one misstep sent him stumbling to avoid a fallen Rigelian woman. As he regained his balance and renewed the chase, he was in time to see Jaeq disappear around a corner of the building at the end of the faux street comprising this section of the district.

Setting off again, Farber dashed down the concourse until he made it to the end of the lane. He rounded the bend and found himself looking at what essentially was a portion of Stars Landing's support facilities: warehouse doors and back entrances to the buildings comprising the restaurants, clubs, and other venues for this area of the esplanade. He counted thirteen doors of varying sizes, some open, some not. A few people were standing around, some of them sporting perplexed expressions while others appeared to be oblivious to what might have just happened.

And no sign of Jaeq.

Instead, Farber's eyes came to rest on the rumpled tan robe lying on the ground ten meters ahead of him.

Stealth suit.

"Damn it!"

Remembering the conversation with al-Khaled and Lieutenant Jackson in the cargo bay after the earlier altercation with Jaeq, Farber slammed a fist against the façade of the building. If the Orion had still been wearing the black garment underneath his robe, he likely had all he required to avoid being tracked by the internal sensors in this part of the station.

So intense was his mounting anger that Farber did not hear his communicator until it signaled a second time for attention. Retrieving the unit from his waistband, he flipped it open and pressed the activation control.

"Farber here," he said, pushing the words out between rapid breaths.

"Where the hell are you?" the voice of Okagawa yelled from the communicator's speaker grille.

"It was him, Captain," Farber replied. "The one who attacked me and al-Khaled. He killed Ballard and probably Malhotra, too. He got away."

Okagawa said, "Security's alerted, Isaiah. Don't worry, he won't get far. In fact, there's really only one place he can go."

Chapter 10

Ganz, Okagawa decided, was one gigantic son of a bitch.

The Orion seemed to fill the hatchway leading from the docking platform to his ship, the Omari-Ekon .

Standing just inside the hatch's threshold, dressed in blue silken trousers and a matching shirt left open to expose his well-developed chest complete with an array of gold and silver piercings, Ganz was all but cloaked in shadow due to the reduced illumination inside the ship's airlock. The gloom lent a subdued gray pallor to his jade skin, and did much to enhance the expression of barely contained disdain clouding his face as he looked down at Reyes, who stood less than two meters in front of him.

"I want Jaeq," the commodore said. Though not a small man, Reyes still was dwarfed by Ganz's oversized physique and was forced to look up to meet the merchant prince's gaze. Still, it seemed not to bother the commodore as he stood before the Orion, his chin thrust forward, his body language communicating with no uncertainty that he was in charge.

Ganz's sole reply was to flex a pair of pectoral muscles that made Isaiah Farber's seem prepubescent in comparison. Otherwise, he remained silent, an arched eyebrow the only other indication that he had even heard Reyes's demand.

"I have proof he murdered two of my people," Reyes continued, "and almost killed another Starfleet officer. If you're harboring him aboard that tub of yours, then you're an accessory to the crimes." Stepping forward, the commodore placed his hands on his hips. "It'd break my heart to bust your ass, Ganz, but I'd get over it."

The Orion continued to regard Reyes a moment before his head tilted the slightest bit to one side. "Mr. Jaeq no longer works for me, Commodore. No one has seen him since this morning, and I'm certain he won't be returning." He paused, a small, knowing smile teasing the corners of his mouth. "It's as though he vanished into thin air."

I'll bet, Okagawa mused. Given what he knew of life within the Orion Syndicate, the most powerful weapon in a crime lord's arsenal was deniability. Jaeq's actions no doubt had endangered Ganz's vast array of illegal or even merely questionable activities. At the very least, they had brought the Orion unwanted attention from Starfleet. The easiest and fastest way to disassociate him from anything Jaeq had done would be to sever any and all ties to his troublesome employee.

In the Orion Syndicate, that usually meant only one thing.

Okagawa had no doubt Reyes understood the situation, as well. Nodding in amused understanding, the commodore said, "That's right, I heard scuttlebutt about some personnel issues you were dealing with. I guess what they say about being able to hire good people is true after all." He pursed his lips and made a cynical tsk-tsk sound. "Must really be annoying when we're talking about your right-hand man."

Ganz cast a glance to the trim Nalori standing just behind his left shoulder, whom Okagawa recognized as Zett Nilric, thanks to T'Prynn's hurried briefing prior to his and Reyes's coming down to the docking bay. "Mr. Nilric here is my business manager now," he said. "If you have need of my services, he'll be your point of contact."

As if to accentuate the statement, Nilric nodded once before reaching up to brush away a piece of lint from the lapel of his well-tailored charcoal suit. His expression was cold and calculating, no doubt in keeping with his reputed occupation as a professional assassin. Okagawa was certain the Nalori could kill both him and Reyes before either man might raise a hand in a futile attempt at defense.

According to what Okagawa remembered from T'Prynn's remarkably detailed dossier on him, Zett Nilric had been a lower-level employee within Ganz's organization, though doubtless looking for any avenue to advance his own standing. Judging from outward appearances, Nilric's ambition coupled with

Jaeq's apparent series of hazardous missteps seemed to have provided just such an opportunity.

Bum luck, Jaeq.

Okagawa said, "My people discovered some alarming things about your former employee and a rash of thefts. Several odd communications between someone aboard the station and Mr. Jaeq, particularly with regard to assorted supplies and equipment located in different storage bays that would fetch impressive prices on the black market."

Reyes looked to Nilric before returning his gaze to Ganz. "Don't suppose either of you know anything about that, of course."

"Of course," Ganz echoed, though Okagawa caught the subtle, fleeting look of worry in the Orion's eyes.

The captain shook his head. "Damn shame about that. See, if Jaeq were here, I'd be able to tell him that we found his little network of hidden communications emitters that were used to sneak past the station's comm and sensor protocols."

"I haven't found his cohort yet," Reyes said, "but you can bet I will." He held his hands out in a gesture of questioning. "Wonder what he'll say when I get him in a small, locked room and ask him about his various business relationships?" Looking to Okagawa, he asked, "Better yet, put him in there with T'Prynn. She'd get some juicy details out of him. What do you think, Captain?"

"I think you're absolutely right, Commodore," Okagawa replied, struggling to keep from smiling.

To his credit, Ganz almost was successful in concealing any discomfort he might be experiencing as he listened to the commodore, who appeared to be enjoying catching the merchant prince off guard. Okagawa suspected Reyes had for some time been searching for some means of gaining the upper hand with the Orion.

"What does any of this have to do with me?" Ganz asked, his expression for the first time betraying mild strain as he clasped his massive hands before him.

"Depends," Reyes replied. "If all of the property that's gone missing from my station was to suddenly reappear from where it was taken, I might be inclined to ease up on my immediate efforts to find Jaeq's partner in crime. For a little while, anyway."

That caught Okagawa by surprise. Was the commodore actually offering Ganz, in addition to an opportunity for returning whatever stolen Starfleet property currently was in his possession, a chance for one of his people—Zett Nilric, perhaps—to find Jaeq's accomplice and resolve the issue "internally"? If so, it revealed a side to Reyes that the captain had not expected to see—a willingness to bend or even break rules, not for personal gain but as a means of bringing about resolution to tough problems.

He's commanding a station in the back end of nowhere, Okagawa reminded himself. The rulebook's not always going to apply, is it?

Ganz seemed to consider Reyes's proposal for a moment before nodding, once. "I'll look into the matter, though I can't promise any immediate results."

"The offer expires at 2300 hours, station time, tonight," Reyes said, any trace of cordiality now gone

from his voice. “After that, I start turning over every rock I can find. Understood?”

Drawing a deep breath through his nose, Ganz replied through tight lips, “Yes.”

“Fabulous,” Reyes said, the word dripping with sarcasm. “Now, a few new rules for you: First, your vessel is still welcome to dock here just like any other civilian ship. You’re still free to partake of the facilities at Stars Landing and to conduct legal business with any of the civilian merchants. What you’re no longer allowed to do is initiate business contact with any Starfleet personnel, in any capacity. While I won’t officially place your ship off-limits, you’re to discourage anybody in a Starfleet uniform who might venture to your ship during shore leave from sticking around too long.”

For the first time, Ganz frowned. “My competitors will notice that, I’d think.”

Reyes shrugged. “Spin it any way you like. Whatever makes you look good, I don’t care. Also, it should go without saying that I expect Jaeq’s misadventures to be the last time I have to worry about Starfleet goods being stolen, either from my station or a ship making port. Anything goes missing, I’m coming to see you. Also, God help you if another one of my people gets so much as food poisoning from one of your buffets.”

“What if I’m not responsible?” Ganz asked.

“Again,” Reyes replied, “I don’t care. Tell all your friends that there’s a new sheriff in town, and that I like my life quiet and boring. Screw with themugato, you’re getting the horn. Are we clear?”

The Orion nodded. “As transparent aluminum.”

There was no mistaking the ire rising to a boil beneath Ganz’s façade of calm and control, Okagawa decided. It was easy to see that the Orion was not accustomed to being addressed in such a frank manner by anyone. Only a fool would believe that one stern lecture would be enough to ensure Ganz’s compliance with the restrictions Reyes was placing upon him.

Of course, the captain knew also that Reyes certainly was no fool.

“Since we’re being totally honest with one another,” Ganz offered after a moment, “you might consider that while you’re king of what I admit is a rather large hill, it’s a hill sitting in the middle of a vast plain over which I hold much influence.”

“That’s the only reason your sizable ass isn’t being stuffed into my brig right this second,” Reyes snapped, and Okagawa saw the merchant prince bristling at the clear threat.

“On the other hand,” the commodore continued, “that would be a waste of that influence you’re so proud of. Instead, it occurs to me that if I could somehow avoid drop-kicking you into a jail cell, you might be predisposed toward helping me out on occasion—for example, should I need information on certain illicit ships or people passing through the region. Might go a long way toward making your life easier in these parts, wouldn’t you say?”

Though Ganz said nothing for several seconds, Okagawa could see the Orion mulling over the proposal. He was no fool, either. While he no doubt saw the obvious upside to accepting a “business venture” with Reyes, Ganz was by definition not a lackey—to anyone. He would examine the situation from every conceivable angle, not only looking to see how he might benefit from the unorthodox arrangement but also attempting to see where the commodore might be laying traps.

A crafty bastard, Okagawa thought. Dangerous one, too.

Finally, Ganz bowed his head to Reyes. “An interesting offer. I’ll take it into careful consideration.”

“You do that,” Reyes said, stepping away from the Orion. “We’ll talk later.”

Okagawa followed after the commodore as he turned and strode down the gangway toward the main corridor linking all of the ports along the station’s main docking ring. Though he did not look back to confirm his suspicions, he was sure that the hot ache he felt between his shoulder blades had to be coming from Ganz’s intense stare as the Orion watched them depart.

If looks could kill, and so on.

Waiting until they were well away from the airlock leading to the Omari-Ekon, Okagawa turned to Reyes. “Should I even ask what amugato is?” When the commodore scowled at him by way of reply, he decided to change topics. Nodding toward the docking bay, he said, “Seems to me you two will be butting heads in the future.”

“A gift for understatement,” Reyes replied, releasing a tired sigh. “I don’t suppose you’d believe me if I told you this was supposed to be a nice, quiet tour of duty for me? A twilight assignment before I retired?”

Recalling their earlier conversations in the commodore’s office, Okagawa shook his head. “Not a chance. In fact, if I were a betting man, I’d say that Ganz is likely to be the least of your problems.”

“No bet,” Reyes replied, chuckling as he offered a knowing smile. Excusing himself, he turned and headed for the nearby bank of turbolifts, leaving Okagawa to contemplate the possible nuances layering the commodore’s cryptic answer.

“I’ve got a funny feeling,” the captain said, to no one in particular given that he stood alone in the corridor, “that this place is going to be anything but boring.”

Chapter

11

“Captain, my compliments to you and your crew. I don’t know what we would have done without you, and if you think I won’t catch hell for admitting that, you’re sadly mistaken.”

Standing at the engineering station near the rear of the Lovell’s bridge and watching Diego Reyes on the main viewer, al-Khaled was surprised to see the commodore smile. Until this moment, the engineer was certain such a feat was impossible, despite unconfirmed rumors to the contrary.

“So, who owes who dinner?” whispered Jessica Diamond from where she stood next to him, her question inaudible over the hum and buzz of workstations and status reports coming over various intercom grids scattered around the bridge. The wager had been a friendly one, offered on the spot by Diamond as word of the commodore’s hail was reported by Ensign Pzial, the Lovell’s communications officer currently on duty. Al-Khaled had not even had time to accept or decline the bet before Reyes’s gruff countenance appeared on the bridge’s main viewscreen.

“Anyone who didn’t get shore leave should be exempt,” he mumbled from the side of his mouth, a comment that caught both the attention of and a raised eyebrow from Commander zh’Rhun, who stood in the turbolift alcove next to Diamond. Glancing over at the weapons officer, al-Khaled noted a mischievous glint in her eyes, the only fault in her otherwise deadpan expression as she, like everyone else on the bridge, turned her attention to the conversation between Reyes and the captain.

At least someone got to enjoy themselves a bit while we were here.

“Our pleasure, Commodore,” Okagawa replied from where he stood before his command chair at the center of the bridge. “However, I do believe there’s one last item to address before we depart.” Looking to his right, he asked, “Isn’t that right, Mr. Farber?”

Stepping down into the command well, the burly lieutenant nodded with a small grin. “I suppose so, sir. Thank you for approving my transfer.” As he and the captain shook hands, Farber turned to the viewer. “And to you as well, Commodore. I’m very excited about joining Vanguard’s team.” He paused a moment before adding, “Lieutenant Ballard will be a hard act to follow, but I promise it won’t be for lack of trying, sir.”

Farber’s request was not all that unexpected, al-Khaled decided. The younger man’s enthusiasm while working with the state-of-the-art systems comprising the immense space station had been all but contagious. With the tragic loss of Curtis Ballard, Reyes was in need of a first-rate chief engineer, and Isaiah Farber was as qualified a candidate as the commodore was likely to find. Vanguard’s gain was the Lovell’s loss, of course, but al-Khaled could not fault his friend for wanting to take on a new challenge. The demands of being chief engineer of a starbase on the outer edge of Federation territory would fit that bill rather nicely.

On the screen, Reyes nodded. “Don’t thank me, Lieutenant. From what I saw, I’m getting a hell of an engineer.” Looking past Farber, he added, “One of many, at least. Lieutenant al-Khaled, if you ever get tired of hurtling through space in that deathtrap, you give me a call. I’d be happy to have you, or any member of your team, for that matter.”

Offering a respectful nod, al-Khaled replied, “Many thanks, Commodore. I’ll certainly keep that offer in mind.”

“With all due respect,” Okagawa said, the grin stretching his round face belying the mock irritation behind his words, “may we dispense with the poaching of my crew?”

Reyes smiled again. “For now. Mr. Farber, I trust your personal effects were transferred without incident?”

The young engineer nodded. “Yes, Commodore. All that’s left is my duffel bag in the transporter room.”

“Then I suggest you have yourself beamed aboard in the next two minutes,” Reyes replied, “before your old ship leaves you floating outside the docking bay. I don’t like loiterers around my station, Lieutenant.”

“I guess that’s my cue,” Farber said. After shaking hands with Okagawa once more, the lieutenant moved to the upper bridge deck and made his final farewells. The real send-off had already been handled during the previous evening, with al-Khaled and Ensign Ghrex seeing to an impromptu going-away party after word of the sudden transfer made its rounds throughout the ship.

“It’s been a pleasure, Isaiah,” al-Khaled said as Farber shook his hand. “Good luck with your new assignment.”

His fellow engineer nodded. “Thanks, Mahmud,” he said before looking around at the rest of the bridge crew. “I’ve learned a great deal from all of you, and I’m proud to call you all friends. Hopefully, our paths will cross again one of these days.” With a final nod and wave to the assembled bridge crew, Farber disappeared into the turbolift.

Al-Khaled sensed the momentary pause as everyone watched their shipmate leave, and for the first time since hearing of his friend’s transfer request the engineer felt the void Farber had suddenly left behind. While he knew that moving from ship to ship and assignment to assignment was part and parcel of a career in Starfleet, al-Khaled always felt a momentary pang of regret when such an event occurred. Not just a gifted engineer, Farber also was a trusted friend. There was no doubt he would be missed by the entire Lovell crew.

Such is life in our line of work.

Al-Khaled’s attention was caught by Ensign Pzial reporting that departure clearance from the station had been granted, followed by Okagawa giving instructions to zh’Rhun to get under way. Moving to stand in front of the helm and navigation consoles, the captain turned his attention back to the image of Reyes still displayed on the main viewer.

“Commodore,” he said, “We’ve got our clearance from the dockmaster. Is there anything else we can do before we go?”

On the screen, Reyes shook his head. “Thanks to you, we’ve got just about everything under control. There are still some outstanding repairs, a list of new or replacement components to install, along with the settling-in adjustments we were supposed to be dealing with now, anyway.” Shrugging, he added, “Still, I expect we’ll be fully operational within the month, ahead of our original schedule. After that, well, we’ll certainly have our hands full. You can count on that.”

The statement was straightforward by design, al-Khaled knew. Though he and his team had worked with Starbase 47’s engineers to identify the odd carrier wave as the source of the station’s ills, that discovery had itself uncovered a host of new questions. Judging from the still-unexplained transmission’s effects, there was no denying that its creators were or had been the keepers of wondrous, sophisticated technology. What other knowledge did they harbor? How did it compare to the Federation and its contemporaries?

From what Okagawa had shared with him—based on the very limited and vague information imparted by Reyes—these and many other questions doubtless would be pursued with vigor by the commodore and his people in the coming weeks. That much was obvious from the directive Reyes had issued—for all information pertaining to the carrier wave to be purged from the Lovell’s databanks, and for any member of the crew with direct knowledge of the anomaly to be ordered to secrecy. It all pointed to the commodore’s possessing far more information on the subject than he was able or willing to share, and the purpose for Vanguard’s presence in the Taurus Reach extending far beyond simple support of exploration and colonization initiatives.

In front of Okagawa, the alpha-shift helm officer, Lieutenant Sasha Rodriguez, was intent on her console as she oversaw what essentially was the automated process of the station’s tractor beams maneuvering the Lovell out of its docking bay. Behind her, Okagawa offered an informal salute toward the viewscreen.

“Best of luck to you, Commodore,” he said. “If you ever have need of my people’s particular talents, I hope you’ll give me a call.”

“I’ll be sure to do that. Smooth sailing, Captain. Reyes out.”

An instant later the image on the screen shifted from that of the commodore to a view of the docking bay’s outer doors as the Lovell continued its exit maneuver.

“Transporter room reports that Mr. Farber made it over safe and sound,” zh’Rhun reported as she stepped down to stand next to the captain.

Nodding at the report, Okagawa settled into the center seat. “Excellent,” he said as he looked over his shoulder. “Well, Mahmud, what’s our next assignment?”

Al-Khaled stepped toward the red railing that encircled the command well. “Computer systems upgrades at the Tantalus V penal colony, sir.”

“A vacation hot spot if ever there was one,” Diamond said, stone-faced.

Ignoring the weapons officer, al-Khaled continued, “T’Laen has already begun the initial diagnostics. She should be ready to begin the modifications upon our arrival.”

“Outstanding,” the captain replied. “Commander zh’Rhun, see to getting us on our way, would you please?”

As the bridge crew returned to their normal duties, Okagawa indicated the viewscreen with a wave of his hand. It depicted a receding view of the mammoth space station as the Lovell moved away at impulse power. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask about that station since we got here. You think they could have built something bigger?”

A chorus of laughter echoed across the bridge and even as he joined in, al-Khaled could not help but consider the road not taken. If what he had encountered during their brief visit here was any indication, he suspected that Isaiah Farber, like Starbase 47, would soon face a host of intriguing, perhaps even astounding challenges. The chance to work on the impressive space station—positioned so far beyond the Federation’s borders and on the doorstep of some vast unknown that seemed to be all but begging for attention—was a tempting notion, he admitted, but not one he was ready to accept just yet.

Though the Lovell, like the Corps of Engineers itself, might not be the darling of the fleet, it was a vessel with a heart, and a mission that—while perhaps mundane and even boring by description—brought its own multitude of intriguing possibilities.

They have their mission, whatever it might be, and we have ours.

That thought, and the lure of the path he had chosen not to follow, lingered as al-Khaled’s gaze fixed on the now rapidly shrinking image of Vanguard station—a lone sentinel among the stars, and a beacon of light amid the darkness of mystery surrounding the Taurus Reach.

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About the Authors

DAYTON WARD has been a fan of Star Trek since conception (his, not the show's). His professional writing career began with stories selected for each of Pocket Books's first three Star Trek: Strange New Worlds anthologies. In addition to his various writing projects with Kevin Dilmore (see below), Dayton is the author of the Star Trek novel *In the Name of Honor* and the science fiction novels *The Last World War* and *The Genesis Protocol* as well as short stories that have appeared in *Kansas City Voices* magazine and the Star Trek: New Frontier anthology *No Limits*. Though he currently lives in Kansas City with his wife, Michi, and their daughter, Dayton is a Florida native and still maintains a torrid long-distance romance with his beloved Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Be sure to visit Dayton's official Web site at www.daytonward.com.

For more than eight years, KEVIN DILMORE was a contributing writer to *Star Trek Communicator*, penning news stories and personality profiles for the bimonthly publication of the Official Star Trek Fan Club. On the storytelling side of things, his story "The Road to Edos" was published as part of the Star Trek: New Frontier anthology *No Limits*. With Dayton Ward, his work includes a story for the anthology *Star Trek: Tales of the Dominion War*, the Star Trek: The Next Generation novels *A Time to Sow* and *A Time to Harvest*, and eight previous S.C.E. eBooks. Coming in 2006 are *Turn the Page*, the first book in the relaunched S.C.E. series, entitled *Star Trek: Corps of Engineers*; the first installment of the six-eBook Star Trek fortieth-anniversary story *Mere Anarchy*; and the Star Trek: Vanguard novel *Summon the Thunder*, which continues the adventures of Starbase 47. A graduate of the University of Kansas, Kevin lives in Prairie Village, Kansas, with his wife, Michelle, and their three daughters, and works as a writer for Hallmark Cards in Kansas City, Missouri.

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