



Chapter One

“CAPTAIN, I believe you should come down to see this.”

The captain of the Enterprise smiled at what almost sounded like enthusiasm coming from his Vulcan science officer, filtered through the intercom speakers in his quarters.

“See what, T’Pol?” Captain Jonathan Archer asked. He was currently kneeling on the floor, scratching his beagle Porthos behind one floppy ear.

“I believe that we have found evidence that this planet is, in fact, the homeworld of the Zalkat Union.”

The planet to which the Vulcan sub-commander referred was Beta Aurigae VII.

Enterprise, the still largely experimental flagship of Earth’s nascent Starfleet space service, had been given a mandate to explore new worlds, and the Beta

Aurigae system was full of them. The seventh planet even had an oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere (what the Vulcans referred to as a “Minshara-class” planet), so Archer had authorized T’Pol to lead a team to explore the surface—after a thorough scan, naturally. Archer had made the mistake of not making sufficient preparations for visiting an Earth-type world once, and several members of his crew almost paid for that with their lives. Jonathan Archer liked to think that he learned from his mistakes.

They had not detected any sentient animal life—indeed, the largest animal they’d been able to detect was an insect—nor anything especially dangerous to humanoids. There was plenty of plant life, and the probe and sensor readings indicated a scattering of refined metals and the remnants of a system of roads. “Let me guess,” Archer said, standing upright, thus prompting a hurt look from Porthos, “the Alley Cat Union’s another one of those races we’re not meant to know about yet?” He reached for the cup of coffee on the nightstand as Porthos started sniffing his boots.

“Zalkat, not ‘alley cat,’ Captain, and hardly,” T’Pol said in the tone that Archer had come to recognize as the one she used when he was being annoyingly human. As far as he could tell, those times were roughly whenever Archer was awake. Sometimes, however, the teasing was impossible for him to resist, hence his deliberate malapropism.

She continued: “Archaeological evidence of the Union has been found on several worlds throughout the sector—and all of it indicates that the Union’s heyday was over ninety thousand years ago.”

Archer almost sputtered his coffee. “Ninety thousand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Wow.” It took Archer a moment to wrap his mind around the number. Ninety thousand years ago, Homo sapiens didn’t even exist. “What have you found?”

“The remains of a building that, as best I can tell, was recently unearthed.

I’ve been extrapolating the weather patterns, and it would seem that erosion has been caused—”

“T’Pol,” he said with a smile, “please tell me you didn’t call to talk about the weather.”

“Excuse me?” she said archly.

Archer sighed. “Just give me the basics of what you found. Save the details for your written report.”

A noise that Archer chose to interpret as static rather than a tcha of disapproval preceded T’Pol’s next statement. “We have found several items containing markings consistent with other Zalkatian artifacts, as well as humanoid bone fossils that are consistent with those found at other Zalkatian sites. Ensign Sato has also discovered a box.”

“A box?” Archer prompted when no further details were forthcoming.

“Yes, sir. Mr. Reed has been attempting to gain ingress to the box, thus far with minimal success.”

“What, blasting it open with a phase pistol didn’t work?” Archer said with a laugh.

“No.”

Archer blinked. “T’Pol, I was kidding.”

“So was Mr. Reed when he first made the suggestion. However, after all other avenues were exhausted, he did attempt to, as you so eloquently put it, blast it open. That proved as fruitless. The box is made of a material impervious to coherent phased light.”

After gulping down the remainder of his coffee, Archer asked, “What’s the big deal about this box anyhow?” At Porthos’s pleading look, Archer disposed of the coffee cup and then knelt down to scratch the canine behind the ears some more.

“You’re not getting any cheese, so stop giving me that look,” he said to the puppy.

“Sir?”

“Nothing,” he said quickly. “What about the box?”

“Ensign Sato has concluded, based on a very limited linguistic database that I provided, that the box contains critical documents relating to Malkus the Mighty.”

“Dare I ask what Malkus the Mighty is?”

“Was, Captain. Several of the documents that have been recovered from Zalkatian sites have made reference to Malkus—apparently a tyrant who ruled for many years. Accounts have chronicled his reign at anywhere from ten years to a thousand years—the former is more likely, though the latter more prevalent in the accounts. The box is probably of the same tenor as most other documents relating to Malkus: tributes to his glory, accounts of his greatness, and other such emotional outpourings.”

Grinning, Archer asked, “Is that distaste I hear in your tone, Sub-commander?”

“Certainly not,” T’Pol said indignantly.

“In any case, you’ve sold me.”

“Sir?”

“Sounds like this is a major archaeological find.” He cradled Porthos in his arms and then stood upright. The dog made a happy bleating noise in response and licked Archer’s hand. “I’d like to get a good look at it. Mr. Tucker, Porthos,

and I will be on the next pod down.”

“Sir, I don’t think it’s necessary for you to bring—”

Archer sighed as he interrupted. “Are we going to start this again? Porthos is a beagle. He’s spent most of his time sitting patiently in my cabin when every instinct in his little canine body pushes him to run yapping all over the ship. I’d say he’s earned another chance to run free in the great outdoors for a while.”

After a brief pause, T’Pol said slowly, “If you’d let me finish, sir, you’d have known that I have no objection to bringing your animal down—assuming he is kept out of the main archaeological site we have established. My objection was to the presence of Mr. Tucker.”

“I can’t see why—you two haven’t gotten into an argument for hours,” Archer said dryly. “You must be suffering withdrawal.”

“I simply do not see what Mr. Tucker can contribute to the landing party—plus it would place Enterprise’s four seniormost crew members off-ship.”

“Travis can handle the conn while we’re gone. And Trip’s an engineer. They’re good at opening things that don’t want to be opened—in fact, that’s a particular talent of Trip’s.”

“Really?” The dubiousness practically dripped from T’Pol’s voice.

“Really. We’ll be down within the hour. Archer out.” After cutting off that connection, he opened another. “Archer to Tucker.”

“Tucker here.”

“How’d you like to take a little trip, Trip?”

There was a pause, then a snort of what might have almost been laughter. “Cap’n, however long you been waitin’ to use that line—you shoulda waited longer.”

It took Charles “Trip” Tucker all of forty-five seconds to open the box.

Malcolm Reed stared daggers at him. “How in the hell did you do that, Commander?”

“Sorry, trade secret,” Tucker said with his toothy smile.

“Look, I went at that thing for the better part of an hour,” Reed said, his normally dry face looking positively sour. “I think—”

“Forget it, Malcolm,” Archer said with a grin. “Trip’s not one to reveal a trade secret.”

As his security chief continued to regard his chief engineer with disdain, Archer looked around the dig site. One of Reed’s people had been detailed with keeping an eye on Porthos as he ran around a bushy area. Archer, meanwhile, looked admiringly at a pile of stones that vaguely resembled pictures of Greek ruins he’d seen. The architectural style was completely different, of course, but it evoked the same feeling of treading on ancient ground. Ninety thousand years, he thought, still in awe of the number. Once, this barren, brown kilometer-wide patch of dirt was probably a thriving metropolis. Now there was nothing but an assortment of rocks and broken trinkets. Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair, he thought, recalling the Percy Bysshe Shelley poem. T’Pol had collected several items—some seemingly ordinary pieces of rock, others that appeared to have a particular shape—into a sample case, each tagged with a notation written in the severe Vulcan script. Archer instinctively wanted to rebuke her for that—Enterprise was an Earth ship, so to Archer’s mind the documentation should have been in an Earth language—but he realized immediately how foolish that was. The two people who were going to be spending the most time with the artifacts from this dig were T’Pol and the ship’s linguist, Ensign

Hoshi Sato. It mattered only that those two could read the notes. Their reports would be in English in any case.

Speaking of the young ensign, she was now kneeling down in front of the box, pawing through its contents, her hands clad in sterile gloves. “I was right! These have the same markings as the box.” She held something up to T’Pol, who stood next to her. Archer leaned in close to see a very small cube—barely two centimeters on a side—with surprisingly elaborate markings, given its size. Sato easily held the cube between her forefinger and thumb. “See? That glyph is definitely the symbol for ‘mighty,’” she added, pointing to a marking on one side, then pointed to the opposite side, “and that’s the one for ‘story.’ It’s got to be more of those Malkus Chronicles.”

T’Pol, her hands also gloved, took the cube. “The evidence does seem to point to that conclusion.”

“The word ‘mighty’ shouldn’t be a clue all by itself,” Archer said. “I mean, this Malkus guy can’t have been the only person to whom that word would apply.”

“Actually it is,” Sato said sheepishly. “See, that,” she said, pointing to one corner of the glyph, “indicates that it’s a proper name, and belongs to a great personage.”

T’Pol added, “The word ‘mighty’ written in that particular style has thus far been exclusively found in relation to Malkus. It would seem that Ensign Sato’s hypothesis was correct.”

Smiling, Sato stood up. “Told you.”

“This is an even greater find than you might think,” T’Pol said. “These are a type of data storage. Other such items have been found—many of them fragments of the so-called Malkus Chronicles. Until now, however, we have not found any units in such pristine condition.”

“They were certainly well preserved in that damn box,” Reed muttered. Then, louder, he added, “Actually, that’s probably why that box was so bloody hard to get into. If it was related to such an important figure...”

T’Pol nodded. “That is a logical deduction.”

“Pristine or not,” Archer said, “it doesn’t do us any good if we can’t read it.

I don’t think we have anything on board that’ll interface with that thing.”

Tucker walked over to the box. “Lemme take a look at that.”

Sato grabbed the box and moved it away from Tucker. “Not until you get some gloves on.”

“Whoa there, Ensign Squeaky Clean, I took a shower ’fore I came down.”

“I don’t care if you dipped yourself in a vat of decon gel, you’re not touching my artifacts without gloves on.”

“Your artifacts?” Tucker said with a laugh. “You said they had this Malkus fella’s name on ’em, not yours.”

“Malcolm, give the commander a pair of gloves,” Archer said before the argument went on.

“Fine, fine, gimme the damn gloves,” Tucker said with a look at Sato. For her part, Sato continued to look defiant. She had obviously taken a personal interest in this find.

Reed smiled as he went to the supply box, and said in a perfect imitation of Tucker’s drawl, “Keep your shirt on.”

Archer managed to maintain a straight face, as, naturally, did T’Pol. Sato had somewhat less discipline, and burst into a giggle.

Tucker turned to Archer. “Y’know, if I wanted abuse, I coulda stayed home. Next time, open y’own damn boxes.” However, he took the gloves Reed profered a moment

later, put them on, then looked at Sato. “May I?”

Presenting him with the box, Sato said with a smile, “Knock yourself out, Commander.”

Tucker studied one of the cubes for several seconds, then said, “I think I might be able to modify one of the readers. It’ll take a couple hours, though—and I’ll need to take one of these with me.”

“All right, take them back up to Enterprise,” Archer said. “T’Pol, go with him and give him a hand.”

“Captain,” Sato said, “request permission to go back—”

“Denied—for now,” he added at the ensign’s forlorn look. “Once they’ve rigged the reader up, then I’ll want you in orbit translating what’s on these cubes, but until then, with T’Pol going back to the ship, I want you down here cataloging what we find.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You will be remaining as well?” T’Pol asked Archer.

The captain nodded. “Not quite a first contact, but close enough for me. I’d like to learn more about this Zalkat Union. Besides,” he added with a smile, “Porthos could use a little more running-around time.”

Five hours later, Archer took a pod back up to Enterprise, along with Reed, the rest of the archaeological crew, a crate full of samples, and a very content beagle (who spent the entire trip from the surface asleep in Archer’s lap). An hour prior to that, T’Pol had sent a pod down to fetch Sato, and by the time Archer had settled back onto Enterprise, the two of them had a preliminary report for him.

The captain sat behind his desk. T’Pol stood calmly on the other side of the

desk, while Sato was pacing around the cramped space, seemingly ready to burst.

Archer found it an amusing contrast.

T'Pol said, "This chronicle is somewhat different from the others that have been unearthed."

"It was written after Malkus was overthrown," Sato added excitedly.

"I have to say, Ensign," Archer said with a smile, "you're remarkably enthusiastic for someone who'd never heard of the Zalkat Union two days ago."

"It's a fascinating culture, Captain," Sato said, now sounding a bit more sheepish. "I could spend days just listening to their language—it has so many layers and nuances. They took their words very seriously. And their sculpture—what we were able to unearth and what the sub-commander's shown me in some other records—it's just amazing."

Smiling indulgently, Archer said, "Continue your report, Sub-commander."

After a brief nod, T'Pol said, "Ensign Sato is correct in that this chronicle was written after Malkus was overthrown. In addition, it also provided the first evidence of how Malkus was able to rule for so long."

"How long?"

"Apparently," and here, it seemed to Archer, T'Pol spoke with the greatest reluctance, "he truly did reign for the rough equivalent of one thousand years. Malkus had four items constructed which served as the instruments of his rule. They were devices of impressive power—far in excess of the Union's baseline technology level."

"Did he steal the technology from another spacefaring power?"

"Unknown—and unlikely. Based on the descriptions that Ensign Sato and I have translated, it is in keeping with the Union's technology curve, simply farther

along on that curve than the rest of the Union of that era. To give an Earth analogy, the creator of these devices was the Zalkatian equivalent of Leonardo da Vinci. Unlike da Vinci, however, who could not construct the ornithopter he designed, Malkus was able to provide the material for these devices to be created.”

“So what do they do?” Archer asked, shifting uncomfortably in his chair.

“One was capable of controlling the weather, one imparted a fatal virus, one served as an immensely powerful energy weapon, and the final device could be used to channel telepathy.”

Archer sat up. “Mind control?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Basically,” Sato said as she paced back and forth past the images of other, older ships named Enterprise on the office wall, “he could force people to do what he wanted, and if they still didn’t obey, they had their choice of dying by disease, tornado, or being blasted into oblivion.”

“That’s quite a combination.” Archer knew his words didn’t do their meaning justice. He thought back to the tyrants of human history, and imagined what Julius Caesar, Genghis Khan, Napoleon Bonaparte, Adolf Hitler, or Colonel Green would have done with even one of those devices, much less all four. Hell, he thought, any sufficiently crazed Japanese shōgun or Russian czar would have a field day. “So what happened to the devices after Malkus was overthrown?” He snorted. “For that matter, how was he overthrown?”

“We haven’t found that part, yet,” Sato said. She had moved to stand next to T’Pol. “Captain, each of the cubes we found had different things on it, but the information we’re giving you about Malkus’s devices is on all of them. I think that’s why the box was so well preserved—the Zalkatians wanted someone to find

these chronicles in the future.”

“Why?”

T’Pol said, “As a warning. The devices proved impossible to destroy. According to the chronicle, they tried every method they could imagine, including dropping the devices into a sun.”

“That didn’t work either?” Archer asked, surprised.

“No. The devices were able to resist the gravitational forces of the sun and drift back out, unscathed. However, the Zalkatians could not risk another possessing even one of them, much less all four.”

“Smart move. So what’d they do?”

“Spread them to the nine winds,” Sato said with a grim smile. She started pacing again. “The Zalkat Union was huge, Captain. It included parts of the galaxy we’re probably never gonna see in our lifetime. And the rebels buried them in four different places on the outskirts of their territory.”

“Where?”

“That information was deliberately withheld,” T’Pol said, “in order to keep anyone from finding them. The only definitive information is that they are in four separate locations and that they are simple black boxes.”

A wry smile played across Archer’s face. “The Zalkatians have a thing for ordinary-looking boxes, don’t they?”

Sato also smiled.

T’Pol, of course, did not, but simply went on as if Archer hadn’t commented.

“This rather generic form makes recognizing the devices visually difficult.

However, the devices do give off a distinctive energy signature when they’re active. That signature is encoded into all of the cubes we found, and can easily

be programmed into Enterprise's sensors."

Archer stood up. "We need to do more than that."

Sato frowned. "Sir?"

"Think about it, Ensign—we're not the only ship out here. More to the point, we're not the last Earth ship to explore; we're the first. If someone comes across one of these devices when it's active, they need to know what it is—especially if they're so unassuming looking."

The look of trepidation on Sato's face showed that she was thinking about it now, and understood the potential danger.

"Ensign, prepare a message to Admiral Forrest. I want him to know everything you just told me—along with my strong recommendation that the information about these devices be programmed into every Starfleet ship and also be made available to any civilian ship."

T'Pol nodded what Archer guessed was an approving nod, and said, "I would like you to prepare a similar message to the Vulcan High Command, Ensign."

Archer's eyes widened as an idea hit him. "Actually, I think the recommendations to both Earth and Vulcan should come from both of us, Sub-commander. And we might want to provide this information to the Axanar, too—as a goodwill gesture to our new friends."

Another approving nod. "An excellent idea, Captain." Enterprise had made first contact with the Axanar only a couple of weeks earlier. At last report, diplomatic relations with them were going well.

Sato headed toward the door. "I'll start preparing the message right away, sir."

"One other thing, Ensign," Archer said. Sato stopped, her arm hovering over the door control. "I also want to recommend to the admiral that a general order is created that requires any Starfleet vessel that does encounter this energy

signature be ordered to confiscate the device immediately.”

“Yes, sir.” Sato touched the control to open the door and departed.

“Another excellent idea, Captain,” T’Pol said.

“Twice in one lifetime, Sub-commander,” Archer said with a wide grin. “When you’re hot, you’re hot.”

Archer waited expectantly for some kind of comeback. When none was forthcoming, he realized that T’Pol knew that Archer was expecting some kind of rebuke, and she had decided not to give him the satisfaction of rising to the bait.

Well, I did bring her along to keep me on my toes. “What say we head belowdecks so you can take a look at the other goodies we dug up down there?” Archer asked, heading for the door.

T’Pol nodded in acknowledgment. “After you, Captain.”

Part 1: The First Artifact

2266

This portion of the story takes place shortly before the Star Trek first-season episode “Balance of Terror.”

Chapter Two

SHE WAS PRETTY SURE the vacation sounded good when Alvaro suggested it. As the wind sliced through her thermal suit and snow obscured her goggles, however, it didn’t sound nearly as appealing at the moment.

Pirenne’s Peak had gotten warm enough to be habitable to humans only in the last few years. It was almost virgin territory. She had always liked hiking and climbing, and finding a new mountainous area of Alpha Proxima II to explore was certainly tempting.

And it wasn't like she had anything better to do now.

Of course, "habitable to humans" was a relative term. Proxima was a colony world, after all, and, though it was Class-M, no sentient life had ever evolved on it. That was, many felt, because it was so hot on most of the surface. There were exceptions, of course: the parts of the northern continent where the colony had been founded and now, almost a century later, thrived; and the mountaintops, above the cloud layer, where temperatures plunged to well below the freezing point.

After spending so long in the oppressive heat of Sierra City, she had thought she would welcome the cold. It matched her mood.

Damn them all to hell.

It's normal, they said. This sort of thing always happens when someone new takes over, they said.

But someone new shouldn't have taken over, didn't they understand that? That job was hers, by every right. Hers, dammit, and they had no right to take it away from her.

Take a vacation, they said. You'll feel better, they said.

Right now, she didn't feel better. She felt cold and miserable and like she was being attacked by wind and snow and she wanted it to stop.

The path she was on would lead to the top of the peak. It had been cleared by the tourist bureau as a way of encouraging hikers like herself to come to the peak. Unfortunately, the path made things too easy. If she had had to work a bit harder to get up to the top by navigating the natural crevices and outcroppings, she might have been able to actually accomplish what Alvaro had suggested: keep her mind off her recent misfortunes.

Misfortunes? Hell, it was thievery. That job was mine, dammit, mine ! They had

no right!

She touched a control on the lining of the glove of her thermal suit. A display appeared on the inside of her goggles, showing the route that would take her to the top. She then had the image pull back and expand to show the entire region. As she had hoped, there was another way to the top. It would take twice as long, and involve clambering over ground much more treacherous than this path—including at least one section that, according to the map, was covered in ice. But she was hardly in a rush—it wasn't as if she had a job to go home to—and she'd been in far more dangerous climbs when she was a child. This would be easy.

Half an hour later, sweat poured down her forehead, staining her goggles (which obediently cleaned themselves), her arm and leg muscles ached from the exertion of climbing in the bulky suit, and she hadn't thought about the misery her life had turned into for the entire time.

She paused, having found a small rock to sit on. Using one control to call up the map, she used another to activate the water dispenser. As refreshing water poured through a straw into her dry mouth, she looked over the display. Only about another twenty minutes or so, she thought. Had she taken the beaten path, as it were, she would have been there ten minutes ago. She preferred this.

I'll just wait here for a few minutes, get my breath back, then go on.

The cold and the snow and the wind somehow didn't matter as much now. Finally, she had found something to distract her. To make her forget her misery and what they took from her.

You can do better.

She sat up. "Who said that?" she asked aloud, not sure that anyone would even be

able to hear her in the fierce wind.

You can get revenge.

Now she stood up. "Who is this?"

I can help you.

Almost against her will, she found herself looking between the rock she sat on and the one next to it. She squinted, and saw a faint green glow.

You can have your revenge. Just take me with you and everything you want will be yours.

Her arm just barely fit between the two rocks. She reached in, felt around near where the green glow was. She felt the metal shape, which was warm even through the protection of her gloves.

Unfortunately, she couldn't fit it through the small space between the rocks.

Indeed, she could barely fit her hand through.

Consumed suddenly by an all-encompassing need to get the whatever-it-was out from between the rocks, she clambered off the rock, got on her knees, and examined the space. The rocks were close together, but the gap between them widened closer to the ground. They were also buried in snow. Maybe if I dig down a bit, they're farther apart!

No. Not maybe. They were farther apart. She just had to dig into the snow.

Somehow, she knew this.

On her knees, the peak, the vacation, the climb, everything forgotten, she started to dig with her hands, clearing away the snow at a great rate.

She had no idea how much time passed before she cleared out enough room to reach in between the rocks and grab the item. But as soon as she had, she did so.

It was a black box. It felt amazingly warm in her hands.

Now you can have your revenge.

She smiled.

“Y’know, I really hate the night shift, Dad.”

Sitting in his quarters on the U.S.S. Constellation, Commodore Matthew Decker laughed at the image of his son set in the desk monitor. Commander Willard Decker—whom his father would have sworn was only a child a week ago—sat in the operations center of Starbase 6, where he served as Admiral Borck’s adjutant.

“It’s space, son, it’s—”

“—always night,” he finished, “I know, I know.”

Both father and son laughed. It was an old joke dating back to when Will was four. His parents had told him it was time for bed because it was night. Even then, Will had been thinking about following his father’s footsteps into Starfleet, and he had said, “Mommy, Daddy, when I go to space I’m’na have to sleep all the time. ’Cause, in space it’s always night!”

“C’mon, son, it’s only for another day.”

“I know, I know. I just prefer to be in the thick of things.” Will leaned back in his chair and sighed. He looked, his father had to admit, good in his gold shirt. Won’t be long before he has a command of his own.

Something on the console behind Will beeped. He brushed a lock of blond hair off his forehead and checked the console. “Damn—I’ve got to take care of that. I’ll talk to you later, okay, Dad?”

“That’s Commodore Dad to you, mister!” Decker said with mock authority.

Will saluted sloppily. “Yes, sir, Commodore Dad, sir !” Then he nodded.

“Starbase 6 out.”

The monitor on Matt Decker’s desk faded to black. The commodore leaned back in

his chair. He was proud of his son. The boy's record was spotless. Truth be told, it was cleaner than his old man's, which had enough reprimands to choke a sehlat. Matt Decker had clawed his way through the ranks. His Academy professors had deemed him not fit to be command material. He came up through security, and wasn't expected to advance all that far. Most of his commanding officers considered him to be insubordinate—though never to the point of court-martial—and overly opinionated.

No one was more surprised than he when Admiral Fitzgerald gave him his captain's braid and command of the Constellation all those years ago.

Will, though, was a Starfleet poster boy. Although Decker hadn't told his son this, the next high-level starship first officer position to become available was probably going to go to Willard Decker.

The commodore got up and pulled his golden uniform shirt over his head. As he did so, he felt like all the energy drained out of his body—almost as if the shirt had been keeping him awake. It had been another long day on their two-week scientific mission examining the emissions from the neutron star in the Beta Proxima system. His second officer, Lieutenant Guillermo Masada, had been pushing his people pretty hard to get all the readings that they could before their next assignment three days hence—the oh-so-exciting hosting of a diplomatic conference in the Crellis Cluster. Even as Masada had been gathering enough sensor readings to challenge the storage capacity of the Constellation computer, Decker's first officer, Commander Hiromi Takeshewada, had been working with security to get all the details ready for the conference.

Bleary-eyed, Decker looked at himself in the mirror, scratching his rough, stubble-covered cheek.

“Bridge to captain.”

It was Masada. Decker was about to ask what he was still doing up, then realized it was a silly question. Guillermo has hardly slept since we warped into Beta Proxima.

Thumbing the intercom on his desk, he said, “Decker here.” Then he winced, realizing how slurred his words were. He wondered if he had sounded that bad when talking to Will.

“Sir, we’re picking up a distress call from Alpha Proxima II.”

In an instant, he was wide awake. Alpha Proxima was almost literally the star system next door to the Constellation’s present location, so they were ideally situated to respond to the call. “Specifics?”

“Medical emergency—some kind of plague has broken out. That’s all we’ve got.”

“That’s enough. Set a course, maximum warp, and have Commander Takeshewada and Dr. Rosenhaus report to the bridge. I’ll be right up. Decker out.”

“Sir, I—”

Decker thumbed the intercom off before Masada could finish the sentence. He knew that tone in his science officer’s voice. He was going to try to talk Decker out of changing course until they had more information so he could squeeze more sensor readings out of the neutron star. But the star wasn’t going anywhere, and he had a duty to respond to the medical emergency immediately.

Throwing his shirt back on, he went out into the corridor, rubbing the sleep that had already started collecting in his eyes. I haven’t even gone to bed yet, and I feel like I just woke up.

He approached the turbolift just as Hiromi Takeshewada did likewise from an adjacent corridor. Decker nodded down at her by way of greeting. Decker was a tall man, relatively broad shouldered, and starting to get the inevitable paunch

that all the men in his family got after they hit fifty-five. In complete contrast, the slim Takeshewada only came up to Decker's shoulder. Where Decker's lined (and, at the moment, stubbly) face had all his years etched on it, Takeshewada's porcelain-like features probably allowed her to still pass for a cadet. Some had even been foolish enough to not take her completely seriously because of that—though never twice.

Right now, she looked as tired as Decker felt. "I take it you were roused out of bed, Number One?" Decker said with a smirk.

"Not quite," she said. "I was heading for bed. I could see my bed from where I was standing when Guillermo called me. But no, I didn't actually make it to the bed." As the turbolift doors opened and they entered, she looked up at Decker's face. "So you gonna grow that beard, or what?"

Decker chuckled as he grabbed the turbolift's handle and said, "Bridge."

Takeshewada had been on him to simply grow a beard. Decker hadn't been entirely comfortable with the idea, but he also hated shaving. "Still thinking about it."

As soon as the doors opened to the bridge, Decker noticed that any signs of fatigue were erased from Takeshewada's smooth features. Nodding his approval, they both entered the Constellation's nerve center. "Report," Takeshewada said to Masada, who had been sitting in the command chair, and vacated it for Decker. Masada, whose normally well-trimmed beard was now thick enough to obscure his lips, ran his hand over his receding salt-and-pepper hair as he moved to the science console. "Alpha Proxima II reports that a plague of some kind has broken out and they need medical attention. Like I told the commodore, that's all the detail we've gotten so far."

As Decker sat in his command chair, Yeoman Guthrie appeared at his side with a cup of coffee—milk, no sugar. Decker accepted the cup with a grateful smile.

Takeshewada walked to the console directly behind Decker, where the night-shift communications officer—whose name Decker could not for the life of him remember—sat pushing several buttons. Before the first officer could say anything, the young ensign said, “I’ve been trying to raise Proxima since we received the distress signal, Commander. They have yet to respond.”

“Have any other ships answered the distress call?”

He nodded. “The Enterprise.”

Decker turned around. “Isn’t that Chris Pike’s ship?”

“No, Jim Kirk has her now,” Takeshewada said. “Has since Pike was promoted to fleet captain.”

Grunting, Decker turned to the navigation console. “ETA to Proxima?”

The helm officer, another fresh-faced young officer Decker didn’t recognize, said, “Twenty minutes, sir.”

“Something wrong, Ensign?” Takeshewada said.

Decker turned to see that the comm officer looked vexed, which had prompted the first officer’s question.

The communications officer touched the receiver in his ear. “I’m not sure. The comm traffic on Proxima is tremendous, but none of it is on the official frequencies. In fact, the official government channel is dead.”

As he spoke, the turbolift doors opened to reveal the smooth, unlined face of Dr. Lewis Rosenhaus. Only a few years removed from his graduation with honors from Starfleet Medical, Rosenhaus had been something of a prodigy. After Decker’s previous chief medical officer retired a month ago, Admiral Fitzgerald had all but forced Rosenhaus upon the Constellation, claiming he was one of the best. Decker’s sole impression of the young man so far was that he was a bit too

eager. He also hadn't had to do much beyond routine physicals to acquaint himself with his four hundred new patients. I suspect, Decker thought with some trepidation, that this will be a test for him. Let's hope to hell he passes it.

Idly, he wondered who the Enterprise CMO was, and hoped it was a more experienced hand.

His presence led to some chuckling around the bridge, as the doctor hadn't bothered to change into uniform, and his wavy red hair was sticking up in all directions. He was still wearing his pajamas—silk, Decker noticed, or something similar.

“What's happening?” the young man asked. “Lieutenant Masada said it was some kind of medical crisis.”

“We don't have any details yet, Doctor,” Takeshewada said. “So far, all we know is that Alpha Proxima II has been hit with a medical emergency of some kind.”

“That could be anything,” Rosenhaus said prissily.

“The word ‘plague’ was used, Doctor,” Decker said. “Does that help?”

“Not especially, no. Hard to prepare sickbay when I don't know what to prepare it for.”

Takeshewada turned to Masada. “Talk to me about Proxima, Guillermo.”

Masada reached behind his head and yanked on his ponytail, which he always did right before giving a report. “Your basic Class-M planet—part of the big colonization push after warp drive was discovered, made part of the Federation, gobby gobby gobby. Nothing particularly notable.”

Decker could hear the undercurrent in Masada's voice, and knew he was dying to add, Unlike, say, a neutron star. “Guillermo, knock it off.”

Sounding nonplussed, Masada said, “Sir?”

“We know you're angry about cutting the neutron star survey short. Get over it

and give a proper report.”

Straightening in his chair, Masada pulled on his ponytail again. “Yes, sir,” he said quickly, and peered into his sensor hood. Blue light shone on his features as he read off the data contained therein. “Alpha Proxima II was colonized in 2189 by the S.S. Esperanza. They set up two cities, both on the northern continent. In fact, the northern polar region’s the only place that’s really comfortable for humans—rest of the planet’s either too hot or covered in water. Current population is about one million four hundred thousand. The government consists of a planetary council run by a chief speaker, and they also have representation on the Federation Council.” He looked up. “You want their chief exports?”

Chuckling, Decker said, “I’ll pass, thanks.”

Then Masada’s console beeped. “What the—?”

“Report,” Takeshewada said.

Masada peered back into the sensor hood. “That’s weird.” He looked up at Takeshewada, who was now standing behind him. “We’re picking up an energy signature from Proxima, one that triggered a flag in the computer relating to Starfleet General Order 16.”

Decker frowned. “I don’t remember that one.”

“Neither do I,” Takeshewada said, sounding ashamed at the lapse.

Masada snorted. “Honestly, if the computer hadn’t just shoved it in my face, I wouldn’t have remembered it, either. But if this sensor reading is accurate, we may have stumbled across a deadly weapon.”

“What kind?” Takeshewada asked.

“Not sure,” Masada said, shaking his head and starting to work his console, “but

I'll have something by the time we get there.”

Decker turned away from Masada and smiled. Now that he had a problem to solve, Masada was sounding less petulant. Good, he thought. Last thing I need is Guillermo feeling sorry for himself when we've got a medical crisis and some unknown weapon....

The Constellation's Sensor Control Center—or “sensor room,” as it was more commonly known—was not normally a hotbed of activity. Someone was always on duty to make sure everything was working. However, that person was often alone. Located on deck twelve, all the sensor information from the ship came through this room. Unlike the bridge sciences station—where the duty officer could pick and choose what to focus on—the consoles in this room took in and recorded everything. Its functions were generally automatic.

Since the Constellation had arrived at Beta Proxima eleven days ago, though, there had never been fewer than four people in the sensor room at any given time, and sometimes up to ten. Lieutenant (j.g.) Chaoyang Soo had joked that the science staff had spent more time in the room in those eleven days than they had during their entire collective tours on the Constellation.

Right now, Soo was frowning at a new reading that had come in. With the sudden departure to respond to a medical emergency, Soo had taken it upon himself to dismiss the staff—mostly noncommissioned scientists who had spent the last eleven days being harangued by Lieutenant Masada—leaving only himself and Ensign Sontor. Were Sontor not a Vulcan, Soo would have dismissed him, too. However, he had apparently altered his metabolism so he would not need to sleep at all for the two-week period of the mission. It was a move that some viewed as showing off, but it also made dismissing him so he could get some sleep more or less

pointless.

“Curious.”

Soo, who had been gazing at the lateral sensor array, walked over to stand behind Sontor, who was staring at the same anomalous reading. “What do you make of it?”

“We have detected the energy signature of one of the Malkus Artifacts.”

“You say that like I have the first clue what that is.” Soo realized after he said it that he sounded more irritated than he should have. Ah, hell, it’s not like Sontor’ll care.

“My apologies. I had, of course, assumed that you would be familiar with the major archeological find on Beta Aurigae VII one hundred and fifteen years ago, since it relates to the sixteenth of Starfleet’s General Orders.” Sontor’s right eyebrow shot up. “Obviously, my assumption was in error.”

Soo closed his eyes and counted to ten in English, French, and Mandarin. Then he opened them again. “Ensign Sontor, would you be so kind as to enlighten me as to what a ‘Malkus Artifact’ is?”

“Masada to sensor room.”

“Our master speaks,” Soo muttered, then thumbed the intercom. “Sensor room, this is Soo.”

“I need everything on Starfleet General Order 16 and what it has to do with emissions we’re getting from Alpha Proxima II, and I need it yesterday.”

With a look at Sontor, Soo said, “I don’t think that’ll be a problem, sir.”

“So you’re saying that this plague may be caused by this—this artifact?”

Decker felt dubious about the story that Ensign Sontor was relaying to him on

the bridge now. On the other hand, Starfleet didn't issue general orders without a reason. Obviously whoever issued the order—and, according to Sontor, it dated back to when Starfleet was Earth's space exploration arm before the forming of the Federation—thought the threat of these four artifacts was real enough. Even if the distress call turned out to be a false alarm, just detecting those emissions meant that the Constellation and the Enterprise were now obligated to find and confiscate the artifact or artifacts. “Do we know what type of disease the artifact can cause?” he asked.

“No, sir. Only that the disease in question is fatal.” Sontor hesitated. “If I may say so, sir, this is a fascinating discovery, of great scientific importance.”

“You may say that, Mr. Sontor, but I'm a bit more concerned about the loss of life on Proxima.”

“Of course, sir,” Sontor said quickly, though he didn't sound nearly contrite enough to suit Decker.

Oh lay off the kid, he admonished himself. He's just being Vulcan. He wouldn't know contrite if it bit him on the rear.

The ensign at helm said, “Entering Alpha Proxima system, sir.”

“Come out of warp and bring us into standard orbit of the second planet.” He turned to Masada. “Guillermo?”

Peering into the sensor hood, Masada said, “Several artificial satellites and small vessels in orbit, all matching what should be there. Also reading a Constitution -class starship in a standard orbit, registry NCC-1701—that'd be the Enterprise. I can also now verify the presence of the energy signature from General Order 16 on-planet—but I can't localize it. At least, not yet.”

Decker turned to communications. “Any luck raising anyone in authority, Ensign?”

The ensign shook his head. “No, sir, but I’m getting a signal from the Enterprise.”

“Good.” He turned to Takeshewada. “What’s the captain’s name again?”

She rolled her eyes in the long-suffering manner that Decker had long since learned to ignore. “Kirk.”

“Right. Ensign, open a channel.”

When they came out of warp, the viewscreen had provided an image of Alpha Proxima II—a gold-and- yellow-tinged planet—and a ship of the same class as the Constellation in orbit around it. Within moments, that image was replaced by a bridge that was also of the same design as the Constellation.

In the center seat sat a man who was barely in his thirties. My God, they’re letting children captain starships. “I’m Commodore Matt Decker of the Constellation.”

“James T. Kirk, captain of the Enterprise. It’s a pleasure, Commodore—I’m just sorry we can’t meet under better circumstances.”

“Likewise,” Decker said quickly. “Have you been able to get anything from the planet?”

Kirk nodded. “Not from the government, but my chief medical officer has been in touch with the chief of staff of one of the hospitals. I’m afraid the news isn’t good, Commodore. Right now, over thirty percent of the population is either incapacitated or dead from this virus.”

“My God.” That was Rosenhaus, who still stood by the turbolift, still in his nightclothes.

“Unfortunately, most of the planet’s public officials are among that thirty percent.”

Decker blinked. “How is that possible?”

“My first officer is working on that right now, though he has a theory based on some emissions we’ve received.”

Nodding, Decker said, “The Malkus Artifacts? General Order 16?”

Again, Kirk nodded.

“All right, I want you, your first officer, and your CMO to beam over here in fifteen minutes. Bring everything you know about the situation, both on Proxima and regarding these artifacts. We’ll do likewise.”

“Of course, Commodore.” Kirk sounded as nonplussed as Masada had when Decker dressed him down earlier. “We’ll see you in fifteen minutes. Enterprise out.”

Without turning to look at Rosenhaus, Decker said, “Doctor, that gives you fifteen minutes to put a uniform on and get to the briefing room.”

“Hm? Oh, right. Sorry,” he said sheepishly, and went into the turbolift.

Takeshewada stepped down to the lower portion of the bridge and stood next to Decker. “A little rough on the kid, weren’t you?”

“He showed up on the bridge in his jammies, Number One, that—”

She smiled. “I don’t mean Rosenhaus, I mean Kirk.”

Decker snorted. “I’m the ranking officer here. Besides, Kirk doesn’t look old enough to shave.”

“You do know that he’s got a list of commendations about a kilometer long, not to mention the Medal of Honor, the Silver Palm, a Kragite, and probably some others I’m forgetting, don’t you?”

Decker grinned. “Yeah, but I bet I’ve got more reprimands.” He hauled himself up from his chair and drained his coffee cup. Handing it to Guthrie, he said,

“Yeoman, make sure there’s a full pot in the briefing room. We’re gonna need it.”

“Yes, sir,” the yeoman said, taking the now-empty cup.

“Masada, Sontor, let’s go.” He turned—and realized that he didn’t have a clue what the names of any of the officers left on the bridge were. He had enough trouble keeping track of alpha shift, much less the nearstrangers from gamma shift presently staffing the duty stations.

Takeshewada, bless her, whispered the word “Alamanzar” in his ear.

“Alamanzar,” he said without missing a beat, and wondering which face that name belonged to, “you have the conn.”

Decker spent the time waiting for the Enterprise contingent and Rosenhaus to show up taking a quick glance at Kirk’s service record. Although the commodore was appalled to see that Kirk was only a few years older than Decker’s son, he was also impressed with the young man’s service record. Kirk had several citations besides the ones Takeshewada mentioned.

Still think he’s too damn young to be a ship captain...

The man himself came in a moment later, followed by two men in blue uniforms, one Vulcan, one human; they were led in by a security guard, whom Decker dismissed with a nod.

Decker stood up and offered his hand. “Captain Kirk.”

“Commodore. May I present my first officer, Mr. Spock, and my chief surgeon, Dr. Leonard McCoy.”

The first officer’s wearing blue? What the hell kind of ship is this kid running? The ship’s second-in-command should have been in command gold, not the blue of the sciences. Aloud, he said, “This is Commander Hiromi Takeshewada, my XO; Lieutenant Guillermo Masada, my second officer; and Ensign Sontor, one of my

science officers. We're still waiting on—”

The door opened and Rosenhaus ran in, tugging on a blue uniform shirt that looked like it had been hastily thrown on. He was also trying to smooth his red hair down, and only partially succeeding.

“—my CMO,” Decker finished with a smile. “Dr. Lewis Rosenhaus.”

“A pleasure, sirs,” Rosenhaus said breathlessly.

Within moments, they were all seated around the table. “Dr.—McCoy?” Decker said.

When the doctor nodded affirmation, he continued. “Since you’ve been in touch with the surface...”

McCoy nodded. “According to Dr. Baptiste, the head of the Sierra City Medical Center—and, for all intents and purposes, the surgeon general down there, since the S.G.’s one of the ones who’s down for the count—what we’re dealing with here appears to be a virus that stimulates the adrenal gland. The body can only handle so much of that, naturally, and eventually the organs become overworked. The most common actual cause of death is heart failure—the heart almost literally explodes from the intensity of the blood being pumped through it.” The doctor made a snorting noise. “In fact, most of the people who have died from this did so before anyone realized something was wrong. Damn difficult to diagnose a disease whose symptoms include feeling energetic, unusual vigor, and general excitement.”

Rosenhaus asked, “What finally led them to realize it then?”

“Over a dozen seemingly unrelated deaths with the same cause within a close time frame. Law-enforcement types tend to notice that kinda thing,” McCoy said dryly.

“The autopsies revealed the presence of the virus, and they started treating it and asking anyone with the symptoms to report to the nearest hospital immediately.”

Decker leaned back in his chair. “Which meant the hospitals were flooded with healthy people who felt good and thought their hearts would blow up.”

McCoy half-smiled. “Exactly. But the virus is fairly easy to identify.”

“So what’s the problem?” Rosenhaus asked.

“No one’s been able to find a cure is the damn problem,” McCoy snapped at the younger doctor. Decker had to hide a smile. McCoy went on: “Dr. Baptiste is sending us all his lab work. They’re treating with sedation and anti-adrenal medications, but that’s only temporary. The virus works past that eventually. It also inhibits any attempt to put the body into stasis. Even under sedation, it won’t allow body functions to slow down enough for that.”

“Impressive disease,” Rosenhaus said. “It knocks out the best method of staving it off, and badly cripples the second-best. Have they tried using broloquine?”

McCoy frowned. “You can’t use broloquine in these cases.”

“Of course you can—according to—”

Both Kirk and Decker said, “Gentlemen,” simultaneously. Decker smirked and added, “You two’ll have plenty of time to kibbitz later. Doctor, if you could please have that lab work sent over to us as well, so Dr. Rosenhaus can argue with authority.”

“Of course,” McCoy said. “The other problem,” he said before Decker could then turn to Kirk and ask him for a report—Decker had thought McCoy to be finished, “is that there’s no pattern to the distribution of the virus.”

“It’s not airborne?” Rosenhaus asked.

“No, and it’s not being transmitted by contact, either. In fact, as far as Baptiste has been able to tell, it’s not in the least bit contagious. But suddenly, without any kind of warning, a group of people in a certain geographic

area all contract it.”

“Dr. McCoy is correct,” the Vulcan first officer— what the hell is his name?

Decker thought in a mild panic—said. “The size of the area targeted varies from incident to incident. One of those targets was Sierra City, the colony’s capital, during a full council session. Most of the representatives of the government are now ill—and several of them are dead, including the Chief Representative, who was the head of the government.”

Turning to Kirk, Decker said, “So what’s the situation planetside?”

“In a word, Commodore, chaos. The government’s ground to a halt. We may need to take drastic actions.”

Sontor spoke up then. “It is likely that the Malkus Artifact is indeed responsible for the virus.”

The Vulcan from the Enterprise said, “Agreed. The logical deduction would be that someone has unearthed the artifact and is using it to foment chaos.”

“Or at least strife,” Kirk said. “Chaos is random, and there was nothing random about the attack on the government.”

Masada tugged on his ponytail. “I’ve picked up the artifact’s energy pattern, but I haven’t been able to localize it.”

“Nor have I,” Kirk’s first officer said.

“In that case, Mr. Spock,” Kirk said with a small smile, “the logical course would be for you and Mr. Masada to pool your resources. And see if there’s any more information about the Zalkat Union.”

“That goes for our doctors, too,” Decker said. “Time to prove if two heads really are better than one. One question, Doctor—if it’s not contagious, do we need to quarantine the planet?”

McCoy fidgeted with a stylus. “I’d still recommend it, Commodore. All right, so

it's being transmitted to a person with some kind of artifact instead of traveling on microbes through the air—that's still transmission of a disease, and it still calls for a full quarantine. No ships leave orbit, no ships come into orbit. That includes us.”

“Very well—put that into motion as soon as we're done here.” He turned to Kirk.

“In the meantime, Captain—”

Decker's words were cut off by the comm officer. “Bridge to Decker.”

He thumbed the intercom, and the young ensign's face appeared on the three-screen monitor in the center of the briefing room table. “Decker here.”

“We're getting an emergency distress call from a Chief Bronstein on the planet.

She's apparently the head of the Proximan Police Department. Riots have broken out in Sierra City, and they're requesting immediate assistance.”

“Tell her we'll be sending a party down. Decker out.” He stood up. “Captain, I suggest you and I both beam down and assess the situation in person and put both our security staffs on standby.”

“Commodore, if there are riots breaking out—” Takeshewada started.

“I'm a big boy, Number One, I can handle myself. You have the conn while I'm gone.” Decker noticed that this Spock person didn't put up the same argument. He wondered if that was because he was spineless, or just knew better than to argue with his captain—and if the latter, did that mean Kirk was stubborn or that Spock just knew him too well?

Of course, Hiromi knows me too well, and I'm pretty damn stubborn, but so's she. She'll keep beating her head against the same wall, figuring it'll fall sometime...

However, that was speculation that could wait. “Let's go, people.”

Chapter Three

“CHIEF , we’ve got more problems.”

“Oh, good,” Anna Bronstein said through gritted teeth. Her chief deputy had just entered her toocramped office with this unwelcome news. The chief of police for the Alpha Proxima II colony had been up for thirty-six straight hours dealing with crisis after crisis. Keeping order at the hospitals alone was proving to be a nightmarish duty, and that was only the tip of the iceberg—and now people were rioting in the streets. Her shoulder-length brown hair, normally tied up and neat, was loose and tangled, her head felt as if someone had taken a welding laser to it, and her uniform was starting to take on a rather unfortunate odor of sweat and grime.

I should’ve joined Starfleet like Aunt Raisa, she thought crankily. She had only been on the job for a month, was still learning half the regular procedures, and now she was scrambling to implement the emergency ones.

“I was just thinking I needed more problems. What is it this time?”

Deputy Armando Ramirez ran a hand through his thinning black hair. “Well, first of all, the people we have guarding the water reclamation plant are about to go off-shift, and we don’t have anyone to relieve them.”

“Can’t they work another shift?”

“All of them are on their second shift—some of them on their third. They’re gonna collapse soon.”

“Is there anywhere we can divert?”

Ramirez snorted. “That was a joke, right?”

“I had my sense of humor surgically removed when I took this job, ’Mando.”

“That explains a lot, Chief.”

Bronstein glowered at Ramirez, then started gnawing on her fingernail again.

“Have half of ’em work half the shift. Let the other half get some rest, then switch ’em off. What else?” The nail broke off, and she looked at the finger like it had betrayed her.

“Nobody’s showing up to run the cargo transporter downtown.”

“So?”

“Nobody at all. That’s the one they use to get the food and stuff to Arafel County. If nobody shows up, they don’t get their food.”

Bronstein frowned. “Doesn’t Arafel have an emergency supply?”

“Well, yeah, but that’ll only last a couple days, and—”

“In a couple of days, we’ll probably all be dead, ’Mando. That’s not a priority.” She started nibbling on her middle finger’s nail. “How’s Stephopolous coming with his investigation?”

“It’s definitely murder. Stephopoulos figures that it was the roommate.”

Bronstein got up from behind her desk, which was presently so covered with reports and other items that she couldn’t tell what the desk was made of anymore, and started to pace. “Why is it that the first wrongful death this planet has had in six years has to happen when the planet’s falling apart at the seams?”

Ramirez scratched his ear and started to answer when Bronstein said, “Mando, that was a rhetorical question. Anything else?”

Before Ramirez could answer, she heard a familiar sound—that of a transporter. She whirled around to see two patterns starting to coalesce in the doorway to her office. Without hesitating, she unholstered her phaser. Ramirez did likewise.

The patterns became two white males in gold Starfleet uniforms. That means

either two people from those ships that responded to our distress call or two imposters.

“Identify yourselves now,” she said without lowering the phaser.

The younger of the two men held his arms out in a conciliatory gesture. “I’m James T. Kirk, captain of the Enterprise. This is Commodore Matt Decker of the Constellation. We don’t mean you any—”

“Don’t move,” Bronstein said when Kirk started moving forward.

He stopped moving. “I’m sorry. We’re here in response to your distress call. We’ve both got security teams standing by, but we need you to tell us where to put them.”

Decker put in, “We figured that beaming down in the middle of the street might cause more problems than it would solve.”

Well, if they are Starfleet, at least they’re not idiots. “Ramirez?” she asked, not taking her eye off of Decker and Kirk.

She could hear the whirring of Ramirez’s tricorder. “The transporter beam did originate from orbit, and not from a position that matches any of the satellites or local ships.”

Bronstein let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding and lowered her phaser. “I’m sorry, Captain, Commodore, but the way things have been—”

“Say no more, Chief, we understand,” Kirk said with a nice smile and in a gentle, reassuring tone—and, to Bronstein’s surprise, she actually felt reassured, an emotion she would not have given herself credit for feeling.

The commodore, though, didn’t smile when he asked, “So where can we put our people down?”

Indicating the west wall, she said, “Take a look.” The wall contained a map of Sierra City, with sections marked in red and blue. The amount of red far

exceeded the blue. “The red areas are where the worst of the rioting is—the blue areas are the ones we’ve got contained. Everything else is stable, for now.

We’ve been trying to keep people indoors, but we’ve got everybody working double and triple shifts. Not surprisingly, the worst is at Government Center, since people want their elected officials to actually, y’know, do something.

Second-worst is the two hospitals.” She shook her head. “Can’t tell what they’re thinking.”

“They’re not,” Decker said. “They’re a mob, Chief—mobs don’t think, they just act.”

Bronstein sighed in acknowledgment.

Taking out his communicator, Kirk said, “We’ll try to provide you with some relief. Kirk to Enterprise.”

Decker also took his communicator out, and they each spoke with their security chiefs. While they did so, Bronstein said, “Ramirez, get in touch with the OICs at all the sites and tell them to expect some help.”

Nodding, Ramirez headed back to his desk in order to contact the officers in charge.

“We’ll have people in place within the next minute,” Decker said. “Their phasers are on stun and they’ll be able to pacify the crowd.”

“Great—then what?” Bronstein said. “We don’t have holding facilities for this many people, and I can’t just leave them lying in the street.” She sighed.

“Running this place is supposed to be a straightforward operation. I’ve only been here four weeks, and I specifically came here because it was supposed to be calm and relaxing. The worst thing I have to deal with is crowd control during holidays and major sporting events. Now, I have to—”

“Excuse me?” came a small voice from doorway. Bronstein turned to see a short, pale man wearing an ugly one-piece brown suit. “I’m looking for Chief Bronstein?”

“That would be me. You are?”

The little man entered, gave Kirk and Decker a surprised look, then offered his hand to Bronstein. “My name is Johan Trachsel, and I’m one of the directors of the Sierra City Medical Center. I was told to come see you about authorizing an Emergency Powers Act for the hospital so SCMC can simply treat everyone who walks in without having to go through the usual entry process.”

“You mean you haven’t been?” Kirk asked, sounding as surprised as Bronstein felt.

“I’m afraid not—or, rather, some of the doctors have, but it’s been haphazard.

We’d rather it was official to save problems down the line.”

Decker snorted. “Assuming there is a ‘down the line.’”

“We prefer to remain optimistic, sir.” He turned to Bronstein. “In any case,

I’ll need you to sign off on this.”

Bronstein blinked. “Me? Why me?”

Trachsel went wide-eyed. “You don’t know?”

“Don’t know what?” Bronstein asked, exasperated.

“Uhm, well, you see—you’re in charge now.”

Again, Bronstein blinked. “In charge of what?”

“The planet. The entire council has been either hospitalized or is dead.

According to the Proxima charter, in the event of something like this happening, power then goes into the hands of the chief of police.”

Bronstein stupidly looked down at her hands, as if Trachsel had spoken literally. Casting her mind back, she remembered something during her

orientation about the fact that the chief of police was next in line if the entire government was incapacitated, but she hadn't taken it very seriously—after all, how likely was that to happen in real life?

Then she looked up. “Me? In charge?”

“I’m afraid so, ma’am.”

She found herself looking helplessly at Kirk and Decker. Decker was inscrutable, but Kirk looked sympathetic. “I’m barely able to do my job, now I’m supposed to do the whole government’s?”

Trachsel was holding out a copy of the executive order and a stylus. “Please, ma’am, if you can sign this, we can streamline the treatment of the sick.”

“Right, fine,” she said, grabbing the stylus and signing in the appropriate spot. “Someone may want to mention this to the lunatics throwing things at Government Center...”

Soon, they’ll all be dead.

She stared out the window. It all looked so peaceful. So quiet.

But she knew better.

She had been watching the newsfeeds. They were rioting now. Maybe not here, near her house, but elsewhere in Sierra City, oh, yes.

Cowards. Weaklings.

They had had it so easy, and now they were falling apart at the seams.

And it was all her doing.

Sure, they went through the motions, pretending to be civilized. But introduce a little bit of death into their perfect lives, and they become savages.

Their lives had been disrupted. Just as hers was. They stole her life from her,

now she was stealing their lives from them.

She turned on the newsfeeds, curious as to whether things had gotten any more entertaining in the last fifteen minutes.

“According to the latest reports, Starfleet security personnel have been sighted near Government Center as well as at Kurkjian Memorial and SCMC. It is hoped that the presence of additional forces from Starfleet will help curb the tide of violence, though some are questioning the presence of Starfleet under these circumstances, and wondering what that means in terms of the search for a cure.

Presently, two starships are in orbit, the U.S.S. Constellation and the U.S.S. Enterprise. Both ships have impressive security staffs and heavy armaments. They also have medical facilities that rival our own, and have the benefit of not being inundated with rioting citizens. Further—”

She turned it off in disgust. Damn Starfleet, anyhow, who asked for them to stick their noses into this?

Not that it mattered. She’d just have to use the gift again.

The gift that gave her power.

The wonderful black box with the green glow.

Take my power away from me? I’ll show you power, my friends. I have the power to make you dead—and turn the rest of you into a band of raving lunatics.

She laughed. People used to say that she didn’t have a sense of humor, which wasn’t true. She just didn’t like to laugh very much. When she did laugh it was always awkward and painful-sounding.

Now, though, she laughed with the greatest of ease.

It had been difficult to not run all the way down Pirenne’s Peak after she had found the gift. But that was dangerous, both to herself and to her ability to keep the gift secret. After all, it was her gift. She couldn’t share it, not

with anyone—not even Alvaro. No, it was hers. Her gift, her salvation, her instrument of revenge.

So she had calmly made her way back down the trail, moving as fast as she could without raising suspicion, and then had waited impatiently in the queue for the transporter that would take her home.

She held the gift in her hand and contemplated it. She wondered who to use it on next. Maybe I'll use it on the rioters. That would be so wonderfully ironic, wouldn't it?

Again, she laughed.

Soon, they'll all be dead.

Never thought I'd love the sound of a transporter so much, Matt Decker thought. He stood with Jim Kirk on the roof of Police Headquarters, which afforded them a fine view of the Government Center. Not to mention the hundreds of people who were yelling, screaming, holding signs, throwing things, and pushing against the barely adequate cordon of exhausted-looking police officers. That cordon was all that kept the mob from pouring into the GC.

Then Decker heard the familiar whine of a transporter beam, only amplified to a much greater degree than what he was used to. As the sound increased, the noise from the mob quieted down proportionately. No one was sure what the noise was, at first, but they didn't seem to think it was good.

After a moment, the noise reached a crescendo, and some forty humanoid figures started to coalesce.

The transporter whine died down, but a concomitant noise increase from the crowd did not occur—mainly due to the fact that the transporter had heralded the

arrival of two score people wearing red Starfleet uniforms and each holding a phaser rifle. These were Kirk's people, so Decker didn't recognize any of them—the Constellation security detail was assigned to the hospitals—but they looked sufficiently menacing.

Some people continued to shout, but the efforts were much more half-hearted. Decker remembered a skirmish with a Klingon patrol several years earlier—the Klingon transporters, he had noted then, were almost totally silent. At the time, Decker had envied that discrepancy—especially since it had almost got him killed. Today he was grateful for it. The noise had had much more of an effect than even the presence of armed Starfleet personnel.

“Attention, citizens of Sierra City,” came a voice from everywhere. Again, Decker didn't recognize the voice, but he assumed it to be that of Kirk's security chief, doing what he was supposed to do: using an amplifier on his voice as he tried to talk them down. True, they could have just stunned everyone from orbit, but that had a certain ruthlessness that both Decker and Kirk wanted to avoid if possible. Besides, as Bronstein had pointed out, that would raise the question of what to do with the unconscious bodies. Better to at least attempt to pacify with words rather than phaser beams. And we can still knock 'em out from orbit if we need to.

The security chief continued: “Please disperse and return to your homes. The Proximan government is doing everything it can to alleviate the current crisis, but it cannot function under these conditions. If you do not comply, we will use force. Please do not put us in that position.”

With that, the Enterprise security personnel started moving forward—but with their phasers lowered. Emboldened, the Sierra City police did likewise, with their weapons holstered, guiding people away from the GC.

Amazingly enough, it worked. Where the mob probably figured it could handle a few local cops, a cadre of Starfleet security was a completely different matter.

“Everything is being done to alleviate the crisis,” the Enterprise security chief said. “Please return to your homes and await further word. With your help, we will get through this and cure the disease, but we can’t accomplish anything with actions like this going on.”

Ever so slowly, the crowd started to disperse. People lowered the signs, pocketed items they intended to throw, and started to move off. Some still shouted the occasional epithet, but without the white noise of the screaming crowd to back them up, they came across as petty and weak rather than threatening.

Decker turned to Kirk. “Nice job your man did there.”

“Thanks,” Kirk said absently. “Commodore, are you by any chance related to Will Decker?”

Feeling his face crack with a smile of paternal pride, Decker said, “Yes, he’s my son.”

“I met him when we had a layover at Starbase 6. He’s a good man.”

“Thank you,” Decker said, but he could tell from Kirk’s distracted tone that that was not what he’d intended to ask the commodore about. “Kirk, you’ve obviously got something on your mind. Nice as it is to know you think well of my son, I’d rather you just come out and tell me what you’re thinking.”

Kirk took a moment to answer, then indicated the crowd below with a gesture.

“This is only a temporary solution. These sorts of things are going to keep happening, especially if whoever has that artifact decides to infect more people. Chief Bronstein can barely handle her own duties without our help, much

less run the government.” He finally turned to look at Decker. His face had a somber quality that Decker frankly wouldn’t have credited so young an officer—even a starship captain—as being capable of. “Commodore, with respect, I strongly recommend that we put Proxima under martial law.”

Decker almost flinched. As it was, he did take a step backward, as though Kirk’s words were a physical attack. “Are you joking?”

“Not about something like this, believe me.”

“Kirk, we can’t—”

“I don’t make this request lightly, Commodore,” Kirk interrupted. “I’ve lived under martial law. You familiar with Tarsus IV?”

“Of course,” Decker said. Kirk didn’t need to be any more specific—Decker knew that Kirk was referring to what happened on that colony world twenty years earlier. Decker had been serving as security chief on Starbase 4 at the time. A fungus had wiped out the food supply, and the planetary governor, a lunatic named Kodos, had declared martial law and ordered half the population—some four thousand people—put to death. It had been his way of preserving the entire colony, murdering some so the others could survive. With those four thousand taken out of the equation, the remaining populace could survive on the remaining available food stores. From a eugenics standpoint, it made a certain amount of sense, if one had a sufficiently diseased mind, but from a human standpoint it was one of the most appalling acts committed since the Federation’s founding a century earlier.

“You were there?” Decker asked. After Kirk nodded, Decker did the math. “You must’ve only been a teenager.”

Again, Kirk nodded. “I’ve never forgotten Kodos. For a long time I associated the very concept of martial law with the death of thousands of people.” Kirk got

a faraway look in his eyes. Then he blinked, and looked at Decker. “But right here, right now, what we’re looking at is anarchy. Under regulations, our only recourse is to declare martial law.” He took a deep breath. “It’s your call, Commodore—you’re the ranking officer. But just because this has been done wrong by people like Kodos doesn’t mean it can’t be done right. It isn’t martial law that’s evil, it’s those who abuse it. I’d like to think that you and I are capable of rising above the temptations and using the power wisely.”

Decker looked into the eyes of the younger man. He saw a determination that belied the captain’s age. Or maybe I’m just not being fair—being under forty doesn’t automatically make you an idiot, he admonished himself.

He pulled out his communicator. “Decker to Constellation.”

“Constellation. Takeshewada here.”

“Number One, please note in the ship’s log that, due to the crisis on Alpha Proxima II, I, as ranking Starfleet officer, have been forced to take extraordinary action. As of this moment, Proxima is hereby under martial law, to be jointly administered by myself and Captain Kirk until such a time as we have deemed the crisis to have passed. Inform Starfleet Command of this immediately.”

“Commodore—Matt, are you sure—”

“That’s an order, Number One!” Decker barked. Then he took a breath. “Hiromi, believe me, this way is best. Kirk and I’ll stay down here. You’re in charge of the Constellation. Ride herd on Rosenhaus and McCoy to find a cure for this thing, and I want Masada and Spock working round-the-clock to find that damned artifact.”

“Understood, Commodore,” Takeshewada said in a tone that Decker recognized as her we’re-going-to-talk-about-this-later tone. Well, at least she’s not giving

me a hard time now.

Indicating the doorway back into the building, Kirk said, “We need to tell Chief Bronstein, then inform the general population.”

“And won’t that go over like a lead balloon,” Decker muttered. “I doubt most folks even know that the government’s been laid low by the virus.”

With a small smile, Kirk said, “It’s a challenge, Commodore.”

Chapter Four

LEWISROSENHAUS could barely contain himself as he beamed over to the Enterprise.

He had copies of several notes and papers with him, including case studies he’d done at the Academy that he thought might be relevant. This was the moment he’d been waiting for since Admiral Fitzgerald had first given him the assignment to the Constellation last month.

And not waiting very patiently, either. He had graduated at the top of his class at Starfleet Medical, only to find himself languishing in a research position on Earth. Rosenhaus distinguished himself as much as he could in so dreary a place, but what he longed for was to be out in space, exploring strange new worlds, seeking out new life and new diseases, and coming up with brilliant methods of curing them. That was his whole reason for joining Starfleet in the first place.

Finally they put him on one of the twelve Constitution -class vessels—the elite of the fleet. These were the massive starships that were spearheading the Federation’s expansion, making first contacts, making history. The Constellation’s CMO had retired, and Fitzgerald himself had contacted him and cut him his new orders to report to Commodore Decker.

So how’ve I spent my first month on the job? Doing physicals. Not a single new world, not a solitary biological phenomenon. Instead, they’d spent almost two weeks studying a neutron star. Of what possible benefit could that be to

humanity?

Now, though, he had a virus he could sink his teeth into. Better still, he'd be working with Leonard McCoy, a Starfleet veteran, who had already pioneered several revolutionary surgical techniques. This was a colleague, not those sycophants on the medical staff of the Constellation—lab techs with no brains, nurses with no good sense, and a junior physician with all the skills of a twentieth-century suturer.

The instant the transporter fully materialized him onto the Enterprise platform, he was down the stairs and ready to run out the door. He was stopped by a blonde woman in a blue uniform. "You must be Dr. Rosenhaus," she said in a pleasant voice. "I'm Nurse Chapel. If you'll come with me, I'll take you to sickbay."

"Ah, thanks," Rosenhaus said, surprised. "But, uh, I already know my way there. Our ships have the same design, y'know."

"Perhaps, but Dr. McCoy thought it would be best for you to have an escort."

Rosenhaus shrugged. "Fine, if that's what he wants. It's good manners, I guess, if nothing else." As they exited the transporter room, he took another look at the nurse. "Waitasec—are you Christine Chapel? The one who cowrote that paper on practical applications of the records found in the Orion ruins—oh, hell, what was that called?" He started racking his brain.

"That was a long time ago," Chapel said quietly.

"Not that long. You wrote it with Roger Korby, right?"

"Uh, yes, but—"

"You both did some great work. What are you doing serving in Starfleet as a nurse? The work you and Korby did was years ahead of its time."

"Thank you, but—Dr. Korby has been missing for several years. I—I really don't

want to talk about it, Doctor, if it's all the same to you.”

Open mouth, insert foot. Nice work, Lew. “Oh my God, Nurse Chapel, I'm so sorry, I had no idea.”

“That's quite all right,” Chapel said as they turned a corner and entered sickbay. Her tone of voice belied her words, but Rosenhaus decided it was best not to say anything further.

They entered the laboratory area, where McCoy was already working, looking over a bio sample. “Dr. McCoy, I see you've started without me,” he said with what he hoped was his best smile.

McCoy didn't even look up as he snapped, “Under the circumstances, I didn't think waiting would be such a good idea considering people might die in the interim.”

Rosenhaus blinked. “I'm sorry, Doctor, I was just trying—”

Looking up from his sample, McCoy waved his hand. “No, never mind, I'm the one who should be apologizing. Been a long day. Let me show you what we've gotten from the surface.”

They started going over the data, which McCoy had called up on the lab desk monitor. Rosenhaus sat in front of the monitor—McCoy, for some reason, preferred to stand.

“What the virus does,” McCoy explained as he paced back and forth on the other side of the lab desk, “is attach itself to the adrenal medulla and starts causing it to generate epinephrine and norepinephrine, independent of the usual stimuli. As far as I can tell, the damn thing actually consumes some of it, but only a minuscule portion of what's generated—maybe ten percent.”

Rosenhaus nodded as he peered at the screen. He was grateful for the more clinical analysis. McCoy had translated the diagnosis into lay language for the

briefing on the Constellation—a necessary survival skill when serving with nonmedicos, as Rosenhaus had learned early on in his Starfleet career—but that gave it an imprecision that irked the younger man. “So the rest of it gets pumped into the system, and eventually the heart rate increases and the heart muscles constrict.”

McCoy nodded.

Frowning, Rosenhaus asked, “Have there been any other causes of death besides heart failure?”

“Cause of death is the virus, not—”

He waved a hand. “I realize that, but there are other side effects of pumping epi and norepi into the system. I mean, lipolysis and pupil dilation isn’t usually fatal, but what about constricting of blood vessels? Just from a purely mathematical standpoint, some of these people should have died from a burst blood vessel rather than their heart giving out.”

“I see what you’re saying,” McCoy said with another nod. “Some people do have stronger hearts but weaker blood vessels.” He rubbed his chin. “Computer, call up the autopsy reports from Kurkjian Memorial Hospital and Sierra City Medical Center.”

“Working.”

“Are any of the specific causes of death not heart failure?”

A brief pause, then: “Negative.”

Rosenhaus snorted. “The odds of that are real slim.”

McCoy gave him an annoyed look. “Thank you, Doctor, for stating the obvious.

Computer, were any of the people autopsied checked into the medical facility prior to dying?”

“Affirmative.”

“How many?”

“Two.”

“Put their records on screen at this station.”

Rosenhaus moved his chair over so McCoy could stand next to him and they both could see the monitor screen.

“Look at this,” McCoy said, pointing to one part of the screen. “The norepi count is fifteen percent lower than the epi count. That accounts for why it’s always been heart problems—epi is what contracts the heart muscles and increases the rate. Norepi constricts blood vessels, but that isn’t in as high a concentration.”

“The virus probably only consumes norepi, then.” Rosenhaus leaned back in his chair. “Can we inject norepi directly into the virus itself, maybe?”

McCoy shook his head. “That’s already been tried. Do me a favor, son—read over all the reports before giving me diagnoses?”

That was the third time McCoy had snapped at Rosenhaus, and he wasn’t even apologizing anymore. Maybe working with a Starfleet veteran isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, he thought sourly.

Over the course of the next several hours, they continued to pore over the data.

On several occasions, Rosenhaus had a breakthrough, only to have McCoy shoot it down—either as something already tried on Proxima or as not practical.

“I still think that a kerylene solution would do the trick,” he insisted.

McCoy closed his eyes. “Kerylene turns dopamine toxic—”

“In only five percent of the cases. It’s an acceptable—”

Slamming his hand on the desk, McCoy shouted, “There is no such thing as an acceptable loss—not in my sickbay! Is that understood?”

“What if the alternative is death?”

“My God, man, we’ve barely scratched the surface! Maybe— maybe—I’d accept kerylene as a last resort, but we’re nowhere near that yet!”

Rosenhaus took a deep breath. He tried to keep his voice as calm as McCoy’s was hysterical. “Fine, but I think we may want to consider synthesizing some just in case it becomes a last-resort situation. If you won’t, I’ll have the Constellation lab do it.”

“You want to waste your people’s time, be my guest.” He got up.

“Where are you going?”

Before McCoy could answer, the computer beeped. Rosenhaus turned to see a status display on the monitor. “Finally! We’ve now got all the medical records from the planet. Their computer must be at least three or four decades old to take this long.”

“I’m sure they’ll be heartbroken at your disapproval,” McCoy muttered. “To answer your question, I’m heading down to the planet. I need to take a look at some of the current patients—maybe see if one of ’em can be brought up here.”

“Are any of them stable enough for transport?” Rosenhaus asked.

“Even if they were, I wouldn’t go scrambling a sick person’s molecules all over creation. But that’s what shuttles are for.”

“That’ll take hours. Doctor, we’ve got all the reports, and we can do simulations here without disturbing a live patient.”

“What the hell’re they teaching you at Starfleet Medical these days, boy, medicine or computer programming?”

“They teach us medicine,” Rosenhaus said, standing up, “and I’m really getting tired of your attitude, Dr. McCoy. I’m a certified physician, just like you. I’m

a chief medical officer on a starship, just like you. I'd appreciate being treated with something other than condescension. Or, at the very least, not being called 'boy.' I think I've earned that much at least."

McCoy's face did soften a bit. "I'm sorry—that was uncalled for, Doctor. Crises tend to bring out my unprofessional side. There's a commanding officer and a halfbreed Vulcan on this ship that can quote you chapter and verse on that." He took a breath. "As for the rest of it—the computer models we can build are based on guesses and hundred-year-old archaeological digs. Call me old-fashioned, but I prefer to work with the real thing. Besides, anything we do come up with will need to be tested on a live patient eventually, and I'd rather do that here, seeing as how down on Proxima they're having riots and all."

Rosenhaus found he couldn't argue with that.

After McCoy left, Rosenhaus went over every single patient, every single treatment that was tried (and failed). He was proud of the fact that everything that had been tried was something he had thought of independently. In addition, several things he did think of weren't tried at all, though McCoy had rejected each for a different reason.

The obvious solution was to "starve" the virus of norepi, but all the usual methods of suppressing the adrenal gland didn't work—the virus fought past them or prevented them. The one exception was the most general method: sedation. Unfortunately, people couldn't just be kept sedated forever, and as each dose wore off, a higher dose of the sedative was required to achieve the same effect. Eventually, the patient would build up an immunity and sedative would be useless. Worse, the virus didn't "starve" as such. Even without norepi, it continued to live on in the adrenal gland, in as sedated a state as the rest of the host body.

What was more bizarre was that there was no obvious way to track how the virus got into the patients' systems. All indications were that it just materialized in the adrenal gland as if transported there.

Maybe it was, he thought. "Computer, call up all existing records of the Malkus Artifacts." Rosenhaus spent the next hour reading through the driest scientific report he'd ever seen— why do they let Vulcans write these things? he wondered plaintively—and found that his analogy may have been apt. From studies of the Zalkat Union records found on Beta Aurigae a hundred years previous, beaming a virus right into a person was definitely within the realm of possibility for one of the Malkus Artifacts.

They need to find whoever's doing this, and fast. Then he sighed. That's Masada's problem. Mine is to figure out how to stop this.

Another possible solution was to poison the norepi in such a way that consuming it would be fatal to the virus. The problem was that every known method of doing so was equally fatal to the person hosting the virus.

Then it hit him. Vrathev. I'm such an idiot.

He dug through the notes he'd brought over from the Constellation. C'mon, c'mon, he thought as he rifled through the not-as-organized-as-he-wanted-it-to-be pile, I know you're in here somewhere—aha!

Reading through the notes he now had called up on the screen, he smiled. Damn, you're good, Lew.

Back at the Academy, in his final year, Rosenhaus had aided in the treatment of an Andorian cadet named Vrathev zh'Ethre. She had been suffering from psychotic berserker fits that had no discernible cause. It turned out that her own adrenal gland equivalent—what the Andorians called their parafra—was being hypercharged

in a similar way to what this virus did to humans.

“Computer,” he said, excited for the first time since he came on board the Enterprise, “create a new program.” He immediately had the computer run a simulation to see how the treatment used on Vratheev would work on the virus.

When he was done, he asked, “Time necessary to run program?”

“Two hours, fourteen minutes.”

For some reason, that prompted a yawn in Rosenhaus. That, in turn, prompted the realization that he hadn’t gotten a good night’s sleep the previous night, having been awakened by the Proximan distress call. Might not be a bad idea to take a nap.

He checked the time, and saw that it had been four hours since McCoy left.

Shrugging, he called out to Chapel.

“Yes, Doctor?” she said with an air of both demureness and professionalism for which Rosenhaus was grateful, since it meant she wasn’t holding his dopey comments from earlier against him.

“I’ve got a program running that’s going to take two-and-a-quarter hours. I’m gonna grab a quick nap. Wake me if Dr. McCoy comes back, okay?”

“Of course, Doctor.”

Rosenhaus hesitated as he got up from the chair. “Uh, is there any word from McCoy?”

“He reached the surface safely, but he hasn’t checked in with me since. I can double-check with Lieutenant Uhura on the bridge, if you like.”

Shaking his head, he said, “No, don’t bother. I’m sure he’s fine. Is there a free bed in sickbay I can sack out on?”

“Of course, Doctor. Help yourself.”

Nodding, Rosenhaus exited the lab and went two rooms over to the exam room. He

lay down on one of the two beds.

The biomonitor immediately fired up. Sighing, Rosenhaus said, “Computer, discontinue bioreadings.”

“Disabling of medical functions requires authorization by chief medical officer.”

“Authorization Rosenhaus-426-Gamma.”

“Authorization not recognized.”

Again, he sighed. You’re not on the Constellation, Lew. Computer doesn’t know you from Schweitzer.

This was a quandary. The only bed that didn’t show bioreadings was the exercise bed across the room, but that was too small to lie down on. “Computer, can you at least mute the noise?”

“Negative.”

A third sigh. “Nurse!” he called out.

After a moment, Chapel came into the exam room. “Yes, Doctor?”

“I’m going to beam back to the Constellation until the program’s run. I need some familiarity for a bit.”

Chapel actually smiled at that. “I understand completely, Doctor. I’ll have Lieutenant Uhura contact you if Dr. McCoy comes back before the program finishes running.”

Viewing that smile as a good sign, Rosenhaus returned it. “That’s very good of you, Nurse Chapel. Thanks.”

As he walked through the sickbay doors, he had a mild spring in his step. I’m willing to bet that the Andorian treatment will do the trick. And then, once I’ve saved the day, maybe I can convince the lovely nurse to let me make up for

my gaffe with dinner. . . .

“I can assure you that we are doing everything we can to ensure that a cure is found quickly, and that your lives can return to normal operation. I repeat, this is a temporary measure. For now, we ask that people stay in their homes unless they have sanctioned duties. A list of those duties is readily available on the information net. Please carry identification with you at all times.”

She stared at the image of the young man in the golden Starfleet uniform in something like shock.

They’ve declared martial law. Amazing.

She hadn’t thought that her oh-so-esteemed former colleagues would do such a thing.

But then, maybe they didn’t. Maybe Starfleet just waltzed in and took over.

Not that it mattered. They could impose curfews, restrict movement, quell riots—none of it could possibly have made the tiniest difference.

Because she had the power.

She walked over to her gift. It sat on her kitchen table, pulsating with the green glow that she first saw on Pirenne’s Peak.

She still didn’t know where the gift came from or who built it. Images had flooded her mind of strange alien beings who died in odd ways, thanks to this gift, but ultimately the images had no meaning to her, no context.

It didn’t matter. It provided her with deliverance. It provided her with vengeance.

She loved the irony. Not only did it instantly make people fatally ill, but the illness also had hard-to-identify symptoms. Nobody would even know there was anything wrong until they were dead.

Dead by her hand.

The only drawback was that it could only do so much at once. She had hoped to destroy everyone on Proxima in one shot, as it were, but that had proven beyond the gift's capabilities. Only a few hundred had contracted the virus before the green glow dimmed.

At first, she had been furious. Killing a random group of people in Sierra City hardly satiated her need for revenge. Everyone had to die. More to the point, everyone had to suffer.

Then the green glow had come back. By that time, people had started to die, their hearts exploding like photon torpedoes in people's ribcages. Her only regret was that she had been unable to stand over their bodies as they expired. She wanted everyone's last sight to be of her. She wanted them to know why they were dead.

When the glow returned, she used it again, this time on everyone occupying the Government Center, which had called an emergency session.

Now it was glowing again.

Who shall I destroy next?

The voice on the newsfeed droned on. "Medical scanners are being distributed to all residents of Proxima. Distribution schedules are posted on the nets as well.

Please use these scanners regularly, but do not tamper with them. They have been specifically calibrated to seek out the virus. If a scan turns up positive, report to the nearest hospital immediately for treatment."

She turned in anger. They had identified the virus? They were treating it?

Worse, they were now giving people the means to find it?

Damn them!

She had originally considered targeting police headquarters. With Starfleet involved, that won't work anymore. So who—?

Then she realized what she had to do. Oh, this is too perfect.

The annoying Starfleet face went away, to be replaced by the usual newscaster.

“That was Captain James T. Kirk of the U.S.S. Enterprise, one of the two starships that has declared martial law on Proxima. It should be added that the first decree made by Kirk and the U.S.S. Constellation's Commodore Matthew Decker was that the news sources would be allowed to continue uncensored. To repeat, medical scanners are being handed ou—”

She turned off the feed. Infecting both ships with the virus wasn't possible—at least not at once. But she could take down one of them...

The computer diligently woke Lewis Rosenhaus up two hours after he'd hit the pillow in his quarters. As usual, he was wide awake in an instant. First Rosenhaus checked in with the lab, where Technician Shickele assured him that the synthesizing of kerylene was proceeding apace. McCoy may not want to be prepared for every eventuality, but I'm not going to make the same mistake.

He then contacted the bridge and asked the communications officer to put him through to Nurse Chapel on the Enterprise.

“Yes, Doctor, what is it?”

Rosenhaus blinked. Gone were the demure tones of the woman whom Rosenhaus had embarrassed with his verbal blundering about Roger Korby. Now she sounded as excitable as a Klingon. “Uh, I wanted to make sure my program—”

“Yes, your program's all done, and no, Dr. McCoy hasn't come back on board yet.

I would've told you that, Doctor, I did promise you that. I can assure you, I'm the type that—”

A fist of ice clenching his heart, Rosenhaus said, “Nurse, do you have a medical tricorder on you?”

“What the hell kind of ridiculous question is that? Of course I do, but I hardly—”

“Scan yourself, please.”

“Why should I—?”

“Nurse, please, run a scan on yourself.”

Even as Chapel spoke, Rosenhaus could hear the telltale sound of the Feinberger running over Chapel’s form as it read her biological data. “Dammit, Doctor, I really don’t have time for—Oh my God.”

“You have the virus, right?”

“Yes, I—”

Rosenhaus got up from his bed and put a fresh shirt on. “Where are you?”

“Sickbay. Doctor, I’m so sorry, I—”

“Never mind that. Run a scan on some other people—pick crew members at random, then report back to me.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

She signed off, then he contacted the bridge. “This is Dr. Rosenhaus again. Put me through to Dr. McCoy, Priority One.”

After a few moments, a familiar, cranky voice came on the line. “This better be damned—”

“Doctor, I believe the Enterprise has been infected.”

A pause. “What!?”

“I’m back on the Constellation. I left your ship two hours ago while I had a program running and took a quick nap. And before you bite my head off, I only

got an hour's sleep before the distress call from Proxima came.”

“That’s one hour more than I got,” McCoy grumbled, “but that doesn’t matter.

What happened?”

“I contacted your Nurse Chapel, and she sounded more excitable than usual. I asked her to scan herself, and she had the virus. I asked her to scan some random crew members to be sure, but—”

“But whoever’s doing this probably targeted the whole ship. Damn.” McCoy sighed.

“Jim’s gone and declared martial law, so I’d better let him know, too. At least he’s safe down here, and Spock’s on the Constellation with your pal Masada.”

Running a hand through his shaggy red hair, Rosenhaus said, “We’ll need to declare a quarantine on the Enterprise. We can’t let anyone on or off.”

“Don’t be an idiot! First thing we verified is that this isn’t contractible unless you’re targeted by that blessed artifact.”

Rosenhaus cursed his own stupidity. “Sorry. Force of habit. Not used to a disease that doesn’t wipe out the whole room.”

“None of us are, son,” McCoy said in a surprisingly conciliatory voice. “I sent up a woman on a shuttlecraft to the Enterprise. She volunteered to be our guinea pig. I’ll have it divert to the Constellation. You’ll need to go over to the Enterprise, verify this and retrieve all the data, then—”

Another voice interrupted. “Bridge to Dr. Rosenhaus.”

“Rosenhaus here.”

“Doctor, I have Nurse Chapel on the Enterprise.”

“Put her through, please.” Rosenhaus took a very deep breath. Here it comes...

“Chapel here.”

“Nurse, I have Dr. McCoy on the line, also. What’s the verdict?”

“The ship’s been completely infected. I’ve got Lieutenant Sulu here as well—he’s

in charge of the bridge, with the captain and Mr. Spock both off-ship. I've informed him as well."

Another voice, this one deep and male, said, "You know more about this disease than I do, Doc. What do you recommend?"

McCoy's voice was surprisingly gentle. "I hate to do this, Hikaru, but the only treatment we've been able to come up with is sedation. At that, it's only a temporary measure."

"Not only that," Rosenhaus said, scratching his cheek, "it'll take forever to administer the sedative."

"That's not an issue," Sulu said. "We can flood all decks with anaesthazine gas."

"You can do that?" Rosenhaus asked, incredulous.

"Of course," Sulu said, as if it were the most natural thing in the galaxy. "How long do we have, Doc?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, before we implement any kind of mass sedation, I'd like to check with the captain, and Mr. Scott will need to put the ship on automatic so we don't fall into the atmosphere when we're all asleep."

"You don't need to do that," Rosenhaus said. "Some relief crew can come over from the Constellation."

"Won't they get the disease?" Sulu asked.

"Of course not. The disease isn't contractible." Rosenhaus tried not to sound quite so haughty, but he still felt foolish after his previous blunder.

"All right, I'll have to coordinate with Commander Takeshewada," Sulu said with surprising calm, considering that he had a virus that was pumping adrenaline

into his body at a great rate. “I’ll need at least an hour to get everyone to report to their quarters and set things up for the replacements. Our best bet is to keep the relief crew on the bridge—as long as they don’t have to do anything too complicated, they can run the ship from there. And then we’ll flood every other deck.”

“Sounds like it should work,” McCoy said.

“I agree.”

“I wasn’t asking your approval!” McCoy then took a deep breath. “Sorry, Doctor. Just goes against the grain to put your crewmates to sleep.”

“As long as the sleep isn’t permanent,” Rosenhaus said. He was starting to understand why McCoy was so snappish. He hated the idea of being helpless. I guess we all deal with that in our own way. Me, I prefer to let it drive me to greater heights.

Within the hour predicted by Lieutenant Sulu, the entire Enterprise staff had reported to their quarters, prepared for a very deep sleep. The chief engineer—an obscenely excitable man, though Rosenhaus supposed the virus could have been responsible for that—had routed all functions to the bridge.

Takeshewada had roused the Constellation’s gamma-shift bridge crew out of their beds and they had taken their bleary-eyed places at the different-yet-familiar consoles. Rosenhaus had also brought his junior physician over to keep an eye on things, since the Enterprise’s medical staff was going to be just as incapacitated as everyone else.

Then, finally, the entire Enterprise, save the bridge, was put to sleep.

Rosenhaus had, of course, beamed off the Enterprise at that point, after verifying that neither he nor the relief crew had contracted the virus. Captain

Kirk had, he understood, made some sort of speech to his people telling them something no doubt inspirational and encouraging and downright tiresome, but Rosenhaus hadn't bothered to listen. He was too busy gathering his notes.

When he returned to the Constellation, he saw that a woman under sedation had been placed on a biobed.

He summoned Emil Jazayerli, his head nurse. "Who is that woman, Nurse?"

Jazayerli squinted at the biobed, a habit in the older man that Rosenhaus found almost as annoying as the nurse's tendency to run his index finger and thumb over his thick black mustache. "That's the woman that arrived with the Galileo, Doctor."

Blinking, Rosenhaus said, "The Galileo? There's another ship in orbit?"

"No, Doctor, the Galileo is an Enterprise shuttlecraft." He walked over and picked up the woman's chart, then held it out for Rosenhaus. "I believe she's a Proximan volunteer with the disease."

"Oh, right," Rosenhaus said, taking the chart, "Dr. McCoy's guinea pig." He peered at the chart, which showed that her name was Mya Braker, she served as the Representative for the Ninth District, and she'd gotten the disease at the same time as everyone else in the Government Center. "All right," he said, handing the chart back to Jazayerli, "keep an eye on her EEG and her epi and norepi count. If any of them change in even the slightest degree, let me know immediately."

"Of course, Doctor."

It irked Rosenhaus that Jazayerli never called him, "sir." It probably wouldn't have bothered him all that much, except that he always called him "Doctor" in a tone of voice that indicated that the nurse didn't think much of the title.

Hardly the right attitude for a subordinate.

Sighing, he went into the lab. Maybe I can convince Decker to let me transfer him off when this is all over.

As he sat down at the desk, he called up the results of his test—which, in all the hugger-mugger on the Enterprise, he hadn't had the chance to thoroughly look over.

After reading over the results, his pale face broke into a huge grin. I think we've done it!

He contacted the bridge. "Is Dr. McCoy still on the surface?"

The communications officer—a friendly young lieutenant named George Howard—nodded. "He's meeting with the commodore and Captain Kirk right now. You need to raise him?"

He was about to say yes, then changed his mind. "No, he can find out when everyone else does," he said with a smile.

Frowning, Howard asked, "Find out what?"

"I've got a good line on a cure. I'm going to test it now."

The communications officer's face split into a grin. "Lew, if that's true, it'll be the first good news all day."

Rosenhaus belatedly realized that gossiping with the communications officer was probably not such a hot idea. "Well, keep it to yourself, George. I still haven't tested it yet."

"No problem, Lew. My hailing frequencies are closed till you say otherwise."

"Good," Rosenhaus said with a smile. "Sickbay out."

Howard's face faded, to be replaced by the computer simulation. Rosenhaus looked it all over one more time. Briefly, he contemplated waiting until he could have a second set of eyes look them over, then decided that wasn't practical. His

junior physician was back on the Enterprise, and McCoy was still on Proxima.

Besides, he'll probably just come up with sixteen reasons why it won't work, he thought sourly.

He went over to the synthesizing lab, where the stout form of Norma Shickele sat hunched over a computer terminal. "Get off my back, L.R.," she said in her booming voice, "you'll have your damn kerylene soon enough."

"Hold off on that for a minute," he said, forcing his voice to remain calm. He hated being called "L.R.," which was, of course, why Shickele insisted on doing so. Rosenhaus also knew he couldn't afford to antagonize the lab techs because he relied on them in situations—well, much like this one, so he had to be on his best behavior in her presence. She knew that, too, and so always did everything she could to goad him. So far, he hadn't risen to the bait.

Maybe I can get Decker to transfer her along with Jazayerli, he thought wistfully.

He continued. "I've got a serum. I need you to prepare a test batch."

"You said the kerylene was priority."

Patiently, Rosenhaus said, "This is higher priority. The kerylene has the potential to be a last-resort cure. This could be the actual cure." Shickele, he had learned, preferred to have things explained in detail. Just giving an order and expecting her to do as she was told was never sufficient.

She reached out one pudgy hand. "Fine. You're the doctor, after all."

Sighing with relief, Rosenhaus handed her the data. The words, "you're the doctor," said in that snide tone that Shickele had probably spent most of her adult life perfecting, usually signified the end of the conversation.

Grateful, Rosenhaus headed back into the main part of sickbay, and once again

looked over Braker's chart. Everything seemed to be in order—but for the presence of the virus, she'd be in perfect health.

The doors opened to reveal Commander Takeshewada, holding a hand to her forehead. "Got anything for a headache, Doc?"

Smiling at the small woman, Rosenhaus said, "Of course. Follow me." As he led her into the dispensary, he asked, "Rough day?"

"Rough hour. First I had to rearrange the shift schedule, since our third shift is now off on the Enterprise, then I spent twenty minutes going at it hammer and tongs with Matt."

"The commodore?" Rosenhaus asked, surprised, as he fetched an analgesic from the cabinet.

"No," Takeshewada snapped, "Matt the quartermaster. Of course the commodore."

She sighed. "Damned stubborn ass of a man, he is."

He handed her the pills. "What was the argument about?"

"Martial law, pros and cons. Thank you," she added as she took the pills. She swallowed them quickly. "I understand the rationale behind it, but I've always been leery of outside authorities waltzing in and taking over. Besides, Kirk lived on Tarsus IV."

Takeshewada spoke as if that planet should mean something, but Rosenhaus hadn't a clue to its significance. "Okay," he said, hoping not to sound too foolish.

Chuckling, Takeshewada said, "I keep forgetting how young you are." Quickly, the first officer told a story about a colony world, a poisoned food supply, and an insane governor.

"My God," Rosenhaus said. He had had no idea that something like that could even happen in the Federation. "And Kirk was there for that?"

"As a teenager, yes. And he was the one who suggested declaring martial law

today. According to Matt, he wants to 'do it right,' so to speak. Still, I can't help but think of the old saying about abused children growing up to become abusers." She took a very deep breath.

"Well, wouldn't the commodore keep him in line?"

Takeshewada pursed her lips. Rosenhaus didn't like the expression it formed on her face. It was a bizarre combination of frightened and concerned. "Between you and me, Doc? The problem with Matt Decker is that he's impulsive. Once he gets an idea in his head, he tends to jump into it feet first and figure out the consequences later. He's made it work for him so far through a combination of stubbornness and dumb luck. I just hope today isn't the day his luck runs out."

Grinning, Rosenhaus said, "Not likely. After all, I'm on the job, and I think I've got us something."

Eyes widening, Takeshewada said, "Oh?"

"I've got the lab synthesizing a serum based on a project I was involved with at Starfleet Medical. Computer sims show that it should work. Dr. McCoy sent up a volunteer from the surface, so as soon as it's ready, I can test it on her."

Smiling a small smile, the commander said, "Best news I've heard all day, Doc. Hell, wish you'd told me sooner, it probably would've taken the headache away and saved you a couple of pills."

"Lab to Rosenhaus. Your magic potion is ready, L.R."

Thumbing the intercom, Rosenhaus said, "Thank you, Shickele," in what he hoped wasn't a cranky voice. "I'll be right there."

Now Takeshewada's smile was wider. "'L.R. '?"

"Don't ask." Rosenhaus shuddered. The last thing he wanted to do was get into the sickbay politics he'd been dropped into the middle of. Then again, she is

the first officer. . . “Or rather, don’t ask now. I’d actually like to sit down with you and talk about some—issues I have regarding sickbay.”

“Fine by me,” she said with a nod. “We’ll set something up—after you perform your miracle.”

Rosenhaus’s Miracle. I like that. “That’s fine, Commander.”

Heading for the door, she said, “Thanks for the pills—and keep me posted.”

“I will.”

With a spring in his step, Rosenhaus headed back to the lab. Even the dark look Shickele gave him couldn’t spoil his mood.

“Can I get back to the kerylene now, L.R.?”

He considered telling her not to bother—the serum was bound to work—but one didn’t wish to take chances. “Yes, please do.”

“You’re the doctor.”

Damn right I am, he thought triumphantly as he took the hypo that Shickele had prepared, and went to Braker’s bedside. He checked to make sure the dosage on the hypo was set properly, took a deep breath, and applied the hypo to Braker’s neck.

Then he let out the breath he was holding.

Over the course of the next hour, he and Jazayerli monitored Braker’s progress, watching as the virus’s attempts to produce epi and norepi were frustrated by the serum. Yes! he thought triumphantly. Where sedation simply put the virus to “sleep” in the same way it retarded all other bodily functions, this serum actively inhibited the virus without doing any damage to the patient.

It works!

The doors opened to Dr. McCoy. “What’s this I hear about a cure?”

Rosenhaus blinked. “How’d you find out? I only just tested it an hour ago.” He

indicated the medical scanner. "Take a look."

"The transporter chief mentioned it when I came on board," McCoy said as he approached the scanner.

Sighing, Rosenhaus made a mental note to keep his damn mouth shut next time he talked to George Howard.

Peering at the readout, McCoy said, "Seems to be working. What'd you use?"

"It's a serum that was developed at Starfleet HQ about five years ago to treat an Andorian who was sufferi—"

McCoy looked up sharply. "What!? Dr. Derubbio's treatment? On a human?"

"Yes," Rosenhaus said with a smile. "I interned under him when—"

"Doctor!" Jazayerli said in a voice of warning.

Just after the nurse spoke, an alarm went off on the biobed scanner. Rosenhaus looked up to see that Braker was going into cardiac arrest.

"What the hell—? That shouldn't be happening!" Rosenhaus said.

Then both he and McCoy cried, "Cordrazine, two milliliters!" in perfect unison.

Well, Rosenhaus thought dryly, at least we agree on something.

Jazayerli prepared a hypo and, to Rosenhaus's annoyance, handed it to McCoy, who applied it to Braker's neck.

Within a moment, her heart started up again. "We've got to flush this damn serum out of her system, now!" McCoy said.

"We don't know that the serum is causing this," Rosenhaus said. "It could be—"

McCoy interrupted. "Nurse, get me eighty CC's of dicloripin." Then he turned to Rosenhaus. "Dave Derubbio's serum is fatal to humans—when it interacts with human blood, it creates xelaxine."

Rosenhaus's face fell. "What?" Xelaxine was toxic to humans. For that matter, it

was toxic to Andorians, but it didn't—

Then he thought about the differences between Andorian and human blood, and saw the possible connections.

“Here you go, Doctor,” Jazayerli said, handing McCoy the hypo.

As he applied the hypo to Braker, McCoy said, “Didn't you run one of those damned computer simulations you were going on about before?”

“Of course I did.” Rosenhaus was offended that McCoy would even consider the possibility that he didn't do so. “I tested it on the virus and the gland and it showed—”

McCoy looked up. “Just the virus and the gland?”

“What do you mean?” Rosenhaus asked, looking up to see that Braker's vitals were returning to normal.

“They may call 'em artificial intelligence, son, but trust me, they ain't that bright. You tell 'em to test the virus and the gland, that's all they'll check! You didn't check how this might affect the blood cells or any of the organs it came into contact with!”

Rosenhaus closed his eyes. “You're right. I didn't—I mean, I—” He sighed. “I'm sorry, Doctor, I—”

“You don't need to apologize to me, you need to apologize to this woman here,” he said, pointing to Braker. “Assuming she lives through this.” He sighed.

“Assuming we all do, and don't go off half-cocked.” McCoy took one last look at Braker's vitals, then ran a Feinberger over her. “Times like this, Doctor, we have to be extra careful—both with what we do and who we say it to. Ships're like small towns. Word spreads like wildfire.” He looked up. “And another thing—you don't need to prove anything. You said before that I should treat you with the respect you deserve, and that's fine, but you gotta earn the respect.”

Turning the Feinberger off, he picked up Braker's chart and handed it to

Jazayerli. "The virus is still in the gland. Update the chart, please, Nurse."

"Of course, sir."

Rosenhaus sighed. That was the first time he'd ever heard Jazayerli use the word

"sir" to refer to a doctor.

"Now then," McCoy said, "let's take a look at this serum. Obviously it made some

headway—we just have to figure out how to make it work without killing the

patient."

Stunned, Rosenhaus said, "Uh, right."

"Something wrong, Doctor?"

"You're being nice to me. I just almost killed a woman. You spent half the day

chewing my head off when I didn't do anything, but now—when you actually have

cause to scream at me—you're being calm and reasonable."

Smiling, McCoy said, "Son, all the titles in the world don't mean a damn thing.

Yeah, we're both chief medical officers, but at heart, we're just human. Me, I'm

an old country doctor who let his temper get the better of him. You, you're a

young kid who made a mistake. Luckily, that mistake wasn't fatal." He put an

encouraging hand on the younger man's shoulder. "So let's see what we can do to

make the mistake work for us, all right?"

Rosenhaus nodded. "Let's get to work, Doctor."

Chapter Five

"COMMODORE, you're not being reasonable."

Matt Decker rubbed the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger in a

futile attempt to stave off the pounding headache he was developing. Normally,

he'd call sickbay for a remedy, but his own sickbay staff was presently occupied

with the search for a cure, and the local hospitals and dispensaries had much bigger problems right now.

Dealing with the infinite demands of running a colony under siege by disease and terror, however, was combining with his lack of sleep to create a phaser on overload in his sinuses.

Now, topping it all off, he had to deal with a tiresome bureaucrat.

He stared at that bureaucrat's face on the small viewscreen embedded in the desk he'd taken over. It sat opposite another like desk, which Kirk had taken over, in the small office in the Government Center. The office normally belonged to some government functionary or other. Neither Decker nor the young captain had felt comfortable taking over the office of the late Chief Representative.

Besides, they could do the job as easily from here as anywhere else. Indeed, they could have administered from orbit, but both of them saw that as precisely the wrong kind of symbolism. They needed to be among the Proximan people if this was to work.

"Mr. Malruse," Decker said, "I'm under no obligation to be reasonable. Proxima is currently in a state of martial law. That means what I say goes. It also gives me broad discretionary powers as to who to say it to and where to put them when they don't do what I say. Am I making myself clear?"

The face on the viewscreen in front of Decker scrunched into a frown.

"Commodore, I have several contracts I need to fulfill. While the current situation is regrettable, I can't just—"

Decker leaned forward and put on his intimidating look, the one he'd used to good effect on subordinates and his son alike. "I see I'm not making myself clear. As of now, you don't have any contracts to fulfill. You don't have a business. All you've got is a mandate from the person running things to take

over the supervision of food distribution to the counties of Arafel, New Punjab, and Rivershore. What you've also got is my promise that your not fulfilling this mandate would be a bad career move. Now am I making myself clear?"

Malruse's frown somehow grew deeper, something Decker wouldn't have credited it capable of. "I don't appreciate threats, Commodore."

"Oh, this isn't a threat. It's an explanation. So what's it going to be, Mr. Malruse?"

Decker watched as Malruse's face flashed several facial expressions over the course of about three seconds, ranging from anger to annoyance and finally to resignation. "Very well, Commodore. My people will start taking charge of the food distribution within the hour."

"Glad to hear it. The person you'll be coordinating with is Ensign Litwack—she's my assistant chief of security. She'll be there to make sure everything goes smoothly." Decker assumed the implication was obvious.

"Of course, Commodore," Malruse said with a sigh, then signed off.

As soon as the screen went dark, the phaser in his sinuses did go on overload. If I had known that this was going to entail forcing private-sector nincompoops to do public-works projects, I'd've told Kirk to go hang himself.

That wasn't entirely fair, Decker knew. Most of the slack of public jobs had been taken up by private enterprise with remarkable ease. In some cases, the work was more efficient. But, given the situation, Decker or Kirk had to deal with it only if something went wrong, so he was hyperaware of the few problems and needed to remind himself of how much was actually going smoothly.

He was about to get some coffee when his communicator beeped twice. Oh great, now what? He pulled it out of his belt as he headed for the food slot embedded

in the wall. “Decker here.”

“Takeshewada here. A ship’s just pulled into orbit and you need to talk to the pilot.”

“Uh, why ca—?”

“I tried to handle it,” Takeshewada said, as usual anticipating him. “I explained about the quarantine and the dangers and the fact that every second she spends in orbit she risks contracting a fatal disease that we don’t have a cure for. I told her about the martial law. I, in fact, went on at great length on the subject of why she needs to beat a hasty retreat out of orbit, if not out of the entire star system. You know what her reply was? ‘Let me speak to whoever’s in charge.’”

Decker sighed as he entered the command for coffee into the food slot’s panel.

“That’s me, isn’t it?”

“Unless you want to fob this off on Kirk.”

“Fob what off on Kirk?” came a voice from the doorway. It was Kirk, returning from his latest state-of-the-colony address to the people. They had agreed early on that Kirk—younger, better looking, and generally less intimidating than Decker—would be the voice of the temporary government to the people of Proxima, and he had been giving those every couple of hours or so. Decker had admired the strategy. It reassured the Proximans that there was somebody in charge—especially since Kirk had made an effort to put substance in the addresses, specifying what was being done.

To answer the question, Decker said, “Someone in orbit who won’t take ‘get the hell out of here’ for an answer.” Back to the communicator, he said, “Have Howard pipe it down here, Number One.”

“Have fun.”

Decker could picture Takeshewada's not-quite-a-smile in his mind's eye. I get the feeling I'm in for another fun conversation, he thought with a sigh.

He went back to his desk, coffee in hand. Kirk came around to stand behind him.

Decker was silently grateful for Kirk's presence, as the younger man would likely be a calming influence. Kirk had a certain charisma about him that he used to good effect on people he dealt with. Takeshewada had a similar quality—Decker himself had never had the patience for such things.

The screen lit up to show the face of the most beautiful woman Matt Decker had ever seen in his life.

“You must be Commodore Decker,” she said in a voice that sounded like the songs of angels.

“Yes,” Kirk said before Decker could reply, “and I'm James T. Kirk. How can we help you?”

“I'm Aidulac, captain of the Sun,” she said with a bright smile that seemed to light up the viewscreen. “I have this problem that I'm sure you two could easily solve.”

“We'll be happy to do anything at all that we can to help you,” Kirk said, again cutting Decker off before he could say anything. Not that he minded that much—he was just happy to be looking into Aidulac's beautiful black eyes.

“I have this cargo that needs to be brought down immediately. That commander on the Constellation gave me some song and dance about a virus, but I—”

“It's not a song and dance, I'm afraid,” Decker said.

“The virus is quite real, and very dangerous. Honestly, you should probably leave orbit as soon as you can for your own safety.” He spoke in an urgent tone, as he was actually frightened of the possibility that Aidulac might be harmed by

the virus. “Surely your cargo—”

“The items are perishable,” Aidulac said, and she pouted in a manner that melted

Decker’s heart. “Surely you can at least let me land one shuttle?”

Kirk asked, “Why not transport it down?”

“It can’t be transported. So can you help me, please?”

Decker pried his eyes away from the vision of gloriousness on the screen and

turned to look at Kirk. “What do you say, Captain, can we—”

Then he blinked. He realized that he suddenly couldn’t recall what Aidulac

looked like, even though he’d been looking at her for the past minute. More to

the point, his head cleared and he realized just what he’d been thinking during

that minute. And then he remembered the Constellation’s strip to Pegasus Major.

“Computer, disengage video transmission, now!”

Kirk was aghast as the screen went dark. “Commodore, why did you do that? That poor woman needs our help.”

“Commodore, I don’t understand, why have you—”

“Don’t even think about it, Captain Aidulac. You are hereby instructed to leave orbit, or I will order the Constellation to fire on you. Do I make myself clear?”

Kirk grabbed Decker’s shoulder. “Commodore, what are you doing? This woman has a simple—”

““This woman, Kirk, is a Siren.”

A blank expression came over Kirk’s face. “A what?”

“Can I assume,” Decker said, addressing himself to the darkened viewscreen,

“that the Sun’s registry is to the Peladon Affiliation, Captain Aidulac?”

The silence that met the question spoke volumes.

“As I expected. Captain Kirk, maybe you’re familiar with the world of Pegasus

Major IV. A humanoid race evolved there known as the Peladons, who eventually founded an Affiliation that encompasses the entire solar system. On that planet, there's a sect of specially trained women who can exert great influence on the male of the species—as well as the males of several other species. Vulcan men have proven to be able to overcome it, and Andorians are immune for some reason, but every other species they've encountered that has men in it have succumbed. The first Federation captain to deal with one called them 'Sirens.'”

“Commodore, you're being horribly unfair. I just want—”

“Still there, Aidulac? I'd have thought you'd have obeyed my instructions by now.” He took out his communicator. “Decker to Constellation. Has the Sun left orbit yet?”

“Takeshewada here. Not yet. Orders?”

“Give her two more minutes, Number One, then blast her out of the sky.”

Aidulac's voice—now sounding rather petulant, though Decker suspected it was the same tone of voice she used when pouting earlier, he simply was interpreting it differently now—came through the desk's speakers. “There'll be no need for violence, Commodore. But I can assure you, I have friends at Starfleet—”

“All men, I'm sure,” Decker muttered.

“—and they're going to hear about this. Trust me, these aren't men you want to have as enemies.”

“They'll have to get in line, Captain,” Decker said with a snort, thinking back on all the people he'd pissed off in his decades of service. “Proxima out.”

As he cut off the connection, Takeshewada said, “She's leaving orbit now, Commodore. She was a Siren, wasn't she?”

Decker blinked. “You knew?”

“It was a guess. I wasn’t entirely sure. Best way to be sure was to gauge your response. If you gave in, I’d know for sure.”

Sighing, Decker said, “Remind me to yell at you for that later.”

“Of course, sir.” Again, Decker could envision his first officer’s not-a-smile.

“Constellation out.”

Closing his communicator and directing several unkind thoughts in Takeshewada’s direction, Decker turned to look at Kirk. The captain had an angry look on his face.

“I’m sorry, Commodore. I can’t believe I fell for such a—a cheap parlor trick.”

“Easy, Kirk, it’s no parlor trick. The Peladons have been breeding and training Sirens for centuries. Hell, I knew about ’em, and I almost gave in.”

Kirk shook his head. “Still, it’s not a weakness a commanding officer can afford.”

Shrugging, Decker said, “Maybe. But the good COs figure out how to pay it off anyhow.” Decker leaned back in his chair. “So, how’d the address go?”

“Well enough,” Kirk said after a hesitation. The captain obviously didn’t want to change the subject, but Decker had always thought of recriminations as being generally useless, self-recrimination even more so. His mindset was more toward solving the problem than apportioning blame.

Before Kirk could elaborate, Decker’s communicator beeped.

Sighing, Decker muttered, “Does it ever end?”

“Never soon enough,” Kirk replied with a smile.

With a snort, Decker opened the communicator. “Decker here.”

A cacophany of noise erupted from the communicator—people shouting, mostly, and the occasional sound of soft impacts. “Vascogne here, Commodore,” said Decker’s security chief. “We’ve got a situation.”

“You still at SCMC?”

“Yes, sir.” Vasogne had just reported everything being quiet at the Sierra City Medical Center a mere hour earlier.

What have they done this time? Decker wondered. “What kind of situation?”

“Somebody started a rumor that they found a cure up on the Constellation. Now everyone’s trying to get into the hospital to get it. Request permission to pacify the crowd, Commodore.”

Decker’s eyes grew wide. Vasogne wouldn’t have made the request if he thought there was a better alternative. For a security chief, the middle-aged lieutenant was remarkably nonaggressive. “Is that your recommendation, Lieutenant?”

There was a pause, and an “oof” sound could be heard through the speaker amidst the growing crowd noise. “It’s my opinion, sir, that no other option is viable.”

“Commodore, wait,” Kirk said before Decker could give the order. “I’d like to try something else.”

I really hate my job, Lieutenant Etienne Vasogne thought as he pulled the large Proximan off his leg.

“Keep these people back!” he screamed at his people, who were mixed in with some local police.

Should’ve joined the police force back home on Gammac like Uncle Claude wanted me to, he thought as he awaited the arrival of his commanding officer.

Vasogne was glad that Captain Kirk had apparently come up with some kind of alternative to shooting these poor people down. He hadn’t been able to come up with a better plan of his own, and stunning a large crowd was infinitely

preferable, to his mind, to said large crowd stomping all over him. The people were pressing up against the cordon with such force, Vascogne couldn't tell whether it was his own sweat he smelled or that of the person shouting epithets into his face.

Most of the cries of the people in that crowd were so much white noise, but certain phrases kept cropping up: "We want the cure!" "Give us the cure!" "Stop holding out on us!" "Cure now!" Some held signs with similar sentiments. Despite himself, Vascogne was impressed with how quickly the signs had been put together, given that the rumors had started less than an hour earlier.

Suddenly, an amplified voice blared out over the crowd. "Please, ladies and gentlemen, there is no cure!"

Vascogne allowed himself an instant to turn around, and he saw both Decker and Captain Kirk standing at the hospital entrance. He wondered briefly how the hell they got there, and then realized that they must have transported. That's quite the loud crowd, he thought, if they can drown out a transporter. Either that or I'm just getting old...

The crowd noise abated slightly at Kirk's utterance, but not much. "Don't gimme that!" "We know there's a cure!" "They told us you had it!" "We need it!"

"I can assure you that people are working around the clock to find a cure for this plague—but whatever you've heard, it's just not true!" Kirk raised his hands as if he were trying to push the crowd back. "Now please, return to your homes—your families. I promise you, the minute we find a cure, we will be distributing it to everyone as fast as we can, but until then—"

"Liar!" "We want it now!" "You're never gonna give it to us!"

"If you want, I can have the doctors working on the problem give you an update themselves. But right now they're working diligently—both the medical staffs of

the Enterprise and the Constellation, and the acting surgeon general of Proxima.”

“You want to kill us all!” “I bet you’re not even working on it!” “Liar!”

Kirk looked directly at the person who called him a liar. “I’m not lying to you! I have no reason to lie to you! All I have to do is give one simple order, and these security guards and Proximan police will fire their weapons and leave you all lying stunned in the street. Or one of our ships can do the same thing from orbit. But I don’t want to do that to you—because you don’t deserve that. You deserve the truth—you deserve to not have to live in fear that you may be the next one to contract the disease—you deserve not to be treated like criminals in your own home. That’s why we’ve been keeping you all updated—so you know that we’re doing everything we can to help you! We will get through this crisis—I know we will. All it will take is patience on your part. Give us a chance to prove ourselves.”

He looked out over the crowd, seeming as if he was trying to look each person in the eye, even though that wasn’t really possible. Despite himself, Vascogne admired the rhetorical technique. Guess they’re teaching public speaking at Captain School these days, he thought wryly.

“Whoever’s doing this to you wants this. Whoever’s doing this wants you all at each other’s throats—fighting each other like animals, rioting like maniacs.

This virus is being used as a weapon of terror—and the best way for you to fight back is not to let it change anything! The best way to fight this battle is to let us do our jobs—and to go on doing yours. Show whoever’s attacking you that you won’t let this stop you—won’t let their cowardly attack turn you into savages.”

Now he seemed to be looking at all of them. There was a pleading look in his eyes—and, at the same time, a very tired one.

“Please—go home. We will inform you the minute there’s a cure.”

As Kirk’s speech had gone on, the crowd had slowly quieted down, and had just as slowly calmed. Shouters had shut up; people gesturing and holding up signs had let their arms fall, the signs lowered or dropped to the ground; those rushing the cordon of security and police had ceased their forward motion.

Then what had been a furious, amorphous blob of humanity gradually became a group of individuals slumping their dispirited way home. The captain’s words had broken the mob spirit.

Vascogne just hoped it was replaced with something—well, calmer. His cynical side was quite sure that said replacement would not be permanent unless a cure was found, and damn soon.

As his people and the Proximan police kept an eye on the erstwhile mob and guided them away from the SCMC, Vascogne approached the captain, standing next to Decker. “Nice speech.”

Kirk blew out a sharp breath. “Thank you.”

Smiling, Decker said, “I especially liked all the dramatic pauses.”

“Just fumbling for words, Commodore,” Kirk said with a smile.

“I gotta say,” Vascogne said, running a hand over his bald head, “I didn’t think anything short of phaser fire would stop that crowd.”

“It was certainly my first choice,” Decker said.

Kirk took a breath. “No offense, Commodore, but—well, weapons fire is what Kodos would have done. For years I thought of martial law as inherently evil because of what Kodos did. But don’t you see?” He clenched his fists. “This is our chance to show that it can be a source of good if it’s used properly.”

“Yeah, well, from your mouth to these people’s ears,” Vascogne muttered. “What I want to know is how that rumor got started in the first place.”

Decker shook his head. “Situation like this, rumors are flying all over the damn place. I’m sure half the people on the planet are convinced that Starfleet made this up so we could declare martial law and take over.”

Taking out his communicator, Kirk said, “We’ll just have to prove them wrong, won’t we, Commodore? Kirk to Constellation.”

“Constellation here.”

“Put me through to Dr. McCoy, please.”

After a moment, another voice came through the communicator’s tinny speaker.

“McCoy here. What is it, Jim?”

“Progress report, Doctor. How goes the search for a cure?”

“Slower the more I talk to you.”

“Sorry, Bones,” Kirk said with a small smile. “I’m going to need one of you to give an address to the people down here—fill them in on your progress.”

“I don’t have time to be giving press conferences. Besides, that’s how rumors get started, and we’ve got enough of that going on here.”

Frowning, Kirk asked, “What do you mean?”

“Ah, it’s nothing. Rosenhaus thought he found a cure and made the mistake of telling someone before he tested it.”

Vascogne almost groaned out loud. He knew how fast the rumor mill on the Constellation could function. Within two-and-a-half seconds of Rosenhaus saying he found the cure—and knowing the young doctor, he probably sounded supremely confident as he said it—the whole ship probably knew about it. That could just as easily have spread to the planet through one of Vascogne’s own people.

“Bones, does that mean—?”

“It means we’re on a track, Jim, but I don’t have any idea whether it’s the right track, or how far we have to go on it. I’ll keep you posted. McCoy out.”

Decker regarded Kirk with a quizzical look. “Kirk, I can’t help noticing that that doctor of yours didn’t actually agree to give a statement.”

“He thinks it’ll distract from his work. All things considered, it’s probably best to let him proceed as he sees fit. Perhaps your Dr. Rosenhaus can speak at our next state-of-the-planet address?”

Vascogne rolled his eyes. “Like the doc needs a reason to feed his ego.”

Chuckling, Decker said, “Don’t worry, Vascogne, I’m sure we’ll all work to make sure he doesn’t live it down.”

Chapter Six

GUILLERMOMASADA blinked as he entered the sensor room and saw Lt. Commander Spock sitting at one of the consoles. “What’re you doing here?”

Spock’s right eyebrow climbed up his forehead. “I assume that is a rhetorical outburst and not an actual request for information?”

Chuckling, Masada said, “Yeah, something like that. Sorry, but when I said we should take a break for twenty minutes, I thought that meant that you’d, y’know, be out of the room for twenty minutes.”

Turning back to the readings he was getting from the sensors, Spock said, “Your exact words, Lieutenant, were an expression of exhaustion, followed by the words, ‘I could use a break. What do you say, Spock, twenty minutes?’”

Smiling as he sat at the console next to Spock, Masada said, “Yeah, well, when you agreed and left with me, I thought that meant you were going to take the full twenty.”

“Your assumption was made on a faulty premise. I don’t require large amounts of

‘break-time.’”

“Really?” Masada said with a smile. “And that’s because you’re a Vulcan.”

“Correct.”

“Except you’re not—entirely. You’re half-human.” He grinned. “That explains two things, actually. One, you’re half-human, so you only needed half the break time.”

The eyebrow shot up again. “Oh?”

Masada turned to face Spock directly. “I do love that trick. Ensign Sontor does it, too.”

“Trick?”

“The eyebrow thing. My theory is that’s the Vulcans’ secret for repressing their emotions—they channel them all into that one eyebrow. That’s why you guys raise them so often—it’s the focal point of all those emotions you’re suppressing.”

Spock turned back to the sensor display. “Your reasoning could charitably be referred to as ‘specious,’ Lieutenant. Barring the unlikely happenstance that you have scientific data to back it up, it is a hypothesis, not a theory. In addition, it’s equivalent to hypothesizing that you cull information from your hair.”

Masada frowned. “Excuse me?”

“The small gathering of hair at the back of your head. You have a tendency to grab it before providing information.”

Straightening in his chair, Masada said, “I do not!”

Again, the eyebrow shot up.

“Fine, whatever. And it’s called a ponytail.”

“A misnomer, given that ponies actually have much longer tails.”

Masada laughed. “That’s the second thing that you being half-human explains.

You, Commander Spock, are a laugh riot.”

To Masada’s great joy, that earned him a sharp look from the Enterprise first officer. “I fail to see how my conversations are akin to the behavior of the people on Proxima.”

“No, no, not that kind of riot. It’s an old expression—it just means you’re funny. One of my staff is a Vulcan—that Ensign Sontor I mentioned. I’ve worked with a bunch of other Vulcans, and you’re the only one of ’em that’s cracked me up.”

“Fascinating,” Spock said dryly as he turned back to the console. “However, I can assure you that any humor you might perceive is solely a construct of your own interpretation.”

Masada said, “Don’t you see, though, that’s exactly what makes it funny? The literal-mindedness, that dry tone of yours—by being so serious, you become humorous.”

“That is a contradiction in terms, Mr. Masada. If one is serious, one cannot be humorous.”

“Sure you can. It’s the inherent contradiction of human existence. The difference between the interpreter and the interpreted, the—” He cut himself off. “Sorry, I guess I’m still tired. I only get philosophical when I’m tired.

Feel free to ignore me.”

“I had already decided on just such a course of action,” Spock said.

Laughing, Masada said, “See? There you go again. You just crack me up.”

Turning his gaze back to Masada, Spock said, “I do not discern any ruptures in your skin, Lieutenant.”

“It’s another expression,” Masada said with a sigh.

“Another contradiction of human existence?”

“Sort of. More like a metaphor. You make me laugh so hard, I’m in danger—well, metaphorical danger, anyhow—of shaking myself to pieces. Hence, ‘crack me up.’”

“That is less a metaphor than a simile, Lieutenant, and it is also rather imprecise. It would be better if—should something amuse you in the future—to simply say that it amuses you. It would save you from having to make lengthy explanations of things you find to be patently obvious.”

Again, Masada laughed. “You’re too much, Commander.”

“Too much what?”

He started to answer, then said, “Never mind.” Turning to his console, which showed him the lateral sensor array—presently detecting many things, with the irritating exception of the precise location of the Malkus Artifact—Masada then asked, “How’s our search coming?”

“Thus far, sensors have been unable to localize the energy signature.” Spock, Masada noticed, had no difficulty changing the subject back to business.

They had started their search on the bridge, but soon realized that they would need the more widespread capabilities of the sensor room to work with. Masada had dismissed Soo and most of the rest of the science staff, telling them to work on collating the data from the neutron star. There was no chance they’d get back to it anytime soon—even if they solved the problem here in Alpha Proxima within the next hour, there was no way they’d be able to return to Beta Proxima to do any significant work on the star before they’d have to go off to that silly conference at Crellis.

And at the rate we’re going, he thought, it’s gonna take a helluva lot longer than an hour to find that damn artifact. Plus, the Constellation was probably

going to stick around for at least another day after the crisis was past— if the crisis came to a satisfying conclusion, which was, of course, no guarantee.

Masada had therefore resigned himself to the fact that they'd done all they could with the star, so there was no reason not to have Soo and the others start on the final report.

The only member of the science staff he held back was Sontor, who was presently monitoring the data upload from Vulcan with everything they had on the Zalkat Union in general and the Malkus Artifacts in particular. Masada assumed that the Vulcan records were more complete than the Starfleet ones, which didn't have much beyond the existence of the energy signature. But then, Beta Aurigae was first explored by an Earth ship, pre-Federation, and prior to the duotronic revolution in computer storage. Not every record survived that particular transition. Thank God that old ship had a Vulcan observer on board to take good notes.

Masada ran his hand over his head, then tugged on his ponytail. My God, he thought, I do tug my ponytail! Gotta watch that... He looked over their records—which he'd been looking at steadily for many hours—and for the first time realized that the pattern they were using was a bit of a time waster. Funny how you don't notice something until you've stepped away from it for twenty minutes.

“Why don't we narrow the field to the northern hemisphere—better yet, to just where there are sentient lifesigns? I mean, those are the only places where there are people, so the artifact has to be there.”

“It is unlikely that the Zalkatians took human comfort into consideration when hiding the artifact.”

“Yeah, but there's an intelligence behind this. You yourself pointed out that

this has to be directed by a person or persons with malice aforethought.”

Spock made an adjustment to the console as he spoke. “That does not require that the artifact be where there is sentient life. Whoever is controlling the artifact could easily have access to a transporter, and could leave the artifact anywhere on the planet.”

Stopping himself from reaching back to pull on his ponytail again, Masada said, “Oh come on, that’s taking possibilities to an extreme. Besides, we’ve got a deadline here—we’ve got to narrow the search. Logically, we should eliminate less likely avenues of exploration.”

For several seconds, Spock didn’t move. Masada was about to ask if something was wrong, when he finally spoke. “Your point is well taken. I will narrow the search.”

Just then, Sontor entered the sensor room. “Sirs, the download from the Vulcan archaeological database is complete.”

“About time,” Masada said, blowing out a breath. “Anything interesting?”

Sontor’s right eyebrow was far thicker than Spock’s, but it crawled up his forehead in a disturbingly similar way. “I would be willing to debate at some length that all of it is interesting, Lieutenant. However, I assume that you are referring to data relevant to our current search.”

“See what I mean?” Masada said, turning to Spock. “He’s nowhere near as funny as you.”

“I beg your pardon, sir?” Sontor asked, both his tone and his eyebrow arched.

Spock added, “I detect no significant difference in timbre, pitch, or verbal delivery between Ensign Sontor and myself to account for your perceptions, Lieutenant.” Before Masada could reply to that, Spock said, “Then again, as you

yourself pointed out, your fatigue may be having an effect on your perceptions.”

Masada started to say something to Spock, stopped, started again, stopped again, then finally said, “Never mind.” He turned back to Sontor. “What’d you find?”

Sontor leaned down into one of the consoles and punched up a record. “According to T’Ramir, who has been the primary specialist in Zalkatian matters for the last ninety-seven years and seven months, the Malkus Artifacts might be more easily traced by using a lowband sensor sweep. The lower bands are closer to what is believed to be the primary form of electronic detection during Malkus’s reign. Logically, the artifact’s distinctive emissions would be more readily found with a method similar to that used by the creators of said artifact.”

“Unnecessarily complicatedly put, Sontor.” As was that sentence, Masada rebuked himself, but didn’t say aloud. I really am tired. “But that follows. Changing bandwidth of main sensor array.” He suited action to words as his fingers played about the console.

“Unfortunately,” Sontor said, “the lower band means that the readings will take considerably longer to obtain. A full sweep will take up to four-point-two-three hours.”

“Give or take point-three hours,” Masada said with a small smile.

“Negative. ‘Give,’ perhaps, as the search may take a shorter interval due to the possibility of finding the artifact before the search is complete, but it will not take any longer than that.”

Pointing at Sontor but looking at Spock, Masada said, “See, now if you’d said that, it would’ve been much funnier.”

Spock, however, was looking at the sensor readouts. In fact, he looked to Masada as if he were studiously ignoring both Masada and Sontor.

Grinning, Masada said, “Let’s start the scan at Sierra City and work our way

outwards.”

“Logical,” Spock said.

“Glad you approve.”

Sontor said, “A Vulcan would always approve of a logical course of action.”

“Naturally,” Spock said. “To do otherwise would be foolish.”

Save me from all this self-congratulating, Masada thought with a wry smile.

“I think we’ve got something, Leonard,” Lewis Rosenhaus said with a smile.

They had been working for hours, trying to find some way to modify Dr.

Derubbio’s serum so that it wouldn’t produce xelaxine. Thus far, all the methods

for doing so also eliminated the serum’s effectiveness in actually removing the

virus.

Still, for whatever reason, McCoy had become easier to work with. Instead of

snapping at him, McCoy listened to all his questions and suggestions and had

intelligent comments to make. He didn’t denigrate, and his criticisms were

bereft of the ire they had had earlier. I never would’ve thought I could bond

with a fellow doctor over almost killing a patient, he thought with a happy

smile.

McCoy rubbed his eyes as he came over to where Rosenhaus was sitting. “What’ve you got, Lew?”

That was the other good thing: Rosenhaus really liked the sound of McCoy calling

him “Lew” instead of “boy” or “son.” He hadn’t even liked it when his own father

called him “son,” much less someone he’d only just met.

Rosenhaus looked at McCoy’s lined face. The older man’s blue eyes were

bloodshot, and they had goodsized bags under them. “You should probably take a

break, Leonard—or take a stimulant.”

“I’m fine,” McCoy said, waving him off. “Answer the damn question.”

Great, he’s getting crotchety again. “I was checking the pH readings. Xelaxine

is basic. If we lower the pH value, make it neutral, it’ll go inert. Now,

Derubbio’s serum is neutral, and the acidity is irrelevant to its effectiveness.

What if we try adding an acid compound to the serum?”

“You want to introduce an acid into the human bloodstream?”

Rosenhaus sighed. “It was just a thought. If we can find an acid that’s

relatively harmless—ascorbic, maybe, or citric.”

McCoy looked at the computer model Rosenhaus had called up, and shook his head.

“Won’t work. The only acid strong enough to bring xelaxine’s pH down to seven

would have to be a lot nastier than the human body can take. It’d eat the blood

vessels alive.”

“Dammit.” Rosenhaus pounded a fist on the table.

Putting a hand on Rosenhaus’s shoulder, McCoy said, “Easy, Lew, we’re not out of

the woods yet. There’s something—”

“What?” he asked, looking up at the older doctor.

“Computer, call up the molecular structure of Andronesian encephalitis.”

Rosenhaus frowned. “What does—?”

“You ever heard of Capellan acid?”

“Uh, no.”

“Not surprised. I was stationed on Capella IV for a few months before I reported

here. The Capellans are warrior types—they had no interest in medicine or

hospitals.”

Rosenhaus blinked, then blinked again. “Okay, at this point I’m completely

lost.”

McCoy smiled. “Bear with me, Lew. Computer, call up molecular structure of Capellan acid.”

As soon as Rosenhaus saw the second image pop up on the screen, he winced.

“That’s a naturally occurring acid on Capella? What do they use it for, sieges of the castle? You could do wonders pouring this over the battlements—wipe out your enemies in a microsecond.”

“Believe it or not, it’s in their drinking water,” McCoy said with a smile.

“They build ’em tough on Capella, but not that tough. One of the things I noticed when I was there was that they didn’t suffer from Andronesian encephalitis, even though the conditions on the planet are ideal for it. Turns out, they did have it, and they also had this corrosive acid in their water.”

Rosenhaus put it together and snapped his fingers. “The acid neutralizes the encephalitis.”

“For starters, yes. It still leaves acid in the system, though, just nothing as nasty as the acid’s raw form. The question is if it’s enough to also neutralize the xelaxine.”

“Only one way to find out.”

McCoy nodded. “Computer, call up molecular structure of xelaxine.” After it did so: “All right, now project what would happen if all three were combined in the human bloodstream.”

Rosenhaus watched as the molecules rotated toward each other on the screen.

Atoms shifted, bonds broke and re-formed, shapes changed—first the xelaxine and the encephalitis each broke apart, then the Capellan acid did likewise, and then they all started to come together in new combinations. Finally, when they settled down, there were five molecules. One was a single oxygen atom bonded

with two hydrogen atoms; three were carbon bonded with two oxygen atoms; the last was six carbon atoms, eight hydrogen atoms, and six oxygen atoms.

“Water, carbon dioxide, and ascorbic acid,” Rosenhaus said. “I don’t believe it.” He laughed. “They go from dying of a nasty virus to the functional equivalent of eating a grapefruit.”

Chuckling, McCoy said, “That and holding their breath too long. We’ll have to monitor their CO₂ levels—probably need to flush it out of most people’s systems before they can be safely discharged—and of course they’ll all need to be re-inoculated for encephalitis.”

Rosenhaus nodded. “We’ll have to make sure everyone is inoculated first. If they haven’t been, we’ll have to give it to them.”

“I want to run a few more tests before we try this on Ms. Braker over there, but I think we’re on the right track here.” He turned to Rosenhaus and smiled. “Nice work, Doctor.”

“What nice work? I made a dumbass suggestion. You’re the one who turned it into something workable.”

Chuckling, McCoy said, “I tell you, I never thought anything good would come out of those months I spent on Capella.”

Nurse Jazayerli—whose presence in the lab area Rosenhaus hadn’t even registered—said, “I hate to interrupt this mutual admiration society, Doctors, but I have checked on Ms. Braker, and she has indeed received an inoculation against Andronesian encephalitis.”

McCoy nodded. “Thank you, Nurse. C’mon, Lew, let’s get to work.”

Matt Decker swore he would never complain about the difficulties of running a starship ever again. As bad as it could sometimes get, it couldn’t possibly be

worse than co-running a planetary government for a day.

He and Kirk had been at it for almost twenty-four straight hours—and that was on top of a full day of neutron-stargazing. Decker was about as exhausted as he ever intended to be when there wasn't an actual war on.

Then again, he thought, for all intents and purposes, we are fighting a war.

We're just waiting on Guillermo and Spock to find the enemy for us.

However, all the tasks that needed to be performed had been, and any others that were pending could wait until morning. There hadn't been any new outbursts of the virus since the Enterprise was targeted. Masada, Spock, McCoy, and Rosenhaus had all reported that they were making progress, but had nothing new to report.

Bronstein had said that all had been quiet since Kirk's little speech at the SCMC. As the sun started setting on Proxima, things seemed to have quieted down. Right now, Commodore Matthew Decker needed a good night's sleep more than anything.

Idly, he wondered how anyone on this planet did sleep. Proxima had a thirty-hour day. With the colony primarily in the northern hemisphere, at this time of year the sun was up for about twenty-six of those hours. He remembered Will's childhood joke about how it was always night in space—on Proxima, it was never night, it seemed.

Kirk had just gotten a couple hours' sleep—and he had also gotten some sleep prior to the mission, since his ship's time was at early morning rather than late night when they arrived at Proxima. The idea was that he would then stay up during the rest of the night in case of an emergency, leaving Decker to catch up on his desperately needed rest.

As he hauled himself up from his chair to head for the door, he said to Kirk,

“So where are we supposed to sack out, anyhow?”

Before an irritatingly fresh-faced Kirk could answer, Decker’s communicator beeped.

Shaking his head, he took it out of his belt. “I knew I should have phasered this thing when I had the chance. Could’ve just said the rioters did it.” He opened the communicator. “Decker here.”

“Wow, Commodore, you sound like hell,” Takeshewada said.

“Number One, I’m going to sound like the ninth circle of hell if you don’t give me a very good reason why you called me when I was on the way to bed.”

“As it happens, I do, and it’s good news, twice over. Our two doctors think they’ve nailed the virus. It’s notwithout small risks, but nothing as life-threatening as the virus itself.”

Kirk stepped up. “How soon can they adminster it?”

If Takeshewada was bothered by being queried by a different CO, she didn’t show it, and Decker himself was too tired to care. “They have to verify that people have a particular inoculation—some kind of elephantitis or somesuch. Lew said it was a common vaccination, so it shouldn’t be an issue. But they figure to have mass-produced the serum by morning.”

Decker smiled a happy smile for the first time since arriving at Proxima.

“That’s the best news I’ve heard since my son made commander, Number One. What’s the other good news?”

“It’s even better. Guillermo and Spock have localized the emissions from the artifact. Unfortunately, we can’t get a transporter lock within fifty meters of the emissions—apparently this thing interferes with the beams.”

“So much for pulling the beam-out-the-suspect trick,” Decker muttered.

“Mhm. And we can’t get any decent sensor readings in there. Best we can tell is

that there may be some human lifesigns, possibly. Our only real option is to go in person. Permission to beam down and lead the security detail to apprehend the suspect.”

“Denied. I’ll take Bronstein, and—”

“Matt, with all due respect, you’re exhausted. So’s Bronstein. I’ve actually slept recently, and if we’re dealing with the type of psychopath that would infect an entire colony and a starship, you need a fresh hand on deck, not a stubborn old commodore who’s falling asleep on his phaser.”

Decker sighed. Takeshewada had said all that without even taking a breath—she had obviously rehearsed it ahead of time, knowing full well that he would insist on leading the party himself.

“I’d like to go also, Commodore,” Kirk said. “With all due respect to the abilities of your first officer, I think we owe it to the Proximans for one of the two of us to be present when the person responsible for this nightmare is taken in. And the commander’s right—you’re in no shape to lead it. It should be me.”

“I’m perfectly capable of commanding the mission, Captain,” Takeshewada said in her most clipped tone.

“And I think I’ve earned it after sitting on my rear end since we got here.”

Decker sighed, as he feared he was going to have to navigate some minefields here. He did not want to have his first officer in a pissy mood.

“I’m not impugning your skills, Commander Takeshewada,” Kirk said tightly, “it’s just that—”

“Both of you simmer down,” Decker interrupted. “Hiromi, you’re right, I’m in no shape to deal with this. But Kirk’s right in that he should be in charge. He

knows the terrain better, and he's been the face of the government all day—I think the Proximans will appreciate his presence when we apprehend whoever the hell this is. Where is this location, anyhow?"

"A house in a residential section just outside Sierra City." She read off a series of coordinates. Decker checked the wall map and saw that it was the Karsay's Point neighborhood, about half a kilometer outside the city.

Takeshewada continued, "We're still waiting on a profile of the occupant of that house. I've already talked to both ships' security chiefs. I've got a team of twenty set to meet up at Posada Circle."

Kirk looked at the map. "I can be there in ten minutes."

"Fine," Takeshewada said, once again utilizing her we're-going-to-talk-about-this-later tone. "Takeshewada out."

Decker closed his communicator. At this rate, he thought, Hiromi and I'll be talking for hours when this is done.

"Don't worry, Commodore," Kirk said as he grabbed his phaser from out of the drawer of the desk where he'd been keeping it, "we'll have this taken care of by the time you wake up."

"Like there's a chance in hell I'm gonna be able to sleep," Decker said with a snort. "Hey, Jim."

Kirk stopped midway between the desk and the door and gave the commodore an expectant look.

"We don't know what we're dealing with—for all we know, there's an army down there. Even if it's just one nutcase, it's someone who's attempted mass murder. Be careful."

For one second, Jim Kirk looked just like Will did the day he got his commission—sober, calm, yet obviously ready to face whatever was coming.

“Thanks, Matt. And don’t worry.”

As soon as he left, Decker let out a long breath that sounded more like a snort.

“Don’t worry, he says. What’m I supposed to do, sleep?”

He fell more than sat into the chair behind his desk and called up a report from one of Bronstein’s people. May as well get some work done...

Hiromi Takeshewada took a moment to lean back against the statue of Captain Bernabe Posada, look up, and let the setting sun shine on her face. It’s been too damn long, she thought.

Growing up in Tokyo on Earth and moving around to various cities all over the Sol system, Takeshewada had always considered herself a city person, never one for “the great outdoors.” A career in Starfleet was a natural for her after living in tall buildings in the midst of cities.

But after spending so long indoors—whether on planets or in starships—she had grown to truly appreciate breathing fresh air, feeling the light of the sun on her face, and the unique tactile experience of standing on real ground. In her younger days, serving as an ensign aboard the U.S.S. Mandela, she never really appreciated what it was like to feel a planet under her feet instead of a constructed floor. Now, though, with age came wisdom, and she knew to appreciate when she stepped on a planet.

She never knew when it might be her last chance.

The Mandela had been destroyed less than a month after Takeshewada had transferred off the ship to take a post as a lieutenant aboard the Potemkin. She had lost a lot of good friends there. Right before she left, she had passed up the opportunity for shore leave on Starbase 13, which orbited a lush world. But

she had had paperwork to catch up on, so she didn't bother, figuring she'd do so the next time.

If her promotion hadn't come through, there wouldn't have been a next time.

So she stood now in Posada Circle—like the statue that was its centerpiece, the circular road was in honor of the captain of the colony ship S.S. Esperanza, and also the first Chief Representative of Proxima's government—surrounded by a detail of Constellation and Enterprise security. As she waited for Kirk and Vasconge to arrive, she made sure she took a moment to bask in the sunlight.

Because the Constellation could be destroyed tomorrow—or the next day—or next year. And if it does happen, I will have done this. And it feels good.

Then a government aircar landed six meters from the statue of Captain Posada, and Kirk stepped out of it. As the young captain walked toward Takeshewada, she noted that he was shorter than she had been expecting, though he was still taller than she was. Most people were, to her great irritation.

Kirk carried himself with a confident air. Takeshewada might almost have called it smug, though she admitted that she may have been overlaying her own annoyance at the way Kirk had muscled into this operation. Takeshewada had always been a hands-on type. She had bristled at spending so much of this mission on the bridge, and was looking forward to leading this party herself.

Rationally, of course, she knew that Kirk's reasons for being here made perfect sense. He had indeed been the "face of the government" to the Proximans in these hard times, and putting him at the forefront of what they hoped was the arrest of the person responsible was good politics.

Takeshewada hated politics. She was good at playing the game—a blessing when serving as XO to Matt Decker, who was as anti-political as they came—but she still hated having to do it.

“Are we ready to move, Commander?” Kirk asked.

“We’re just waiting on Vascogne. He’s supposed to have the information on our suspect. Right now, we just know that her name is Tomasina Laubenthal. I’ve already had our people clear the streets between here and her house.”

Just as Kirk nodded in acknowledgment, Takeshewada heard the whine of a transporter. Several of the security guards turned sharply, and one or two put their hands to their phaser holsters, just in case.

However, the two forms that coalesced in the beam were familiar ones: the bald head and compact form of Etienne Vascogne, and the taller, blonder, and slimmer form of his assistant chief of security, Helga Litwack.

“Sorry to beam in like this, Hiromi, but I was running late,” Vascogne said as the transporter whine faded. “Captain!” he said upon sighting Kirk. “Didn’t realize you were joining the party, sir. Or are you here to give another speech?”

“This time I’m hoping to commit some actions to speak louder than my words, Lieutenant,” Kirk said with a disarming smile. Takeshewada hated to admit it, but it was a damn good smile. No wonder he was the one doing the broadcasts. I love Matt, but he comes across as the irritating old uncle you could never stand. Kirk is much more personable.

“What’ve you got, Etienne?” Takeshewada asked.

“A doozy,” Vascogne replied, running a hand over his smooth head as he looked down at his notes. “Our Ms. Laubenthal is a single caucasian female, fifty-three years old, born and raised here on Proxima. Graduated with a degree in political science from Yasmini University in ’34, she’s worked a variety of civil-service jobs since then, and then went into politics six years ago. Until about two

months ago, she was the deputy assistant to the Proximan secretary of the interior.”

Kirk frowned. “What happened two months ago?”

“The secretary’s an appointed position,” Vascogne said, glancing up from his notes. “When the old secretary retired, rather than promote from within, the Chief Representative decided to give it to someone new from outside. That new person also brought her own people in—Laubenthal was let go. According to some people Litwack and I talked to, she had been expecting to get promoted to assistant, with the assistant becoming secretary. Instead, they were both dismissed.”

“Chikushou.” Takeshewada muttered the curse.

With a wry smile, Vascogne said, “Yeah, I was thinking that sounded kind of motive-like.”

“But why wait two months?” Kirk asked.

“That’s the real fun part—she took a vacation to Pirenne’s Peak. It’s in a mountain range about a hundred kilometers south of here. It only recently became a popular spot because the weather’s gotten milder in that area over the last five years or so. Once I saw that, I got Litwack here to help me question some people about her. That’s why we were late. Most of the people she worked with are under sedation or dead, but we found a friend of hers named Alvaro Santana who confirmed that she was bitter after being dismissed. He’d been bugging her to take the vacation, and she only did so recently—Santana said he was half-convinced she only went to shut him up about it.” He looked at Takeshewada with a grave expression. “Nobody’s seen her since she got back. And, according to the tourist bureau, she spent her entire time on the peak alone and unescorted—and she left sooner than planned. So if she did find the artifact...”

“I think we have a suspect,” Kirk said dryly. “Time we apprehended her.”

Unholstering a phaser of his own, Kirk signalled to the security people. “Let’s go!”

As a unit, they moved toward Laubenthal’s house. Within minutes, they arrived at a nondescript three-story white house with a small lawn area in front. The first level was taken up with an aircar garage, with white stairs leading up to a door on the second level. The architecture was your basic prefabricated colonial standard—Takeshewada mused that it probably dated back to the colony’s founding over seventy-five years earlier. Where most of the colony had, over time, developed its own architecture—varying from neighborhood to neighborhood—some still stuck with the functional original structures.

A sense of the practical outweighing the aesthetic, Takeshewada thought. She wasn’t sure what it meant, really, but she noted it anyhow.

One of the Enterprise guards—a woman named Leskanich—set up a comm system on Laubenthal’s lawn. Vascogne handed Kirk an amplifier, which the captain attached to his uniform shirt. The rest of the guards moved into formation, surrounding the house, covering all the possible exits (the garage door, the front door, and a back door) and windows. Takeshewada tried to get a tricorder reading inside the house, but couldn’t. Something was interfering with the scan—presumably the Malkus Artifact.

“Attention, Ms. Tomasina Laubenthal,” Kirk said, his voice now loud enough to be heard for blocks around, “this is Captain James T. Kirk. I’m about to contact you directly—please answer.” He then gave Leskanich an expectant look.

For her part, Leskanich had brushed aside a lock of curly brown hair to place an earpiece in. She seemed to be staring at nothing while her fingers played across

the controls of her portable comm unit. Then she looked up and nodded just as Kirk's communicator beeped.

Kirk turned off his amplifier and flipped open his communicator. "This is Kirk. Am I speaking to Ms. Laubenthal?"

"I've got a hostage!"

For a second time, Takeshewada muttered, "Chikushou." This was a complication they didn't need.

Muting his communicator, Kirk asked Takeshewada, "Can you verify that?"

Takeshewada shook her head. "I can't even verify that she's in there right now."

Kirk set his jaw, then de-muted the communicator. "Ms. Laubenthal, I need you to listen to me. We don't want to hurt you. Please, let the hostage go, and we can talk thi—"

"There's nothing to 'talk' about, Kirk! They took it all away from me, don't you understand? Soon they'll all be dead and this will be over. Them and you and your precious starships."

"Ms. Laubenthal, you don't need to do this."

"Oh, I don't, don't I? What do you know about it, anyhow?"

"I know that you feel you were cheated out of your job, and I—"

"I feel ?! You don't have the slightest idea how I feel, Kirk! They took everything from me! That job was mine, they had no business taking it away from me!"

Takeshewada sighed. She whispered to Vascogne, "She's hysterical. I don't think reasoning with her's gonna cut it."

"Maybe, maybe not," Vascogne said with a shrug. "We can't do anything else as long as she has a hostage. Besides, I've seen the captain in action before.

Stopped a mob in its tracks. Damndest thing I ever saw. Give him a shot."

“I’d rather give Laubenthal a shot.”

Vascogne grinned. “Well, we’re working on that.” He opened his communicator, which was set on a separate frequency from the one Kirk had Laubenthal on.

“Talk to me, people.”

Each member of the team reported in, but nobody could see anyone through the windows of the house.

Shaking his head, Vascogne said, “I can’t believe this—how’m I supposed to work without tricorders? Who depends on line of sight, anyhow? It’s like firing blindfolded.”

“Life’s full of little frustrations for you,” Takeshewada said with a small smile.

Kirk, meanwhile, was continuing to try to talk Laubenthal down. “Ms. Laubenthal, I don’t pretend to understand what you’re going through—but I do know that we can work this out.”

“Really?” Laubenthal let out a rather disturbing laugh. “Why should I believe you? You really think anyone here is going to work anything out with me?”

“You forget—Commodore Decker and I are in charge of the planet now. I can guarantee that you won’t be harmed if you free the hostage and turn yourself and the artifact in now—before anyone else is hurt or killed.”

“No—I can’t take that chance! It won’t be over until everyone is dead!”

“And then what?” Kirk said quickly. “Once everyone’s dead, what will you do then? You’ll be left with nothing but an empty planet. Starfleet knows what’s happening here. When no one replies to any of their calls, they’ll send someone else.”

“Then I’ll kill them, too. I’ll kill everyone, if I have to!”

“Don’t you understand, they’ll keep coming—until they’ve stopped you, once and for all. In force if they have to, but they will come. If you end this now, we can keep the damage to a minimum. Please, Ms. Laubenthal, end this now—before it gets beyond your control or mine.”

Takeshewada heard only heavy breathing through the communicator for several seconds. I don’t like this, she thought as she opened her own communicator, tuning it to the frequency the security guards were using. “Does anyone have a shot?”

Several choruses of “Negative” met her query.

Laubenthal’s breaths got progressively slower. Takeshewada tried to convince herself that it was a good sign, but found herself unable to do so. The number of instances of psychotic episodes were many fewer than they were even fifty years ago, but Takeshewada had been present for one of them—when they established a mining outpost on Beta Argola six months ago. One of the miners had an episode and nearly killed both Vascogne and Takeshewada. After that she read up on the phenomenon.

Right now what she remembered most was that oftentimes psychotics were quite calm when they committed their most hideous acts.

“Maybe—maybe you’re right.”

Takeshewada held her breath. Laubenthal sounded much too calm for comfort.

“I am right, Ms. Laubenthal,” Kirk said in a honeyed voice. “Please—let the hostage go.”

“Maybe you’re right, Captain,” Laubenthal repeated in an even calmer voice.

“Maybe this does need to end. Maybe it needs to end now. Right now.”

Then they heard a phaser blast, followed by a scream.

Takeshewada didn’t hesitate as she screamed into her communicator, “Move in!

Everyone, move in!” I can’t believe she shot the hostage, she thought angrily.

As fast as the commander and the security detail reacted, Kirk reacted even faster. The second the phaser blast sounded, Kirk was running full tilt toward the staircase that lead to the front door. By the time he reached the top of the stairs, his phaser was out. By the time she reached the top of the stairs, Kirk had tried and failed to get the door open. As Takeshewada was wondering if Vascogne had brought a P-38 with him, Kirk aimed his phaser at the door mechanism and fired.

The door opened a second later.

“Nothing like the direct approach,” Takeshewada muttered as she and Kirk ran in, past the smoking remains of the door mechanism. She could hear Vascogne and several security guards running up the stairs behind them.

Dimly, Takeshewada registered the décor of the house’s interior—several pictures of a woman at varying ages. A few trophies—a quick glance showed that they were for sports, and all dated from her time at Yasmini University. Several of the pictures of her in her younger days had her in climbing or hiking gear, which fit the profile of someone who’d take a vacation on a mountain.

Oddly enough, there were no pictures of anyone else. No family, no significant others, nothing. Just Laubenthal herself.

The furniture was fairly ugly to Takeshewada’s eye—and she was no interior decorator—but the place definitely felt lived in. The gaudy flower-print couch was piled with readers, and there were more on the shelves. Most of it was fiction, with titles Takeshewada didn’t recognize.

The commander followed Kirk through a hallway and a sitting room—then he stopped short at a doorway. Kirk was, of course, taller than Takeshewada, so she

couldn't see past him to determine what the room was, nor why he stopped.

"What is it?" she prompted.

That had the desired effect, and he moved out of the way, his head lowered.

What the hell—?

As Kirk walked back into the sitting room and Litwack and two others came into the room, Takeshewada looked into what turned out to be the dining room.

A white plastiform table sat in the middle of the room, surrounded by white plastiform chairs. A comm unit sat on the table.

Takeshewada registered that in her subconscious. Her conscious mind was taken up with the dead human female body on the floor next to the table with the very large hole in her chest.

The face on the body matched that of all the pictures.

Vascogne stuck his bald head into the room. "There's no one else in the house."

"Well, I was right," Takeshewada said with a heavy sigh. "She did shoot the hostage."

Chapter Seven

MATTDECKER found Jim Kirk sitting on the bench next to the statue in Posada Circle. It had been almost eighteen hours since Tomasina Laubenthal had killed herself. Decker, who had indeed been unable to sleep, had dealt with everything since then, as Kirk had left the scene and wandered back to this bronze likeness of Captain Bernabe Posada.

"You plan on spending the rest of your life here, Jim?"

Kirk looked up, his eyes bloodshot. "If you're here to reprimand me, Commodore—"

"What the hell would I want to do that for?"

"I failed," Kirk said, sounding surprised that Decker would ask such a foolish question. "I was supposed to take Laubenthal into custody, and I didn't do it."

Decker held up a small handheld computer. “Know what this is?”

Kirk shook his head.

“Laubenthal’s diary. Vascogne found it when he and Bronstein went through her house. Most of it’s pretty dry—until she lost her job. After that, she completely lost it. Jim, the woman was several crystals short of a warp core—there was nothing you could have said. She was completely insane. Those people you talked to at the SCMC were just scared, normal people. Words work on rational people. Crazy people, though, that’s a no-win situation.”

“I’ve never believed in the no-win situation.”

Decker snorted. “Yeah, well, I don’t like to lose, either. Doesn’t mean it isn’t gonna happen.”

Kirk said nothing in response to that.

“Vascogne also recovered the Malkus Artifact. For all the trouble that thing caused, it’s pretty dull. Just a square piece of metal with a slight green glow, and this weird marking on it. It can’t be transported, so the Enterprise is sending a shuttle down.”

That got Kirk’s attention, and he looked up at Decker. “The Enterprise?”

Decker smiled. The last Kirk knew, his entire ship was under sedation. “That’s right, Jim. You’ve got your ship back. Whatever Rosenhaus and McCoy came up with worked. They’ve been administering the antidote on your ship, and the hospitals have been handling it down here. It’s not an instant cure, but your people should be ship-shape again in a few hours.”

Kirk let out a long breath. “That’s good news, Matt. Thanks.”

“Not only that, but you and I can finally get out of here. The minister of state is going to be Acting Chief Representative until they can hold another election

in a month or two. Once she's released by the hospital, she'll take over, and we can revoke martial law."

At last, Kirk smiled. "That's even better news." The smile then fell. "What was the final death toll?"

"Four hundred and fifty-six. Well, technically, four hundred and fifty-eight, if you count Laubenthal herself and that other wrongful death Bronstein has had to deal with that was unrelated."

"That's more than the crew of either of our ships," Kirk said in a quiet voice.

"True," Decker said as he sat down next to the younger man on the bench. "On the other hand, over four hundred thousand were infected. That's a point-one-percent fatality rate." He sighed. "That doesn't change how much it stinks, but it could've been a lot worse."

Kirk stared straight ahead. "It could've been a lot better, too."

"Look, Jim, I know this wasn't easy. You sit in that chair on that bridge, and you know that everyone's relying on you—and when you don't come through, it's rough. But don't go beating yourself up over it. You did some damn good work here. Look what you did at the SCMC—hell, Vascogne and I were all set to stun 'em and sort it out later. Instead, you talked 'em out of it. That's a rare gift you've got there, my friend. All right, so it didn't work on Laubenthal—but trust me, she was so far gone, I doubt that the entire Federation Diplomatic Corps could have talked her down."

Letting out a very long breath, Kirk said, "You're right, Matt—I know you're right in my head. But I've still got this sense of—of failure."

Decker stood up and put an encouraging hand on Kirk's shoulder. "Keep that sense of failure, Jim. But don't let it overwhelm you. Just make sure you try to do better next time. That's what separates the good captains from the great ones."

Kirk stood up and chuckled. "I'm hardly a 'great' anything, Commodore."

"Maybe not yet. Give it time. So, you done sulking? You've got a planet and a ship waiting for you."

"That I do, Commodore. Let's go."

As they walked toward the aircar Decker had arrived in, Kirk asked, "So what's next on the Constellation's 'agenda?'"

"Well, we have to spend the next few hours getting everything together for handing power back over. And there's a memorial service tonight that I think you and I should attend."

"Agreed."

"So, by the time that's all finished, we'll have just enough time to get to the Crellis Cluster."

"The diplomatic conference?" Kirk asked, wincing. "I was wondering who got saddled with that."

Decker shuddered. "Yeah, lucky us. Hiromi's handling most of it, but I still need to at least be visible.

I'm barely gonna have time to shave," he added with a rueful rub of his stubble-filled cheek. "As it is, I haven't slept in two days."

"Actually, Matt, I've found that half-asleep is the best way to deal with diplomats."

Decker considered that. "Good point. Have to remember that." As he climbed into the aircar, he asked, "Don't believe in no-win situations, huh? You must've just loved the Kobayashi Maru test back at the Academy."

"Oh, it was a challenge," Kirk deadpanned.

Frowning, Decker asked, "What's that supposed to mean?"

“The night before, I reprogrammed the simulation so I could rescue the Maru and got away from the Klingons.” He smiled. “You’re not the only one who doesn’t like to lose, Matt.”

Decker didn’t know whether to be outraged or amused. The bark of laughter that exploded from his mouth settled the debate. “You’re a piece of work, you know that?” he said as the aircar took off.

“That’s what the instructor said when she gave me the commendation for original thinking.”

“You got off easy—and I’ll bet that wasn’t all she said, either.” Decker shook his head, then offered his hand. “It’s been a pleasure ruling the world with you, Captain Kirk.”

Kirk returned the handshake. “Likewise, Commodore Decker, likewise.”

“So this is it, huh?”

Guillermo Masada stood outside the Shuttlecraft Galileo with Spock and Leonard McCoy. They were preparing to bring the Malkus Artifact—currently cradled in Masada’s arms—into orbit. The Enterprise’s next port of call was Starbase 10, whereas the Constellation was going straight to the Crellis Cluster, so the former ship would drop the artifact off at the starbase, for its ultimate transfer to the Rector Institute on Earth. Spock and Masada had contacted the institute directly, and the director was champing at the bit to get his hands on it, as was a team of human and Vulcan anthropologists. T’Pol herself was catching the next shuttle from Vulcan to Earth.

Meanwhile, a day and a half after Tomasina Laubenthal took her own life, most of the infected population had been given the serum to cure them of the virus, the senior staffs of both ships had attended a general memorial service led by Chief

Bronstein and the new Acting Chief Representative, and life on Proxima was starting to return to a semblance of normal.

And all this because of a ninety-thousand-year-old artifact. Masada wondered if the folks at the Rector Institute would react the same way McCoy did upon seeing the thing.

The doctor continued: "It's just a box."

Spock did his eyebrow thing again. "I believe, Dr. McCoy, that there is a human saying about judging a book by its cover. Sometimes the outer form gives no indication of inner capabilities."

"Oh, I don't know, Mr. Spock. Looking at you, one would expect a cold, emotionless Vulcan—and they'd be absolutely right."

"And looking at you, they would see an overly emotional human," Spock said, "which is why I used the adverb 'sometimes.'"

Masada chuckled. "There you go again. You really do crack me up."

Before either Enterprise officer could reply to that, the artifact—which had been glowing a slightly greenish color—suddenly let loose a quick burst of bright green light.

So surprised by this action was Masada, that he dropped the box—right onto his right foot. "Yeow!" he screamed as the metal corner of the artifact slammed into his boot.

As he pulled his foot out from under it, he noticed that the artifact's green glow had disappeared altogether.

Both Masada and Spock took out their tricorders. To Masada's surprise, he was now getting a reading from the thing—whatever interference it had been running before was gone—though the reading he got was, in essence, nothing.

“The artifact has gone inert,” Spock said, his words matching what Masada’s own tricorder was telling him. “Fascinating.”

“Maybe it’s shutting down,” Masada said. “According to the records, it was attuned to Malkus. If it became similarly attuned to that Laubenthal woman, her death may have caused it to go inactive again.”

McCoy said, “She died almost two days ago.” He had taken out his Feinberger, and was now running it over the three of them.

Masada shrugged. “So it’s not a perfect hypothesis.”

“Well,” McCoy said, “that discharge doesn’t seem to’ve done any harm. Low-level radiation, only about half a rad. No damage to any of us that I can find.” He smiled. “Well, except for that foot.”

“The artifact was a tool of an absolute monarch,” Spock said. “It is logical to assume that any displays it is programmed for would be ostentatious—much like the lieutenant’s histrionics.”

“Histrionics?” Masada asked angrily as he knelt down to massage his hurt foot.

“Yes. Although, I do admire your continued quest for knowledge. Having already exhausted the possibilities inherent in deconstructing Vulcan speech patterns in order to extract a nonexistent humorous intent, you have now moved on to the much simpler examination of the form of humor known as slapstick.”

Having satisfied himself that nothing was broken, Masada stood up. “I have not been studying slapstick, all I did was drop the artifact when it surprised me.

For that matter, I haven’t ‘exhausted’ anything, I was just pointing out what I observed and you know all of this already, don’t you?” He shook his head, and also noticed that McCoy was trying, and failing, to keep a straight face.

“You’ve been pulling my leg all along, haven’t you?” “I can assure you, Lieutenant,” Spock said gravely,

“that I would never assume such an undignified position. I leave that to you, as you have just proven yourself quite adept at it.”

McCoy abandoned all pretense of the straight face, and was now grinning. Holding up his hands, Masada joined McCoy in his grin and said, “Fine, fine, I surrender.” He indicated the artifact. “Anyhow, that thing’s all yours. I need to head back up to the Constellation. Commander Spock, it was a pleasure working with you.” He held his hand up in the Vulcan salute. “Peace and long life.”

If Spock was surprised at Masada’s knowledge of Vulcan ritual greetings, he didn’t show it. Instead, he simply returned the gesture and said, “Live long and prosper, Lieutenant Masada.”

To McCoy, he offered his hand. “And Doctor, congratulations on surviving the experience of working with Lew. I don’t know whether to offer condolences on having to work with him or give you a medal for not killing him.”

“Ah, he’s not that bad,” McCoy said, returning the handshake. “He’s got good instincts, he just needs a little more experience. Give him a couple years, he’ll make a damn good physician.”

“Tell you what, in two years, I’ll let you know if he’s gotten tolerable.”

“Fair enough,” McCoy said with a smile. “For now, I’d just settle for him slowing down a little. When we were on the Enterprise, he jostled my arm while we were preparing some of the antidote. Spilled some Capellan acid on my lab table. I’ll never get that damn spot out.”

“Really?” Masada grinned. Rosenhaus had twice been involved in incidents in the mess hall that resulted in food and drink on the floor—once with a particularly aggressive Tellarite security guard. Vascogne and Takeshewada had managed to defuse both situations, but they had quickly become part of the Constellation’s

'gossip network. Masada was looking forward to adding this to it, as well.

The two Enterprise officers boarded the shuttle, Spock now carrying the artifact. Masada took out his communicator. "Masada to Constellation. One to beam up."

As the transporter returned him to his ship, he wondered if he'd get a chance to work with them again.

He hoped so. If ever anyone needed a practical joke played on him, it was Lieutenant Commander Spock...

The third planet in the Narendra system was Class-M. Located in territory proximate to Klingon space, the empire had been eyeing the planet as a possible base for some time.

Buried deep under the ground of the smallest of Narendra III's twelve landmasses lay a metal box, emblazoned with the name of its former owner on one side. The slight green glow it gave off was lost in the rock and dirt that encased it.

Within the box, a telepathic voice screamed. Unencumbered by the limitations of a larynx, it had continued this scream for over ninety thousand years. That mind had lived alone in the box for all that time.

The first chance for freedom had finally come after so long—but she turned out to be weak and foolish. A nobody with insignificant dreams of a pointless vengeance.

Suddenly, and only for a moment, the artifact glowed brighter. When the glow dimmed back to normal, three brain patterns had imprinted themselves on the box.

Now the telepathic voice had company, after a fashion. Three minds that could be controlled.

When the time was right, in any case...

First Interlude

Captain's personal log, U.S.S. Enterprise, Captain James T. Kirk, Stardate 4208.5.

In my official log, I noted that Matt Decker died in the line of duty when he piloted the Enterprise shuttlecraft into the so-called planet-killer. Though his actions were tragic, it did lead us to the solution to stopping the planet-killer before it reached the Rigel Colonies.

In this personal log I wish only to add that I regret that the commodore was unable to take the advice he had given me on Proxima over a year ago: not to let my sense of failure overwhelm me. Ultimately, Matt was unable to get past the deaths of the crew of the Constellation, whom he had beamed down to the third planet of System L-374 only to watch helplessly as that world was destroyed.

I also wish to express my regret for the loss of the Constellation crew—Commander Takeshewada, Lieutenant Masada, Dr. Rosenhaus, Lieutenant Vascongne, and the rest of the men and women who served on that fine vessel. I only hope that the Enterprise can live up to their example of courage and bravery.

Part 2: The Second Artifact

2370

This portion of the story takes place shortly before the Star Trek: Deep Space Nine second-season episode "The Jem'Hadar."

Chapter Eight

"WELCOME TO THE ODYSSEY, Commander Sisko. I'm Joseph Shabalala, first

officer.”

Joe Shabalala offered his right hand to Benjamin Sisko as he stepped off the transporter platform. The U.S.S. *Odyssey* had just arrived at Station Deep Space 9, a Bajoran station administrated by Starfleet and commanded by Sisko.

Shabalala knew of the tall man—as tall as Shabalala himself, in fact, not a common occurrence—only by reputation, mainly due to the sudden prominence both Bajor and DS9 had gained almost two years earlier when Sisko had discovered a stable wormhole in the Denorios Belt. That wormhole linked the Alpha Quadrant to the Gamma Quadrant and turned the station from an insignificant backwater to the most important port of call in the sector.

The handshake Sisko gave in return was firm, the smile that accompanied it friendly. “A pleasure to meet you, Commander. I was sorry to hear about Captain Simon.”

Shabalala blinked in surprise. “You knew the captain?”

“She was two years ahead of me at the Academy—and,” Sisko added with a grin, “captain of the wrestling team when I joined.”

Chuckling, Shabalala said, “Ah yes, what she called her ‘misspent youth.’”

Sisko looked around the transporter room. “You seem to have done well for yourself. First officer of a Galaxy -class ship.”

Thinking about the disastrous final mission of the U.S.S. *Fearless* at Patnira,

Shabalala said gravely, “Perhaps. But I’d rather have the captain back. We’d been together on three different ships, you know—going back to when she was a full lieutenant and I was an ensign on the *Bonaventure*. And then she chose me to be her first on the *Fearless* when they gave it to her. It’s—very odd to be serving under someone else.” Banishing thoughts of the past out of his head, he forced a smile onto his face and indicated the door to the transporter room.

“Speaking of which, we shouldn’t keep Captain Keogh waiting. Shall we?”

“After you, Commander.”

They walked in companionable silence to the captain’s quarters. Sisko suddenly seemed a bit skittish. As they approached Keogh’s quarters on deck nine, Shabalala asked, “Is everything all right, Commander?”

Sisko shook his head as if trying to shoo away a fly. “It’s nothing. Just—some odd memories of my last trip aboard a Galaxy -class ship.”

Nothing more was forthcoming, so Shabalala shrugged it off and touched the doorchime for Keogh’s quarters. “Come,” came the captain’s deep voice from behind the doors, and they obligingly opened.

Keogh was standing near his desk, ramrod straight, his hands behind his back, as if he were conducting an inspection. When he had first reported to the *Odyssey* three months earlier, Shabalala had thought that Keogh was just an on-duty pain, but he’d since seen the older man in a variety of situations, both on and off duty, ranging from a meeting with the admiralty to drinks in Ten-Forward to a pitched fistfight against members of his own crew that had been mutated by spores. No matter what, he always stood perfectly straight, always maintained a hard, cold expression on his face, and—if at all possible—had his hands behind his back. It had been a difficult style for Shabalala to get used to after so many years of Captain Simon’s easygoing manner.

Still, he’d lasted three months—he was halfway to tying the *Odyssey*’s record for tenure by a first officer. The ship had left Utopia Planitia’s shipyards five years previous and had never had a first officer last more than half a year. One only lasted a week.

“Greetings, Commander Sisko,” Keogh said with as small a smile as it was

possible for his face to engage in and still be recognizable as such. “I’m

Declan Keogh. Welcome to my ship.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

Walking toward the replicator, Keogh asked, “Can I get you a drink?”

“A raktajino would be nice,” Sisko said after a moment’s consideration.

Keogh looked expectantly at Shabalala, who shook his head. He could have asked for what he wanted—a syntheholc Saurian brandy. But if he did, he would have had to endure yet another tirade about how he should try a real drink like whiskey, not “this Saurian swill.” It had only taken the first officer a week to determine that sharing drinks with the captain wasn’t worth the trouble. As it is, he thought, Sisko’s probably going to get an earful about his choice of beverage.

“A raktajino and a black coffee,” Keogh instructed the computer, which obligingly provided two mugs with same. As he handed the former to Sisko, Keogh said, “Klingon coffee, eh? Can’t abide the stuff. Never could see how a human could handle it. Like drinking an oil slick.”

Unable to resist, Shabalala added, “Only without the tangy aftertaste.”

Sisko laughed. Keogh didn’t. Shabalala shrugged, having expected precisely that reaction.

“Curzon Dax introduced me to it when I served under him as an ensign. I’m afraid it’s become something of an addiction.” Sisko took a seat on the couch against the outer bulkhead of the quarters.

Through the window over Sisko’s head, Shabalala could see the spires of Deep Space 9 from the Odyssey’s vantage point at one of the station’s upper pylons.

Looking like a hollowed-out crab, the station had the aesthetic sense that

Shabalala would have expected from the Cardassian Union, who built it as the

seat of their occupation of Bajor decades before: hideous. Shabalala preferred the sleeker, rounded designs of Starfleet.

“You knew Dax?” Keogh said, taking a seat on the chair perpendicular to the couch. “Good lord, I haven’t heard from the old man in years. How is he doing?”

“He isn’t—exactly,” Sisko said with a smile. “Curzon died three years ago. Dax is now in Jadzia, a lieutenant in Starfleet, and my chief science officer.”

“Jadzia? You mean to say that Curzon Dax is a woman now?”

Sisko nodded.

“Some would call that ironic. Others would call it poetic justice.”

Again, Sisko smiled. “I call it lucky enough to get a damn fine science officer.”

Diplomatically put, Shabalala thought, but was wise enough not to say aloud.

Keogh tilted his head. “Perhaps. In any event, Commander, we didn’t come to your station to talk about mutual acquaintances. What’s this assignment you need my ship for?”

Sisko took a sip of raktajino, then set the mug down on the coffee table and leaned back on the sofa. “It’s several assignments, actually, Captain. Admiral Todd-man said you’d be detached to the Bajoran sector for the next two weeks.”

Shabalala smiled. “Those are the precise words he used with us. They were also the only words he used.”

“We were told you would elaborate,” Keogh added.

“Bajor is still trying to rebuild after the Occupation. Unfortunately, Cardassian mining operations have ruined some of their most arable lands. My first officer, Major Kira, has come up with a plan to convert a part of Bajor’s second moon to farmland. She and Lieutenant Dax wrote a proposal that both the

provisional government and Starfleet approved.”

Keogh nodded. “And you want the Odyssey to set up the farm?”

“Eventually, yes,” Sisko said with a small smile. “There’s something you need to do first.”

“Oh?”

Shabalala had to stop himself from grinning. Keogh only said “Oh?” like that when he expected to hear something he wouldn’t like.

“Well, what’s a farm without farmers? You need to pick up a group that has volunteered to toil in the fields. They’re presently in the Valo system on the Cardassian border—specifically on the ninth planet. The Enterprise relocated them there two years ago.”

This rings a bell, Shabalala thought. “Isn’t that where many Bajorans set up resettlement camps?”

Nodding, Sisko added, “And also the base for some of their offworld terrorist activity against the Cardassians. One terrorist in particular has stayed away from Bajor even as all the other refugees were welcomed home after the withdrawal.”

Keogh’s eyes smoldered. “You’re talking about Orta, aren’t you?”

“That’s the one,” Sisko said with a grin.

Standing, Keogh said, “Commander, you can’t possibly be serious. Orta’s a terrorist of the worst kind. He was never interested in Bajor’s freedom, he just wanted revenge against the Cardassians for maiming him.”

“I see you’re familiar with Orta’s file,” Sisko said dryly.

“I’ve had my share of run-ins with the Cardassians over the years, Commander Sisko. I’ve made it my business to know as much as I can about them—and their enemies. In any case, assuming Orta’s desire to come home and be a farmer is

genuine—which I very much doubt—why on Earth do you need my ship to get him back?”

“Orta refused to be escorted by a Bajoran ship. He asked for the Enterprise, but they’re unavailable, so he said another Starfleet ship would do. Since you’re in the area…” Sisko shrugged.

“Wonderful,” Keogh said, sitting back down. “I’ve been reduced to Picard’s understudy.”

Shabalala kept his best poker face on and asked, “After we’ve delivered Orta and his followers to their new home, Commander, what then?”

“Then,” Sisko said, picking up his raktajino, “it’s a matter of getting the farming colony started. There’s some material you’ll need that’s on Bajor right now, plus part of the plan calls for use of a starship’s phasers to change the composition of the land.”

Keogh actually looked intrigued by that. “Really?”

“The moon’s surface is primarily rock, but the top layers are cooled lava. Dax has come up with a way to use a ship’s phasers to convert that to soil. We’ll provide you with all the specifics,” Sisko added quickly as Keogh opened his mouth to ask another question. Again, Shabalala kept his poker face intact.

Sisko went on: “Once that’s done, we’ll have some supplies for the New Bajor colony that you’ll need to bring through the wormhole to them, and then Admiral Toddman wants you to patrol the Cardassian border for a few days. Things have been a bit tense in the DMZ lately, and Starfleet wants a top-of-the-line ship to do border patrol—remind the Cardassians that we’re taking things seriously.”

“And perhaps remind our own people of what we stand for,” Keogh said irritably.

On this, Shabalala could get behind his captain. Many Starfleet personnel had

been joining the Maquis lately. A recent treaty ceded several Federation colonies near the Cardassian border to the Cardassian Union and vice versa, and also declared a Demilitarized Zone between Cardassian and Federation space. It probably seemed reasonable to the politicians who negotiated it, secure in the knowledge that it would have no direct bearing on their lives.

Meanwhile, Federation citizens who refused to give up their homes, even though those homes were no longer in Federation space, found themselves harassed by the Cardassian military. The situation deteriorated quickly, and a group of terrorists formed, naming themselves after the Maquis, resistance fighters from a twentieth-century war on Earth. Indeed, one of the Maquis founders was a former Starfleet lieutenant commander named Cal Hudson, and several Starfleet personnel had “defected” to the Maquis since then.

Keogh stared at Sisko. “Orta’s really interested in becoming a farmer?”

“I’ve spoken with Major Kira on the subject. She knows Orta better than anyone else on the station, though she’s only met him once. From the sounds of it, he doesn’t want to fight anymore, but he doesn’t trust the provisional government, either—and he has no interest in setting foot on Bajor again.”

“Why not?” Shabalala asked, confused.

“He was tortured on Bajor,” Sisko said quietly. “It’s not always easy to put aside those associations.”

Shabalala thought about how he would react if he ever had to return to Patnira.

“I see your point.”

Again, Keogh stood up. “Well, if that’s what Starfleet wants us to do, it’s what we’ll do. But I don’t see any good reason to like it. Mark my words, Commander—Orta is a killer. I’ve studied many freedom fighters in my time, including your own Major Kira, and he does not fit the bill. He’s a killer who

happened to find a semi-legitimate outlet for his need for vengeance. Bringing him to Bajor in anything other than a prison transport is a mistake. I just hope we all live to regret it.”

Sisko and Shabalala also stood up, Sisko finishing his raktajino as he did so.

“I hope so, too, Captain. I’ll have Lieutenant Dax forward the specifications of the farm’s setup to you so you can study it on your way to Valo.”

Again, the just-barely-a-smile. “Thank you, Commander. Mr. Shabalala will show you to the transporter room.”

“We’ll see you back here tomorrow, then.”

“Barring complications, yes.” Keogh shook the tall commander’s hand. The captain looked even more sour than usual as he looked at Sisko’s smiling face. He was definitely expecting those complications.

After they left, Sisko said to Shabalala, “You were awfully quiet in there.”

“Had nothing to say.”

Sisko shot him a look.

Smiling, Shabalala added, “Well, nothing that was worth trying to get a word in to say, anyhow. I’ve found that Captain Keogh’s monologues are best left uninterrupted. He always finishes them anyhow; it just takes longer if he has to start over.”

Sisko laughed at that, and Shabalala joined in the laugh.

As they entered the turbolift, Sisko said, “Keogh may be right about one thing—Orta’s record isn’t exactly spotless. He’s not the only former resistance member who’s stayed away from Bajor, but he is the most vocal.”

“I know, I’ve seen some of his speeches.” At Sisko’s surprised look, Shabalala shrugged. “Captain Keogh isn’t the only one who’s studied Cardassia’s enemies.

Orta's a borderline anarchist. He makes those Kohn-Ma fellows you put down last year look positively calm by comparison. I just don't see him as the farming type."

The turbolift stopped and its doors opened. As Shabalala led Sisko out, the latter said, "I tend to agree, but this is what the chamber of ministers wanted—and they wouldn't approve the farming plan if Orta wasn't part of it." "I thought Bajor needed this farm. Why would they jeopardize it just to please someone like Orta?"

Sisko smiled. "They're politicians."

Snorting, Shabalala said, "An excellent point."

"Seriously, they need to pull all the old factions in. If Bajor's going to get back on its feet, it needs all of Bajor—even the anarchists. They can't afford another internal squabble like that mess earlier this year."

"The Circle?" Shabalala remembered reading about the Alliance for Global Unity—or, simply, the Circle—that had attempted a coup d'état, leading to Starfleet temporarily abandoning Bajor and Deep Space 9. Sisko and his crew had exposed the Circle as being supplied by Cardassia—something even the Circle themselves did not know—and the coup died aborning. But that kind of unrest was not uncommon on Bajor even now, and Shabalala saw the wisdom in the provisional government attempting to unify the factions in order to avoid another such civil conflict.

"We'll keep you apprised of our progress, Commander," Shabalala said as they entered the transporter room.

Nodding as he stepped onto the platform, Sisko said, "Energize."

It had all been going too smoothly—Orta knew that now. Not a single military

ship had even come close, despite their going through one of the more densely populated shipping lines, and when they landed on the planetoid, they had met no resistance until they reached the rendezvous in the caves.

Cardassians loved their theatrical trials, after all, and it would be a much better show if they had footage of Orta actually purchasing the weapons from the Yridian.

Once the transaction was completed, it was as if the Cardassian soldiers grew out of the rock. It was ironic, since Orta himself had been the one to insist on meeting in the caves. Orta had always preferred dark spaces far underground. Sensors didn't work as well underground, and the darkness was better for Orta's guerilla tactics than Central Command's more overt ones.

But this time they used that predilection against him. They got the Yridian to make the deal, and made the weapons—stolen Starfleet phaser rifles—impossible for Orta to resist. It was the perfect setup, and Orta fell for it.

They brought him to Bajor, of course. It was the first time he'd set foot on his homeworld since he stowed away in the cargo hold of a Ferengi trader at the age of ten. His foster parents—Orta had been orphaned as an infant—had just died. They were collaborators who had made the mistake of betraying the Cardassians to help a group of Bajoran refugees. They tried to play both ends, and wound up disintegrated for their trouble.

Orta had no great love for his foster parents, but he had less for the Cardassians who rewarded their compassion with death. He swore he would show them death.

He showed them plenty. For twenty years, "Orta" went from being the name of a forgotten runaway orphan to that of the scourge of the Cardassians. He made

dozens of strikes against Bajor's oppressors, gaining a deserved reputation for brutality. It got to the point where every off-Bajor terrorist act was credited to Orta whether he was involved or not.

And now they had captured him. He had brought only one compatriot to the rendezvous, and she had died in the firefight. Central Command knew he had dozens of followers. The trial would be much more effective if it ended with a score of executions instead of one. But Orta would not yield, not to the glinn who ruined his face on the transport, nor to the Obsidian Order agent who carved out his vocal cords on Bajor.

When even the vaunted Obsidian Order proved unable to pry the information out of Orta, they—in a rare show of cooperation with Central Command—agreed to transfer Orta to a gul named Madred. Orta knew of many who had been sent to Madred. None returned unbroken.

That was when he struck back.

The Cardassians' mistake was in thinking that burning off half his face and allowing him to speak only through the benefit of an electronic vocoder attached to his neck had softened him up, with Madred prepared to deliver the killing blow.

It only increased his determination.

Orta never found out the name of the Obsidian Order agent who ruined his larynx.

But as Orta carved the man to pieces with the very kitchen knife the agent had used to cut his food while eating in front of a starving Orta for days on end, the Bajoran pretended that it was his foster mother he was killing, that it was his foster father who screamed in agony, that it was the Cardassian who'd killed them who begged for his life.

His people rescued him at great risk to themselves. A team of fifteen had

mounted the rescue mission, and only four of them—counting Orta himself—made it back to the Valo system.

Within an hour of his return, he had already planned an assault on Central Command's listening post at Chin'toka.

Each Cardassian he killed was that Obsidian Order agent, that glinn, Madred, his foster parents—it didn't matter. None of it mattered, as long as Cardassians continued to die. It would never end.

Orta woke up suddenly. He did not scream—he could not even if he felt the urge to. His vocoder lay on the ground next to his pallet. Without it, he could not utter any sounds. With it, he spoke clearly and eloquently, albeit with a slight artificial timbre. With the damage done to his face, his mouth could not properly form words in any case. In many ways, the Obsidian Order agent had done him a favor. Had he left his vocal cords intact, Orta's speaking voice would have been slurred, distorted, foolish. Forced to rely on technology, he could still rally his people to his cause with the same eloquence he'd had before his temporary capture.

At least for a while. After a time, the terrorists' equipment started breaking down. Weapons ceased to function, warp drives went inert, and Orta's reputation had grown to such epic proportions that everyone was scared to even do business with him. The Cardassians made it clear that anyone caught dealing with Orta would receive the strictest punishment possible. His activities became curtailed, limited to strikes on the border at the Valo system. It got to the point that the Cardassians' attempt to frame Orta for the attack on the Federation colony at Solarion IV failed because the terrorist's own resources had dwindled to the point that such an attack was no longer physically possible

for him to achieve.

Two years ago came the final insult: the cause no longer existed. The Cardassians had withdrawn from Bajor. His homeworld was free. Orta had thought it too good to be true—a trick to lull the refugees, the terrorists, the freedom fighters out of hiding and then have them all killed.

Instead, he soon realized, the Cardassians had played the ultimate joke on Bajor: they now had to govern them-selves. They proved as inept as Orta had feared. A “provisional” government formed. At the first opportunity, they begged the cowards of the Federation for help; they fell victim to internecine politics and attempted coups. The only leader on the planet worth a damn was Kai Opaka, and she died within months of the withdrawal.

Bajor was still helpless. Orta had been helpless twice in his life. He saw no good reason to repeat the experience.

So he had resisted all attempts to bring him “home.” The caves of Valo IX were more of a home than Bajor ever would be, as long as Bajorans remained weak and foolish.

But his followers grew restless. The Cardassians had gone, and they were left with nothing. Without the Cardassians to rally against, they lost their fire, their motivation. In truth, so had Orta. True, he would always desire vengeance against the people who had destroyed his homeworld, destroyed his family, destroyed him—but that could only go so far with the others.

Then he found the prophecy.

Orta’s gift had always been the ability to form plans in an instant. He had not been in Valo five minutes after being rescued from weeks of torture before he had come up with the scheme to destroy the base at Chin’toka. Likewise, as soon as he came across the prophecy in a derelict civilian vessel that his people had

salvaged after it drifted into Valo, a new plan formed. He just needed to wait for the right moment—a moment that came when the provisional government came to him with an offer to go to Bajor's second moon.

“Ready to go through with it?”

Orta looked up to see Tova Syed, his most loyal lieutenant. They had first met as children on the refugee camp at Valo II. They had grown up together, suffered together, fought together. She had been the one to spearhead his rescue from the Cardassians, and she was one of the other three who survived the mission.

However, in the last two years, she had also been the one urging him most strongly to return to Bajor. Like Orta, she did not trust Bajor's provisional government, nor the Federation—but she did believe that the time for violence was over. When the enemy was Cardassia, they had to fight. This war, though, needed to be fought in other, more peaceful ways.

But she also always deferred to Orta in the end.

After affixing the vocoder to his neck, Orta said, “No, I'm not ready. I don't think I'll ever truly be ready to become a farmer.”

“Oh, I don't know,” she said with a smirk that made the scar over her nose ridge curve in an odd manner. “I think after twenty years of destruction, working to create something will be a nice change. In any case, the *Odyssey*'s here to take us to the moon.”

“How wonderful.” Orta had been disappointed in Starfleet's choice of escort. He had no love for the Federation, but he had liked Jean-Luc Picard—mainly because the *Enterprise* captain had made his Federation superiors look like the fools they were for falling for the Cardassians' frame of Orta—and had been looking forward to seeing him again.

“Turns out that the Odyssey is of the same class as the Enterprise.”

Orta made what would have been a snort when his larynx worked. “As if that mattered. It was Picard I wanted, not a ship that happens to look like his.” He sighed, the one sound he could still make on his own. “Is everything in readiness?”

Tova nodded.

“Then let us prepare to depart.”

He got up and headed toward the entryway to the alcove that Orta had taken over as his “bedroom.” As he passed Tova, she put a hand on his shoulder. Orta stopped and looked down at her battle-scarred face—and battle-weary eyes. Orta wondered if his own eyes would ever look like that, and was not at all disappointed to realize that they wouldn’t. Full of battle, yes, but never weary of it.

“This is the right thing to do,” she said.

“I wouldn’t have agreed to it if I did not think so, Syed.”

“You would if you had some other plan in mind. And you always have a plan. You have ever since we salvaged that derelict.”

“My plan is to bring about peace, Syed. That has always been the plan.”

Tova regarded Orta for several seconds before finally taking the hand off his shoulder. “I hope so,” she finally said.

Then they went together to the beam-out sight.

It was time to leave Valo behind.

It was time to go home.

Chapter Nine

“ENTERINGBAJORAN SYSTEM .”

Declan Keogh nodded at his first officer after that report from the conn.

Shabalala returned the nod and said, “Go to impulse and set course for the second moon.”

“Aye, sir.”

The pickup had gone well enough, Keogh mused. He had been worried that Orta and his people would cause a scene, but—though they could hardly have been described as docile—they came on board with a minimum of fuss. They had spent their time in their quarters, with some of them venturing to Ten-Forward. The latter group—which did not include Orta—took to sitting in a corner, not mixing in with the rest of the crew. Hardly an auspicious omen for a group that’s supposed to be involved in a cooperative effort, Keogh thought disdainfully. He knew this mission was going to end badly.

“Commander, take a look at this,” said the second officer, Maritza Gonzalez, from the ops position.

In reply, Shabalala went over to the ops console and peered at the readouts therein. “What am I looking at?” he asked.

“Bajor’s moons,” Gonzalez said. “I just compared their orbital paths—in a few days, almost all of them will be perfectly aligned for about half an hour. The funny thing is, the only one that won’t be is the second one.”

“Put it on screen, Lieutenant.”

Keogh looked at the display—to the naked eye, the moons seemed scattered in various orbits as usual, but when Gonzalez overlaid indications of their orbital pathways, he saw that all but the second would indeed line up soon.

“Fascinating,” Keogh said with a nod. Then he frowned as he looked at the fifth moon. “Lieutenant Gonzalez, the fifth moon—that is Jeraddo, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.”

As displayed now, Jeraddo was a fiery red, looking about as uninhabitable as a ball of flame, when Keogh was sure that it was supposed to be Class-M. “So what in blazes happened to it?”

Gonzalez turned, gazing upon her captain with almond eyes. “Sir, Jeraddo’s core is being tapped as part of an energy-retrieval project begun by the Bajoran government a year and a half ago.”

Keogh nodded. “Very well. Thank you, Lieutenant.” Silently, the captain chastised himself. He had tried to familiarize himself with all aspects of this mission, but that particular fact had eluded him.

“Sir,” Shabalala said, “another ship is coming into orbit of the second moon.”

“It’s a Danube -class runabout,” Gonzalez added. “Registry reads as the Rio Grande.”

From behind him at the tactical station, Lieutenant Talltree said, “We’re being hailed by a Major Kira Nerys on the runabout.”

Shabalala moved back to the command section and took his seat next to Keogh while saying, “On screen, Mr. Talltree.”

The display of Bajoran moons was replaced with the image of a Bajoran woman in a red uniform of that planet’s Militia. Next to her was a Trill in a blue Starfleet uniform.

“This is Captain Keogh of the Odyssey,” he said. “You must be Major Kira.”

“Yes,” she said simply. “Welcome back, Captain. This is DS9’s science officer, Lieutenant Dax.”

Keogh blinked. It had been one thing to be told that Curzon Dax was now a woman named Jadzia, but being confronted with the rather attractive reality was still jarring. He recovered quickly, however, and said, “A pleasure, Lieutenant. It’s been a long time.”

Dax frowned. "Excuse me?"

"We, ah, met on the Lexington about twenty-five years ago."

"I'm sorry, Captain, I'm afraid—oh, wait," she added, her face brightening.

"Deco Keogh?"

Shifting uncomfortably in his chair, Keogh said in a hard voice, "It's been quite some time since anyone called me that, Lieutenant."

"Of course, Captain. I just didn't recognize you with so much less hair. My apologies. It's good to see you again, too."

Damn the woman, he thought angrily, she has that same smile Curzon had whenever he said something guaranteed to embarrass you.

To Keogh's relief, neither Shabalala nor Gonzalez nor Talltree visibly reacted to Dax's comment. He did notice Ensign Doyle at conn was trying to hide a snicker, and he was quite sure that the other junior personnel at the aft stations were doing likewise. I'll deal with that later, he thought angrily.

"We're preparing the required modifications to our phasers, and we have a full team standing by to help set the colony up on the surface, along with your farmers from the Valo system."

"So Orta did come," Kira said with a nod. "I wasn't sure he would."

"Honestly, Major, neither was I. I still doubt his intentions. But he's here, as are his followers."

"Good." Next to her, the Trill started manipulating controls. "Lieutenant Dax is transmitting beam-down coordinates for both Orta's people and your team."

"Excellent. We'll meet you there, Major. Odyssey out." As the screen went blank, Keogh stood up, Shabalala doing likewise next to him. "Mr. Talltree, have Orta and his people gather in Transporter Room 3 and have them beamed to the major's

first set of coordinates. Have the scientific team meet Mr. Shabalala and myself in Transporter Room 1.”

“Yes, sir,” the large security chief said from the tactical station.

“You have the conn, Lieutenant,” he said to Gonzalez, who nodded and moved to the command chair.

Shabalala let Keogh enter the turbolift first, then followed him in and said,

“Transporter Room 1.”

Keogh nodded to his first officer. He liked Shabalala. After the string of incompetents that Starfleet had saddled him with over the years, he was grateful to have someone who properly served as an interface between him and his crew, and who kept his ship operating at peak efficiency—in other words, what a first officer was supposed to do.

As soon as the doors closed, Shabalala said, “‘Deco,’ sir?”

“Commander, let me be perfectly clear: I don’t ever expect hear that word again.”

“Of course, Captain,” Shabalala said with an emphatic nod.

“And I want Ensign Doyle reprimanded for her behavior.”

“Naturally, sir.”

Keogh nodded, confident that this would truly be the end of it. Shabalala had served under Captain Simon on the Fearless—a good commander whom Keogh had been sorry to see lost, especially under such horrendous circumstances. Simon and Shabalala both were the kind who understood the need to run a tight ship.

Within minutes, they had beamed down to the moon, along with a team of both science and engineering personnel led by Keogh’s chief engineer, Commander Rodzinski.

Keogh was not encouraged by what he saw. The moon was a dark, desolate place.

Long stretches of barren ground to his left were broken only by small markers. In the distance was a single mountain—which, he recalled from his reading of Kira’s proposal, was an inactive volcano, one of several on the moon. The moon also had an underground network of rivers. One of the teams from the *Odyssey* had been assigned to set up the irrigation system that would tap those rivers. Meantime, those markers were placeholders for the Starfleet-issue prefabricated housing structures that would serve as the farmers’ homes. To Keogh’s right was a large expanse of equally barren land, but without the markers. Most of this would be the actual farmland, once the *Odyssey*’s soon-to-be-modified phasers did their work to turn the rock into arable soil. Worse, it was cold. Part of that was because the sun had set. For approximately six months of the year—a period that would end in a month’s time—the sun was “up” only four of every fourteen hours. That was why this was the optimum time to start this project—by the time the seeds they planted were ready to sprout in a month’s time, the moon’s rotation would take it out of the shadow of the third moon, and the sun would be up for twelve of those fourteen hours. The sound of a Starfleet transporter beam heralded the arrival of Kira and Dax. Kira smiled as she looked at Keogh. “Doesn’t look like much, does it?” Keogh actually returned the smile. “I was just thinking that, Major. But then, that’s what you need me and my ship for. So, let’s get to work, shall we? I looked over your proposal while we went to pick up Orta and his people, and I put together a plan of attack, as it were. We should start—” “Uh, Captain?” Dax said in a voice that sounded like she was talking to a child, a tone Keogh rather resented. “We already have a plan.” “Lieutenant, you’re using my staff, my equipment, my ship—I think, therefore,

that I've earned the right to implement their deployment.”

“Captain—”

“Why don't you two talk this out,” Kira said quickly, stepping between the two of them. “I'm willing to bet that there's a common ground the two of you can find.”

“Major,” Keogh said, “I see no reason—”

Kira now stood right in front of Keogh. She was shorter than Keogh by half a head, but no less impressive for that. “Captain, this is my project. I'm the one who conceived it, I'm the one who practically shoved it down the chamber of ministers' throats. The Bajoran government has also put me in charge of the project.”

“Are you giving me an order, Major?” Keogh had to admit that he liked this woman's aggressiveness, but there were chain-of-command issues to be settled here. Kira was subordinate to Deep Space 9's commander—whom Keogh outranked. He wanted there to be no question of who gave orders to whom on this mission.

Kira's smile grew wider—and it was the smile of a predator swooping down on prey. “Starfleet is a guest of Bajor, Captain. As your host, I'm asking you to work with Lieutenant Dax. She helped me write the proposal, including developing all the technical aspects of it. Her presentation of those aspects is a lot of what sold this to the provisional government. You've only known about this project for a day. I would think you'd want the input of someone with more experience.”

Nodding, Keogh said, “An excellent point. Very well, Lieutenant, let's see what you have in mind.”

Smiling much more sweetly than Kira was, Dax said, “Happy to, Deco.”

Keogh winced.

As Joe Shabalala led Kira to where Orta and his people had beamed down, she asked, “How, exactly, do you put up with him?”

Smiling, Shabalala said, “I grind my teeth a great deal.”

Kira laughed. “That’s usually how I deal with the chamber of ministers. It’s the main reason why they sent me up to DS9. I’m far enough away that they can only hear me shouting when I contact them on subspace, and even then, they can always cut me off. They like…” She trailed off. Her eye was caught by something on the horizon. Shabalala followed her gaze.

Bajor was starting to rise.

Shabalala had seen an Earthrise from Luna once—the sight of the huge blue ball slowly coming into view over Armstrong City had left him in openmouthed amazement for a good fifteen minutes. His wife had told him he was going to catch flies if he wasn’t careful. He pointed out that there were no flies on the moon, but that sort of logic never deterred Aleta.

As glorious as that sight had been, Bajor’s rise was even more spectacular.

Whether it was because the green-tinged planet took up more room in the moon’s sky than Earth did in Luna’s, Shabalala couldn’t say—and right now, he didn’t care that much.

“When I was younger,” Kira said, “I came up to the fifth moon with my resistance cell. Prylar Istani used to make me stop and watch every time there was a Bajor-rise. I used to think it was a waste of time, but she was a prylar, so I watched, waited for it to be over, and got back to work. After a while, though, I started to appreciate it. Once I started watching them without her, she said she was glad. ‘That’s what we’re fighting for, Nerys,’ she used to say. ‘Don’t

ever forget that.”

“Wise woman,” Shabalala said.

Kira nodded. “I haven’t forgotten, I can tell you that.” She smiled sheepishly.

“Sorry, Commander.”

“That’s quite all right,” Shabalala said. “This project obviously means a lot to you.”

“Bajor means a lot to me,” Kira said with a quiet vehemence that impressed Shabalala, and frightened him a bit. “This project will help Bajor, so yeah, you could say it’s important. And I don’t want it messed up because a Starfleet captain’s ego is larger than the quadrant.”

Shabalala laughed. “Don’t worry, Major. Part of my job description is to keep Captain Keogh’s ego at least planet-sized. We’ll get this done.”

“So there’s Bajor.”

Starting in surprise, Shabalala whirled around to see a Bajoran wearing a scarf around his head. The scarf obscured most of his face. The voice with which he had spoken so suddenly was mechanical and cold.

Orta.

The odd voice continued. “It’s good to see you again, Nerys—though I’m surprised to see you in that uniform.”

“I’m doing what I can to help our home, Orta. Now, so are you. And if you ask me, it’s about damn time.”

“Are you questioning my loyalty, Nerys?” Despite his computerized voice, Orta managed to imbue his question with a fair amount of menace. Shabalala suddenly wished he’d thought to bring a phaser.

Kira smiled sweetly—a smile that scared Shabalala even more than her earlier vehemence—and looked Orta right in the eye. Though Orta was not as tall as

Keogh, he was still taller than the major, but she managed to look bigger even as she gazed up at him. “I’m not questioning anything, Orta—except for what took you so long to come home.”

“I’m here now. And I’m eager to serve. So tell us what we are to do, and we shall do it.” He pointed at the rising planet. “For the greater glory of Bajor.”

Kira pointed to a security detail about a quarter-kilometer away. Lieutenant Talltree had sent most of his staff down to aid in the preparations. Shabalala also noticed some Bajoran Militia security amongst them, no doubt lent by Deep Space 9.

“Good,” Kira said. “You can start by helping those Starfleet people set up the processors. The ground needs to be properly prepared before the Odyssey can start the operation. It’ll go faster if you help them out.”

Orta stared down at Kira, then looked over at the security people. “Two years ago, Cardassians trembled at my name. Now I’m preparing ground for farming. Some would call that tragic.”

“Really?” Shabalala said. “I’d call it progress.”

“I’m sure you would, Commander. I’d think that you have never had to fight for your very survival.”

Unbidden, images from the final mission of the Fearless entered Shabalala’s head. He banished them quickly. “You’d think incorrectly. It’s true that I’ve never had to live in caves, or wonder where my next meal was coming from. I’ve never been physically tortured or mutilated. But don’t think I’ve never had to fight, and don’t think I don’t know what it means to fight for something. The question for you is, were you fighting for Bajor or against the Cardassians? If it was the former, then now you’ve got a chance to make that fight mean

something.”

Orta stared at Shabalala for several seconds before turning and heading toward the security detail without another word.

“Nicely put,” Kira said, giving her fellow first officer an appreciative look.

Shrugging, Shabalala said, “I simply said what I believed—as you did, Major. We shall see soon enough if it actually meant anything. What was that?” he added, hearing some shouting in the distance.

“What was what?” Kira asked.

Closing his eyes, Shabalala listened closer. Then he sighed. “Captain Keogh is yelling at Lieutenant Dax. If you’ll excuse me, Major, I’ll leave you to make sure Orta and his people prepare the ground. I need to go save my captain.”

“Good luck,” Kira said with a chuckle.

For Shabalala’s part, he winced at his own phrasing. Save my captain indeed, he thought. You aren’t exactly overburdened with a good track record in that regard, are you, Joe?

As he got closer, the shouting coalesced from Keogh-sounding noise to coherent words from the captain’s mouth: “—and then we can fire away.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Dax’s voice was not quite as loud as Keogh’s, but she, too, had raised her voice.

“No, Lieutenant, what’s ridiculous is wasting the time it will take to prepare the ground.”

Shabalala put on his best smile and asked, “Is something wrong?”

“Nothing is ‘wrong,’ Commander—” Keogh started.

“Except,” Dax interrupted, “that your captain’s not thinking things through.”

Keogh was about to say something else, but Dax overlaid him. “With all due respect, sir,” she said with no respect in her tone whatsoever, “there’s too

much risk in what you're proposing."

"It will take time to prepare the ground and modify the phasers to the right heat and magnitude and get the irrigation system up and running before we're ready to begin," Keogh said. "While that's going on, we can have the housing entirely constructed—it'll shave a good twelve hours off the start time."

"Except," Dax said, "that the housing then comes under the risk of being hit by a stray phaser blast. Orbital blasting isn't exactly what you'd call an exact science."

"We can protect the houses with force fields."

"Or we can protect them by not building them at all until after there's weapons fire nearby."

"My ship is capable of precision firing, Lieutenant," Keogh said tartly.

Shabalala sighed. This was typical Keogh: once he got an idea into his head, you couldn't get it out with a phaser rifle. Even though Dax was obviously right, Keogh would not easily give in on this point.

"Captain," Shabalala said before Dax could say another word, "our timetable is such that we don't need to rush this. Yes, we'd save twelve hours—but that would be twelve hours we'd spend sitting on our hands. We can't go to New Bajor for another three days in any case, as the supplies won't be at DS9 until then. Why take the chance—admittedly, a small one, but still a chance—that something will go wrong with the phasing?"

Keogh glanced at his first officer. "I suppose you're right, Commander, but I still feel like we're wasting time."

With that, he turned and walked away.

Dax looked at Shabalala and said, "Thank you. Is he always this—this—"

“Single-minded?” Shabalala asked with a smile.

Chuckling, Dax said, “I was going to say arrogant, but that works, too.” She turned toward the small mess area that had been set up a few meters away. “Join me for a cup of raktajino?”

“Gladly,” Shabalala said, following the intriguing lieutenant toward the circular array of benches and tables, in the center of which sat a replicator.

About a dozen blue-and gold-shirted individuals sat at assorted benches—mostly noncommissioned engineers and science personnel who were taking a break from either irrigation or ground-preparation duty. Shabalala was proud to realize that he knew the names of each of them—and after being on board this ship with its complement of a thousand only for three months. “In any case, with the captain it’s mostly a matter of managing him. He is a good CO.”

Dax snorted. “Never thought I’d hear that about Deco Keogh.” They arrived at the replicator. “Two raktajinos.”

Shabalala smiled as the two Klingon coffees materialized. Dax had just given him a handy opening. “All right, Lieutenant, I have to ask—why do you keep calling him that?” It had, in fact, been the real reason why he agreed to join her in the raktajino.

“Because that’s what he asked me to call him.” Dax’s smile was very small and very mischievous looking—in fact, to Shabalala’s amusement, she looked exactly like his eleven-year-old daughter when she did something she wasn’t supposed to do. She handed him his mug, and they both sat down at an empty table. “He was a brash young lieutenant when I met him—and I was a cranky old male ambassador named Curzon who didn’t suffer brash young officers gladly.”

“That can’t be all there is to it?”

The smile widened. “No.” She took a sip of raktajino. Shabalala did likewise,

and was instantly reminded why he mostly avoided this particular drink. Gamely, he swallowed the bitter liquid anyhow.

“So what’s the rest of it?” Shabalala asked, realizing that Dax wasn’t about to volunteer it.

“There was this woman.”

Unable to help himself, Shabalala laughed. “Why is it that every embarrassing story about a human male in his youth starts with the phrase, ‘There was this woman’?”

“Not sure,” Dax said thoughtfully, “but you’re right, it is a universal constant. In any event, I was on the Lexington for a diplomatic assignment—they were hosting a conference with the Antedeans. Young Lieutenant Keogh was chief of security, so he and I interacted quite a bit, since the Antedeans are prickly.”

“I thought they hated travelling through space.”

Nodding, Dax said, “They do. But as long as we didn’t hit the warp drive, we were fine. Anyway, remember this was two-and-a-half decades ago. So your esteemed captain looked—well, a bit different.”

“Different how?”

“Full head of lustrous brown hair down to his middle back, which he kept tied back in a ponytail.”

Shabalala blinked. He suddenly wished he’d ordered a Saurian brandy—a real one—instead of raktajino. “Captain Keogh? In a ponytail?”

Dax nodded. “And you know, looking back, he wasn’t at all bad looking. Not really my type, but I can see why several women on the ship vied for his attention.”

Grinning, Shabalala said, “Really?”

“Oh yes. Now the opening reception was supposed to happen on the rec deck. The night before the Antedeans were supposed to beam on board, I went down there to make sure all the preparations and such were in order.

“Unfortunately,” and here Dax’s smile grew deeper without growing wider somehow, “somebody was using the room, and had forgotten to engage the privacy seal.”

Shuddering, Shabalala said, “Captain Keogh?”

“Ol’Deco himself, with a female crewmate in a very compromising position.”

Now I really wish this was a Saurian brandy, Shabalala thought with a plaintive look at his beverage. “I believe, Lieutenant, that that mental image will haunt me until my dying day.”

“How do you think I feel? I’m stuck with that image for dozens of lifetimes.”

He raised his mug. “My sympathies.”

“You did ask, Commander.”

“Yes. Yes, I did.” He drained the bitter brew, hoping it would wash the taste of the image in his head out. At that, it failed rather spectacularly. He shook his head. “It’s funny, these days, he wouldn’t be out of place on a Vulcan ship. I wonder what happened to change him.”

“He got older—it happens to all of us. Well, most of us. Some of us get to do it all over again.”

“Lucky you.” Shabalala rose. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go wash my mind out with soap. Thank you for the drink.”

Dax’s face never lost that little smile of hers. “You’re welcome.”

Chapter Ten

“W E ’ RE READY TO BEGIN on your signal, Captain.”

From the command center that they had set up ten kilometers from the farm site,

Keogh said, “Thank you, Mr. Talltree,” to the image of his security chief on the small viewscreen. “Stand by.”

The command center included a large portable science console from which they could monitor the phasing of the future farmland. Keogh turned to look at Dax.

“Are we ready, Lieutenant?”

The science officer frowned as she peered down at the readings she was getting.

“Give me a minute,” she said distractedly.

The past eighteen hours had been a nightmare for Keogh. The new Dax managed to be even more irritating than the old one, and her arrogance had to be seen to be believed. She simply had to do things her way. Pulling rank was a lost cause, as she seemed to be much more the centuries-old Trill than the twenty-nine-year-old Starfleet lieutenant she appeared.

Just because she knew me when I was young and foolish is no reason—

He cut the thought off as unworthy of him.

She was a talented scientist, he gave her that much at least. But how Sisko put up with her on a daily basis was beyond him.

The operation itself was, Keogh had to admit, rather elegant. The moon was, basically, a big rock made up of solidified lava and extinct volcanoes. Talltree had modified the phasers to vary temperatures so that it would pulverize the surface layer of scoria and pumice into component minerals. Phase one would have the mineral grains heat and cool, expand and contract—the functional equivalent of several decades of seasonal weathering without having to actually wait several decades. The scoria and pumice would turn into fine-grained dust, which would then be inundated with water from the irrigation system. After that, phase two would consist of more phasing to simulate more decades of seasonal

weathering, resulting in a mixture of clay, sand, and mineral grains. After that, phase three would be the simple mixing of organic matter—presently in an Odyssey cargo bay, fresh from Bajor—with the transformed lava via the transporter and, as Dax had said, “Presto-change-o- poof! We have arable land.” Kira and Shabalala were on the runabout, monitoring the operation from there. It was one of the few recommendations Keogh had made that Kira and Dax had actually listened to. The likelihood of something going wrong on either the moon or on the Odyssey was minimal, but it was worth having the Rio Grande in reserve, both as a monitoring station, and as an armed vessel.

“Okay, we’re ready,” Dax said. “I thought there was an anomalous reading, but it was just a higher concentration of minerals. Nothing to worry about.”

“If you say so,” Keogh muttered. Then he turned to the viewer. He was about to instruct Talltree to prepare to fire, but the security chief’s image had been replaced by the standby screen. “What the hell?”

Then Gonzalez’s round face appeared. “Captain, we have a bit of a problem. There’s a civilian ship entering orbit, and her captain wants to speak to you.”

“We’re a little busy down here, Commander. Tell her—”

“I’ve already told her, sir. She insists on speaking to ‘the person in charge.’”

Dax smiled. “I say, sic Major Kira on her.”

“Very funny.”

“Sir, she’s threatening to fire on us and the Rio Grande. It’s crazy—she couldn’t put a dent in our shields, and even the runabout would probably give her a run for her money—but it would be a nuisance.”

“Firing on a lesser vessel is hardly a ‘nuisance,’ Lieutenant,” Keogh snapped.

“Of course, sir, I’m sorry, it’s just—”

“Never mind. Let’s just get this over with so we can move on. Put the captain on the viewer down here.”

“Switching.”

Gonzalez’s face was replaced by the most amazing sight Declan Keogh had seen since he first met his now-ex-wife twenty years ago.

“I’m Aidulac, captain of the Sun ,” the woman said with a bright smile that seemed to light up the viewer. “I have this problem that I’m sure you could easily solve.”

“Of course, Captain,” Keogh said happily. “Anything you want.”

“Captain—” Dax started, but Keogh ignored her.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to wait a while. We’re in the midst of an operation that requires phasering the surface of the moon we’re on. As soon as that’s done, I promise to do whatever I can to solve your problem.”

“Captain—” Dax started again, but Keogh waved her off.

“That’s very kind of you, Captain, I’m extremely grateful to you for your help—but I’m afraid I’m in a bit of a rush. Do you think I could land on the moon before you start your operation?”

“I suppose it’s possible,” Keogh said without even considering it. All he wanted was to make sure that Aidulac was happy.

This time, Dax pulled him away from the viewer as she bellowed, “Captain!”

“Dammit, Lieutenant, I don’t see—”

Then his head cleared.

He tried to reconstruct the last minute or so, and found that he couldn’t. “What just happened?”

“Captain Keogh, please, you must believe me, I need to come down there.” Keogh

heard Aidulac's words, but refused to look at the viewer.

"Lieutenant, what the hell is going on?" he whispered.

"She's a Siren, Deco, and she's trying to trick you into letting her land."

Keogh had heard stories about the women of Pegasus Major IV who had been specially trained by the Peladon Affiliation to be irresistible to men, but he had always dismissed them as tall tales told at bars by older officers to junior officers or by junior officers to cadets.

As a Starfleet captain, Keogh had had his share of experiences with telepathy and mind control, including one rather nasty occasion last year when he'd been possessed by an energy creature that was trying to blow up a planet as a practical joke. He did not take kindly to it then, and he was out-and-out furious about it now.

"Keogh to Odyssey. Tactical specifications of the Sun, Mr. Talltree?"

"Ah, standard shields, one phaser bank, no torpedoes of any kind."

"So in your professional opinion—"

"We could take her out with one shot, sir. Maybe two."

"Did you copy that, Captain Aidulac? You have one minute to leave the Bajoran system, or we test to see which of Mr. Talltree's guesses is accurate."

"Very well, Captain. I'll leave." Aidulac's tone was petulant. "But you'll regret this, I promise you that."

Keogh heard the viewer switch off. Only then did he trust himself to look at it.

The weakness he'd shown irritated him—more so for having it happen in front of Dax, of all people.

"Gonzalez to Keogh. The Sun is leaving orbit, sir, and is now on a course for the Federation border."

"Good," Keogh said. "Mr. Talltree, ready phasers."

“Kira to Dax. Is everything okay down there, Jadzia?”

Dax was about to answer when Keogh interrupted. “A slight delay, Major. Nothing to worry about. We’ll begin the operation momentarily.”

“If you say so, Captain. Rio Grande out.”

Smiling sweetly at Keogh, Dax said, “Don’t worry, Deco. It could’ve happened to anyone. If your Commander Shabalala had been on the Odyssey instead of Gonzalez, she might have talked him into it.”

“Still and all, Lieutenant, I would appreciate it if you didn’t bring up the details of what just happened.”

Dax looked down at her console, still with that damned smile of Curzon’s. “As I recall, Captain, those were the exact words you said to me on the Lexington twenty-five years ago.” She then looked at him. “Besides, from what Ensign Pérez told me a few weeks later, it wasn’t really worth mentioning.”

Keogh closed his eyes. I knew she was going to bring something up sooner or later, either the holodeck or Curzon’s liaison with Rosita. So naturally, she mentions both in two sentences.

Then he opened them and, pointedly not looking at Dax, said, “Mr. Talltree, you may commence firing when ready.”

And feel free to aim a shot at Dax’s head.

* * *

Aidulac set a course out of the Bajoran system. Once she was safely out of range of either the Odyssey or the Rio Grande, she pounded a console out of frustration.

Damn, she thought, now I’ve got a bruised hand to go with my bruised ego.

She had hoped that her failure with Decker and Kirk was a fluke, that when the

next Instrument was revealed she would be able to convince whoever was in charge to turn the Instrument over to her.

But it was time she faced facts. Her skills had atrophied.

Of course they've atrophied, she admonished herself. It's been how long? She couldn't even remember how to keep track of the passage of time in Zalkatian terms anymore—it had been that long—but by Federation timekeeping, it had been ninety thousand years.

A long time to wait for someone to stumble across where those fool rebels had hidden the Instruments.

Things would have been so different if Malkus had never come to me. If he had never forced me to oversee the construction of the Instruments.

Of course, it wasn't as if she had a choice. Malkus was the supreme ruler of the entire Zalkat Union. Aidulac was a mere scientist working on a world as distant from the Homeworld as it was possible to be and still fall within the Union's borders. She had spent her life working in relative obscurity, developing new technologies, figuring out new ways to use existing technologies, and trying to stay out of the way of other people. Aidulac had always preferred solitude. Once something was finished, she sold the patent to someone else who would develop it and make it available to the general public.

She had set up shop on a small planetoid in a star system that she couldn't even remember the name of now. In the intervening millennia the sun had gone nova, the planetoid long since consumed by the star's death throes, but back then it was just another dying stellar body that nobody cared about except as a scientific curiosity.

Which was how Aidulac liked it.

The only company she had were robot servants, who only spoke when spoken to, the

occasional supply ship that would stop by, and the agents she employed to auction off the rights to anything she invented that might have practical mass-market use. Even then, she limited the contact as much as she could. She was only truly happy when she sat in her lab, trying to unlock the secrets of the universe. Since the universe was miserly with those secrets, the challenge had never lost its luster.

Then the strange ship arrived.

It had all the necessary authorization codes to enter orbit without being shot out of the sky by her automated defenses, which meant that they had been able to bribe that information out of one of her agents. At that moment, she sent out messages informing all her agents that their contracts were terminated, effective immediately, and she made a note to begin searching for new ones the next day.

The ship identified itself as the flagship of Malkus the Mighty. Aidulac was skeptical, obviously, but Malkus's flagship was identifiable through a variety of unique and secure identifiers—most of which were based on Aidulac's own designs.

“Very well,” she told the obsequious young man who contacted her. “I will grant The Mighty One an audience.”

That left the young man nonplussed, but he signed off, and within minutes, Malkus had shifted down to the surface—specifically, to the atrium where Aidulac received her few visitors.

She had seen images of The Mighty One, of course—they were impossible to avoid—and she had expected the reality to be disappointing. After all, it was extremely easy to make oneself better looking, more charismatic, and larger than

life on a viewing surface, but, in Aidulac's experience, few accomplished it in real life.

Malkus, however, was one of those few. He stood half a head taller than Aidulac—who was unusually tall herself—and had a bearing that could only be described as regal. Even though the atrium had directed lighting that emphasized the potted plants and sculptures that she had placed to make the room more relaxing, it seemed that every light in the room shone on him.

She knew the rituals of her people. She bowed from the waist and said, "Mighty One."

When he spoke, it was in honeyed tones that practically begged to have every word hung on to in the hopes of gaining great pearls of wisdom.

"I am told that you were granting me an audience. I rather thought it was the other way around." The smile that accompanied this statement took the threatening edge off his words, though Aidulac now noted that his four bodyguards—whose presence she hadn't even registered—had moved their hands to their rather large (if still holstered) sidearms.

"It is you who came to me, Mighty One."

He laughed, then, a relaxing, pleasant sound. The bodyguards' hands went back to their sides. "Quite correct, quite correct. You are Aidulac of the Girons, yes?"

"It has been some time since I identified myself as belonging to the Girons, Mighty One, but yes, that is I."

"Excellent. I am told that you are the greatest inventor of our age."

She shrugged. "Perhaps."

"I hope so," he said with another smile. "I would hate to think that I was lied to. In any event, Aidulac of the Girons, I am the greatest leader of our age. It seems only fitting that we work together."

With those words, Aidulac knew that her life would irrevocably change. People in the scientific community knew of her, of course, and some did indeed revere her to a degree she found frankly embarrassing. But she had shunned public acclaim because it got in the way of her work.

Now, however, she had come to the attention of not just the public but the leader of them all. Her days of solitude, she thought, were over.

She was both absolutely right and completely wrong.

“How, Mighty One?” she asked, resigned to the inevitable.

“It will take some time. Will you dine with me aboard my flagship, so I may detail my plan?”

The question was a formality. To decline would be as good as telling one of the bodyguards to shoot her down where she stood. She agreed.

Soon, she had shifted to the flagship. She had not changed her clothes, as all she owned to wear were single-piece jumpsuits that were functional and easy to put protective gear on over when she needed it. The Mighty One allowed the breach of protocol.

They did not speak of his plan during dinner, which was a feast unparalleled with anything in Aidulac’s experience. She had lived most of her adult life on a steady diet of processed food, brought regularly by the supply ships and stored until they were eaten. The Mighty One, however, dined on fresh game, vegetables, and drinks that had obviously been prepared specifically for this meal. Aidulac had no idea how it was transported on the ship, but considering the huge amount of space wasted on the vessel—which was a hundred times larger than actually necessary to serve its function—Aidulac was sure that they managed to find somewhere to store live animals, grow plants, and harvest flavored liquids. She

herself had pioneered the technology for ship-based hydroponics gardens, though she never imagined anything that could produce such bright yellow clamdas. They ate at a large table made from actual tree pulp, using utensils of the finest tin.

Much from that era had blurred in Aidulac's mind with the passage of ninety thousand years, including the specifics of the conversation during the meal.

Aidulac was sure that The Mighty One spoke at great length about his own accomplishments, or perhaps about the food, or maybe his family's history—the only thing she knew for sure was that it was ultimately inconsequential. After the final course was served, he said, “And now, to business. I wish you to create four Instruments of Power. I do not know how they may be created, but I wish them to allow me absolute control over all my subjects. I wish them to be portable and responsive only to me.”

Aidulac waited for more details. “What are the specifications of these Instruments, Mighty One?”

Again, he laughed. “How should I know? If I knew how to construct such items, Aidulac of the Girons, I would not need you. The Instruments must grant me power.”

“What kind of power?”

“Absolute power.”

“Your pardon, Mighty One, but I'm afraid I will need instructions a tad more specific than that.”

Malkus gazed upon Aidulac from across the table. He seemed to be studying her the way Aidulac herself would have studied a one-celled organism or a piece of plant life in her laboratory.

“Very well,” he finally said, and Aidulac found herself letting out a breath she

hadn't even realized she was holding. "I wish to have power over the elements.

Power over the mind. Power over life and death. And most of all, the power to overcome my enemies."

For quite some time, she continued to ask questions. However, Malkus never got any more specific than that.

Finally, she said, "Mighty One, I am but a single person. I cannot possibly—"

Malkus laughed, then. "I do not expect you to achieve this by yourself. While it is true that you have accomplished many great things, you are, as you point out, but a single person. I have already assembled some of the finest minds in the Union. What they require is someone to direct them, to lead them, to mold them—and thus allow them to see my vision through to fruition. That someone, Aidulac of the Girons, is you."

When the meal ended, Aidulac was permitted to shift back to the planet to sleep.

By the time she woke up, all of her equipment had been packed by her own robots, which had been instructed by Executive Order—the one way that a robot could be overridden by its rightful owner, an override that was required to go into every robot constructed within the Union's borders. Aidulac had done so to secure hers (erroneously, as it turned out) in the knowledge that it would never be used, but not wanting to find herself subject to an inspection and failing it. As with all of The Mighty One's laws, those who enforced them took them very seriously, and surprise inspections from The Robotics Authority were not unheard of.

Aidulac would never see the planetoid again.

She no longer remembered how long she and her team—which, as promised, included most of the finest minds in the Zalkat Union, including many with whom Aidulac had studied or corresponded, many more whom she had never heard of—spent

laboring over the Instruments. All she remembered was that it consumed her very existence—and that Malkus spared no expense on their behalf.

Eventually, at a time when several outer worlds were fomenting rebellion and The Mighty One's armies were stretched thin to keep order, Aidulac presented him with his Instruments. She had prepared a properly ostentatious speech to make the presentation, having learned how much The Mighty One liked his spectacles. "You asked me, Mighty One," she said when she approached him in his Place of Governing, "to give you power over the elements, power over the mind, power over life and death, and power to overcome your enemies." She indicated the simple black boxes, which she had adorned with Malkus's name. "Behold, the Instruments of Malkus. With this one," she said, pointing at the first of them, "you may control the weather on any world with a natural atmosphere, and control the environment of any place with an artificial atmosphere—power over the elements. With this," she continued, pointing to the second, "you may manipulate the thoughts of any sentient being within its range—power over the mind." She moved on to the third one. "With this, you may infect up to five hundred living beings with a virus that will kill them by making their hearts explode—power over life and death. And finally, with this," she pointed to the last of them, "you have a weapon of tremendous power that can disintegrate matter in less than an instant—power to overcome any enemy."

Malkus did not laugh. But he did smile.

For ninety thousand years, Aidulac remembered that smile.

Aidulac had hoped that Malkus would not use the Instruments, had hoped that the threat of their existence would be enough. But no one understood the power behind a simple black box without a demonstration.

And Malkus the Mighty was only too happy to provide such a demonstration.

The rebellions were all put down by having their ships disintegrated, their hideouts wiped out by hurricanes, their soldiers killed by the virus, and their leaders confessing to their crimes and repenting while under mental manipulation. The borders of the Union expanded by solar system after solar system, as Malkus used his Instruments to gain more and more territory.

Aidulac had hoped that her own obligations would end, and she and her team would be permitted to go back to their own work—work that might help the people of the Union rather than its leader. How many inventions had fallen by the wayside, how many more secrets of the universe might they all have pried loose had they not wasted so much time giving The Mighty One his toys of conquest?

But Malkus was not done with them. He wanted immortality.

They developed a genetic therapy that would prevent Malkus from aging. Then The Mighty One made sure all evidence that it ever existed was destroyed.

That evidence extended to the people who created it.

One by one, the members of Aidulac's team were killed.

The only one to escape the executioner's pistol was Aidulac herself. She had half expected this kind of treachery, and had laid the groundwork for an escape.

As an added bonus, she also had the only copy of the genetic therapy for immortality left—and so, when she made her escape from the Homeworld, she also gave herself the therapy. After all, even The Mighty One would be overthrown eventually. When that happened, then, perhaps, she could return to her work.

How naïve she was.

The Mighty One did fall, of course. He had thought himself invulnerable because he was “immortal,” but all that truly meant was that he could not die naturally.

The universe's worst-kept secret was that it was far easier to destroy a thing

than to sustain it. His body was devastated, and the Instruments confiscated.

She herself was tracked down and arrested. Aidulac was inextricably associated with The Mighty One as the primary inventor of his Instruments—and also the only one of that team still alive. While Malkus was in power and had a use for her, that meant that her life would always be comfortable and she would be treated with reverence. With Malkus overthrown and her own usefulness at an end, she became an object of disdain at best—an accessory to genocide at worst.

Until the rebellion succeeded, Aidulac had never thought about the cost of her inventions to living beings. For that matter, she had never thought about the benefits of her early ones. She had always viewed it as a scientific puzzle to be worked out, the latest in a series of dialogues with the universe to try and trick it out of another nugget of information.

Members of the rebellion—now the Zalkatian government—took her to some of the worlds that had been ravaged by her inventions. She saw the mass graves of people who'd died by disease or by destructive weather. She saw the cities ravaged by the energy weapon she had invented.

She saw death by her hand.

The rebels had tried to destroy the Instruments, but Aidulac had built them too well. Instead, they spread them to the corners of the Union—but did not inform Aidulac of the location of those corners. Having seen the death they caused, Aidulac understood the rationale, but she would have preferred to take custody of the Instruments herself—she knew that, eventually, she would find a way to destroy them.

But nobody trusted her to do that. Instead, she was put in prison.

What they did not know was the process she had perfected just as the rebellion started to succeed: the ability to convince anyone to do her bidding. It was an

ability that would (so she thought) improve with use as her brain took to the genetic changes she had introduced.

It was, therefore, easy to escape her incarceration by simply convincing the guards to free her. She stole a ship called the Sun and made her escape, convincing everyone who followed her to give up the pursuit.

They never found her, but they also stopped looking, as they had problems of their own. The universe hadn't made it any easier to sustain something than destroy it, and running the Zalkat Union proved a task far beyond the capabilities of those who had removed Malkus from power. Different factions fought amongst themselves, and the Union was plunged into civil war.

Aidulac began her search. The Instruments gave off a distinctive wave pattern.

They would not stay hidden forever, and Aidulac herself was immortal. She would wait in solitude.

It was how she had always preferred it.

She set a course to continue her search.

The phasering went off without a hitch.

Orta had watched from a safe distance along with the others as the Federation starship's powerful weaponry sliced through the atmosphere like a dagger, transforming a section of the moon's surface from hard rock to dust. Oh, if only I'd had such weapons at my disposal, he thought with envy. The Cardassians would never have stood a chance.

Soon the water was added, a process that was surprisingly loud. Orta had expected to be nearly deafened by the phasers—which were, after all, noisy instruments even in their handheld version, and a Galaxy -class ship's array was

several orders of magnitude more powerful, and fired at a concomitantly greater volume—but the controlled rushing of water had been a massive cacophony as well. Then the phasing began again. It was a very small-scale version of what humans ethnocentrically referred to as “terraforming,” and remarkably effective. One ship was, in essence, changing the face of the planet—or at least a part of its face. Again, Orta marvelled at the sheer power at work here.

Admittedly, Orta saw many tactical problems with a ship the *Odyssey*'s size—it presented a huge, easy-to-hit target, and was impossible to hide. But it would have been worth it, Orta thought, to have those weapons.

Once the procedure was finished, which took most of the day, Orta and the others were put to work constructing the dwellings they were to live in. The Federation captain carried on for some time about how if they had followed his plan, that would have been done already, but no one paid attention to him.

Certainly Orta didn't. He was far too busy depressing himself by thinking about what his life had in store for him. Seeding the fields. Living in a Starfleet-pre-fabricated home. Waiting for crops to grow.

He mentioned this to Tova who only snorted. “And what's the alternative? Living in a cave, eating whatever we can scavenge, waiting for the Cardassians to find us and bomb us into oblivion? No thank you. At least now we're accomplishing something.”

Orta said nothing in reply.

“Excuse me?”

Turning, Orta saw an old man holding a welding tool. “Yes?” he prompted.

“You're Orta, aren't you?”

It was so ridiculous a question that Orta was tempted to say no just to gauge the old man's response. Then Orta looked more closely and saw the awe in the

man's face. "Yes, I'm Orta."

"I thought so. Well, honestly, who else would you be?" The old man chuckled. "I just wanted to meet you—and to say thank you. My daughter worked in the mines at Amrahan. After you liberated that camp, she was free—she joined the Resistance, and fought till the day she died."

"How did she die?" Orta asked, out of morbid curiosity.

"The fumes from that damned mine—she'd have died anyhow, but at least she spent her last days fighting the spoon-heads instead of working for them. And we have you to thank." He reached up and grabbed Orta's malformed ear, as if the old man were a vedek or something. It took all of Orta's willpower not to break the man's neck. "May the Prophets walk with you, Orta."

"And you also," Orta said by rote. He stopped believing in the Prophets when the Obsidian Order agent sliced his vocal cords in twain. He only continued to wear an earring so they could identify his body.

The old man walked away. Orta watched him for several seconds. Many of the farmers had been culled from Orta's own people, but others, like the old man, were volunteers—people who had lost their own farms, or who just wanted to do some good for Bajor.

He remembered Amrahan. It was one of the last attacks they had made outside Valo before the last of their warp drives had failed. The odd thing was, they had had no idea that there was a mining operation there, nor that there were Bajorans on the planet. Orta had wanted to hit it because the gul who ran it was the brother of the glinn who had first tortured him. That he liberated a brutal mining camp with a death rate of seventy-five percent had been purest coincidence—but one Orta happily exploited for his own purposes. After all, anyone could assassinate

a gul, but liberating a mining camp was the stuff of legends.

That night, before he went to sleep, he took out the padd he'd taken from that derelict and read the prophecy again. Then he went to the window of his new, Starfleet-created home and stared at the sky.

He saw many moons. Most were less than a day away from perfect alignment.

All he needed now was the right weapon.

A plan started to form in Orta's head. A plan for taking over the Odyssey.

Chapter Eleven

I T'S GOING WELL, Shabalala thought as he looked out over the land.

Three days ago, he'd stood on virtually the exact same spot and saw barren nothingness. Now he saw a row of houses, a twenty-square-meter construction with multiple protrusions that went underground to harvest the subterranean water systems for irrigation purposes, and small robots that were tilling the newly created soil under the watchful eyes of a group of Bajorans, most of whom were former terrorists.

"Looking good, isn't it, Commander?"

Shabalala turned to see Dax walking up next to him. "I was just thinking that very thing, Lieutenant. Well done."

"I'm sure Captain Keogh would disagree." In a surprisingly good impersonation of his commanding officer's tone, Dax said, "'If we'd followed my plan, Lieutenant, we'd have been at this stage yesterday.'"

Laughing, Shabalala said, "Perhaps." He considered. "Well, no, not 'perhaps,' at all, I'm sure that is what he'd say. But that is his way. I also can't help but notice that you called him 'Captain Keogh' rather than 'Deco.'"

Once again, Dax put on the smile that mirrored his daughter's. "Well, he's not here for my use of the name to annoy, so why bother?"

“Good point.”

Just then, Keogh and Kira approached from the west. The first officer waved to them.

“Commander,” Keogh said to Shabalala as he approached in as jovial a tone as he ever had. Then he glanced at Dax and added, “Lieutenant,” with somewhat less joviality.

“It’s going well,” Kira said, looking out at the workers.

Chuckling, Shabalala said, “That seems to be the general consensus, yes.”

“With good reason, Commander,” Keogh said. “Of course, if we’d followed my plan, we’d have been at this stage yesterday.”

Shabalala and Dax exchanged a knowing look.

“Odyssey to Keogh.” It was the voice of Maritza Gonzalez.

Keogh tapped his combadge. “Keogh. Go ahead.”

“We’ve gotten word from DS9 that the supplies for New Bajor have arrived.”

“Good to hear, Commander. Set course for the station and stand by to engage at full impulse.”

“We’ll be ready to go as soon as you and Commander Shabalala beam on board, sir.”

“Negative on half of that. Mr. Shabalala will be returning, but I’m staying behind with the scientific team.”

“Yes, sir. Odyssey out.”

Keogh turned to a confused Shabalala. “You’re in charge of the Odyssey.” Next to him, the first officer saw Dax frown and Kira’s eyes widen in surprise, both reasonable reactions to Keogh’s surprising announcement.

“Sir, I’m sure that—”

“You’re not questioning my orders, are you, Mr. Shabalala?”

“Of course not, sir, but—”

“Good. I’ll accompany Major Kira and Lieutenant Dax back to Deep Space 9 when they report back there in two days. I assume you’ll be done by then?”

“That is the plan, sir, yes,” Shabalala said with a sigh.

Keogh nodded. “Excellent.”

Kira smiled, but Shabalala recognized it as the polite smile one used on people one didn’t like but didn’t wish to annoy, either. “Captain, it really isn’t necessary for you to stay.”

“The commander here is perfectly capable of handling the Odyssey, Major. And I want to keep an eye on things here.”

“Captain—” Kira started.

“I’m not doubting your abilities—or even yours, Lieutenant,” he added to Dax.

“It’s not the project I’m concerned about.” He pointed to the scarved individual presently inspecting one of the hoeing machines, which appeared to have some kind of fault. “It’s him.”

Kira pursed her lips. “I can’t stop you from staying, Captain, but I’m perfectly capable of keeping an eye on Orta.”

“Of that, Major, I have no doubt. Still, and all—”

“Fine,” she said, throwing up her hands. “Do what you want.” With that, she walked off.

Keogh regarded Dax, who was giving him a disdainful look. “Is something wrong, Lieutenant?”

“Just wondering how much this has to do with Orta and how much this has to do with Aidulac.”

“Nothing whatsoever,” Keogh said in a tight voice. “I’ve had these concerns

about Orta since the mission started, as your Commander Sisko can attest. Since they are my concerns, I feel it's only appropriate that I address them."

"If you say so." Then she turned and followed Kira.

As the women retreated, Keogh let out a breath.

"Sir?" Shabalala prompted.

"I can understand Kira's reaction. This is her project, and she's never been a hundred percent happy with the Federation's involvement in Bajor. Hell, from all accounts, she views Starfleet as little more than a necessary evil. She's the type who hates the idea of relying on someone else to keep the freedom that she spent all her life fighting for."

"I agree," Shabalala said.

"Dax, though—her behavior is inexcusable. All right, she saved me from doing something stupid with that Siren woman, but I fully intend to note her comportment in my log."

"Of course, sir. If there's nothing else, I'll be returning to the Odyssey."

Keogh nodded. "Carry on, Commander."

As Shabalala requested transport back to the ship, he thought back on Dax's words, and wondered how the life of the party became the man he now served under.

After Shabalala dematerialized, Keogh turned his gaze back toward Orta, who was still struggling with the hoeing machine. Several others were now gathered around the device with him. Keogh tapped his combadge as he started walking toward the tableau. "Keogh to Rodzinski."

"Go ahead," said his chief engineer, who was also staying behind to make sure

all the machinery worked properly.

Keogh gave the coordinates of Orta's location. "Report there immediately—there seems to be some trouble with the hoeing equipment."

"Yessir."

"Keogh out." He tapped his combadge to close the connection just as he reached the crowd. Orta; a woman named Tova Syed, who had been Orta's chief lieutenant for years; and two other Bajorans whose names Keogh did not know were now poking at the machine, which lay inert in the soil. Tova ran a diagnostic tool over it.

"What seems to be the difficulty?" Keogh asked.

"It's broken," Tova snapped in an annoyed tone. To punctuate that annoyance, she threw her tool into the dirt.

"I've contacted Commander Rodzinski—he'll be here any moment."

Pointedly picking up the diagnostic tool, Orta said, "That won't be necessary, Captain. We don't need to run to Starfleet every time a machine breaks down. We will fend for ourselves—as we always have."

"You're not living in a cave anymore, Orta. You're part of a team now—and that means that you work with other people, and you make use of the resources available to you. Right now, you have a Starfleet engineering team at your beck and call. A terrorist works on his own and solves his own problems. A member of a team asks for help from other team members."

"But, Captain," Orta said in what may or may not have been a smug tone of voice—it was hard to tell with his vocoder—"I am no longer a terrorist."

"Then act like it."

Rodzinski showed up a moment later. "What's wrong with it?" he asked.

"It's broken," Tova said again. "Maybe you can tell us why. The diagnostics all say it's working fine, but it's not moving forward like it's supposed to."

Giving Rodzinski a nod, Keogh said, "I'll leave you to it."

"We appreciate your help, Captain," Orta said.

The hairs on the back of Keogh's neck stood up. Something was very wrong here, but he couldn't put his finger on what. Orta being nice was just so damned out of character. He was even more convinced that he needed to stay here to keep an eye on him. Kira was too similar to Orta, and would probably excuse any odd behavior out of loyalty to a fellow Resistance fighter.

As for Dax, he wouldn't trust her with command decisions under any circumstances. When he was younger, he had looked up to Curzon, even emulated him in many ways. But after Altair VI...

No, he thought, it needs to be me. I'll get to the bottom of what you're up to, Orta. That's a promise.

Orta shook his head as he watched Keogh walk away. Idiot, he thought. Like all Starfleet. Well, most, he amended, remembering Ro Laren and Jean-Luc Picard. But they were the exceptions. It will be a pleasure to take command of his ship when it returns. In fact, the captain's idiotic insistence on remaining behind would be a key to Orta's plan. He would make a fine hostage...

The Starfleet engineer, Rodzinski—a diminutive human with gray-and-black hair—stared at his tricorder. "There's nothing wrong with the machine," he said.

"That's what we told you," Tova said in a tight voice.

"But it's not moving," Rodzinski said. "Which can only mean one thing."

"What's that?" Orta asked.

Rodzinski looked up and regarded Orta with a grave expression. "If the cause isn't internal, it must be external." He held the tricorder display-out toward

Orta and Tova. “What’s wrong with this picture?”

Orta peered at the display, which showed a schematic version of the hoeing machine—based on the words over the image, it was the results of the scan of the hoeing machine that Rodzinski had just done. “It looks normal.”

“Look again.”

Tova snarled. “Can’t I just kill him? Don’t worry, they’ll never find the body.”

“Very funny,” Rodzinski said. “Can’t you see what’s wrong here?”

Orta was coming around to Tova’s view of Rodzinski’s prospects for mortality, but calmed himself. “Obviously, Commander, we cannot. We would like you to enlighten us.”

He pointed to a protrusion on the bottom of the machine—which was presently under the soil. “See that?”

Rolling her eyes, Tova said, “That’s the—” Then she frowned. “No, wait, it isn’t. What is that?”

“An excellent question,” Rodzinski said, “to which I don’t really have an adequate answer. We’ll need to see what’s under there. Which, given the fact that it can’t move, is a bit of a problem. I’ll get some antigravs over here.”

As Rodzinski’s hand moved toward his combadge, Orta said, “That won’t be necessary.” He looked at the other Bajorans, who all nodded.

The four of them positioned themselves at equidistant points around the front, back, and left side of the machine and each grabbed a handhold. Orta himself stood at the front of the machine and grabbed it at one of the diggers, and crouched.

“Everyone ready?” Tova said. “And— heave!”

Orta straightened his knees, his back straining with the weight of the machine as he lifted it upwards. The vocoder rendered his grunt as an odd kind of

metallic whining, which annoyed him.

At the back, Tova did likewise, while the three at the side not only lifted up, but also pushed it to the right, overturning the machine.

Rodzinski's mouth hung open. "Okay, I'm impressed."

Tova smiled. "What, you Starfleet types don't do heavy lifting?"

"Not if we can avoid it."

Orta almost snorted. Typical Starfleet weakness, he thought derisively.

"Look at this," Tova said, kneeling down by the depressed spot of soil where the hoeing machine had been. The repeated attempts to move the machine without success had resulted in a hoeing-machine-sized divot in the ground.

Sitting in the middle of that divot was a rather nondescript black box, which gave off a mild green glow. Orta also noticed a marking in some kind of script.

He was no linguist, but he was fairly certain it wasn't Bajoran.

"Okay, this is very odd," Rodzinski said. "Don't touch it!" he added quickly as Tova reached for it.

"Why not?" Tova asked, sounding irritated.

"Because I really don't like the readings I'm getting."

Orta walked over toward Rodzinski. "And what readings are those, Commander?"

Rodzinski frowned. "I'm honestly not sure. I'm getting odd energy emissions—but I also can't get a solid reading on the object itself. Don't touch it!" This time he yelled at Tova as she reached for it again.

"I'm not one of your stupid engineers, Commander," Tova said, standing up.

I can give you what you want.

"What?" Orta asked.

"I said I'm not one of his stupid engineers. It's just some box. Let's get rid

of it so we can get on with the work.”

“Not you,” Orta said, waving his arm. “Something—”

I can give you what you want.

Images suddenly flooded Orta’s mind: Strange alien beings of a type he’d never seen before. One of them hoisting this very box over his head. A beam of pure force emitting from the box as he did so. The other aliens being vaporized by it.

With this device, all that you desire will be accomplished.

He did not recognize the world, the beings, none of it—but he recognized the box for what it was.

It was the final piece to the puzzle. When he found the prophecy, he knew what he had to do. He just needed the right weapon to implement the plan. At first, he thought the Odyssey would be that weapon, but he no longer needed to take over an entire Galaxy -class ship and its crew of a thousand for the sole purpose of making use of its powerful weapons.

Because now he had the ultimate weapon. Something that he now knew—just knew—was stronger than even the Odyssey’ sphasers. And he could hold it in his hands.

I can give you what you want.

“Oh, no,” Rodzinski said.

“What?” Tova asked.

“According to the tricorder’s database, this energy emission is flagged as belonging to a very dangerous artifact. General Order 16 specifically states that I have to take this thing into custody right now.”

“I’m afraid that will not be possible, Commander Rodzinski.” As Orta spoke, he knelt down and took the box—the artifact—the weapon—in his hands.

“Put that down! You have to—”

Rodzinski never finished the sentence. As soon as the weapon was firmly in Orta’s grasp, a bolt of green energy lanced out from it and struck Rodzinski square in the chest. He was vaporized instantly—Orta was quite sure that the engineer never even knew what hit him. Unlike, say, a phaser, the beam made no noise as it fired. It simply destroyed the engineer without a sound.

That silence continued for several seconds, as the others were too stunned to say anything—except for one, who muttered a quick oath to the Prophets.

“You were right, Syed,” Orta finally said, turning to Tova. “No one will find the body.”

Tova looked outraged. “I was kidding, Orta! You didn’t have to kill him!”

“Oh, but I did. You see, he was going to take this away from us—and we cannot let him do that.” Cradling the box under one arm, he adjusted the volume on his vocoder. He wanted to make sure he was heard. “Most of you know of the prophecy we unearthed back at Valo. It is a prophecy that, in the natural course of things, won’t be fulfilled for many hundreds of years.

“But, in the natural course of things, we would never have been conquered by Cardassia. In the natural course of things, Cardassia would never have withdrawn. In the natural course of things, I would have died under interrogation by Gul Madred. Destiny is not what the Prophets write out for us, destiny is what we make it. The prophecy will be fulfilled, my friends. And this—” he held up the weapon “—is the means by which we will make it be done!”

Over the years, he had made many speeches just like this one. He waited for the inevitable cheer that would go up in reply. They always cheered. It was how Orta knew the speech had gone over well. He couldn’t remember the last time a speech

didn't.

No cheers were forthcoming.

"You killed him," Tova said.

Her eyes reflected shock and disgust. The same woman who had stood by his side as he sliced open Cardassians along their neckridges, the same woman who had gleefully detonated a series of bombs on a fleet of Galor -class warships, the same woman who chased a Cardassian scout ship into an asteroid belt just to make sure that the glinn who piloted it was dead—that same woman was now appalled because he'd killed a weak human in an imbecile's uniform.

Next to her, the other two looked frightened.

As well they should. You are a man of power now. Use it.

He gazed down upon his lieutenant, his childhood friend, the woman he'd trusted for most of his adult life. "Do you doubt, Syed?"

Tova's eyes smoldered. "Yes! Orta, the war is over. We can't—"

"The war is not over until Bajor achieves true peace— true prosperity.

Sacrifices must sometimes be made if we are to forge our own destiny. Good people have died for our cause before, and they will do so again. Commander Rodzinski has died today. He may not be the last. But when we are finished, all will be well, because the prophecy will be fulfilled, and Bajor will at last have its true, ordained place!"

"No, it won't, Orta. I can't let you do this."

Orta gazed into the eyes of his oldest friend. Tova Syed, who always came through for him, who spear-headed his rescue, who never doubted, was opposing him.

What's more, he knew he would never convince her otherwise.

A green beam of force lanced out from the device. Tova disintegrated in an

instant.

Orta had killed many enemies over the years. This was the first time he had killed a friend. He thought it would be harder.

Almost as an afterthought, he destroyed the other two. They would be of no use.

Besides, he didn't need anybody. He had the device. Soon, he would have everything he needed.

I will give you what you want.

“Kovac to Keogh.”

Keogh had been inspecting the houses with Dax and Kira when the call came from Assistant Chief Engineer Kovac. Neither woman had kept her irritation at Keogh's presence much of a secret, but Keogh didn't care. As far as he was concerned, he was in charge of this project, at least from Starfleet's perspective. If anything went wrong, he would be held responsible. At present they were at the back of one of the houses, making sure that the feed from the generator worked properly.

“Go ahead.”

“Sir, Commander Rodzinski hasn't reported back yet.”

Keogh frowned. “That's odd. Can you locate him?”

“That's just it, sir—the tricorder isn't picking up his combadge.”

Dax and Kira exchanged glances. Dax took out her own tricorder.

Tapping his combadge again, the captain said, “Keogh to Rodzinski, come in.”

Silence greeted his request.

Looking up at Keogh, Dax said, “I'm not picking it up, either. Where was he last?”

Keogh gave the precise coordinates. “It’s only about half a kilometer from here.

He was assisting Orta and some of his people with a problem with one of the hoeing machines.”

“I’m not reading any lifesigns in that area,” she said grimly.

“Mr. Kovac, set up a search party,” Keogh said.

“Yes, sir.”

An alarm went off on Dax’s tricorder. “What the—”

Kira asked, “What is it?”

Dax tapped her combadge. “Dax to Rio Grande. Computer, this is Lieutenant Dax.

Link with my tri-corder and verify readings.”

After a moment, the familiar vocal interface that all Starfleet computers used replied. “Energy emissions correspond to those described in Starfleet General Order 16. Recommended protocol: locate Malkus Artifact and confiscate immediately.”

“What’s a Malkus Artifact?” Kira asked at the exact same time that Keogh repeated, “General Order 16?”

Dax looked up from the tricorder. “Have either of you heard of the Zalkat Union?”

Both Kira and Keogh shook their heads. Keogh knew that General Order 16 required any Starfleet personnel encountering an item with a particular energy signature—presumably this Malkus Artifact the computer mentioned—to confiscate said item, but he didn’t recall any specific details beyond that.

Dax, however, filled them in quickly, ending by saying, “The artifacts give off a distinct energy signature when they go active.”

“You’re picking up that signature now?” Kira asked.

“Mhm.”

Frowning, Kira said, "So you know about this because of Emony, right? Two hundred years, that's about her time, right?"

"Actually, no," Dax said with a small smile. "Neither Emony, Audrid, nor Curzon knew about the Zalkat Union. I came across them in the Academy—fascinating stuff."

Keogh rolled his eyes. "This is no time for a stroll down memory lane, Lieutenant. We need to find that artifact. Can you pinpoint it?"

Shaking her head, Dax said, "Not yet, but—" Again, she tapped her combadge.

"Computer, access data files on the Malkus Artifacts. How many of the artifacts have been discovered?"

"One of the artifacts was discovered on Stardate 1699 by the Starships Constellation and Enterprise on the planet Alpha Proxima II."

"Which artifact was it?"

"Artifact Gamma, which transports a deadly disease into target."

"Is there a way to recalibrate my tricorder so it can pinpoint a Malkus Artifact?"

"Affirmative."

"Do so, please."

"Working."

Keogh spoke up. "Computer, what are the characteristics of the remaining three artifacts?"

"Artifact Alpha grants the user mental control over other sentient life forms.

Artifact Beta manipulates weather patterns. Artifact Delta can project energy beams of great force."

"None of those are particularly appealing," Keogh muttered.

“Tools of tyrants never are, Captain,” Kira said.

“Tricorder calibrated.”

Dax gazed over her tricorder, then looked up and smiled. “Hopefully we can find this while we’re looking for your chief engineer, Captain.”

Keogh blinked. That was the first time Dax had actually addressed him in a manner consistent with a lieutenant addressing a captain since the mission started.

Before he could revel in this, a mechanical voice said, “That will not be necessary. I have the weapon you are looking for right here. And Commander Rodzinski is quite dead.”

Turning, Keogh saw Orta standing holding what looked like a simple black box with a slight greenish glow. The Bajoran had come from around the other side of the house that the trio had been inspecting.

As Keogh reached for his phaser, Orta said, “I would advise against that, Captain—unless, of course, you intend to hand your phaser over to me. Any other course of action will result in you following Commander Rodzinski into oblivion.”

“You killed him?” Kira said angrily.

Orta shrugged. “It was necessary. Just as it’s necessary now for you to drop your weapons.”

“I’d do it if I were you,” Dax said quickly, throwing her own phaser to the ground. Pointing at the box in Orta’s hands, she added, “That’s one of the artifacts.”

“The Trill speaks the truth,” Orta said. “Commander Rodzinski didn’t even have time to scream before he was annihilated.”

Keogh hesitated. Whatever these things were, they were powerful enough to

warrant a Starfleet General Order, which meant they weren't to be sneezed at. On the other hand, it was just a black box. It hardly seemed like a threat.

Further, Orta could have been lying about Rodzinski—or, if the engineer was dead, it could have been by phaser. The farmers were supposed to be unarmed, but he hardly expected those regulations to stop a terrorist like Orta from smuggling a few weapons in.

“Very well,” Orta said, “if you refuse to believe me, a demonstration.”

Orta held up the artifact in the direction of the house they had been inspecting. A green beam shot out from it. Eerily, the beam made no noise whatsoever. In fact, the only noise Keogh heard was the rush of air to take up the space that was suddenly vacated when the home was vaporized. That, and the gasp that escaped his own mouth.

“My God,” Keogh muttered. The captain knew that there weren't any people in the house, but he was also quite sure that Orta didn't know that. Worse, Orta obviously didn't care.

Keogh wanted nothing more than to wipe the smug look off of Orta's face—preferably with a phaser. Instead he threw his phaser to the ground. Next to him, Kira did the same.

“You're making a mistake, Orta,” Kira said.

Orta laughed—it was a most unpleasant sound, filtered as it was through the vocoder. “You may not think so when I tell you what I am going to do with this wondrous discovery of mine, Nerys. Are you familiar with Akwar's Ninth Prophecy?”

Based on the way Kira's eyes widened, Keogh suspected that she was indeed familiar with it—which put her one up on Keogh. He had never paid attention to

Bajoran spirituality.

“You can’t be serious,” Kira said.

“I am always serious. You should remember that about me most of all. Now then, I need you to take me to your runabout.”

“Never,” Keogh said.

“It’s all right, Captain,” Kira said. “I think we should do as he says.”

Orta looked at Keogh and smiled—if one could call the odd shape that was all his mutilated lips a smile. “Kira is right, Captain. Unless, of course, you wish to end up like your Commander Rodzinski.”

Keogh took a deep breath. “I knew you couldn’t be trusted, Orta. Of course, I never expected anything like this. But you can rest assured, whatever you have planned, you won’t get away with it. I’ll stop you if it’s the last thing I do.”

The foul rictus masquerading as a smile grew wider. “I’m certain it will be, Captain.”

Chapter Twelve

“ODYSSEY TOSHABALALA ! Sir, we need you back on board immediately!”

Joe Shabalala had to blink several times and shake his head before he could even acknowledge Lieutenant Talltree’s frantic message. That it was so frantic by itself was worrisome—Jason Talltree’s reaction to a Borg attack would be to shrug his massive shoulders and say, “Oh, well.” When they had looked over the specifications for how the phasers would need to be modified in order to transform the lava layer into soil, Rodzinski had practically pitched a fit at all that would need to be done, but Talltree had simply said, “No problem,” and made the modifications in under an hour.

The Odyssey first officer had been exploring the monk’s retreat that had just been completed on New Bajor. The Gamma Quadrant colony had been up and running

for a couple of months, and already felt like it had been inhabited for years.

Shabalala had been expecting something more unformed—more like the farming colony, truth be told. But where Bajor's second moon was functional—primarily meant to provide a service to Bajor—New Bajor was to be these people's homes for a long time to come.

Centuries ago, the Bajorans had been known for their spectacular architecture, and their influence could still be seen all across the sector. Now, thanks to New Bajor, that influence extended to the Gamma Quadrant, as the monk's retreat where Shabalala was standing had been designed in the Jarrovian style from some three centuries previous. Shabalala's amateur eye recognized elements from three different substyles with the Jarrovian method that combined into a elegant whole.

So lost had he been in his observations that Talltree's communiqué had caught him off-guard, and it took several seconds for him to say, "Report."

"We just heard from DS9, sir. Captain Keogh and Commander Rodzinski are missing."

Shabalala blinked. "What happened?"

"Not sure, sir. Commander Sisko has asked us to go through the wormhole and report to DS9 immediately."

Making his way to the exit—the monks did not allow transporter beams within the sanctuary—Shabalala said, "Get all hands back on board and have Doyle set course for the wormhole. As soon as everyone's back, engage at warp five."

"Yes, sir."

It took five minutes to get everyone on board, ten minutes to arrive at the wormhole, and another two to arrive at DS9. Shabalala didn't even bother

docking.

Within three more minutes, Sisko and two other members of the station's senior staff—the Bajoran security chief, actually a shapeshifter named Odo, and the chief of operations, Miles O'Brien—had beamed on board, and met with him and Gonzalez in the observation lounge.

O'Brien started. "This is the communication we got from your Lieutenant Kovac."

He pressed a control, and the image of Mislav Kovac came on the screen.

"Deep Space 9, this is Lieutenant Kovac on the farming colony. We have a situation here—Commander Rodzinski has gone missing, and shortly after I alerted Captain Keogh to his disappearance, he too disappeared, along with Lieutenant Dax and Major Kira. We're conducting a search right now. In addition, we cannot raise the Rio Grande, though indications are that it is still in orbit."

Sisko leaned forward. "Both of our other runabouts are off-station, so we'll need to take the Odyssey to the moon and investigate."

"Bridge to observation lounge."

"Go ahead, Mr. Talltree," Shabalala said.

"Sir, Mr. Kovac is checking in."

"Put it through," he said, turning to the viewscreen.

The recording of Kovac's previous transmission was replaced by a live image of the black-haired man. "Commander, we still haven't turned up any of our people, but there are conspicuous absences among the farmers. Orta and three of his followers—Tova Syed, Pin Terim, and Hasa Jol—are also missing. The site where Rodzinski was last known to be presently has an overturned hoeing machine and no people anywhere nearby."

"Any signs of a struggle?" Shabalala asked.

"No. But I can't see any good reason why they'd leave an overturned hoeing

machine right in the middle of a farming operation in the field like this, either. There are also energy traces that my tricorder is flagging as relating to General Order 16.”

That got Gonzalez’s attention. “You’re kidding.”

“No, ma’am.”

Shabalala said, “Keep up the search, Mislav. Report in every twenty minutes, please.”

“Yes, sir. Kovac out.”

O’Brien shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “I’m afraid I’m not familiar with General Order 16.”

“Neither am I,” Odo said.

At Shabalala’s nod, Gonzalez quickly filled them in on the Zalkat Union and the Malkus Artifacts. “Assuming that the one found on Proxima a century back is still in the Rector Institute where it belongs,” she finished, “someone on that moon has managed to find either a weather controller, a mind controller, or a very big ray gun.”

Sisko fidgeted, as if his hands needed something to hold. “I think we can rule out the weather device—if someone had it, we’d know.”

“So far, the evidence points to the mind controller,” Odo said in his gruff voice. “It’s possible that Orta took possession of Major Kira and the others and is using them for his own ends.”

“Assuming that it is Orta,” Shabalala said. “We don’t have any proof at all. And I’m not eager to wait to find out.” He tapped his combadge. “Bridge, set a course for Bajor’s second moon, full impulse.” Turning to the three from DS9, he added, “I hope you gentlemen don’t mind taking a little trip.”

“We want our people back as much as you do, Commander,” Sisko said. Then he turned to Odo. “Constable, you mentioned Orta’s ‘own ends’—what might those be?”

Odo, already sitting as ramrod straight as Keogh normally did, somehow managed to sit even straighter as he gave his report. Shabalala wondered if that was an aspect of his shapeshifting ability. “Orta is the only name he goes by. There are records of a ten-year-old orphan named Gan Orta, who disappeared after his foster parents, Gan Marta and Gan Treo, were arrested and executed for treason. The boy’s description matches what Orta looked like as an adult when he became involved in the Resistance. He primarily operated out of the resettlement camps in the Valo system, but he made strikes all throughout Cardassian territory. He was only captured once, and later escaped—during his capture he was mutilated. His attacks became even more brutal after that. Following the Cardassian withdrawal, he refused numerous entreaties to come home by the provisional government. He finally gave in when the opportunity to work on this farming colony came through.” Folding his arms, Odo said, “Personally, I’ve never met him, but he strikes me as the type who would have difficulty assimilating to a peaceful Bajor. If he gets his hands on one of these artifacts, he might well use it to wreak some form of havoc.”

“Why would he do that?” O’Brien asked. “He won. I’d think he’d want to keep the peace.”

“I’m not convinced he was fighting for peace,” Odo said. “Many of the Resistance fighters were indeed struggling for Bajor’s independence, but plenty of them just wanted revenge against the Cardassians.”

Shabalala nodded. “Revenge can be a great motivator.”

“I suppose you’re right,” O’Brien said quietly. “I remember poor Captain Maxwell, and—” He shook his head. “Well, never mind.”

Turning to the second officer, Shabalala asked, “Maritza, can we pinpoint the Malkus Artifact?”

She nodded. “I can try.”

“Please do. I suspect that wherever it is, that’s where we’ll find Captain Keogh and the others.”

He dismissed the meeting and they adjourned to the bridge. Sisko took Shabalala’s usual seat next to the command chair, while Odo and O’Brien went to the aft of the bridge.

As he sat in the command chair, Shabalala thought, I’ll find you, Captain. I’m not losing another captain. That I swear.

Declan Keogh had to admit that Orta tied a good knot.

He, Kira, and Dax were presently sitting in the aft section of the Rio Grande, each seated at a chair around the mess table. Using some rather coarse rope that Orta had brought with him from the surface, the terrorist had secured each of them to the chair with an exceptionally good knot. Orta had tied the ropes around their arms, legs, and necks in such a way that any attempt to struggle resulted in the rope tightening around the neck.

After they had beamed aboard the runabout, Orta immediately set about securing his prisoners. Keogh grudgingly admired the technique—Orta never put the weapon down, so he tied them up as best he could with one hand. Only after they were all sufficiently encumbered was he willing to put the weapon down and do a proper job with the knots—and even then, he made sure that the other two were in plain view and that he was between them and the weapon.

Orta had, of course, left their combadges on the moon.

Very professional, Keogh thought. But then, I'd expect no less.

Orta then went to the fore compartment. As soon as he was gone, Keogh looked across the mess table at Kira, who had a pensive expression on her face. "What is this prophecy he was talking about?"

Kira looked up. "Akwar's Ninth Prophecy states that when Bajor's moons align, then peace will reign. The thing is, the moons aren't supposed to align for another two hundred years."

Remembering what Gonzalez had said a few days ago, Keogh said, "Most of them will be. I think it's today, now that I think on it."

Dax, who looked more grim than usual, nodded. "In about half an hour, actually. Every moon except this one will be aligned."

"But that's not what the prophecy says," Kira said. "So I don't see how—"

"The artifact," Dax said simply.

Kira's eyes widened. "No."

Keogh frowned, then realized what Dax was implying. "Lieutenant, do you expect me to believe that that weapon is powerful enough to knock the moon out of its orbit?"

"No, Captain, I don't expect you to believe it," Dax said snippily. "But what you believe doesn't matter a whole lot. The point is, Orta believes it, and I'm willing to bet half a dozen bars of latinum that his plan is to mount that box onto the Rio Grande and try to bring the moon in line with the others."

"Brava, Lieutenant," came Orta's mechanized voice from the hatch to the fore section. "That is, in fact, my precise plan."

"There's no way that thing of yours can accomplish this," Keogh said.

"Oh, you're wrong, Captain," Orta said in a surprisingly quiet voice. "In fact, it is the least of what this wondrous device can do."

Dax snorted. “You really think you can change the moon’s orbit just by firing a big gun at it?”

“I know I can—especially with this runabout to plot a precise course. I have no love for Starfleet, Lieutenant, but I will concede one thing: you build excellent machines. I’m quite sure that this ship’s computer can aid me in bringing all the moons into alignment. This will bring about true peace.”

“Bajor is at peace, Orta,” Keogh said. “The only one preventing that right now is you.”

“I’d pretend to be shocked at your naïveté, Captain, but you are Starfleet, after all. Bajor is at the very antithesis of peace. When the Cardassians left, Bajor would have lasted less than a year before the squabbling tore it apart. The only reason it didn’t was the fortuitous discovery of the wormhole. And even with that, the Circle’s attempted coup almost brought Bajor down less than a year after the withdrawal. The Federation and the Cardassians still fight with each other and with us. Then there’s the deplorable situation with the Maquis, and Bajor has been drawn into that, as well. The government still calls itself ‘provisional.’ Bajor is not at peace, Captain. Bajor will never be at peace, until Akwar’s Prophecy is fulfilled.”

“The prophecies aren’t there for you to make happen, Orta,” Kira said.

“Nonsense. If the Prophets have shown us anything, Nerys, it’s that we make our own destiny. We threw the Cardassians out, not the Prophets.” Orta then smiled again, as revolting a sight as Keogh had ever seen. “Besides, the prophecy only says that peace will come when the moons align—it says nothing about them aligning naturally.”

“There’s something I don’t understand,” Keogh said.

The sound that came out of Orta's vocoder was probably a laugh. "I daresay there are several, Captain."

Keogh ignored the barb. "You don't strike me as the kind of person who gloats over his victims. You're telling us all of this for a reason. I'm not a very patient man, Orta—I'd prefer you simply tell us what you want from us instead of boring us to tears with rhetoric."

"My intent is not to bore you, Captain," Orta said, moving closer to Keogh. "I wish you to understand the scope of what I'm trying to achieve. The prophecy is very clear."

"Prophecies are never clear," Keogh said angrily, "and you can't seriously expect me to believe that a freak astronomical phenomenon is capable of bringing about peace."

"You doubt the prophecies, Captain?"

"Of course."

"So you have no intention of aiding me in my quest to bring about peace on Bajor?"

"I can't see any good reason why I should."

Orta nodded. "Understandable. So I'm sure I can't count on you to provide me with the access codes to this runabout?"

"You haven't tried to access any of the runabout's systems?" Kira asked.

Laughing a mechanical laugh, Orta said, "I didn't survive as long as I did by being a fool, Nerys. I know how well Starfleet likes to secure its secrets. If I even attempt to touch a control panel, I have every faith that the runabout will totally shut down. So you will provide me with the access codes."

"And if I don't?" Kira asked.

Orta held the box proximate to Keogh's head. "Then the captain dies."

“Don’t do it, Major!” Keogh shouted. “That’s an order!”

“You do have a death wish, don’t you, Captain?”

Keogh turned and looked up at Orta, who was trying to loom menacingly over the captain. But Keogh refused to be so menaced. “Ten years ago, Orta, I was captured by a Tzenkethi raider. While I cannot say that I endured anything on the level of what you went through in Cardassian hands, I fully expected to die. In my time, I’ve seen combat against Romulans, Tzenkethi, Cardassians, Tholians, and alien races that I’m quite sure you’ve never heard of. Each time, I was ready to die—because I swore an oath to—”

“Tell me, Captain,” Orta said, “does this speech have a point? Or an end? Or perhaps you do have a death wish, and are hoping I’ll vaporize you rather than listen to a pretentious Starfleet diatribe.” He leaned in close. Keogh noted that the man had mal-odorous breath. “You know nothing about suffering or dying for a cause, Captain—or about believing in it. Nothing. You took an oath? Words are meaningless without action, without passion —without faith.”

Keogh snorted. “Honestly? My speech was more interesting.”

Again the awful smile. “Perhaps.” Orta stood upright and looked at Kira. “But you understand my point, don’t you, Nerys? You know what the Prophets are capable of—if we just seize the moment. They gave us the prophecies for a reason. And we can make it work for us—transform Bajor into the place it was meant to be.”

Intellectually, Keogh was impressed by Orta’s skill with oratory, especially when handicapped with a vocoder. Philosophically, of course, he found the man infuriating. He was exactly the kind of fanatic Keogh had feared he would be, and the trouble he was causing now was as bad as anything he might have

predicted to Sisko days ago on the *Odyssey*. If he pulled off this lunatic plan to fire his weapon at the moon, the damage it would do would be incalculable. Tide shifts, gravitational fluxes, weather disruptions—not to mention the likely loss of life, particularly on the farms below.

But much more infuriating was that Kira appeared to be buying his line.

“Don’t kill him,” Kira said in a small voice. “I’ll give you the codes.”

Furious, Keogh started, “Major, I gave you a direct—”

“I don’t report to you, Captain,” Kira said sharply. Then she turned to Orta and rattled off a series of numbers and Greek letters. Keogh held out some hope that the codes she gave were gibberish and Orta would enter them, be seen by the computer to be a fraud, and lock down.

“You have done the greatest service you can for your home, Nerys,” Orta said.

“Believe me, you won’t regret this.”

Orta turned and headed back to the fore chamber. Within seconds, Keogh could feel the thrum of the runabout’s impulse engines, though the ship did not yet move, based on his glance at the viewport.

“You actually did it.” Keogh shook his head in dismay. “Major, I can’t believe you’d be so stupid! He’s a terrorist—Starfleet doesn’t deal with terrorists.”

“I used to be a terrorist,” Kira said in a tight voice. “I know how they think, I know how they operate—and I can assure you, Captain, that this is the only way. You have to trust me.”

Keogh couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Trust you? Major, you just handed over a Starfleet runabout to a lunatic! And why? Because he’s quoting some nonsense?”

To Keogh’s surprise, it was Dax who spoke. “It isn’t nonsense, Captain. Don’t forget, I’ve met the Prophets. I was with Benjamin when he discovered the

wormhole, and I've had an Orb experience."

Eyes wide, Keogh said, "Since when, Lieutenant, do you subscribe to the Bajoran faith?"

"I don't," Dax said in a tone Keogh found to be unconscionably smug, "I'm a scientist. And I don't let narrow-minded prejudices get in the way of empirical evidence."

With a snort, Keogh said, "I'm not the one who just handed a weapon of mass destruction to a madman."

Kira sighed. "I don't expect you to understand, Captain. But you will. Trust in the Prophets."

Easily keeping his temper under control by dint of years of long practice—besides, he could hardly get a proper mad-on while tied to a chair—Keogh nonetheless was furious as he said, "Right now, Major, the only thing I can trust is my own officers—Lieutenant Kovac should have discovered our disappearance by now. I can only hope that he's alerted DS9 and they've alerted the Odyssey. And when this is over, assuming we survive, I can assure both of you that you'll face the full disciplinary wrath of Starfleet for what you've done today."

Chapter Thirteen

"JOE, WE 'LL BE ATBAJOR in ten minutes," Gonzalez said. "Coming into range now."

Shabalala hadn't realized he was gripping the sides of the command chair until he let go and realized how cramped his long fingers were becoming. "Full scan," he said.

"The Rio Grande is still in orbit. Can't get a solid fix on it—there's interference," Gonzalez said, shaking her head in annoyance. "I can tell you

that there are four humanoid life-forms on the runabout, but I'm not picking up any combadges."

"What's causing the interference?"

Gonzalez turned toward the command center and half-smiled. "Well, since the readings got clearer after I compensated for the interference generated by the Malkus Artifact, I'd say that. It's not perfect resolution, unfortunately, but I'd say whoever's on that run-about must have the artifact."

"What about on the surface?"

The second officer gazed back down at her readings. "Plenty of lifesigns—mostly Bajoran and human. I'm reading combadges for everyone who should be there except for Captain Keogh, Commander Rodzinski, Lieutenant Dax, and Major Kira."

"Odyssey to Kovac," Shabalala said, reopening the channel to the surface.

"Anything, Mislav?"

"No, sir. We haven't turned up a trace of them, or Orta's people."

Shabalala muttered a favorite curse of his mother's.

Odo, standing next to Talltree at tactical, said, "We have to assume that they're dead, and the four people on the Rio Grande are Orta and his followers—and they obviously have the artifact. We may need to destroy the runabout."

"General Order 16 is very specific, Constable," Talltree said. "We have to retrieve the artifact, not destroy it."

"You may not have that luxury, Lieutenant," Odo said in a belligerent tone.

Shabalala said nothing. He still was thinking about Odo's words.

The captain may be dead.

He shook his head. We don't know that yet. We can't assume it's happened again.

Even if it has, it isn't my fault this time.

Unbidden, images came to him of the strange, mutated thing that Captain Simon had been transformed into by the Patniran weapon, of Shabalala raising his phaser and destroying her before she could kill him, and then being helpless while other crew members who had been similarly mutated destroyed the Fearless. Not again, dammit, not again...

Gonzalez interrupted his reverie. "Joe, the Rio Grande is powering up."

Talltree said, "That means whoever's on board has the access codes. It could mean that either Kira or Dax gave the codes away before they were killed."

"That is exceedingly unlikely," Odo said. "Besides, it could have been Captain Keogh."

"He didn't know them," Sisko said. "But I agree with the constable. We need to find out what's going on on that runabout." Sisko looked expectantly at Shabalala.

I need to make a decision. He forced away the image of Captain Simon, his dear friend, his commanding officer, dying at his hand, and focused on the situation at hand. "Hail the runabout, Mr. Talltree."

"Yes, sir." After a moment: "No reply."

"Joe, I've managed to refine the scan," Gonzalez said. "At least one of the people on that ship is giving off a bio-signature that matches that of a joined Trill."

Sisko broke into a grin. "Dax."

"She may have betrayed us, sir," Talltree said.

"We don't know anything, Lieutenant," Sisko snapped. "And I'd advise you to be careful of who you accuse of betraying the uniform."

"That's enough!" Shabalala said. He was so busy wallowing in the past, he was

losing control of the bridge. “Mr. Talltree, lock phasers on the Rio Grande, and open a channel.”

Talltree manipulated his console. “Phasers locked, channel open.”

Shabalala stood up, for no other reason than that he needed to stand alone—to be in command, not to sit uselessly next to Sisko. “This is Commander Joseph Shabalala of the U.S.S. Odyssey. If you do not respond to our hails, we will be forced to open fire.”

Several tense seconds went by. “Nothing, sir,” Talltree said.

“Joe, I don’t like this,” Gonzalez said.

Shabalala walked over to her console and stood next to her. “Don’t like what, Maritza?”

“I’m picking up some modifications to the weapons systems.”

“What kind of modifications?”

Grimly, she said, “Well, that’s the fun part—the interference is strongest there. To my mind, that says that they’re hooking the artifact up to the weapons array.”

“If they have the energy weapon,” Odo said, “then they could be attaching it to the runabout’s systems.”

“That’s my guess, too,” Gonzalez said.

Again, Shabalala muttered his mother’s curse. “Prepare to fire, Mr. Talltree.”

From one of the aft science consoles, O’Brien said, “Excuse me, Commander, but I’m picking up fluctuations in the Rio Grande’s power signature.”

Both Sisko and Odo shot O’Brien looks, then moved as one to the back of the bridge. “Is that what I think it is, Chief?” Sisko asked.

“Probably, sir.”

Frowning, Gonzalez said, “It’s just a minor power fluctuation.”

“That’s all it’s supposed to be,” Sisko said. “Commander, don’t fire on the Rio Grande.”

“What?”

“Trust me—let them power up the weapon.”

Less than a year ago, a Patniran doctor he didn’t know asked Joe Shabalala to trust her when she said that Captain Simon would suffer no ill effects. That bit of trust led to Shabalala having to murder his captain and watch as their ship was destroyed.

Sisko stepped down the horseshoe and stood eye to eye with Shabalala. “Give them one minute. If Dax has done what I think she has, this will be over then.

Please, Commander.”

(“Kill me, Joe. Please kill me.”)

Shaking off the memory of Captain Simon’s last words to him, Shabalala stared at Sisko’s intense brown eyes.

“Stand by, Mr. Talltree,” he finally said.

Talltree didn’t sound happy as he said, “Yes, sir.”

In Declan Keogh’s mind, the court martial was already in session.

Jadzia Dax and Kira Nerys stood before a tribunal. Keogh had chosen the three admirals he knew to be the toughest around—Brand, Haden, and Satie. No, wait, Satie had resigned in disgrace. Maybe Nechayev. Alynna’s always been a major pain in the neck. Besides, she was in charge of the Maquis mess in the DMZ, so she knew the players. Yes, she’ll be perfect.

Keogh imagined some useless JAG officer defending the major and lieutenant. He remembered some lieutenant commander or other who’d defended Keogh’s old Academy

classmate during a court martial several years previous. He was an incompetent boob, as Keogh recalled, so he defended. The prosecution, of course, was handled by Keogh himself. So what if he wasn't trained? This was his fantasy, after all.

"And so, sirs," he said in a loud, clear voice, "it is my recommendation that Lieutenant Dax and Major Kira receive the full penalty for disobeying a direct order and aiding and abetting a known terrorist."

Haden handed down the verdict: guilty. They didn't even need to meet to discuss it. The three admirals just glanced at each other and nodded. Keogh's case was, after all, airtight.

Then Keogh amended the situation. After all, they were entitled to some defense. Kira pointed out that she wasn't in Keogh's chain of command, as she had done on the runabout only minutes earlier, but Keogh blew holes in that theory quickly. She was subordinate to a Starfleet officer, Benjamin Sisko, and Sisko was subordinate to Keogh. Therefore, simple logic dictated that she was beholden to his orders.

Hm. Maybe I should have Admiral T'Pol on the tribunal instead of Brand.

Dax, naturally, went on at great length about all the Dax symbiont had accomplished, in her usual arrogant tone. Of course, Keogh was able to dash that argument as well. After all, Jadzia Dax was a different person—that was why she had to go through the Academy, achieve the rank of lieutenant. The accomplishments of the other hosts of the Dax symbiont were not relevant to the proceedings.

Keogh took special pleasure in the mental image of Dax returning forlornly to her seat from the witness stand after that, carrying the same look on her face that he himself had had two-and-a-half decades ago when Curzon Dax barged in on him in the rec deck.

The verdict came down: guilty.

Then he saw it through the viewport: the *Odyssey*.

At last, Keogh thought. Now maybe something will get accomplished.

“So, Orta, when are you going to tell the truth?”

Keogh blinked. This was Kira talking. The captain noted that she, too, had spied the Galaxy -class ship’s presence nearby and, as soon as she did, she smiled.

What is going on here?

“What makes you think I haven’t told the truth, Nerys?” Orta asked.

Dax spoke up before Kira could. “Because we’ve seen your type before. You think the Federation is as bad as Cardassia, and you’re trying to get rid of us by blowing up a Bajoran moon with a Federation runabout. You figure that’ll be enough to get the Federation out of Bajor.”

“Is that what you think?” Orta said with a sneer.

“It won’t work,” Dax said. “With the wormhole there, the Federation won’t pull out easily.”

Orta’s laugh was chillingly sterile. “They already did once, when the Circle threatened your precious space station. I’m quite sure they could be convinced to do so again, given the right circumstances. But you’re wrong. You’re forgetting the prophecy.”

Then Kira did something that shocked Keogh: she laughed.

She laughed very long and very hard.

Keogh, Orta, and Dax all looked at her as if she was slightly demented—certainly Keogh was starting to believe that.

“Something amuses you, Nerys?” Orta asked. That got Keogh’s attention, because the smug, supercilious tone was gone. Now Orta sounded angry.

Keogh wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

“When are you going to tell us the truth, Orta? The real truth. Not what you wanted me to believe, and not what Dax thinks you're doing.”

Dax blinked. “Excuse me?”

Keogh took a certain satisfaction out of the hurt look on Dax's face.

Kira, though, ignored her. “Come on, Orta, I know you. Hell, I used to be you.

You don't want peace. If you did, you'd have been the first person to come back

home, not the last. You've been sitting in that cave on Valo IX waiting for the

war to start up again—hoping and praying to gods you don't even believe in that

the Cardassians were kidding. That they'd come back so you could blow up more of

their ships and depots and outposts. And, after two years, when that didn't

happen, you figured you'd manufacture your own war.”

Keogh looked aghast at Kira. “He wants to start a war with the Federation?

That's insane.”

In a low voice, Orta said, “That's what they told us about fighting the

Cardassians, Captain.”

It took Keogh a moment to find his voice. “Is she right? Is this what you plan?”

“I have obtained a weapon of mass destruction, Captain. Its purpose is to

destroy—not to push.” Again, the smile. “Except, perhaps in a metaphoric sense.”

“So that nonsense about the prophecy was—?” He let the question hang.

Orta shrugged. “A way to convince you that my motives were pure. I knew that

Nerys was one of the devout, so she was likely to believe me—and having the

lieutenant support me was an added bonus.”

Kira laughed again. “You're an idiot, Orta. You always were.”

“You think so?”

Keogh said, “You damn well sound like one. Do you have any idea of the

consequences of your actions? Shifting the moon's orbit was deadly enough—to actually destroy it will cause uncounted changes to Bajor, none of them for the good. The planet's entire ecosystem will be thrown off-kilter. The planet's barely recovered from the Cardassians. You won't be starting a war, you'll be committing genocide.”

“Bajor survived Cardassia's occupation, Captain,” Orta said. “I survived having my throat cut. For that matter, Qo'noS survived Praxis's destruction eighty years ago. Your attempts to frighten me are fruitless.”

“Don't even bother, Captain,” Kira said with disdain. “You'll never convince him. Go ahead, Orta, fire up your weapon. See how much good it does you.”

“Major!” Keogh barked. He couldn't believe this fool woman was encouraging him to destroy the moon. And why the hell is the Odyssey just sitting out there? Why don't they do something?

“Computer,” Orta said slowly. “Fire the weapon.”

Then the entire runabout went dark.

“All systems on the Rio Grande read dead, Joe,” Gonzalez said from the ops station. Then she turned and looked at the command center, smiling. To Sisko, she said, “Looks like you were right, Commander.”

Jason Talltree couldn't believe his eyes. He had been sure that the whole thing was a waste of time, that they needed to disable the runabout and then beam a team on board. He didn't expect some Bajoran Militia thug like this Odo person to understand the niceties of Starfleet General Orders, but Talltree knew that they had to capture the artifact. And that was what he'd do.

He had not expected things to be this easy.

Turning to Odo, he asked, “What, exactly, just happened?”

The Deep Space 9 security chief turned his disquieting gaze upon his Odyssey counterpart. The constable had what looked like an unfinished face—it was almost uncomfortable to look at. Odo was a shape-changer, and Talltree wondered if he chose so bizarre a facial structure as an intimidation tactic. If so, he found himself admiring it.

“Security, Mr. Talltree,” Odo said. “I don’t know if you’ve kept abreast of activity in the DMZ, but the ranks of the Maquis are growing—particularly with Starfleet personnel,” he added with a disdain that Talltree thought unfair. “On DS9, we devised a security protocol to keep our runabouts out of Maquis hands. The security codes were changed, but the old codes still work—after a fashion. A coded message is sent, embedded in the power signature so the saboteurs won’t detect it. Normal operation of the runabout proceeds unless the library computer is accessed, or any defensive systems or the warp drive go online.”

Talltree nodded. “If they do, the runabout shuts down.”

O’Brien put in, “The idea’s to keep any thieves in place until a Starfleet vessel can pick ’em up.”

“An excellent idea,” Shabalala said, “but you might want to inform people of this next time.” The commander spoke in his usual pleasant tone, but Talltree noticed an undercurrent of annoyance.

“We, uh, only just installed it in the Rio Grande,” O’Brien added hesitantly.

Sisko smiled toothily. “We hadn’t tested it—until now, that is.”

“Fair enough,” Shabalala said, though he did not return Sisko’s smile. “Mr. Talltree, get over there with a security team—Mr. O’Brien, go with them.”

Talltree nodded. “Yes, sir.” They still didn’t know the captain’s fate, after all—this wasn’t over yet. He tapped his combadge as he headed toward the

turbolift, O'Brien walking alongside. "DeNoux, Hyzy, report to Transporter Room 3."

He then heard Odo's voice from behind him. "Request permission to accompany the away team, Commander."

After only a brief hesitation, the first officer said, "Granted." Talltree almost objected, then decided he'd rather have Odo's experience with Bajoran terrorists on his side.

The trio rode the turbolift in silence. Within minutes, they arrived at the transporter room, DeNoux and Hyzy already present and armed and ready to go. The transporter chief handed out wristlamps, since there'd be no other light source until O'Brien could re-establish power on the runabout.

"On stun, people," Talltree said as the five of them stepped on the platform. As his people and O'Brien set their phasers, Talltree noted that Odo wasn't armed.

To the transporter chief, he said, "Get the constable a phaser."

"No need. I don't carry weapons."

"You don't?" The idea of a security chief who went about unarmed was incomprehensible to Talltree.

"Trust me," O'Brien said with a smile, "he doesn't need one."

Shrugging, Talltree said, "Suit yourself."

"I always do," Odo muttered.

"Energize."

Although he had anticipated having to adjust from the brightness of the Odyssey transporter room to the darkness of the runabout, it still took Talltree's eyes several seconds to adjust. Those seconds were, he knew, crucial given that they had no idea what to expect. Even with the runabout powered down, the artifact

was interfering with sensors. They still only knew for sure that Lieutenant Dax and three other humanoids were on the runabout.

It quickly became apparent that none of them were in the fore compartment, where they had beamed in.

“What the hell is that?” O’Brien asked.

Talltree followed the path of O’Brien’s wristlamp to one of the side consoles.

Talltree wasn’t completely familiar with runabout design, but he was fairly certain that a small black box attached to one of the consoles wasn’t standard.

“That’s probably the artifact,” he said. “I assume you want to disconnect it?”

“Definitely,” O’Brien said emphatically.

Smiling, Talltree said, “Get to work, then. DeNoux, stay with him. The rest of you, let’s check the aft—”

The security chief’s instructions were interrupted by a grunt of pain from the aft compartment.

“That sounded like Major Kira,” Odo said.

He had no idea how Odo could tell that from a muffled grunt, but Talltree wasn’t about to argue, either. “C’mon,” he said, and dashed toward the aft compartment, Odo and Hyzy right behind him.

Orta had not screamed when he watched his foster parents eliminated by Cardassian soldiers. He had not screamed when he was tortured on Cardassia.

After that Obsidian Order agent cut his vocal cords, he couldn’t scream.

But when the Rio Grande went dark, mutilated throat notwithstanding, Orta screamed.

This can’t be. It was all in my grasp. It can’t go wrong now!

“It’s over, Orta,” came the hated voice of Kira Nerys.

Orta blinked several times, trying to clear his vision, to adjust to the darkness that the runabout had been plunged into. What could've gone wrong?

He reached out with his mind to the glorious weapon that had made all this possible. Why have you betrayed me?

Before he could get an answer, a fist collided with his jaw.

As he fell to the deck, he instinctively kicked with his left leg, and felt its impact against something soft. A female voice let out an "Oof!" in response.

"Damn you!" Orta said. Somehow he just knew the woman who attacked was Kira. The Trill didn't have the skill to untie Orta's knots. "You have ruined everything!

You have betrayed Bajor!"

"I'm trying to help Bajor—help our people," Kira said, sounding winded.

Orta clambered to his feet. "Then you'll die for Bajor," he said, running for the sound of her voice.

To his surprise, he was tackled from behind. "Not today," Kira said.

As he and Kira fell to the deck once again, Orta cursed himself. Kira had deliberately spoken and then moved so he would go for the sound of her voice. He had then fallen for a similar trick—she had jumped him after locating him via his voice.

They rolled on the floor for a moment. Orta tried to land a punch, but failed.

Kira, though, got a grip on his vocoder and ripped it off.

The pain was unimaginable. A small control would release the mechanism's grip on the mutilated skin of his throat, but by simply tearing it off, Kira also removed a layer of that skin.

Again, Orta screamed, but this time no sounds emerged. Blood seeped from his neck.

You betrayed me! his mind screamed, both at Kira and at the device that should have been his salvation. You're like all of them! Mother, Father, Syed, Starfleet, the provisional government—betrayers, all of them!

In his now-silent rage, Orta kicked at Kira, who was knocked off him by the impact.

The device's oh-so-compelling voice sounded in his head. I can still give you what you want. You must kill this woman. It is the only way to accomplish your goals.

Orta stood, put a hand to his throat to stanch the bleeding, and smiled. He would kill Kira as he killed Syed and the Obsidian Order agent and so many others who stood in his way. They all had to die.

It was the only way...

As Jason Talltree entered the aft compartment, he shined his wristlamp inside. The first thing the beam fell on was the pleasant sight of Keogh in a chair. His arms were behind his back in such a way to lead Talltree to believe that they were tied together—but that was comparatively irrelevant. Talltree was just relieved to see him alive. "Captain!"

"Over there, Lieutenant!" Keogh said, just as Odo bellowed, "Kira!"

Before Talltree could turn to see what they were talking about, his attention was drawn by the thud of bodies crashing into a bulkhead. He shined his lamp to see two Bajoran figures struggling—one in a red Militia uniform, the other in civilian clothes.

"Stand back!" Odo said as Talltree drew his phaser. Talltree planned to just stun both of them and sort it out later, but Odo seemed to have something else in mind.

The shapeshifter made as if to throw something with his right hand, though that hand was empty. As his arm came around, it seemed to dissolve—in fact, it turned into a golden liquid and extended toward the scuffle. By the time the protrusion reached the non-Militia Bajoran, it looked like a length of rope tied into a lasso, which wrapped around the Bajoran’s left wrist.

Odo pulled his now-rather-long right arm downward, which yanked the Bajoran off the Militia woman. Talltree then fired his phaser at the Bajoran. He missed, as the Bajoran ducked—

—right into Hyzy’s shot, which stunned him.

Just as the Bajoran—whom Talltree realized had to be Orta—hit the deck, the lights came on. “Thank you, Chief,” Talltree muttered.

Talltree looked around and saw the Bajoran Militia woman—Major Kira—rubbing her wrists, and Keogh and Dax tied to chairs.

“Hyzy, take care of the captain and lieutenant, will you?” Talltree said.

Keogh was looking at Kira. “Major, how the hell did you get out of your bonds?”

She smiled. “Orta always tied a lousy knot.”

Talltree wasn’t sure, but he thought that Keogh got an unusually sour look—even by his high standards—at that.

“It’s good to see you alive, sir,” Talltree said to Keogh as Hyzy finished undoing his hands.

The security guard moved over to Dax while Keogh undid his feet. “It’s good to be seen,” the captain said. He undid his feet and stood up. “Major, would you mind explaining to me what the hell happened here?”

Before the major could reply, Shabalala’s voice sounded over the comm channel.

“Shabalala to run-about. Report.”

Keogh went to an intercom on the wall and tapped it, his own combadge having gone missing. “This is Keogh. We’re all fine, Commander.”

“It’s very good to hear your voice, Captain. We were worried that you’d been killed.”

“Negative, Commander, though Mr. Rodzinski wasn’t so lucky. I’ll tell you all about it back on the ship. Tell the transporter room to prepare to beam us over.”

Chapter Fourteen

A FEW HOURS LATER , Keogh stood with Sisko, Kira, and Shabalala in the shuttlebay of the Odyssey, the Galaxy -class ship’s own shuttles having been moved out of the way to make room for the larger Rio Grande. O’Brien had gone over the runabout to make sure that no further damage was done by Orta before being done in by the counter-Maquis program. The Odyssey was preparing to return its various passengers (including Orta, presently in the brig) and the artifact to Deep Space 9, then proceed to its scheduled patrol of the Cardassian border.

“I wish you’d told me about that little security program of yours, Commander,”

Keogh said to Sisko, who held the Malkus Artifact, which had been recovered from the runabout. With a glance at Kira, he added, “It might’ve saved us all some embarrassment.”

“I am sorry about that, Captain,” Kira said, “but I couldn’t very well let Orta run loose, and I couldn’t clue you in without cluing him in as well.”

“Besides,” Sisko added with a smile, “I’m sure your bickering helped keep Orta in the dark—so to speak.”

Keogh grudgingly conceded the point. “Perhaps.”

“I’m sorry for the loss of your chief engineer, Captain,” Sisko said in a quiet voice.

“Thank you,” Keogh said formally. He had already gone through the onerous duty of informing Rodzinski’s wife and daughter—both also Starfleet officers, presently serving on Starbase 12 and the U.S.S. Sugihara, respectively—of his death, and the bittersweet duty of promoting Kovac to lieutenant commander and giving him Rodzinski’s job.

“In any case,” Kira said, turning toward the run-about hatch, “I need to get back down to the moon and try to put things back together. I’ll see you all back at the station in a few days.”

Just as she started to walk toward the runabout, the artifact in Sisko’s hands—which had been glowing a slightly greenish color—suddenly let loose a quick burst of bright green light.

Then the glow disappeared altogether.

Keogh reacted immediately. “Computer, scan the shuttlebay for any anomalous readings and report.”

After a moment, the computer’s voice calmly said, “No anomalous readings.”

Shabalala had taken out a tricorder. “The artifact is reading as inert, sir.”

Sisko shrugged. “Probably shutting down now that it isn’t being used.”

“I hope that’s all it is,” Keogh said.

After Kira departed, Sisko, Keogh, and Shabalala went to a turbolift.

“Would you like to join us in Ten-Forward, Commander?” Keogh asked Sisko.

“Perhaps later. I want to bring this thing to Dax for safekeeping. Someone from the Rector Institute on Earth is scheduled to come to DS9 and pick it up in a month or two.”

“I have to say, Commander,” Keogh said to Sisko, “I was less than impressed with your science officer. She’s a bit on the—well, arrogant side. I know she’s a

friend of yours, but—”

“It’s hard not to be arrogant after three hundred years, Captain.” With a small half-smile, he said, “I’ll be sure to let her know of your assessment.”

Keogh and Shabalala got off at deck ten, leaving Sisko to continue up to deck eight and the guest quarters.

After a hesitation, Shabalala said, “It’s—good to have you back, Captain. You had us worried.”

“I’m afraid the center chair is going to remain occupied for a while longer, Commander,” Keogh said, allowing himself a smile.

“And you’re welcome to it, sir. I’m just glad I didn’t have to lose another CO so soon.”

Keogh frowned. He knew the details of Patnira, of course, but had thought Shabalala recovered from it. Now, he wasn’t so sure.

As they entered Ten-Forward, he said, “I suppose you’ll want that Saurian swill of yours.”

“Actually, sir—I think I’d like to share a whiskey with you.” Shabalala broke into a grin.

After blinking in surprise, Keogh then smiled again. “I’d be honored, Commander.”

Within minutes, they sat at a table, sharing a bottle of synthehollic whiskey.

“Captain, if you don’t mind my asking—what happened?”

Again, Keogh frowned. “What happened when, Commander?”

“What happened to make you decide not to let anyone call you ‘Deco’—or even say the name in your presence?”

Instinctively, Keogh started to shoot down this line of conversation, but then stopped. If he isn’t as over Patnira as I thought, maybe my story will do him

some good.

“You may find this hard to believe, Commander, but I had something of a reputation in my younger days as a—well, a wild man.”

“Really, sir?” Shabalala said, sounding surprised.

“Yes, really. I insisted everyone call me ‘Deco,’ and that informality stretched to—many things. Mostly to women and drinking.” He held up his glass. “Usually liquids far stronger and less syntheholc than this.” He took a sip from the glass, then set it down, staring at the amber liquid, imagining he could see his younger self. “One night, twenty-two years ago, I was security chief on the Lexington. I indulged in both pursuits rather aggressively the night before we arrived at Altair VI to attend a presidential inauguration. It was someone’s birthday—I don’t even remember whose—and we had a very loud party on the rec deck. I woke up the next morning with an overloading phaser in my head, cotton in my mouth, and a sudden desire to not attend a dull ceremony. So I changed the duty roster—perfectly within my rights as chief of security, mind you—and stayed on the ship at tactical while sending down my assistant chief in my place, along with the five other security guards that had been requested to attend the inauguration.”

Shabalala gave Keogh a look. “Wait a moment—twenty-two years ago? Wasn’t that when—”

Keogh nodded. “The coup, yes. All five of my people down there died when the an-Jirok attacked—including Ensign Manojlovich, who should’ve been safe back on the bridge. But, because I was young and stupid, he died.”

Shabalala took a sip of his whiskey, then gave Keogh as serious a look as the captain had ever seen from his first officer. “Sir, you can’t blame yourself for

that. Every two years since the founding of the Federation, Starfleet has sent three ships to attend the inauguration at Altair VI. The only time they didn't was during the time the an-Jirok ruled, and that only lasted three years.

Starship crews live in dread of getting the assignment. There was no reason for you to attend as chief of security for an event that had, until that point, had the same level of security concerns as walking to the bridge from your quarters.”

“That's not the point,” Keogh said angrily. “I was going to attend, and the only reason I didn't was because I thought a party was more important than being ready to do my duty.”

“Maybe.” Shabalala hesitated, then put a hand on Keogh's shoulder—a familiar gesture that surprised Keogh, and angered him slightly. “And certainly you're not going to change your ways now. But you still can't blame yourself. Every day, I think about what happened on Patnira. Every time I close my eyes, I see the horrendous thing that Captain Simon became. Every time I'm in a quiet room, I can hear her voice begging me to kill her. And yet, no matter how much that day haunts me—I don't regret what I did. It needed to be done, I did it, and if I had to go through it again, the only thing I'd do differently is that I wouldn't have hesitated before firing the phaser. Life is far too short to waste on might-have-beens, Captain.”

Keogh then heard a sound he hadn't heard in quite some time: his own laughter. Several heads in Ten-Forward turned in surprise, as their captain laughing was a unique experience.

Shabalala himself was grinning. “I hadn't realized that what I said was so amusing, Captain.”

“It's not that, Commander, it's just—one of the reasons why I told you about the

Lexington was that I wasn't sure if you had gotten over what happened on Patnira. Looks like I was the one who needed the therapy."

"Well, if I were you, sir, I wouldn't go signing up for sessions with Counselor Zumsteg just yet." Another hesitation. "But I'm glad we had this conversation, nonetheless."

"As am I, Commander, as am I." Keogh raised his glass. "To many years of serving together, Mr. Shabalala."

"I'll definitely drink to that—Deco."

Over the years, the Klingon Empire had built a large base on Narendra III. Proximate to both the Romulan and Federation borders, it was the site of a treacherous attack by several Romulan warbirds. Only the sacrifice of the Starship Enterprise, commanded by Rachel Garrett, enabled the base to survive. In all the years that the Klingons occupied the world, though, they never managed to disturb—or even discover the existence of—the metal box with the green glow.

The screams had continued all but uninterrupted. Their only pause had been a century ago. There had been hope then, but it was fleeting.

That hope revived itself with a second chance for freedom. This one was much better suited to the task—he was a fighter, a warrior, and, best of all, a warmonger. The signs were much better than they were the last time.

But he too failed.

And the screaming continued.

However, now four more minds joined the three that had imprinted themselves before.

Now there were potentially seven to fight on behalf of Malkus the Mighty.

When the time was right...

Second Interlude

Station log, Deep Space 9, Commander Benjamin Sisko, Stardate 47999.2

The U.S.S. Yorktown and Venture are on their way to the station, the former to transport the survivors of the Odyssey, the latter to begin the cleanup work on what's left of the New Bajor colony.

To say that the existence of this new threat from the Gamma Quadrant troubles me would be a vast understatement. The Dominion has made its hostile intentions clear with the destruction of New Bajor and the kamikaze attack on the Odyssey that resulted in the deaths of Captain Keogh, Commander Shabalala, and the rest of their fine crew. Captain Keogh at least offloaded all civilians and nonessential personnel before their mission to the Gamma Quadrant, but that still leaves the death toll in the hundreds of thousands—merely to prove a point.

I have requested that Starfleet assign additional forces to the station. The deaths of the good people of New Bajor and the valiant crew of the Odyssey will not go unavenged.

TO BE CONTINUED...

About the Author

After a trip to the galactic barrier in order to save an injured Klingon, Keith R.A. DeCandido found himself seventy thousand light years from home and put on trial for the crimes of humanity, after which he was declared Emissary.

Eventually, after switching bodies with an insane woman, he was able to become one with the Prophets, stop an anti-time wave from destroying the multiverse,

and get home with the help of his alternate future self. These days, he writes in a variety of milieus. His other Star Trek work ranges from the Star Trek: The Next Generation novel Diplomatic Implausibility to the Star Trek: Deep Space Nine novel Demons of Air and Darkness to the TNG comic book Perchance to Dream to the DS9 novella “Horn and Ivory.” In addition, he is the co-developer of the Star Trek: S.C.E. line, and has written or cowritten over half a dozen eBooks in this series of adventures featuring the Starfleet Corps of Engineers (some reprinted in the volumes Have Tech, Will Travel and Miracle Workers in early 2002). The year 2003 will see the debut of Star Trek: I.K.S. Gorkon, books starring Captain Klag and his Klingon crew—the first time Pocket Books has published a series focusing on Star Trek’ 'smost popular aliens. To say Keith is thrilled at this opportunity would be the gravest of understatements. He will also be contributing to the Star Trek: The Lost Era mini-series.

In addition to all this Trek kin’, Keith has written novels, short stories, and nonfiction books in the worlds of Andromeda, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Doctor Who, Farscape, Magic: The Gathering, Marvel Comics, and Xena. He is also the editor of the upcoming anthology of original science fiction Imaginings.

Keith lives in the Bronx with his girlfriend and the world’s two goofiest cats.

Find out even more useless information about him at his official Web site at the easy-to-remember URL of Decandido.net, or just e-mail him directly at keith@decandido.net and tell him just what you think of him.

Look for STAR TREK fiction from Pocket Books

Star Trek®

Enterprise: The First Adventure • Vonda N. McIntyre

Strangers From the Sky • Margaret Wander Bonanno

Final Frontier • Diane Carey

Spock's World • Diane Duane

The Lost Years • J.M. Dillard

Prime Directive • Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens

Probe • Margaret Wander Bonanno

Best Destiny • Diane Carey

Shadows on the Sun • Michael Jan Friedman

Sarek • A.C. Crispin

Federation • Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens

Vulcan's Forge • Josepha Sherman & Susan Shwartz

Mission to Horatius • Mack Reynolds

Vulcan's Heart • Josepha Sherman & Susan Shwartz

The Eugenics Wars: The Rise and Fall of Khan Noonien Singh, Books One and Two •

Greg Cox

The Last Round-Up • Christie Golden

Novelizations

Star Trek: The Motion Picture • Gene Roddenberry

Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan • Vonda N. McIntyre

Star Trek III: The Search for Spock • Vonda N. McIntyre

Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home • Vonda N. McIntyre

Star Trek V: The Final Frontier • J.M. Dillard

Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country • J.M. Dillard

Star Trek Generations • J.M. Dillard

Starfleet Academy • Diane Carey

Star Trek books by William Shatner with Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens

The Ashes of Eden

The Return

Avenger

Star Trek: Odyssey (contains The Ashes of Eden, The Return , and Avenger)

Spectre

Dark Victory

Preserver

Captain's Peril

#1 • Star Trek: The Motion Picture • Gene Roddenberry

#2 • The Entropy Effect • Vonda N. McIntyre

#3 • The Klingon Gambit • Robert E. Vardeman

#4 • The Covenant of the Crown • Howard Weinstein

#5 • The Prometheus Design • Sondra Marshak & Myrna Culbreath

#6 • The Abode of Life • Lee Correy

#7 • Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan • Vonda N. McIntyre

#8 • Black Fire • Sonni Cooper

#9 • Triangle • Sondra Marshak & Myrna Culbreath

#10 • Web of the Romulans • M.S. Murdock

#11 • Yesterday's Son • A.C. Crispin

#12 • Mutiny on the Enterprise • Robert E. Vardeman

#13 • The Wounded Sky • Diane Duane

#14 • The Trellisane Confrontation • David Dvorkin

#15 • Corona • Greg Bear

#16 • The Final Reflection • John M. Ford

#17 • Star Trek III: The Search for Spock • Vonda N. McIntyre

#18 • My Enemy, My Ally • Diane Duane

- #19 • The Tears of the Singers • Melinda Snodgrass
- #20 • The Vulcan Academy Murders • Jean Lorrah
- #21 • Uhura's Song • Janet Kagan
- #22 • Shadow Lord • Laurence Yep
- #23 • Ishmael • Barbara Hambly
- #24 • Killing Time • Della Van Hise
- #25 • Dwellers in the Crucible • Margaret Wander Bonanno
- #26 • Pawns and Symbols • Majliss Larson
- #27 • Mindshadow • J.M. Dillard
- #28 • Crisis on Centaurus • Brad Ferguson
- #29 • Dreadnought! • Diane Carey
- #30 • Demons • J.M. Dillard
- #31 • Battlestations! • Diane Carey
- #32 • Chain of Attack • Gene DeWeese
- #33 • Deep Domain • Howard Weinstein
- #34 • Dreams of the Raven • Carmen Carter
- #35 • The Romulan Way • Diane Duane & Peter Morwood
- #36 • How Much for Just the Planet? • John M. Ford
- #37 • Bloodthirst • J.M. Dillard
- #38 • The IDIC Epidemic • Jean Lorrah
- #39 • Time for Yesterday • A.C. Crispin
- #40 • Timetrapp • David Dvorkin
- #41 • The Three-Minute Universe • Barbara Paul
- #42 • Memory Prime • Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens
- #43 • The Final Nexus • Gene DeWeese
- #44 • Vulcan's Glory • D.C. Fontana

- #45 • Double, Double • Michael Jan Friedman
- #46 • The Cry of the Onlies • Judy Klass
- #47 • The Kobayashi Maru • Julia Ecklar
- #48 • Rules of Engagement • Peter Morwood
- #49 • The Pandora Principle • Carolyn Clowes
- #50 • Doctor's Orders • Diane Duane
- #51 • Enemy Unseen • V.E. Mitchell
- #52 • Home Is the Hunter • Dana Kramer-Rolls
- #53 • Ghost-Walker • Barbara Hambly
- #54 • A Flag Full of Stars • Brad Ferguson
- #55 • Renegade • Gene DeWeese
- #56 • Legacy • Michael Jan Friedman
- #57 • The Rift • Peter David
- #58 • Faces of Fire • Michael Jan Friedman
- #59 • The Disinherited • Peter David, Michael Jan Friedman, Robert Greenberger
- #60 • Ice Trap • L.A. Graf
- #61 • Sanctuary • John Vornholt
- #62 • Death Count • L.A. Graf
- #63 • Shell Game • Melissa Crandall
- #64 • The Starship Trap • Mel Gilden
- #65 • Windows on a Lost World • V.E. Mitchell
- #66 • From the Depths • Victor Milan
- #67 • The Great Starship Race • Diane Carey
- #68 • Firestorm • L.A. Graf
- #69 • The Patrian Transgression • Simon Hawke

#70 • Traitor Winds • L.A. Graf

#71 • Crossroad • Barbara Hambly

#72 • The Better Man • Howard Weinstein

#73 • Recovery • J.M. Dillard

#74 • The Fearful Summons • Denny Martin Flinn

#75 • First Frontier • Diane Carey & Dr. James I. Kirkland

#76 • The Captain's Daughter • Peter David

#77 • Twilight's End • Jerry Oltion

#78 • The Rings of Tautee • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

#79 • Invasion! #1: First Strike • Diane Carey

#80 • The Joy Machine • James Gunn

#81 • Mudd in Your Eye • Jerry Oltion

#82 • Mind Meld • John Vornholt

#83 • Heart of the Sun • Pamela Sargent & George Zebrowski

#84 • Assignment: Eternity • Greg Cox

#85-87 • My Brother's Keeper • Michael Jan Friedman

#85 • Republic

#86 • Constitution

#87 • Enterprise

#88 • Across the Universe • Pamela Sargent & George Zebrowski

#89-94 • New Earth

#89 • Wagon Train to the Stars • Diane Carey

#90 • Belle Terre • Dean Wesley Smith with Diane Carey

#91 • Rough Trails • L.A. Graf

#92 • The Flaming Arrow • Kathy and Jerry Oltion

#93 • Thin Air • Kristine Kathryn Rusch & Dean Wesley Smith

#94 • Challenger • Diane Carey

#95-96 • Rihannsu • Diane Duane

#95 • Swordhunt

#96 • Honor Blade

#97 • In the Name of Honor • Dayton Ward

Star Trek®: The Original Series

The Janus Gate • L.A. Graf

#1 • Present Tense

#2 • Future Imperfect

#3 • Past Prologue

Errand of Vengeance • Kevin Ryan

#1 • The Edge of the Sword

#2 • Killing Blow

#3 • River of Blood

Star Trek: The Next Generation ®

Metamorphosis • Jean Lorrh

Vendetta • Peter David

Reunion • Michael Jan Friedman

Imzadi • Peter David

The Devil's Heart • Carmen Carter

Dark Mirror • Diane Duane

Q-Squared • Peter David

Crossover • Michael Jan Friedman

Kahless • Michael Jan Friedman

Ship of the Line • Diane Carey

The Best and the Brightest • Susan Wright

Planet X • Michael Jan Friedman

Imzadi II: Triangle • Peter David

I, Q • John de Lancie & Peter David

The Valiant • Michael Jan Friedman

The Genesis Wave, Books One, Two, and Three • John Vornholt

Immortal Coil • Jeffrey Lang

A Hard Rain • Dean Wesley Smith

The Battle of Betazed • Charlotte Douglas & Susan Kearney

Novelizations

Encounter at Farpoint • David Gerrold

Unification • Jeri Taylor

Relics • Michael Jan Friedman

Descent • Diane Carey

All Good Things... • Michael Jan Friedman

Star Trek: Klingon • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Star Trek Generations • J.M. Dillard

Star Trek: First Contact • J.M. Dillard

Star Trek: Insurrection • J.M. Dillard

Star Trek: Nemesis • J.M. Dillard

#1 • Ghost Ship • Diane Carey

#2 • The Peacekeepers • Gene DeWeese

#3 • The Children of Hamlin • Carmen Carter

#4 • Survivors • Jean Lorrh

#5 • Strike Zone • Peter David

- #6 • Power Hungry • Howard Weinstein
- #7 • Masks • John Vornholt
- #8 • The Captain's Honor • David & Daniel Dvorkin
- #9 • A Call to Darkness • Michael Jan Friedman
- #10 • A Rock and a Hard Place • Peter David
- #11 • Gulliver's Fugitives • Keith Sharee
- #12 • Doomsday World • Carter, David, Friedman & Greenberger
- #13 • The Eyes of the Beholders • A.C. Crispin
- #14 • Exiles • Howard Weinstein
- #15 • Fortune's Light • Michael Jan Friedman
- #16 • Contamination • John Vornholt
- #17 • Boogeymen • Mel Gilden
- #18 • Q-in-Law • Peter David
- #19 • Perchance to Dream • Howard Weinstein
- #20 • Spartacus • T.L. Mancour
- #21 • Chains of Command • W.A. McCay & E.L. Flood
- #22 • Imbalance • V.E. Mitchell
- #23 • War Drums • John Vornholt
- #24 • Nightshade • Laurell K. Hamilton
- #25 • Grounded • David Bischoff
- #26 • The Romulan Prize • Simon Hawke
- #27 • Guises of the Mind • Rebecca Neason
- #28 • Here There Be Dragons • John Peel
- #29 • Sins of Commission • Susan Wright
- #30 • Debtor's Planet • W.R. Thompson

#31 • Foreign Foes • Dave Galanter & Greg Brodeur

#32 • Requiem • Michael Jan Friedman & Kevin Ryan

#33 • Balance of Power • Dafydd ab Hugh

#34 • Blaze of Glory • Simon Hawke

#35 • The Romulan Stratagem • Robert Greenberger

#36 • Into the Nebula • Gene DeWeese

#37 • The Last Stand • Brad Ferguson

#38 • Dragon's Honor • Kij Johnson & Greg Cox

#39 • Rogue Saucer • John Vornholt

#40 • Possession • J.M. Dillard & Kathleen O'Malley

#41 • Invasion! #2: The Soldiers of Fear • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn
Rusch

#42 • Infiltrator • W.R. Thompson

#43 • A Fury Scorned • Pamela Sargent & George Zebrowski

#44 • The Death of Princes • John Peel

#45 • Intellivore • Diane Duane

#46 • To Storm Heaven • Esther Friesner

#47-49 • The Q Continuum • Greg Cox

#47 • Q-Space

#48 • Q-Zone

#49 • Q-Strike

#50 • Dyson Sphere • Charles Pellegrino & George Zebrowski

#51-56 • Double Helix

#51 • Infection • John Gregory Betancourt

#52 • Vectors • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

#53 • Red Sector • Diane Carey

#54 • Quarantine • John Vornholt

#55 • Double or Nothing • Peter David

#56 • The First Virtue • Michael Jan Friedman & Christie Golden

#57 • The Forgotten War • William R. Forstchen

#58-59 • Gemworld • John Vornholt

#58 • Gemworld #1

#59 • Gemworld #2

#60 • Tooth and Claw • Doranna Durgin

#61 • Diplomatic Implausibility • Keith R.A. DeCandido

#62-63 • Maximum Warp • Dave Galanter & Greg Brodeur

#62 • Dead Zone

#63 • Forever Dark

Star Trek: Deep Space Nine®

Warped • K.W. Jeter

Legends of the Ferengi • Ira Steven Behr & Robert Hewitt Wolfe

Novelizations

Emissary • J.M. Dillard

The Search • Diane Carey

The Way of the Warrior • Diane Carey

Star Trek: Klingon • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Trials and Tribble-ations • Diane Carey

Far Beyond the Stars • Steve Barnes

What You Leave Behind • Diane Carey

#1 • Emissary • J.M. Dillard

- #2 • The Siege • Peter David
- #3 • Bloodletter • K.W. Jeter
- #4 • The Big Game • Sandy Schofield
- #5 • Fallen Heroes • Dafydd ab Hugh
- #6 • Betrayal • Lois Tilton
- #7 • Warchild • Esther Friesner
- #8 • Antimatter • John Vornholt
- #9 • Proud Helios • Melissa Scott
- #10 • Valhalla • Nathan Archer
- #11 • Devil in the Sky • Greg Cox & John Gregory Betancourt
- #12 • The Laertian Gamble • Robert Sheckley
- #13 • Station Rage • Diane Carey
- #14 • The Long Night • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch
- #15 • Objective: Bajor • John Peel
- #16 • Invasion! #3: Time's Enemy • L.A. Graf
- #17 • The Heart of the Warrior • John Gregory Betancourt
- #18 • Saratoga • Michael Jan Friedman
- #19 • The Tempest • Susan Wright
- #20 • Wrath of the Prophets • David, Friedman & Greenberger
- #21 • Trial by Error • Mark Garland
- #22 • Vengeance • Dafydd ab Hugh
- #23 • The 34th Rule • Armin Shimerman & David R. George III
- #24-26 • Rebels • Dafydd ab Hugh
- #24 • The Conquered
- #25 • The Courageous
- #26 • The Liberated

Books set after the series

The Lives of Dax • Marco Palmieri, ed.

Millennium Omnibus • Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens

#1 • The Fall of Terok Nor

#2 • The War of the Prophets

#3 • Inferno

A Stitch in Time • Andrew J. Robinson

Avatar, Book One • S.D. Perry

Avatar, Book Two • S.D. Perry

Section 31: Abyss • David Weddle & Jeffrey Lang

Gateways #4: Demons of Air and Darkness • Keith R.A. DeCandido

Gateways #7: What Lay Beyond: “Horn and Ivory” • Keith R.A. DeCandido

Mission: Gamma

#1 • Twilight • David R. George III

#2 • This Gray Spirit • Heather Jarman

#3 • Cathedral • Michael A. Martin & Andy Mangels

#4 • Lesser Evil • Robert Simpson

Star Trek: Voyager ®

Mosaic • Jeri Taylor

Pathways • Jeri Taylor

Captain Proton: Defender of the Earth • D.W. “Prof” Smith

The Nanotech War • Steven Piziks

Novelizations

Caretaker • L.A. Graf

Flashback • Diane Carey

Day of Honor • Michael Jan Friedman

Equinox • Diane Carey

Endgame • Diane Carey & Christie Golden

#1 • Caretaker • L.A. Graf

#2 • The Escape • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

#3 • Ragnarok • Nathan Archer

#4 • Violations • Susan Wright

#5 • Incident at Arbuk • John Gregory Betancourt

#6 • The Murdered Sun • Christie Golden

#7 • Ghost of a Chance • Mark A. Garland & Charles G. McGraw

#8 • Cybersong • S.N. Lewitt

#9 • Invasion! #4: The Final Fury • Dafydd ab Hugh

#10 • Bless the Beasts • Karen Haber

#11 • The Garden • Melissa Scott

#12 • Chrysalis • David Niall Wilson

#13 • The Black Shore • Greg Cox

#14 • Marooned • Christie Golden

#15 • Echoes • Dean Wesley Smith, Kristine Kathryn Rusch & Nina Kiriki Hoffman

#16 • Seven of Nine • Christie Golden

#17 • Death of a Neutron Star • Eric Kotani

#18 • Battle Lines • Dave Galanter & Greg Brodeur

#19-21 • Dark Matters • Christie Golden

#19 • Cloak and Dagger

#20 • Ghost Dance

#21 • Shadow of Heaven

Enterprise®

Broken Bow • Diane Carey

Shockwave • Paul Ruditis

By the Book • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

What Price Honor? • Dave Stern

Star Trek®: New Frontier

New Frontier #1-4 Collector's Edition • Peter David

#1 • House of Cards

#2 • Into the Void

#3 • The Two-Front War

#4 • End Game

#5 • Martyr • Peter David

#6 • Fire on High • Peter David

The Captain's Table #5 • Once Burned • Peter David

Double Helix #5 • Double or Nothing • Peter David

#7 • The Quiet Place • Peter David

#8 • Dark Allies • Peter David

#9-11 • Excalibur • Peter David

#9 • Requiem

#10 • Renaissance

#11 • Restoration

Gateways #6: Cold Wars • Peter David

Gateways #7: What Lay Beyond: "Death After Life" • Peter David

#12 • Being Human • Peter David

Star Trek®: Stargazer

The Valiant • Michael Jan Friedman

Double Helix #6: The First Virtue • Michael Jan Friedman and Christie Golden

Gauntlet • Michael Jan Friedman

Progenitor • Michael Jan Friedman

Star Trek®: Starfleet Corps of Engineers (eBooks)

Have Tech, Will Travel (paperback) • various

#1 • The Belly of the Beast • Dean Wesley Smith

#2 • Fatal Error • Keith R.A. DeCandido

#3 • Hard Crash • Christie Golden

#4 • Interphase, Book One • Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

Miracle Workers (paperback) • various

#5 • Interphase, Book Two • Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#6 • Cold Fusion • Keith R.A. DeCandido

#7 • Invincible, Book One • David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido

#8 • Invincible, Book Two • David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido

#9 • The Riddled Post • Aaron Rosenberg

#10 • Gateways Epilogue: Here There Be Monsters • Keith R.A. DeCandido

#11 • Ambush • Dave Galanter & Greg Brodeur

#12 • Some Assembly Required • Scott Ciencin & Dan Jolley

#13 • No Surrender • Jeff Mariotte

#14 • Caveat Emptor • Ian Edginton & Michael Collins

#15 • Past Life • Robert Greenberger

#16 • Oaths • Glenn Hauman

#17 • Foundations, Book One • Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#18 • Foundations, Book Two • Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#19 • Foundations, Book Three • Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#20 • Enigma Ship • J. Steven and Christina F. York

#21 • War Stories, Book One • Keith R.A. DeCandido

#22 • War Stories, Book Two • Keith R.A. DeCandido

Star Trek®: Invasion!

#1 • First Strike • Diane Carey

#2 • The Soldiers of Fear • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

#3 • Time's Enemy • L.A. Graf

#4 • The Final Fury • Dafydd ab Hugh

Invasion! Omnibus • various

Star Trek®: Day of Honor

#1 • Ancient Blood • Diane Carey

#2 • Armageddon Sky • L.A. Graf

#3 • Her Klingon Soul • Michael Jan Friedman

#4 • Treaty's Law • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

The Television Episode • Michael Jan Friedman

Day of Honor Omnibus • various

Star Trek®: The Captain's Table

#1 • War Dragons • L.A. Graf

#2 • Dujonian's Hoard • Michael Jan Friedman

#3 • The Mist • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

#4 • Fire Ship • Diane Carey

#5 • Once Burned • Peter David

#6 • Where Sea Meets Sky • Jerry Oltion

The Captain's Table Omnibus • various

Star Trek®: The Dominion War

#1 • Behind Enemy Lines • John Vornholt

#2 • Call to Arms... • Diane Carey

#3 • Tunnel Through the Stars • John Vornholt

#4 • ...Sacrifice of Angels • Diane Carey

Star Trek®: Section 31™

Rogue • Andy Mangels & Michael A. Martin

Shadow • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Cloak • S.D. Perry

Abyss • David Weddle & Jeffrey Lang

Star Trek®: Gateways

#1 • One Small Step • Susan Wright

#2 • Chainmail • Diane Carey

#3 • Doors Into Chaos • Robert Greenberger

#4 • Demons of Air and Darkness • Keith R.A. DeCandido

#5 • No Man's Land • Christie Golden

#6 • Cold Wars • Peter David

#7 • What Lay Beyond • various

Epilogue: Here There Be Monsters • Keith R.A. DeCandido

Star Trek®: The Badlands

#1 • Susan Wright

#2 • Susan Wright

Star Trek®: Dark Passions

#1 • Susan Wright

#2 • Susan Wright

Star Trek®: The Brave and the Bold

#1 • Keith R.A. DeCandido

#2 • Keith R.A. DeCandido

Star Trek® Omnibus Editions

Invasion! Omnibus • various

Day of Honor Omnibus • various

The Captain's Table Omnibus • various

Star Trek: Odyssey • William Shatner with Judith and Garfield Reeves Stevens

Millennium Omnibus • Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens

Starfleet: Year One • Michael Jan Friedman

Other Star Trek® Fiction

Legends of the Ferengi • Ira Steven Behr & Robert Hewitt Wolfe

Strange New Worlds , vol. I, II, III, IV, and V • Dean Wesley Smith, ed.

Adventures in Time and Space • Mary P. Taylor, ed.

Captain Proton: Defender of the Earth • D.W. "Prof" Smith

New Worlds, New Civilizations • Michael Jan Friedman

The Lives of Dax • Marco Palmieri, ed.

The Klingon Hamlet • Wil'yam Shex'pir

Enterprise Logs • Carol Greenburg, ed.

The Amazing Stories • various

Chapter One

THARIA DIDN 'T CRY when his three mates died.

It had been nine months, and not a single tear had run down his blue cheek.

He sat with two of his fellow Maquis rebels in a cave on some planet or other.

Tharia wasn't even sure where they were, to be honest. He'd been too busy trying

to repair one of the consoles to pay attention to wherever it was that they had crash-landed their shuttle. There had been four of them, but their pilot—a Bolian who had replaced Tom Paris after the imbecile Earther had gotten himself caught by the Federation—died in the crash. That left Tharia ch'Ren, Gerron Ral, and B'Elanna Torres.

“When’s Chakotay supposed to get here?” Gerron asked in a whiny voice that made Tharia want to strangle him.

“He’ll get here soon,” B'Elanna snapped in a voice intended to intimidate. She didn’t bother to look at Gerron. She was too busy keeping her eyes glued to her ancient tricorder, hoping it would tell her of Chakotay’s imminent arrival with their ship, hoping it wouldn’t tell her that Gul Evek or some other Cardassian had found them and was going to blast them into atoms.

At least their mission had been more or less successful. The shipment of grenades that Cardassian Central Command had earmarked for occupying forces on Dorvan V had been annihilated, first stolen from the freighter that was taking them to Dorvan, then destroyed an hour later in the shuttle crash. (Mercifully, the grenades hadn’t been primed yet; had they been, more than the Bolian pilot would have been lost, and Chakotay would only have been able to find their remains with a tricorder—or tweezers.)

It would have been better if they had managed to keep the grenades intact and thus be able to add them to the Maquis’s arsenal, but the important thing was that the Cardassians wouldn’t be able to use them. Sometimes it didn’t matter if you won, so long as the other side lost.

“It’s going to be dark soon.” Gerron, Tharia noted, sounded wholly unintimidated—which meant he was a fool, as B'Elanna’s actions generally spoke louder than her words, and her words were fairly high in volume. “And with all

our supplies trashed, we'll have to forage. I don't know if there's anything here we can even eat, much less—”

Tharia stood up, running a hand through his feathery white hair. “Oh, for Thori's sake, I'll go look for food.” He looked down at Gerron. “If you want to make yourself useful, gather up some rocks that we can heat.”

“Rocks?”

“Basic survival.” Tharia sighed. “Did they teach you nothing on Bajor? You can use a phaser on rocks to heat them.”

Gerron at least had the decency to look abashed. “Sorry. Forgot,” he muttered.

Looking over at the half-Klingon, half-Earther engineer, Tharia said, “I'll be back soon.”

B'Elanna only grunted, focused as she was on the tricorder. Knowing that was all the acknowledgment he'd get, Tharia headed outward toward the cave entrance in the hopes of finding something edible. Given that three—four, really, given B'Elanna's half-breed nature—species were represented in the cave, it would be a challenge. Andorians, Bajorans, Earthers, and Klingons didn't have similar eating habits, after all. But Tharia didn't care that much—he mainly needed to get away from Gerron before the young Bajoran drove him to anger.

Tharia preferred to keep his emotions in check.

His zhavey had cried, of course, back then. It took very little for her to cry, truth be told, and the deaths of her chei' 'sthree mates was certainly more than a little. And several of his friends cried.

But Tharia didn't. Not when he found their broken, bloody bodies in the wreckage of their home on Beaulieu's World after the Cardassian bomb had destroyed it, not at the death rites held at the community center on Beaulieu's, not at the

ceremony back home on Andor.

Ignoring the advice of his zhavey to stay on Andor, Tharia had returned to Beaulieu's after the ceremony. Once a Federation colony, Beaulieu's World had been one of many planets ceded to the Cardassians in a treaty intended to settle a border dispute. Unfortunately, the Federation colonists saw no reason to leave their homes, even if those homes were now in Cardassian territory. The Cardassians, in turn, saw no reason to let them live in peace. Tensions in the Demilitarized Zone that was created between Federation and Cardassian space became increasingly heated, incidents of harassment on both sides were reported, and the treaty intended to settle a dispute wound up setting off a powder keg. A group of (now former) Federation citizens of the colonies, as well as a number of Starfleet personnel sympathetic to the cause, formed a group called the Maquis. Tharia had never been too clear on the etymology of the term, only that it was the same name as a similar group in Earth's pre-spaceflight days. It was also derived from one of Earth's secondary languages, so it was pronounced "mah-kee" rather than "may -kwiss," as Tharia had initially assumed.

Before the bomb struck his home, Tharia had been one of the more outspoken opponents of the Maquis. He didn't think their formation would gain the colonists anything but trouble. True, the Cardassians weren't exactly living up to their side of the bargain—hounding non-Cardassians, occasionally sending military ships into the Demilitarized Zone—but Tharia didn't see that as a reason to become terrorists.

The governing body of Beaulieu's had held an open forum in the community center on the subject of the Maquis, and Tharia had spoken against them there.

"Sentient beings should be able to reason out their problems without having to resort to mindless violence," he had said. "Effecting change from behind a

phaser bank is no true change, simply an imposition of will.”

When someone in the audience had pointed out that negotiation was how they got into this mess in the first place, Tharia had said, “One poor example does not invalidate the method. And one does not compound an error by making a bigger one.”

Tharia had been so passionate at that open forum that tears came to his eyes, and all three of his mates congratulated him on his rhetorical skills.

Two months later, all three were dead, their home destroyed by a bomb of Cardassian make.

Three months later, Tharia sold the land on which the remains of their house stood to an Yridian developer who had been making overtures to them for over a year.

Four months later, he was part of a Maquis cell led by an Earther named Chakotay.

Five months later, he killed his first Cardassian, during a raid on a supply depot.

Tharia hugged himself in the bitter cold that greeted him at the cave mouth. In the two hours since the crash, the temperature had dropped by at least twenty degrees.

He hadn't cared what the name of the planet was, but now he found himself desiring to know it so he could avoid it in the future. He hadn't paid much attention when they crashed—he was more concerned with getting under cover—but now that he had a chance to look around, he realized that this place was what Tom Paris would have termed a dump.

When Thori in Her Greatness created this particular world, Tharia observed, She

obviously was having a bad day. It was as if She couldn't be bothered to put together a proper ecosystem, so She tossed a few rocks and bushes around a flat, gray surface and hoped no one would notice. The sky was equally gray, and a limp wind blew, barely disturbing the minimal vegetation. Tharia's antennae quivered at—something, he couldn't tell what, exactly. All he knew for sure was that this world was dull and gray and he didn't want to be here any longer than he had to. As Tharia walked across that hard, flat ground, he found no animal life, and the plant life was poisonous to all of them. Ironically, the plants were edible for Bolians. Obviously, he thought with irritation, the wrong person died in the shuttle crash.

After ten minutes, he gave up. His tricorder—a thirty-year-old Starfleet model that worked only sporadically at the best of times—was starting to lose power, and the temperature continued to drop. Tharia had never liked the cold. One of the reasons Beaulieu's had appealed to him when he and his family chose to move off Andor was because it was warm. And his antennae were quivering so fast he was sure they were vibrating on top of his head. It was time he went back to B'Elanna and Gerron.

You can do better.

Tharia whirled around. "What?"

You can do better. You don't need to settle for this. You can destroy them once and for all.

The tricorder had now completely lost power, but Tharia's antennae were now quivering with a purpose. The voice was coming from under one of the gray rocks. He knew this mainly because the voice didn't sound in his ears or in his antennae, but in his mind.

Deducing that telepathy was at work, Tharia stopped walking. Only when he

stopped did he realize that he'd been moving in the first place. He had been going toward the rock from which the telepathic voice had emanated, almost against his will. Tharia hated telepaths.

“What do you want with me?”

I want to help you achieve your goal.

“Really? Show yourself—and speak! I will not converse with a telepath who hides.”

I am no telepath, and I'm not hiding. I'm but a tool that can give you what you desire.

Tharia made a derisive noise. “Can you bring my three mates back to me?”

No.

“Then you lie.”

You misunderstand my purpose and my words, Tharia ch'Ren.

“Do I?” He didn't bother to question how the voice knew his name. Telepaths loved to show off how much they knew that was unspoken.

Yes. Getting your family back is a wish, not a goal. Items that can grant wishes are the purview of stories and myths. As I said, I'm a tool—and I can help you get—

“What I desire, yes, I see.” Tharia felt foolish standing in the middle of the gray rocks talking to nothing, so he sat down. “So you can help me get rid of the Cardassians? Aid me in destroying them? Assist me in driving them from my home forever?”

Yes.

“And what do you get in return?”

I have lain unused on this miserable rock for thousands of lifetimes, Tharia

ch'Ren. What good is a tool that gets no use?

Tharia leaned back, supporting himself on the rock with his arms. He could feel the emissions from this whatever-it-was more precisely now in his antennae. It was wedged in between two rocks amid the underbrush of a bush that stuck out between them.

“I will not be coerced. I can feel you trying to convince me with your mind games.”

You are a wise man, Tharia ch'Ren. You are also a man with a mission. I can be a valuable aid on that mission. All you must do is hold me in your grasp.

Tharia stood up. “No. I refuse.”

Images appeared in Tharia's head then.

He saw a humanoid of some kind, holding a small black box that glowed with an odd green hue.

He saw other humanoid figures kneeling before the figure holding the box.

He saw the figure walk outside into a day that was filled with sunlight, a sky with no clouds.

He saw the figure hold up the box.

He saw clouds appear seemingly out of nowhere, saw winds start to gust where the air had been still.

He saw the people cheer as rain came pouring down from the sky.

Then the vista changed: he saw the figure again—older this time—using the black box to start a blizzard. Then using it to melt a snow-filled region with intense, desertlike heat. Then causing a hurricane to tear through a residential area.

“Get out of my head!” Tharia was now screaming as he unholstered his phaser, his dead tricorder long since dropped to the rocky ground. He didn't even check to

see what setting the phaser was on, he just activated it and fired.

The images continued to pour into his mind as he fired. As the amber phaser beam tore into the leaves of the bush, he saw the figure use the black box to wipe out a village with a tornado. As the phaser pulverized the branches, rain was brought to the desert. As the rocks blew apart, a fog rolled into a sky filled with air traffic, causing massive slow-ups and collisions.

“Enough!” Tharia cried as he finally stopped firing. He wrinkled his nose at the smell that emanated from the ground. Nothing remained of the two rocks and the bush but smoke and ash—

—and a black box with a greenish hue.

His mind was free of the images, but the voice remained. You see what you can do if you wield me. All that is required is—

“No!” Tharia raised his phaser to its highest setting and fired again, this time directly at the box.

The box seemed to simply absorb the phaser beam. The weapon had no effect on it.

Think what you can do with my capabilities. Think of the glory you can bring to the Maquis.

“I care nothing for glory! If you’ve seen into my mind you know that. I simply want—I want—to see the Cardassians—to get them—”

You want revenge.

Tears started to flow down Tharia’s cheek. “Yes, damn you! I want revenge! I want them all destroyed! I want their heads ripped from their bodies!”

You want them to feel what you felt when you saw your mates’ bodies in the wreckage of your home.

More images entered Tharia’s mind, but they were not from the box. They were his

own memories, suppressed for all these months when he refused to think about what had happened.

Athmin, impaled on a structural beam. Ushra, her head caved in by the ceiling.

Shers, ripped to pieces by fragments from the Cardassians' explosive device.

Tharia fell to his knees. Pain shot through his legs as his knees collided with the hard ground, but he barely noticed. "I should have died with them," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

But you didn't. As I said, I don't grant wishes. What I can do is make sure that those responsible pay for what they did to you.

He looked at the black box that sat on the ground, blurred by the months of repressed tears that now poured from his eyes. "Yes," he said in a whisper so quiet that Tharia himself could barely hear his own voice over the wind. "Yes, they must pay. All of them."

And they will. All you have to do is pick me up.

Tharia could not make his legs move properly, but somehow, he managed to crawl over to where the box sat, ignoring the pain of the superheated ground around it.

It was cool to the touch, which was impossible. He had been firing on it with a phaser at full, and the box had been absorbing the blast. He should have gotten third-degree burns just touching it. Yet he was able to cradle the box in his arms.

Everything you desire will be yours.

The moment he touched the box, Tharia noticed that the air around him got warmer. The chill that permeated the atmosphere was gone in an instant. It was now as warm on this despicable gray planet as it was on the most pleasant day back home on Beaulieu's.

“What did you do?” he asked quietly, wiping a tear from his cheek with his right hand as he cradled the box under his left.

Fulfilled a simple desire in order to show my ability to do so: I raised the temperature to one comfortable for you.

Tharia stood up. “Thank you.”

It is the first of many desires I will fulfill for you.

It was another hour before Tharia finally made it back to the cave. B’Elanna and Gerron sat in the same spot, but this time they were on either side of a pile of rocks that had been heated by phaser fire. Still, even with that, it was cooler in the cave than it had become outside thanks to Tharia’s new possession.

B’Elanna stood up quickly and barked, “Where the hell have you been?”

“I told you,” Tharia said in a quiet, almost subdued voice. He had wiped his face dry, and carried the box—the tool—the weapon —under his left arm. “I went out to search for food.”

“And you put it in that box?” B’Elanna asked snidely.

“No. This place doesn’t seem to have any native animal life, and the plants are all poisonous.”

“Figures,” Gerron muttered.

B’Elanna sighed. “Well, it doesn’t matter—Chakotay’s in orbit, and he’ll be landing inside of fifteen minutes.”

Nodding, Tharia said, “Good.”

There was a momentary pause. “So what is in the box?” B’Elanna finally asked.

“I’ll tell you all about it when Chakotay arrives,” he said.

B’Elanna stood in front of the Andorian. Tharia could tell she was agitated by

the way his antennae retracted in her presence. “I’m not letting you bring that thing on the ship until you tell me what it is, Tharia.”

“It’s a weapon. The only weapon we’ll ever need. Trust me, B’Elanna. Have I ever lied to you?”

Knowing full well that he hadn’t, B’Elanna could only let out a growl. “Fine. So what does the stupid thing do?”

For the first time in many months, Tharia smiled.

“I’ll tell you when Chakotay arrives.”

Chapter Two

CAPTAIN ROBERT DE SOTO knew he was in trouble the minute he realized that his first officer was threatening his territory.

The extremely wide, almost disturbingly toothy smile of Lieutenant Commander Dina Voyskunsky flashed across the table of the Hood’ 'slounge at the captain as she placed a black stone down in a position that cut one group of his white stones off from the rest of his pieces. Suddenly, what seemed to be a solid, secure group of stones was now in serious trouble. Either it was going to wither and die, or he was going to have to struggle mightily to survive.

Regardless, it was quite possible that the move had cost DeSoto the game. And Voyskunsky knew it. The first officer had a thin face with a disproportionately wide mouth. She also had wide teeth that DeSoto, in his less charitable moments—like right now, when she was beating him at Go—thought would be more at place on a horse than a human.

“Your move, Captain,” she said, leaning back in her chair.

DeSoto sighed, and gazed over the Go board. He could resign the game, of course—that was the proper thing to do when one was defeated and knew it. And DeSoto did know it.

Under any other circumstances, he would, of course, resign, but he wanted to at least try to get some of his own back, even though intellectually he knew better. It wasn't worthy of him—but what the hell, he was the captain, he could make an idiot of himself if he wanted.

Besides, there was a possibility, however slim. Thirty-five years in Starfleet had taught him that there were always possibilities. You just sometimes had to look really hard for them.

“I must once again thank you for teaching me how to play this game.” Voyskunsky grabbed her glass of synthale, moved as if to take a sip, then realized it was empty and put it back down.

“Yeah, yeah, gloat all you want. You know I was the captain of the Academy team my junior and senior years? In fact, all four years I was there—”

“You won two out of four Federation championships,” Voyskunsky said in a singsong tone. “You’ve only told me three times a day every day since I beat you the first time. That was, in case you’ve forgotten, eight months ago, and I’ve beaten you—”

“Regularly ever since,” DeSoto said, taking some small pleasure in being the interrupter this time, “I know, I know.” He ran a hand through his rapidly thinning brown hair. I’m going to be as bald as old Jean-Luc soon, he thought, referring to his old friend Captain Picard of the Enterprise. Sooner if I keep playing Dina.

DeSoto’s mother, Captain Mirabelle Brodeur, had been an amateur champion player of the ancient Earth game of Go, which dated back at least three thousand years.

Originated in China, where it was called Wei Chi, the game was deceptively simple. One player got one hundred and eighty-one black stones and went first,

the other got one hundred and eighty white ones and went second. The board was a grid of nineteen horizontal lines and nineteen vertical lines. Each player took turns placing a stone on an intersection, with the object being to secure the most territory. It was the precursor to many a tabletop war and strategy game, but where they had come and gone—and in some cases improved, particularly with the development of holographic technology—Go remained a vital and popular game. It also had remained all but unchanged over the millennia.

Brodeur's husband, Dr. Hiram DeSoto, a civilian physician, had never evinced any interest in the game, but their son did. By the time Robert DeSoto reached his teen years, he had become renowned—first at his local school, later at the Academy—as a championship-caliber player.

He couldn't get anyone on the Hood to play against him, though. The problem with being a such a good player, of course, was that you were far superior to most of those around you. This, along with the added awkwardness most had at the idea of playing against their commanding officer, left him with either the deeply unsatisfying notion of playing the ship's computer, or not playing.

Then Dina Voyskunsky transferred to the Hood from the Excalibur, and one day saw DeSoto playing against the computer. She asked what he was doing; he told her; she was intrigued, never having heard of the game; and he proceeded to take her under his wing as his mother had done with him.

A year later, he was deeply regretting that decision. Voyskunsky had gone from a nine-stone handicap to playing even with him in six months, and now she was beating him with alarming regularity.

Then he saw it. There was indeed a possibility. It would require both of them to play brilliantly, and would probably still wind up with him on the losing end.

However, he had to give it a shot. He had to do something to salvage the

tattered threads of his dignity.

As he prepared to place one of his stones, he was interrupted by the beep of the communication system. “Bridge to Captain DeSoto.”

It was the voice of Lieutenant Manolet Dayrit, the Hood’ 'ssecurity chief and current duty officer on the bridge. “Go ahead, Manolet,” DeSoto said after tapping his combadge.

“Sir, you need to come up here. We’re receiving a distress signal from the U.S.S. Voyager.”

DeSoto frowned, then recalled a recent fleet memo about the newest Intrepid-class ship, which was supposed to incorporate bioneural circuitry that would facilitate navigation through the Badlands. With the growing Maquis problem—and with the Maquis increasingly making use of the plasma-storm-filled Badlands as a hiding place—Starfleet had decided to create a ship that could handle that navigation hazard more easily.

“We’ll be right up,” the captain said, standing. “DeSoto out.”

Voyskunsky had once again employed her too-wide smile. “So what’s your move?”

“We’ll finish this later. Right now I’m more worried about that distress signal.”

As they exited the lounge, Voyskunsky asked, “Why?” As they headed toward the turbolift, Voyskunsky reached to the back of her head to tie her long brown hair back into a ponytail. She wore it loose only off duty.

“Because Voyager’ 'ssupposed to be on her shakedown cruise. I don’t know where that was supposed to be offhand, but I doubt it was this far out.”

As they entered the turbolift, Voyskunsky said, “So it could be a very clumsily laid trap.”

DeSoto nodded. "Bridge." The turbolift started to accelerate upward. "Or they really could be out here near the Cardassian border, in which case, I'd say the shakedown cruise went horribly wrong."

Dayrit had already moved from the command chair to the tactical station behind it when DeSoto and Voyskunsky entered the Hood's small bridge. Ensign José Kojima stood at the operations console next to Dayrit, also right behind the captain, with Lieutenant Baifang Hsu at the conn at the bridge's fore. While DeSoto moved to the captain's chair, Voyskunsky stood between Dayrit and Kojima. "Report."

"The distress call does seem to be from Voyager, sir—the hailing language matches. We can be there in ten minutes at warp nine. But I checked—Voyager should be in Sector 001 on its shakedown cruise. The location of the distress call is only about an eighth of a light-year from the DMZ."

Voyskunsky looked down at DeSoto. "We have to check it out, Captain."

DeSoto nodded. "Agreed. Baifang, set course for that distress call, warp nine."

The young woman's long-fingered hands played across the conn. "Course plotted and laid in, sir."

"Hit it. José, the nanosecond we're in sensor range, I want a full scan on whatever's broadcasting that signal. Manolet, give me long-range—make sure there aren't any Maquis or Cardassian surprises waiting for us."

A pair of "Aye, sir's" came from behind him.

Ten uncomfortable minutes later, Hsu said, "Coming out of warp, sir."

Voyskunsky peered over Kojima's shoulder. "Reading the ship's ID beacon. It and the hull configuration match with NCC-74656, U.S.S. Voyager." She turned to Dayrit. "Anything on long-range?"

Dayrit shook his head—an odd sight, as the Filipino security chief had no

discernible neck, so his head seemed to swivel directly on his shoulders.

“There’s some activity in the DMZ, but it all seems to be interplanetary—and it’s all civilian.”

“As it should be,” Voyskunsky said. “After all, ‘demilitarized’ means ‘no military.’”

Kojima muttered, “And don’t think the Maquis don’t love that.”

Turning back to the ops officer, Voyskunsky asked, “What was that, Ensign?”

“Nothing important, sir,” Kojima said, straightening. “I just—well, if they allowed military ships in the DMZ, the Maquis might not be so much of a problem.”

Snorting, Dayrit said, “No, instead we’d have Starfleet and Central Command ships baring their teeth at each other. Three minutes later, we have another Cardassian War on our hands.” Something on the tactical console then caught Dayrit’s attention. “Incoming call from Voyager—it’s Captain Janeway.” Good, DeSoto thought. It was looking more and more like this call was legitimate.

“In visual range,” Hsu announced from the conn.

“Put it on the viewer,” DeSoto said.

DeSoto watched as the general vista of space was replaced with a side view of the U.S.S. Voyager. The ship had a more angular saucer section that made it more aerodynamic. Where that was an unnecessary consideration for most starships, the Intrepid -class ships like Voyager were designed to be able to land on a planet’s surface. DeSoto appreciated the alteration to the standard design, though he couldn’t help but think that it made the ship look like a garden spade.

Right now, the nacelles were dimmed, and only about half the ship's running lights were operational. If this wasn't a true distress call, they were certainly making a good show of it.

Standing up, DeSoto said, "Let's answer the hail, Manolet. Put Captain Janeway onscreen."

The view of Voyager was replaced with that of her bridge. DeSoto smiled at the sight of the other ship's much roomier control center. When his former first officer Will Riker had transferred to the Enterprise to be Picard's first officer over seven years earlier, DeSoto had joked that he was going to a luxury liner. While Voyager wasn't as grandiose as the Galaxy -class monster that Jean-Luc and Will served on, it still put the Hood to shame in its roominess. You could run laps on that bridge and not disturb a single duty officer, he thought with a smile.

In the center seat was a woman with features that managed to be both hard and soft, her brown hair tied into a bun at the back of her head.

"This is Captain Robert DeSoto of the U.S.S. Hood."

"Captain Kathryn Janeway of what's left of the Voyager," the woman said dryly.

"Thanks for coming so quickly, Captain."

"You're a little far from home, aren't you?" he said with a smile.

"No, we're a lot far from home. The whole point of a shakedown cruise is to shake the ship and see what falls down. In our case, it fell right on our heads."

"What happened?"

"Something's wrong with the new bioneural gel packs. First they supercharged the engines so much that our dash to Alpha Centauri at warp one became a crazed sprint to the Cardassian border at warp nine-point-nine-eight."

DeSoto whistled in appreciation mixed with horror.

“Now we’re at ten percent power. We’d appreciate a boost, if you’d be so kind, Captain.”

Voyskunsky said, “Bridge to engineering. Prepare to set up a power transfer between Hood and Voyager.”

“On it, Commander,” Lieutenant Czierniewski, the Hood’s chief engineer, said.

Janeway smiled. “Thank you, Captain.”

“Happy to be of help.”

“I’m afraid there’s something else. My security chief discovered something before sensors went down. We need to verify it with you.”

DeSoto shrugged. “Sure.”

A tall, mahogany-skinned Vulcan lieutenant stepped forward from the tactical station at the aft of the bridge and addressed the screen. “If you would please direct your sensors at coordinates 318 mark 15.”

“Scanning,” Dayrit said, manipulating his console. His dark eyes then went wide.

“What the hell—?”

“What is it, Manolet?” Voyskunsky asked.

“Weird energy reading is what it is. It’s focused on one of the ships in the DMZ—hell, it’s changing course. Heading is 211 mark 9, heading away from us. Can’t get a solid fix on the ship.” His dark face contorted into a grimace.

“Damn, they changed course again.”

Kojima spoke up. “Sir, I’ve determined what the energy reading is. It relates to General Order 16.”

DeSoto turned around to look at Kojima. “Sixteen?”

“That confirms my suspicions,” the Vulcan said. “There is a ship in the

Demilitarized Zone that is carrying one of the Malkus Artifacts from the Zalkat Union. Standard procedure would be to pursue that ship and confiscate the artifact.”

Turning back to the screen, DeSoto said, “Yeah, well, standard procedure is also that Starfleet vessels don’t enter the DMZ—or abandon ships in distress that they’re in the middle of helping.” He sat back down in the command chair.

“Manolet, try to track that ship as best you can until it goes off sensors.”

“It’s already changed course four times, Captain.”

“Understood. Keep trying anyhow.” He looked at the viewscreen. “Captain, I’m familiar with what General Order 16 says but not why it says it. Since your security chief seems to know more about it, I suggest you beam over here so we can figure out the best way to retrieve it.”

“I already have some thoughts about that, actually.”

DeSoto smiled. “I’m sure. Meantime, I’ll send a damage control team over to help your engineer out.”

“Mr. Honigsberg will welcome the help.” Janeway returned the smile. “We’ll be ready to beam over in fifteen minutes. Janeway out.”

Voyskunsky was checking one of the aft consoles. “Power transfer beam is active—reading stable. Power is increasing to Voyager.”

Nodding, DeSoto got up. “Great. C’mon, Dina, let’s greet our guests. You have the conn, Manolet. Send all our sensor telemetry to Admiral Nechayev at Starfleet with a note that more will be forthcoming.”

Dayrit nodded, which looked on him like his head was about to tumble forward and fall off.

As he walked toward the turbolift, DeSoto looked forward at Hsu. “Baifang, once the ship goes off sensors, project a course—take all their course corrections

into account. If I'm going to talk Nechayev into letting us fly free in the DMZ, I'm going to need to know I have a course to follow."

Hsu nodded. "Aye, sir."

Voyskunsky's too-wide smile made a return as they entered the turbolift. "You're going to convince the Ice Queen to let you hop the fence?"

DeSoto grinned. "That's the plan."

"I guess the first question before us," DeSoto said as he looked around the table in the briefing room, "is what, exactly, are the Malkus Artifacts, and why is there a Starfleet General Order regarding them?"

In addition to himself and Voyskunsky, three officers from Voyager had come over for the briefing: Captain Janeway; her first officer, Lieutenant Commander Cavit; and the Vulcan security chief, Lieutenant Tuvok.

Janeway cut an impressive figure. She had what DeSoto had always thought of as the "captain's trick"—appearing to be the tallest person in the room even when he or she wasn't. DeSoto, who barely cleared a meter and a quarter, had never mastered the trick, which was why he had always cultivated a more relaxed style of command. People like Janeway or Picard could lead by their presence. Bob DeSoto knew he didn't have that, so he led his people in other ways.

Aaron Cavit had the look of a seasoned officer, though DeSoto found his round face almost as impossible to read as Tuvok's—from whom he at least expected it. DeSoto did, however, notice Cavit giving Voyskunsky an odd look as he entered. If DeSoto's first officer had any reaction to that look, she hid it well.

Tuvok, who was holding a padd, answered the captain's opening question. "There are, in fact, four Malkus Artifacts, and they date back to the heyday of the

Zalkat Union—an interplanetary governmental body that encompassed much of what is now known as the Alpha Quadrant approximately ninety millennia ago. For a period of indeterminate length, the Union was ruled by a tyrant colloquially known as ‘Malkus the Mighty.’ Two hundred and twenty years ago, an Earth ship discovered what is believed to be the homeworld of the Union on Beta Aurigae VII.”

Voyskunsky snapped her fingers. “That’s where I know the name. We used to vacation on Aurigae when I was a girl. We visited the museum there.” She smiled. “I haven’t been back there in years, though. As I recall, the ruins and artifacts found there were quite impressive.”

“Indeed,” Tuvok said, betraying only the slightest irritation at the interruption. He touched the display on his padd, and an image appeared on the briefing-room screen. It was a human woman in an old-style Earth space-service uniform and a Vulcan woman in a uniform that DeSoto didn’t recognize. They were both wearing some kind of gloves and holding small objects that looked like old-fashioned optical chips. “Most telling was a chronicle that the officers of the Earth ship, aided by a Vulcan observer, were able to translate. It indicated that Malkus was able to enforce his rule with the aid of four devices.”

DeSoto nodded. “The so-called Malkus Artifacts.”

“Yes, Captain.” Tuvok changed the display to one that showed a Vulcan Starfleet officer in a blue uniform holding a black box. The picture had to be at least a century old, based on the uniform, and after a moment DeSoto realized with surprise that he was looking at Ambassador Spock from his days serving in Starfleet. “Though all the artifacts look alike, each serves a particular function. One can exert telepathic control; one can manipulate weather patterns; one emits a beam of force; and one imparts a deadly disease. After Malkus was

overthrown, the artifacts were removed from the Zalkatian homeworld and placed on distant worlds throughout the quadrant.”

Janeway, who had been leaning forward in her chair, smirked. “But they didn’t say which worlds, right?”

“No. It was feared that if any record was made of the artifacts’ destination, someone of a less than scrupulous nature would seek them out and try to re-create Malkus’s tyranny.”

“Why not simply destroy them?” Janeway asked.

Tuvok’s eyebrow shot up in that manner common to many Vulcans. “That was attempted, but the artifacts have proven resistant to brute force. They also give off a distinctive energy signature, which was encoded in the chronicles.”

“I don’t understand,” Voyskunsky said. “If they wanted to hide them, why make them easy to find?”

“It’s not a question of being easy to find,” Cavit said with a level of annoyance out of proportion to Voyskunsky’s question, “it’s a question of knowing what you find if you stumble across it.”

“Precisely,” Tuvok said. “Thus far, two of the artifacts have been located. The first, as you can see from this picture, was found by the U.S.S. Enterprise and the U.S.S. Constellation during a mission to Alpha Proxima II to aid in curing a plague that had broken out on the surface.”

“Caused by the artifact?” DeSoto asked.

“Yes.” Tuvok changed the image again, this time to a starship shuttlebay. Once again a Starfleet officer held a black box, but this time the uniform was contemporary. And once again DeSoto recognized the figure: Benjamin Sisko, the commander of Station Deep Space 9. “The next was found four-point-five months

ago on one of Bajor's moons by a terrorist known as Orta. This was the artifact that emits a beam of force. Orta was captured on the Runabout Rio Grande and incarcerated on the U.S.S. Odyssey. Both artifacts are presently being studied at the Rector Institute on Earth."

Cavit leaned back. "And it looks like the Maquis have found the third artifact. God help us if it's the mind controller, but even the weather controller would be devastating in their hands."

"There is one other concern." Tuvok changed the display once again, this time showing several identical sensor readings. Two were obviously from older Starfleet sensors, based on the style of the displays; the other four were modern starship displays. "These are the sensor readings taken of the artifacts. The first two are from the Constellation and the Enterprise a century ago, the second two from the Odyssey and the Rio Grande four-point-five months ago, the latter two the ones just taken from Voyager and the Hood. Notice the slight difference."

DeSoto squinted and realized that there was a slight variation in the energy pattern given off by the artifact in the DMZ. "That difference is pretty negligible."

"Indeed it would be, but for the fact that, according to the chronicle, the energy signatures should be precisely the same."

"And the signatures of the first two artifacts were precisely the same," Janeway added. "I doubt it's anything that significant, though."

"Perhaps not, but I thought it worth pointing out," Tuvok said archly.

Janeway smiled affectionately. "Of course you did."

DeSoto also smiled. Obviously these two have served together a long time.

"We need to go in," Voyskunsky said. "General Order 16 is pretty clear: we have

to confiscate the artifact. Even if there wasn't such an order, Aaron's right—we have to keep that thing out of Maquis hands.”

“An aggressive charge across the DMZ would be a mistake,” Janeway said. “For one thing, it would alert the Maquis that we're onto them. Besides, you know full well that the Cardassians won't allow a Starfleet vessel to go in without an equivalent Central Command presence.”

DeSoto sighed. “And that way lies madness.”

“Definitely.”

“What do you suggest, Captain?”

Janeway smiled. “I'm glad you asked. Tuvok?”

Tuvok changed the image on the screen once again. This time it was yet another familiar Starfleet face, though he wasn't wearing a Starfleet uniform. In fact, legend had it that he'd disintegrated his uniform with a phaser.

“Cal Hudson?” DeSoto asked, bemused. “What does he have to do with this?”

“Our first mission, once the shakedown is complete,” Janeway said, “is to go into the Badlands to try to root out some of the terrorists that are hiding out in there—especially the Starfleet defectors like Hudson.”

Tuvok steepled his fingers together. “Captain Janeway, Lieutenant Commander Cavit, and I have been formulating a plan whereby I would infiltrate the Maquis. Starfleet Intelligence has been able to trace Lieutenant Commander Hudson's movements, and we're reasonably sure that we can locate his cell. From there, I should be able to join them and gather intelligence about the organization.”

Cavit added with a small smile, “We were kind of hoping to do this once Voyager was fully operational, so we'd be available to pull him out if need be, but with this...”

“The only alteration to Mr. Tuvok’s mission would be that he would also be tasked with finding the Malkus Artifact and working to get it out of Maquis hands,” Janeway said.

“And the only change in plan,” Cavit added, “is to use the Hood instead of the Voyager as the backup ship, since we’re out of action.”

DeSoto tapped his finger on the desk. He certainly didn’t have any problems with the idea in theory—he’d need to look at the plan the three of them had concocted, of course—but it would have been preferable for Tuvok’s own ship to keep an eye on things.

“Dayrit to DeSoto.”

The captain looked up. “Go ahead.”

“Sir, Lieutenants Czierniewski and Honigsberg are requesting permission to beam aboard. They have a report they want to give you regarding Voyager.”

“Send them down here, Manolet.”

Within minutes, the short, rotund form of Tara Czierniewski entered, joined by the tall, lithe form of a human in a lieutenant’s uniform—presumably Alexander Honigsberg, Voyager’s chief engineer. “Report,” DeSoto said.

Honigsberg tossed a padd onto the table. “It’s broken.”

Janeway blinked. “Can you be a touch more specific, Mr. Honigsberg?”

“Oh, I’m sure I could spend half an hour breaking down all the specifics in a way that would sound really complicated, but it’s all in the report,” Honigsberg said, pointing at the padd. “And what it boils down to is that it’s broken.”

The smile Janeway hit Honigsberg with was as scary a sight as DeSoto had ever seen. “Try me, Lieutenant. I’ve used the occasional two-syllable word in my time. I think I can handle it.”

Letting out a long breath, Honigsberg closed his eyes. Then he reopened them and

spoke. “The connections between the gel packs and the other systems are misreading the inputs. It’s transferring power at a greatly accelerated rate, and we can’t slow it down. It’s not just improving response time like it’s supposed to, it’s increasing everything. And it’s not a software problem. The only way to fix this is to go back to Mars and replace every single damn gel-pack unit—and every single gel pack, since the current ones are all burned out.”

The smile became a sweet one, but no less scary for that. “See, Mr. Honigsberg, was that so hard?”

“How much time will we need at Utopia Planitia?” Cavit asked.

“We’re talking weeks, Commander, at least. This is a major design flaw.”

Czierniewski added, “But not unusual when you’re playing with new toys. I mean hey, this is why you have shakedown cruises.”

Cavit turned to DeSoto. “All the more reason why we need your help here, Captain.”

Turning to his first officer, DeSoto asked, “Any objections, Commander?”

“Assuming the plan is sound, no. Aaron’s plans do tend to work, though, so I’m pretty sanguine.” She smiled. Cavit grimaced. “I still think we’d be better off going in full force, but sometimes the sneaky approach is better.”

Remembering their latest Go game, DeSoto silently agreed, and turned back to Janeway. “All right, then, let’s see what you’ve got. If we both back it up, I’m sure we can sell the changes in the plan to Nechayev.”

Chapter Three

HAVING FINALLY CONVINCED DE SOTO to resign the Go game—and gaining great satisfaction out of it, especially since she was able to counter his last-ditch

maneuver—Dina Voyskunsky left the lounge and headed to the bridge while the captain headed for bed. Just as she arrived for the overnight shift, a communication came in from Voyager. Taking it in the captain's ready room, she was greeted by the smiling face of Lieutenant Honigsberg.

“Commander, it looks like we're as shipshape as we're going to be. We're back up to a hundred percent. I figure we'll only be at optimum power consumption for about six hours or so, but that's enough to get us home so we can beat this puppy into shape.”

Voyskunsky returned the smile, remembering the glee of problem-solving from her own days as an engineer. “Looking forward to it, eh?”

“Nah, not so much,” Honigsberg said with a slight tilt to his head. “I want to get out into the field with this beast. I'm greatly looking forward to spending many years with these engines.”

Chuckling, Voyskunsky said, “I'll have Czierniewski cut the power transfer, then.”

“Fine. Thank her and her team for me, will you? The extra hands really helped. Oh, and Mr. Cavit wanted to talk to you.”

“Put him on,” Voyskunsky said with a smile, thinking, I doubt that “wanted” is the right word to use. “Felt it necessary,” maybe.

The image switched from the happy face of a chief engineer to the dour face of a first officer. “You know,” she said without preamble, “you didn't used to always look grumpy all the time.”

Cavit closed his eyes, took a deep breath, then opened them. “I was really hoping DeSoto would be on duty.”

“Nope, he's asleep,” Voyskunsky said, reveling in his discomfort. “Went to bed after I whapped him at Go again.”

Blinking, Cavit said, "I couldn't have heard that right."

"Heard what?" Voyskunsky blinked coquettishly, feigning innocence.

"It sounded like you said you beat Captain DeSoto at Go."

"That's because it's what I said." Voyskunsky got up and went over to the replicator in the ready room. If she was going to have a lengthy one-on-one talk with Aaron Cavit, she needed fortification. "Orange blossom tea, hot," she instructed the computer.

"When did you learn how to play well enough to beat him?"

"Captain taught me himself," she said, removing the tea from the replicator dispenser. The steam carried the lovely scent of oranges to her nose, relaxing her almost instantly. She retook the desk chair and faced Cavit. He looked more shocked than he had that time on Risa. Now, that was a shore leave, she thought with fond remembrance.

He snorted in a long-suffering manner. "Doing your usual making friends and influencing people, I see."

"Was there a point to this call, Aaron, or did you just feel like making up for lost time by cramming twelve years of verbal abuse into five minutes?" She took a sip of her tea. It was too bitter again. She made a mental note to talk to Czierniewski about it.

Cavit looked like he was about to say one thing; then he stopped himself, to Voyskunsky's annoyance. "I wanted to tell you that Mr. Tuvok is ready to beam over. Have you taken care of everything on your end?"

She'd been hoping to get a proper response out of him, but he was reverting back to professional mode. "I've updated all the records—as far as anybody's concerned, Tuvok's been serving on the Hood for three months and his family

moved to Amniphon three years ago. I even got the authorities on Vulcan to change his wife and kids' records around so they're listed as having died on Amniphon last month, though I doubt the Maquis would be able to dig that deep."

She smiled, then decided to take another shot. "I did tell you that I'd take care of it. You doubting my word now?"

"No, I just—" He sighed. "Never mind. What was that crack about in the meeting, anyhow? About my plans 'tending' to work?"

"They always did in my experience." She managed to keep her face straight. "When can we expect Tuvok?"

"At 0100 hours. Look, you don't have to make snide comments in meetings. If you want to—"

Voyskunsky rolled her eyes. This was not what she was hoping for. She wasn't sure what to expect after twelve years, honestly, but this whining certainly wasn't it. "Enough of this. Look, Aaron, I wasn't going to bring a damn thing up. I didn't say anything in that meeting that was out of line with my duty as first officer of the Hood. Anything you choose to interpret is, frankly, your problem. Now, is there anything else?"

"I—" Cavit sighed. His dark eyes looked almost pleading, but she didn't want pleading, dammit, she wanted contrition. Or at least an emotional response of some kind that wasn't snarky. "No, Commander, nothing else. We'll be getting under way shortly after Mr. Tuvok reports to you."

"Fine. And good luck."

"Thank you." Cavit sounded like he wanted to say something else.

She decided to go for broke. "Look, Aaron, as far as I'm concerned, you've got a lot of gall copping an attitude when you were the one who never showed on Pacifica. Now unless there's anything else, I actually have work to do over

here.”

“No, Commander,” he said tightly, “there’s nothing else. Voyager out.”

He cut the connection.

Damn, damn, damn, she thought. Could’ve handled that more smoothly. She started to sip her tea, then thought better of it.

She tapped her combadge as she exited the ready room, leaving the tea behind.

“Voyskunsky to engineering. Cut the power transfer to Voyager.” To the young night-shift ensign at conn, she said, “Set course for the Cardassian border.

We’ll implement at warp three once Lieutenant Tuvok reports on board.”

“Aye, sir.”

The viewscreen held the image of Voyager, a gray line seeming to connect it to a point just under the screen: the power transfer. Then the line blinked out of existence. All of the Intrepid -class ship’s running lights were going at full bore; the nacelles glowed with their full blue luminescence. From what Honigsberg had said, that was a temporary condition, but at least they should be able to get back to Utopia Planitia and fix whatever was wrong.

“Transporter room to bridge. Lieutenant Tuvok and all his personal effects have arrived safely, Commander.”

Voyskunsky smiled. “Hit it, Ensign.”

The following morning, Captain DeSoto found his first officer in the main shuttlebay along with Lieutenant Tuvok. The former was holding a tricorder, the latter a phaser rifle, and both were standing near the Shuttlecraft Manhattan.

The shuttle had seen better days: phaser scars marred several parts of the hull.

As the captain entered, Voyskunsky said, “Now fourteen centimeters up and six

centimeters to the right.”

Tuvok fired the phaser at the hull of the Manhattan without bothering to take any measurements. DeSoto had no doubt that the resultant phaser blast was right where Voyskunsky instructed it to be in relation to another phaser scar.

“How goes the deception?” DeSoto asked.

“Almost finished,” Voyskunsky said. “Next one should be across the port bow, say a forty-five-degree angle.”

Tuvok turned to look at the lieutenant commander. “That would not be consistent.”

“I beg your pardon?”

DeSoto smiled. “Let me guess, Mr. Tuvok—you’re about to point out that the next logical phaser blast would be across the starboard bow, as that would be the standard Starfleet tactical procedure when firing on a small vessel taking a standard evasive course, yes?”

“That is correct. If we wish the Maquis to believe that I stole this shuttle from the Hood—”

“Then the phaser scarring should match the pattern that we’d follow. Not everything in the field is by the book. Commander Voyskunsky, Lieutenant Dayrit, and I sometimes improvise these things. Besides, we’d know that you, logical person that you are, would follow a textbook evasive course.”

“And we’re the kind of people who like to throw people off by reading the book backward,” Voyskunsky added with a smile.

“The Maquis would not necessarily be aware of your—proclivity for improvisation.” Tuvok hesitated briefly, and DeSoto suspected the Vulcan was searching for an appropriately diplomatic way of putting it.

Voyskunsky nodded. “Maybe. And it’s true, there are no known Starfleet defectors

in the Maquis who served on this ship. A testament, I'm sure, to our fearless leader's ability to inspire loyalty," she said with a nod to DeSoto.

"If you're trying to suck up after last night's game, Commander, it won't work," DeSoto said with a chuckle.

"Noted, Captain." Her face growing more serious, Voyskunsky continued. "On the other hand, for all we know they have informants in Starfleet, and even here on the Hood—or at the very least, someone I may have served with on the Excalibur or that Manolet served with on the Discovery. I'd rather we erred on the side of personal consistency."

"And if Lieutenant Commander Hudson or one of the other Maquis examine the Manhattan and question this anomaly?"

DeSoto shrugged. "Then you tell them the truth. Adds verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative."

Tuvok raised an eyebrow. "Let us hope that, unlike Pooh-Bah's, my narrative is believed."

Laughing, DeSoto said, "I wouldn't have pegged you for a Gilbert and Sullivan fan, Lieutenant."

"I am not. However, during my first tenure in Starfleet, I served under Captain Sulu on the Excelsior. He was—inordinately fond of *The Mikado*, and there were several performances of it on the ship during my time there." Tuvok spoke with as much distaste as he could muster.

"In any case," Voyskunsky said, "if you'd be so kind as to fire across the port bow at an angle of forty-five degrees?"

"Of course, Commander."

As Tuvok took aim, Voyskunsky tapped the tricorder against her chin. "That

raises an interesting question. Legend has it that Vulcans never lie.”

“Extreme generalizations are not logical,” Tuvok said after firing the phaser, “as it only takes one counterexample to disprove them. However, deliberate falsehood is frowned upon, yes.”

“And yet you’re going to have to tell the Maquis that your family was among those lost in that rockslide on Amniphon. Now, the rockslide itself destroyed most of Amniphon’s computer records—in fact, that’s the biggest argument that it was artificially induced by the Cardassians rather than natural, since the damage was so specific—but the fact is, your wife and children didn’t die there. Are you going to be able to say they did?”

Tuvok lowered the phaser rifle and regarded Voyskunsky. DeSoto noticed no change in his attitude or demeanor— but then, I probably wouldn’t. According to Tuvok’s file, during the time between his two tours with Starfleet, he had undergone the Kolinahr ritual. DeSoto didn’t know all that much about Vulcan disciplines, but he did know that Kolinahr resulted in a much deeper repression of emotions than even the Vulcan norm.

“My first duty, Commander, is to Starfleet. You can be assured that I will follow that duty wherever it may take me. Now then, if you please,” he said, once again raising the rifle, “what is the next shot?”

Before Voyskunsky could answer, the intercom beeped. “Bridge to Lieutenant Tuvok.”

“Go ahead.”

“You have a personal message from Vulcan, sir.”

Tuvok looked at DeSoto. “May I take this in the shuttle, Captain?”

“Of course.”

Setting the rifle on the deck, Tuvok moved toward the shuttle hatch, opened it,

entered, and closed it behind him for privacy.

Voyskunsky grinned. “Speak of the devil and the devil calls you on subspace—assuming that is his wife or one of his kids calling.”

“Probably. I take it you’re concerned with Tuvok’s cover story.”

“Just want to make sure. We’ve had enough legitimate defections that he should be able to blend in fine. And we certainly created enough of an isolinear trail that any checks the Maquis do will turn up fine. I’m worried about two things: whether or not he can sell the cover story, and whether or not he won’t be one of those defections.”

DeSoto blinked. “Why are you worried about that?”

“Tuvok left Starfleet once already, some seventy-three years back. I don’t want to risk a repeat performance.”

“I wouldn’t worry,” DeSoto said, putting a reassuring hand on Voyskunsky’s shoulder. “His record is spotless. I’m sure he’ll do his job and do it well.”

She nodded twice. “You’re probably right, sir—I just want to be sure.”

“Understandable. By the way—is there something going on between you and Commander Cavit that I should know about?”

“That you should know about? No, sir.”

DeSoto smiled. Nicely handled, he thought. An honest answer without actually giving any information. “If you say so.”

The shuttle hatch opened. Tuvok stepped out and picked up the rifle.

“Was the news good, bad, or indifferent, Lieutenant?” DeSoto asked with a smile.

“The news was personal, Captain. I would prefer not to go into any more detail.”

“Of course,” DeSoto said. “Carry on, you two. Let me know when you’re ready to leave.”

Gul Eska hated rain.

As he left home for his usual morning walk to the office, he found himself suddenly pushed by a heavy wind and pelted with enough rain to soak his garments and hair in seconds.

One of the reasons he had fought hard for the assignment to Nramia was that it had mild weather—rain was a rarity in the capital city of this Cardassian colony near the Federation border. No, Nramia was a planet that had nice, hot weather. The red sun beat down on the planet like a lover's embrace. It was paradise. For months, Eska had supervised the military installation on Nramia as well as the six hundred thousand colonists who lived peacably on the surface. Krintar grew on Nramia, a rare plant that was the primary ingredient in halant stew. No replicator had ever been able to match the exquisite flavor of natural halant stew, and people would pay through the neck for krintar roots, so by administrating Nramia, Eska was sitting on a latinum mine.

Some pointed out that he would have been better off taking on a few shipboard assignments, but as much as Eska hated bad weather, he hated no weather even more. The idea of spending his time trapped inside a duranium can with nothing but recycled, sterile air to breathe filled him with loathing. True, many lived their whole lives in artificial environments, whether on ships or on planets with unbreathable atmospheres, but that didn't mean Eska had to live that way. He could barely call that living. No, he wanted the dirt of a planet beneath his feet and the warmth of a real sun beating down on his face.

On Nramia, he had that.

Until the day it started raining.

Eska had heard that the Federation could actually control the weather, to a

degree, on their planets. While Cardassia had nothing quite that sophisticated, their ability to predict the weather was near absolute. The meteorological system on Nramia had never been off by more than a few degrees in temperature here, a bit off in the speed of the wind there.

Never had the system neglected to predict a rainstorm.

Certainly, not this kind of rainstorm. Oh, it rained periodically in this area of the continent, but nothing like this.

It was coming down in sheets, a heavy wind blowing hard enough that the rain seemed to be coming at him sideways.

Eska's home was only a five-minute walk from the office complex where he had his seat of power. Picking up the pace, he ran the rest of the way, covering the distance in less than a minute. Grateful for his Central Command training, he wasn't even winded when he reached the door.

When Eska had taken over the administration of Nramia, he had had the military headquarters moved to this building. Though it was considered an eyesore by most—it was from a period in Cardassia's architectural development that many considered negligible, and indeed most examples of it throughout the Union had long since been demolished—Eska rather admired it. The entire façade was made of one-way transparent aluminum. Nobody could see in, obviously—that would be a security threat—but every room in the building had a glorious view of the capital city. Better still, throughout the day they could see the sun providing its glorious warmth.

Except for today, of course. Today, all they saw were the streaks of rain on the windows.

Eska was greeted at the door by his two aides with a towel and a refresher.

Inside the lobby of the complex, the staccato rhythm of the rain pounding on the transparent aluminum was a constant undercurrent. It reminded Eska of being on board a ship. Whenever he traveled, the thrumming engines always seemed ridiculously loud and made concentration difficult. He never understood how anyone could grow accustomed to such constant noise. Now, with the even more intrusive noise of the rain, he wondered again.

The taller of the aides, Glinn Coram, shook his head and smiled. “Were we transported to Ferenginar without anyone telling us, sir?”

“I’m starting to wonder,” Eska said, toweling his ears. They were so waterlogged that Coram had sounded like a staticky subspace comlink. “Find out what’s going on. Get in touch with the meteorological center. This—” He was interrupted by a massive thunderclap of a type he hadn’t heard since he was stationed on Chin’toka IX during monsoon season. “—should not have happened,” he finished in a harder voice.

“Yes, sir.”

To the shorter, fatter aide, he said, “Doveror, do a full sensor sweep of the entire planet. Tie in to the satellites. I want a full picture.” He had to raise his voice even higher, as the rain was growing more intense by the minute. No longer staccato, the rain was a virtual wall of sound slamming against the building.

“Yes, sir,” Glinn Doveror said in his squeaky voice. Most found him irritating and difficult to listen to, but he was also a most efficient aide, so Eska put up with it.

“And call Gul Evek and tell him to get a ship over here, just in ca—”

Eska’s words were interrupted by another thunder-clap, but this time it was immediately followed by an earsplitting shattering sound, as an entire section

of the transparent aluminum collapsed, shards flying through the air, propelled by the wind and no longer held in place by the structure of the building. Even as his ears cleared of that noise, it was replaced by exclamations of pain ranging from quick shouts to lengthy screams. Shards of transparent aluminum were all over the floor of the lobby, and probably elsewhere in the building. Then Eska felt like he was being pelted with stones. The rain had turned into hail and was now coming into the building. Raising his arm to protect his eyes, Eska ran toward the turbolift bay at the inner portion of the building. He didn't even bother to look to see if Doveror or Coram followed.

As it happened, they did, which he knew only because they entered the turbolift with him. "Operations," Eska said as the door closed. "Something is wrong."

"The weather is certainly a bit aberrant," Doveror said gravely.

"Aberrant!?" Eska almost grabbed Doveror by the neck ridges. "'Aberrant' is a few extra centimeters of rain per year. The first hailstorm in the recorded history of this continent is not 'aberrant.' Thunder intense enough to shatter our allegedly unbreakable windows is not 'aberrant'! Someone is attacking us, and I want to know who."

Coram fixed his commanding officer with a dubious glance as the turbolift doors opened. "Attack? That seems unlikely, sir."

Eska stepped out of the lift into the large room. Consoles lined three of the walls, and a large round desk sat in the center. The fourth wall was taken up with a viewscreen. Currently on that screen was an image of the capital city, which was a chaotic jumble of snow, sleet, freezing rain, hail, and wind.

"Weather patterns don't develop like this naturally," Eska said, pointing to the viewscreen, "and they certainly don't develop out of a cloudless sky."

One of the glinns sitting at the main operations table said, “Sir, we’re picking up—something in orbit.”

Eska threw his towel angrily at Doveror, who fumbled to catch it, and approached the table. “Define ‘something,’ Glinn.”

“I’m afraid I can’t, sir,” she said. “We can’t get a firm fix on it. It’s probably a ship, but—” Her eyes widened. “Sir, it’s firing on the orbital defense satellites!”

“Return fire!” Then Eska frowned. “Why didn’t the satellites challenge that ship immediately?”

“Not sure, sir—best guess, the indeterminate readings were too anomalous for the computer to register as a threat. Honestly, sir, I probably wouldn’t have bothered reporting it to you if not for everything else that was happening—and because the weather changes matched when the reading appeared in orbit.” She peered at her display. “Sir, all orbital defenses are down!”

Eska was about to say that that was impossible, that one anomalous reading shouldn’t be able to take out six satellites, but he was interrupted by the shaking of the entire room. Loose items fell to the floor, and several people followed the objects. Eska was not among those, as he gained purchase on the edge of the center table even as his footing was momentarily lost.

When the ground settled, he turned to the glinn. “That was a lightning strike, sir,” she said in a very small voice.

“That was lightning?” Eska obviously needed to revise his estimates on what was impossible.

“Yes, sir.” She peered down at her console, then looked back up at Eska. “The subbasements are still structurally sound, but the infrastructure of the aboveground portion of the building is compromised.”

“Evacuate the building immediately.”

“Sir, I don’t think they’ll be any safer out there. The winds are now at two hundred—”

Eska’s head swam. “They’re still safer in the open than inside a fifty-story building that’s about to collapse!”

“Yes, sir.”

He whirled to face Coram, who was now at a communications console. “Get me Evrek!”

“Waiting for his reply now, sir,” Coram said in a surprisingly calm voice. It made Eska realize just how hysterical he was starting to sound.

Eska turned to the viewscreen. People, both civilians and Central Command soldiers, were running out of the building. You could tell the difference only by what they were wearing, as they all had the same panicked look as they dashed about madly. The building itself was quite literally a shell of its former self.

Its roginium super-structure was all that was left—the transparent aluminum had been blasted away, as had the plastiform that made up the interior walls.

If this place is collapsing, Eska thought with horror, then the rest of the city’s buildings will be dust before this is over. And we have no defenses. . . .

Eska silently cursed whoever was responsible for not assigning any ships to Nramia. He could hear whichever idiot Central Command bureaucrat it was now, going on about how the orbital defenses were more than sufficient for the job. . . .

“Sir,” Doveror said, “reports are coming in from all over the planet. This peculiar weather is not limited to the capital. The polar regions are registering temperatures several orders of magnitude hotter than usual. The ice up there is melting, and computer projections are calling for dangerous floods

within a day or two. The tropical regions are suffering blistering heat with no humidity, the desert regions are getting massive rainfall—”

“I get the idea,” Eska muttered.

Then, to Eska’s relief, the image of Gul Evek came on the screen. Cardassian heads tended to be rather rectangular, but Evek’s countenance was downright boxy.

“What can I do for you, Eska?” Evek said distractedly, looking down at some readouts even as he spoke.

“We need to evacuate Nramia.”

Everyone whirled toward Eska at that. Eska couldn’t blame them, as he was as surprised as any of them at the words that had come out of his mouth, but it was the only sane course of action.

Evek looked up sharply at that. “Excuse me?”

“Something in orbit has wiped out our defenses and is causing deadly weather all over the planet.”

Smiling an unkind smile, Evek said, “You want us to evacuate because of the weather, Eska?”

The building chose that moment to shake again. “Another lightning strike, sir,” the glinn said.

“That was lightning?” Evek was frowning now.

“Yes, Evek, that was lightning. And we’re in a subbasement in the most structurally sound building on Nramia. Our polar ice caps are melting, our jungles are drying out, our deserts are flooding, and here in the capital, we’re being subjected to deadly hail and gale-force winds.”

“Don’t you have ships of your own?”

Eska rolled his eyes. Save me from spacefaring types. “Yes, of course we do. And

at present, they're all on the planet. With conditions as they are, none of them would be able to achieve orbit before being torn to pieces."

The building shook again for good measure.

"I'm diverting the Sixth Order to Nramia now," Evek said. "We'll be in orbit within three hours."

Eska grimaced. "I hope we live that long."

"If you don't, the Maquis will pay for your deaths, rest assured."

"The Maquis?" It never occurred to Eska that the Maquis would be responsible—not because they weren't philosophically capable of it, quite the opposite, in fact, but because they were a ragtag group of terrorists whose ships were held together with little more than stem bolts and happy thoughts. Nothing in any of the intelligence reports Eska had read indicated that they had any kind of weaponry that could do this. He said as much to Evek.

"Perhaps you're right. But this fits their mode of operation, even if it is beyond what we know of their capabilities. Still, remember that there are far too many former Starfleet personnel in the Maquis, and they are distressingly resourceful." With a bitter smile, Evek added, "Besides, whether they are responsible or not doesn't mean we can't blame them."

"I'm thrilled for your ability to milk this for political gain, Evek," Eska said through clenched teeth, "but I'm a bit more concerned about the people of Nramia."

"I've done all I can for now. I will contact you when we arrive."

With that, Evek's face faded, replaced once again with the image of ever-more-panicky Cardassians in the street of Nramia's capital.

"Sir," Coram said, "the anomalous reading has disappeared. If it was a ship, I

would guess that it has left orbit.”

“Let’s hope the weather improves, then.”

But it did not. By the time the Sixth Order—five Galor -class ships, including Evek’s command, the *Vetar*—arrived at Nramia, fully a quarter of the population were dead, most were injured to some degree or other, the capital was flooded under several meters of rainwater, and the polar ice caps had started to melt, with icebergs starting to roam in the oceans. Computer projections estimated that Nramia would be uninhabitable within a day.

As Eska was beamed up to the flagship of the Sixth Order, he thought, I really really hate rain.

Chapter Four

AS CAL HUDSON READ THE REPORT from the Maquis infiltrator on Deep Space 9, he felt queasy.

He was tempted to mention this to his second-in-command, Darleen Mastroeni, presently sitting next to him in the cramped bridge of the *Liberator*. Indeed, the word “bridge” bespoke a grandeur it hadn’t earned. It was more like the cockpit of an old airship. Hudson and Mastroeni sat side by side in chairs they barely fit in, surrounded by controls on either side of them and lining the bulkhead in front of them—excepting the tiny viewscreen, of course. A third person on the bridge would have been a physical impossibility.

However, if Hudson did share his gastrointestinal discomfort at the report with Mastroeni, the shorter woman would probably just make a comment about how his precious stomach, having been raised on safe and easy replicated food, wasn’t used to the home cooking favored by most Maquis—mainly because replicator power was not the near-infinite resource it was on a Starfleet vessel, and needed to be rationed for other uses.

But it wasn't the badly prepared hamburger he'd had for lunch that was making him ill right now. It was the report from Michael Eddington, newly appointed head of Starfleet security for DS9, and Maquis agent.

Getting Eddington onto the station had been quite a coup for the Maquis. DS9 was, after all, the most important strategic post in the sector thanks to the Bajoran wormhole that led to the Gamma Quadrant. Many ships went through there, and having an agent on-station would be invaluable—even if that agent was someone who pretty much told a lie every time he put on his Starfleet uniform. But it wasn't even the use of a Starfleet officer to aid the Maquis cause that irked Hudson. He, too, had turned his back on Starfleet and the Federation—but given how shabbily those two organizations had treated their citizens with this idiotic treaty, he had no compunctions about that. If Michael Eddington had no trouble reconciling his duties on DS9 with his dedication to the Maquis, then Hudson had no trouble using him.

No, the true source of Hudson's queasy feeling was that he was doing this to Ben Sisko.

Hudson and the DS9 station commandant had been friends since their Academy days. They had gotten into trouble with each other, they had participated in each other's weddings, they had consoled each other when they lost their respective wives.

Now they were on opposite sides of a war. Ben had brought Hudson his Starfleet uniform, and Hudson had made a show of phasing it into oblivion in front of him. And now Hudson had put a viper in his friend's midst.

"Cal, we're picking something up," Mastroeni said. She looked up and touched a control over her head. "It's a Starfleet distress call, but with a Maquis call

sign.”

“Really?”

Mastroeni snarled. Her face had never formed a smile in the six months that Hudson had known her. “An outdated call sign. It isn’t one of ours—probably some Starfleeter trying to lure us into a trap. Permission to blow it to atoms.”

Hudson sighed. The unfortunate thing was, Mastroeni was dead serious. However, Hudson wasn’t so cavalier. He checked the sensor readings. “Reading a type-3 shuttlecraft—call sign indicates it’s the Manhattan, presently assigned to the U.S.S. Hood.”

“I’m not picking up the Hood on any scans—or any other Starfleet vessel,”

Mastroeni said. “So if we destroy them, no one will know.”

“She’s also damaged,” Hudson continued, ignoring her. “Those are phaser hits—starship phaser hits.”

“Now we’re being hailed. I assume I should ignore it and fire phasers?”

Turning angrily at Mastroeni, Hudson said, “I’m not about to fire on a ship in distress, Darleen.”

“You’re not in Starfleet anymore, Cal.”

“You’re right—and I haven’t joined Central Command, either. If we start firing on ships that ask for help, we’re no better than the Cardassians.”

“I don’t give a good goddamn about being ‘better’ than the Cardassians!”

Mastroeni said, slamming a hand on the arm of her chair. “I just want them and Starfleet gone from my life.”

A beep from the console sounded before Hudson could reply. It was a repeat of the hail from the Manhattan. Hudson reached over and answered it rather than ask Mastroeni to open the channel.

“This is the Federation Shuttlecraft Manhattan to any Maquis ship within range.

This is Tuvok of Vulcan, former lieutenant in Starfleet. I request asylum with the Maquis. Please respond.”

“Good thing he identified himself as a Vulcan,” Hudson muttered. “That’s the only thing to explain how calm he is.” Louder, he said, “Mr. Tuvok, this is the Maquis.” He wasn’t about to identify himself by name over an open channel.

“We’ve got you on sensors. What happened?”

“I absconded with this shuttlecraft when Starfleet refused my request for a leave of absence following the deaths of my wife and children on Amniphon.”

Hudson looked sharply at Mastroeni. The rockslides on Amniphon had killed thousands. They still hadn’t even begun to properly catalogue the dead.

“So you left Starfleet.”

“Affirmative. The Hood naturally tried to pursue, but they would not enter the Demilitarized Zone without authorization. However, that authorization may come soon. Therefore I would request that you beam me aboard and then destroy the shuttle.”

Hudson rubbed his chin. “Mr. Tuvok, I’d love to accommodate you, but I’ve got a first mate here with an itchy trigger finger. She’d like to just destroy your shuttle without bothering to beam you over first. I’m gonna need a good reason to hold her back.”

“Your attempt to play the human game of ‘good cop/bad cop’ is somewhat transparent, sir. However, I do understand that you will require a gesture of good faith. I was the chief of security on the Hood, and can provide you with intelligence and current access codes that might prove beneficial to the Maquis.”

Mastroeni lined up a shot with her phasers. “Like we need him for that. C’mon,

let me—”

“In addition,” Tuvok added, “I have information on how to detect a weapon that is currently within the confines of the Demilitarized Zone. It is an artifact of tremendous power that might tip the balance of power in favor of the Maquis. And Starfleet Command is not presently aware of it.”

“He’s lying.” Mastroeni’s eyes almost rolled back in her head.

“Maybe.” Hudson rubbed his chin again. “And maybe not. I’m willing to look into it.” He smiled at Mastroeni. “We can always kill him later.”

She just snarled again in response.

“Prepare to be taken in tow, Mr. Tuvok.”

“I would not recommend that course of action. As long as the Manhattan is intact, the Hood will be able to track it. Starfleet has recently improved the security measures on their shuttlecraft. One such attempt by a potential Starfleet defector to deliver a shuttle into Maquis hands resulted in the officer’s incarceration. I would prefer to avoid Ensign Lestewka’s fate.”

“I don’t believe him,” Mastroeni said.

Hudson frowned. “There was an Ensign Lestewka who served on the Tian An Men. Reports were that he was favorable to our cause, but he was caught trying to defect. I always assumed he just got caught ’cause he was stupid, though.”

“Only,” Tuvok said dryly, “if you consider not paying attention to security briefings ‘stupid.’ The choice is, of course, yours, but it would be safer for all concerned if you destroyed the shuttle. If nothing else, it denies me my best avenue of escape and leaves me wholly at your mercy.”

“You already are at our mercy, Vulcan,” Mastroeni said, now locking phasers on target.

“Hardly. Although damaged, this shuttlecraft could still hold its own in a

firefight—especially against a sub-standard Mishka -class raider with a malfunctioning phaser array.”

At that, Hudson laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Mastroeni asked.

“He’s good. All right, Tuvok, have it your way. Stand by for our signal to beam you aboard. Out.” Then he opened an intercom channel. “Mindy, you there?” Mindy McAdams was supposed to be on duty in the transporter room.

“Yeah, Skip. And I overheard your tête-à- Vulcan. I’ll get Schmidt in here with a couple of rifles and bring him on board.”

“Good.” Hudson had long since given up discouraging McAdams from calling him “Skip,” short for “Skipper.” He turned to his copilot. “Once he’s on board, blow up the shuttle. Then let’s start doing some digging. I want to know everything there is to know about Tuvok of Vulcan, security chief of the U.S.S. Hood. See if Eddington can call up his service record and get it to us.”

“Fine, whatever you say.”

Hudson sighed and fixed his first mate with an encouraging expression. “Look, Darleen, if even the slightest thing is off-kilter with what we find, we’ll kill him. I promise.”

“I’m holding you to that, Cal. Because we’re going to regret having that Vulcan on our ship, mark my words.”

“Are you out of your mind?”

Tharia heard Chakotay’s words, but did not acknowledge them. He was busy trying to figure out what his next target should be.

Chakotay’s ship—which he had christened the Geronimo, after some Earther freedom

fighter or other—had been salvaged from a Tellurian depot a year earlier. Tharia admired the bridge design: a U-shaped, two-level room at the fore of the ship. The upper level extended from the back wall about halfway into the room, and contained the command center. Generally, Chakotay, Seska, and Tharia sat there; they were there now, plus Torres. The front part of the lower level had the navigation and engineering consoles, with all other systems controlled from consoles under the command center, which was accessible via a ladder. Most impressive of all was that the entire front wall was a viewscreen. Right now, it showed Nramia. Normally appearing bright green and yellow from orbit, now the planet was shaded in darker greens and blacks, giving it an almost sinister look. Inset into the huge screen was a sensor reading that showed the abnormal weather patterns throughout the world.

Weather patterns that Tharia had caused.

Chakotay was pointing at those sensor scans. “This was not part of the plan, Tharia. We were just going to target the military headquarters, not wipe out the entire population.”

From below, Chell said, “Uh, actually, they may not all die. I’m reading a fleet of Galor -class ships. Registers as the Sixth Order. My guess is that they’re here to handle some kind of evacuation or other. At least, that’d be my guess.”

“Evek,” Chakotay muttered. Then he said to the Bolian, “Get us out of here, Chell. Maximum warp.”

“No!” Tharia screamed. “We can’t! Not yet! They have to all die first!”

Chakotay grabbed Tharia by the shoulders. “Get ahold of yourself! I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but it stops now.”

“What’s the big deal, Chakotay?” B’Elanna asked.

With a vehemence that might have surprised Tharia if he bothered to care about

such things anymore, Seska replied. “There are civilians down there, B’Elanna. Military’s one thing—they swore an oath to die for the Central Command, and they knew what to expect. But the civilians aren’t responsible for the treaty or for the actions of the government, any more than we are—or than my people on Bajor were when the Cardassians subjugated them.” Turning to Tharia, she added, “They certainly don’t deserve this. At this rate, unless you reverse what you did, the planet’s entire ecosystem will tear itself apart within a few months. The flooding alone will cause incalculable damage.”

“We’re not giving him the chance,” Chakotay said. “Engage at warp six, Chell.”

Tharia said, “We have to make sure they all die!” at the same time that Seska said, “We can’t just leave them!”

Chakotay, ever the calm presence, first looked at Seska. Tharia knew that the two of them were lovers, and he wondered if he’d still be so calm if he found her broken body destroyed by Cardassians. “We can’t stick around so Evek can pound us to a pulp, Seska. B’Elanna’s right—these are Cardassians, and I have no problem with tying them up in a rescue mission and with the military outpost here being history.” Then he turned to Tharia. “I do have a problem with the scale—and with my orders being disobeyed. I want you to turn that box of yours over to me right now.”

“You don’t understand,” Tharia said.

“You’re right, I don’t. And I don’t care, either. Dalby,” he called down to the lower level, “escort Tharia to his barracks and retrieve that box of his.”

Tharia paid no attention to anything anyone was saying, or to Kenneth Dalby, who came up the ladder and practically yanked Tharia toward the doorway. “C’mon, ch’Ren,” he said, “let’s get this over with.”

He paid no attention because he was turning his thoughts to his next campaign.

It was obvious that Chakotay was no longer to be trusted. There's one warp-capable shuttlecraft left, he thought. The Geronimo had two originally, but they had crashed one on the planet where Tharia found his gift.

As soon as he and Dalby reached the cabin Tharia shared with Hogan, Ayala, and Bendera, the Andorian reached out with his mind to the weapon. In turn, the weapon reached out to the ship's environmental controls.

The traitors cannot be allowed to stop me, he thought.

"C'mon, ch'Ren, get a move on," Dalby said, pushing Tharia toward his bunk.

As the temperature in the room lowered, Tharia turned and leapt through the air, tackling a surprised Dalby. While he lay stunned on the floor, Tharia ran to his bunk, grabbed the weapon, ran back toward the door, grabbed Dalby's phaser, kicked him in the ribs for good measure, then headed toward the shuttlebay.

The temperature continued to lower to near-freezing levels, but Tharia only really noticed it on an intellectual level—he didn't feel anything except for his burning need to make the Cardassians pay.

By the time he got to the shuttlebay, he reckoned, it would be down past freezing. Then he would raise the temperature to the boiling point as he left the Geronimo. The hull would start to rupture under the stress.

In his mind's eye, he started plotting a course for the Slaybis system. The traitors there will die just as the traitors here will.

Chakotay and the others had been his comrades. But they could not see the truth.

The Cardassians all had to pay, whether civilian or military. They all had to die. Seska was Bajoran, she should have understood that.

Since she did not, she would die when the hull buckled.

Ayala and Henley were doing some kind of maintenance on the shuttle when Tharia

came in. Without hesitating, he shot them both. He had no idea what setting the phaser was on—the fact that they fell to the deck in a heap meant it wasn't set to disintegrate, but that still left half a dozen possible settings—nor did he much care. If they weren't dead now, they would be soon.

He boarded the shuttle, entering an override code. The bridge systems were probably literally freezing up by now, so there was no way Chakotay or Torres would be able to stop him.

“Bridge to shuttlebay. Whoever's in there, get back here now!” Chakotay's calm voice had finally broken into a shout. Tharia also could hear a shiver in his voice.

Tharia cut off the communication as he exited through the shuttlebay doors.

Once he was clear of the Geronimo, he set course for the Slaybis system. There were more people there who needed to die.

About his comrades, he didn't spare a thought.

He was thinking about the broken bodies of his mates. And the broken bodies of the Cardassians who died on Nramia.

It wasn't enough. Not yet.

I will help you achieve your goal.

Soon...

Cal Hudson sat in his quarters and read through the data on the optical chip Tuvok had provided. Half-remembered Academy classes in galactic history came back to the forefront of his mind as he read it. So many of those damn ancient civilizations, he thought, they all blend. The Zalkat Union, the Iconians, the Tkon Empire...

He remembered sitting in that class, bored out of his mind. Ben Sisko was in the class with him, and they'd spend most of their time the first few weeks trying to get the other one to do something stupid that would get the (negative) attention of the professor. It was childish, but they were first-year students who were eager to explore strange new worlds. A class about dead civilizations didn't interest either of them.

Eventually, they settled down, of course—if they hadn't, they wouldn't have made it through the Academy in the first place. Those were good times, Hudson thought with momentary sadness.

Exacerbating the painful nostalgia was the fact that the artifact that Tuvok had found with the Hood's sensors while on the night shift at ops—and, according to the Vulcan, had then wiped from the ship's records—was one of four. Two others had been discovered, one only a few months ago on one of Bajor's moons. Ben was involved in that mission. So if I do chase this thing down, it'll be another connection to Ben. Seems we can't get away from each other, even when I try....

Hudson shook his head. Thinking about Ben led to thinking about Ben and Jennifer, which led to thinking about Gretchen. He shook his head, forcing himself to pay attention to the data in Tuvok's chip.

Tuvok himself was currently under guard in the mess hall. The Liberator didn't have a brig—prisoners weren't often a consideration in their line of work—so Hudson stuck him there while he went over the data and sent Mastroeni to check out his story.

The door chime rang. "Come on in," he said. The door opened to the short, compact form of his second-in-command. "What do you have for me, Darleen?" As the door closed behind her, Mastroeni let out another of her snarls. "I hate to say it, but everything checks out. Eddington went over the records on DS9,

and Tuvok was recently assigned to the Hood and the Hood has been patrolling the Cardassian border lately. His family is listed as having lived on Amniphon at the time of the rockslides.”

“What about his requests for leave?”

She shook her head. “DS9 doesn’t have records that complete about officers not actually assigned to the station, and he couldn’t really dig that deep without arousing suspicion. However, I got Quiring to hack into the Vulcan central net.”

Hudson’s eyes widened and he rose from his chair. “What!? Are you out of your mind? Darleen, you don’t hack the Vulcan net!”

Mastroeni almost smiled. “Quiring did. At least a little. He got out before anyone caught on to him, but he was in long enough to verify that T’Pel and all the little Tuvok-lets moved to Amniphon three years ago. What about the stuff he gave us?”

Sitting back down, Hudson glanced at the small viewscreen on his desk. “Well, the codes he gave us aren’t anything we haven’t gotten from Eddington, but Tuvok wouldn’t know that. If nothing else, it worked as a good-faith gesture. And this artifact thing he found could be damn useful.”

“You’re not sure?”

Tilting his head, Hudson said, “It depends. It’s one of two possible artifacts left over from a ninety-thousand-year-old empire.”

A snort escaped from Mastroeni’s lips. “And it’s still supposed to work?”

“Two others have been dug up, and they both worked just fine.” Too fine, he thought with a shiver, having just read the reports of the epidemic on Proxima a hundred years ago, and the near-destruction of one of Bajor’s moons only a few months ago. “One possibility is that it can manipulate weather patterns.”

Mastroeni's eyes widened. "That has all kinds of entertaining possibilities."

"I agree." Hudson leaned back in his chair and fixed Mastroeni with a serious look. "The problem is, the other possibility is that it's a telepathic weapon that enables the user to control other people's minds."

It would be inaccurate to say that Mastroeni's face darkened, given her near-permanent scowl, but that scowl did appear to deepen. "If it's a telepathic weapon, I don't want a damn thing to do with it."

"Neither do I. But—"

Slamming a hand on the wall, Mastroeni said, "I mean it, Cal. I won't have us going that way! I'll destroy the thing!"

"Good luck." Hudson chuckled. "Those things are apparently indestructible. That's why they're still intact and working after ninety millennia. Anyhow, it doesn't matter—point is, we need to track this thing down, and Tuvok's given us the energy signature. I think we ought to follow it. And I think we need to keep Tuvok alive. He's earned at least that much."

With obvious reluctance, Mastroeni said, "I agree—but only that much. So far, he's done everything right, but he's also done everything I'd expect a Starfleet infiltrator to do. I want a phaser pointed at his head every minute of every day."

Hudson sighed, knowing that she was serious, regardless of the impracticalities of such a plan. Still, he figured it would probably be wise to assign McAdams to Tuvok, at least for the time being. Unlike Mastroeni, she would keep a clear head, and was much less likely to fire without provocation or orders.

He got up and proceeded to the mess hall, Mastroeni right behind him. McAdams and Schmidt were on opposite sides of the room—McAdams's lithe form leaning against the wall near the door, Schmidt's massive body crammed into one of the

mess-hall chairs across the hall, both of them with phaser rifles conspicuous.

Tuvok sat placidly in the middle of the room, his elbows resting on one of the tables, his fingers steepled together near his forehead. Probably something vaguely meditative, Hudson thought.

At the new arrivals' entrance, McAdams straightened up. "He's just been sitting there, Skip. I don't think he's even blinked since he sat down." She grinned.

"Better check, make sure his eyes haven't gone all crusty."

Hudson smiled and approached the prisoner.

Tuvok looked up. "My suspicions were correct, I see."

Frowning, Hudson said, "What suspicions, Mr. Tuvok?"

"Your voice over the comlink sounded sufficiently similar to the voice on record as belonging to a former lieutenant commander in Starfleet named Calvin Hudson. Your face matches that record as well. It is therefore reasonable to deduce that you are he."

McAdams grinned. "Well, if he does wind up joining, he can fill Sakona's old role of class pedantic."

Mastroeni shot the other woman a venomous look, no doubt angry that McAdams used the name of one of their fellow Maquis, but Tuvok said, "If you are referring to the woman who was captured on Deep Space 9 last year, it is my hope to prove more useful to you than she was." He turned his impassive gaze on Hudson. "You have investigated the data?"

"We have." Hudson rubbed his chin. "So far, it looks promising—but I don't see any good reason to trust you. On the other hand, I have half a dozen reasons to shoot you on sight."

"I will assume, since you have not shot me on sight, that you're willing to give

me the benefit of the doubt for the nonce.”

“For the nonce,” Hudson said with a nod. “We’ll enter these energy readings into the computer, see if we can track it down.”

“I will join you on your bridge,” Tuvok said, standing up.

Hudson smiled. “I’m afraid that won’t be possible, Mr. Tuvok. Our bridge doesn’t have much walking-around room. We’ll keep an open channel down here.” He pointed to the viewscreen on the side wall. “I’ll tie that in to the main viewer so you can see what we see. Let us know if we do anything wrong.”

Dryly, Tuvok said, “I will assume that request is limited to anything you might do in relation to the Malkus Artifacts.”

Mastroeni raised her phaser. “Good assumption, Vulcan. You’ve been living on borrowed time since you first entered the DMZ, and it’s only a matter of time before someone burns your head open with a phaser.”

Tuvok seemed unmoved by the threat. “All mortals live on ‘borrowed time,’ madam. Concerning oneself over-much about the nature of how one gives that time back, so to speak, would be an illogical waste of resources.”

“Darleen!” Hudson barked just as Mastroeni raised her weapon.

After a moment, Mastroeni calmed down and lowered her weapon. “Don’t push me, Vulcan.”

Tuvok continued to look unimpressed.

Hudson grabbed Mastroeni by the arm and led her out, giving both McAdams and Schmidt nods as he left, indicating that they were to remain on guard. As soon as the door closed behind them, he spoke. “Will you stop that, please? I know you don’t trust him, but we’re not killing him if we don’t have to, and if he is legit, I don’t want him expecting a phaser in the back from you.” As they approached the door to the bridge, which was on the same deck, he added,

“Unless, of course, you’re just trying to intimidate him, in which case you’re wasting your time. He’s obviously one of the more imperturbable types.”

Mastroeni snarled again. “I just don’t like him.” With that, she opened the door to the bridge.

Hudson sighed and followed, settling into his chair. He entered Tuvok’s chip into one of the slots in the console in front of him, then called up the energy signature. Not for the first time wishing like hell they had a ship with a working voice interface, he manually fed the signature into the ship’s sensors and then did a long-range scan.

“I think this is a waste of time,” Mastroeni said. “We’re not going to find anything. We should just shoot him and then get as far away from—”

The sensor alarm beeped. “We’ve got something,” Hudson said with a certain amount of satisfaction. Mastroeni’s caution was understandable, of course, but there was enough of the Starfleet officer left in Cal Hudson that he didn’t feel comfortable with a first mate who insisted on shooting a person down in cold blood.

“That’s in Cardassian space,” Mastroeni said, peering at the sensor display in front of Hudson. “Right over the border.”

“Nearest planet is Nramia.” Hudson pursed his lips. “That’s on the list.”

Mastroeni shot Hudson a look. He didn’t need to explain any further. The Maquis had a list of planets that were viable targets. Hudson knew that one of the other cells—though he did not know which, nor would he know—had targeted Nramia, a colony that had a military outpost.

Hudson hesitated at first. He didn’t want to barge in on someone else’s operation—but if one of the Malkus Artifacts was on Nramia, he had to find it

sooner rather than later. They certainly couldn't risk the Cardassians getting their hands on it.

Besides, there was no timetable for the attack on Nramia that Hudson was aware of. So for all he knew, whoever was attacking wouldn't be doing so for weeks yet.

"Set a course for Nramia, Darleen. Warp six."

They made their way toward the Cardassian border in silence. Hudson took advantage of the time to finish reading the report from Eddington that he'd started. What got his attention in particular was the Defiant. Hudson remembered Ben Sisko talking about the ship—a warship originally designed for use against the Borg—when the latter was assigned to Utopia Planitia. The ship had been outfitted with a cloaking device, on loan from the Romulan Star Empire with the proviso that it be used only in the Gamma Quadrant.

I wonder if there's any way we can get our hands on that....

"Cal, we've got a problem. Actually, two."

Hudson looked up. "What?"

"I'm not reading the energy signature anywhere near Nramia anymore. However, I am picking up five ships bearing down on the planet, and they're all Galor-class."

Hudson immediately called up a long-range scan of Nramia itself. Something didn't look right.

Tuvok's voice sounded suddenly over the intercom. "Those readings should not be accurate. Nramia's northern continent is mostly desert and should not experience such extremes of precipitation as are being shown in that scan. In addition, the polar ice caps are melting at an alarming rate, one that would, in the normal course of time, take decades. The logical deduction is that the Malkus Artifact

in question is the weather controller, and it has already been used.”

“Gee, all that from a long-range scan,” Mastroeni said, rolling her eyes.

“I would also surmise—”

“This ought to be good,” Mastroeni muttered.

Tuvok continued as if Mastroeni hadn’t spoken. “—that the artifact is already in the hands of fellow Maquis.”

Hudson smiled. Nice touch, he thought, referring to them as “fellow.” “It’s possible the Cardassians have it.”

“Unlikely. If that were the case, we would still be reading the artifact’s emissions. I recommend that we abandon our course to Nramia and attempt to relocate the emission.”

“Much as I hate to agree with our—guest, he’s right,” Mastroeni said.

Hudson nodded. “I agree, too. Those Cardassians’ll have itchy trigger fingers, and they’ll probably blame the Maquis whether or not we’re actually responsible.

Change course back into the DMZ. I’ll try to reacquire the emission.”

“Changing course 284 mark 9.” Mastroeni then frowned. “We’re picking up a weak distress signal at 173 mark 6.” She looked up. “It’s a Maquis call sign—a current one this time.”

“Go,” Hudson said, then looked down at his readout as the sensor display beeped.

“I’ve got the artifact emission.”

“Good. We can pick it up after we check out the distress call,” Mastroeni said.

Hudson grimaced. “It’ll be sooner than that. The emission’s at 173 mark 6.”

Mastroeni looked up sharply.

“Warp eight, Darleen. I’ve got a nasty idea about what’s happening.”

To her credit, Mastroeni didn’t hesitate, even though the maximum safe cruising

speed for the Liberator was warp seven-point-three.

Then Hudson tried to boost the gain on the distress signal. “—otay of the Geroni—mayday, we need imme—ance. Repeat, this is Chakotay of— nimo, we need immediate assista—”

That was followed by the sound of wrenching metal.

A shiver went down Hudson’s spine and he froze in his chair. Anyone who had ever lived on a starship, as Hudson had most of his adult life, learned to fear that sound, because it meant that the hull—your lifeline, the only thing separating you from the unforgiving vacuum of space—might well be buckling.

“I lost the signal,” Mastroeni said.

“Warp nine.”

Mastroeni didn’t even look up, trying as she was to regain the distress call.

“That’s crazy, Cal, we can’t—”

“I said warp nine!”

This time she did look up. Cal Hudson rarely raised his voice—but he wasn’t in the mood for an argument, and he wasn’t about to let Chakotay and his people suffer any more than they had to. He didn’t know Chakotay well, only that he too was ex-Starfleet, that he was from Trebus, and that he had already carved out a good reputation among the Maquis for both efficiency and fairness. But even if he were a total stranger, he would not allow him to suffer the agonies that awaited him if the Geronimo’ ’shull ruptured.

“Fine, warp nine,” she said. “I just hope our hull doesn’t go the way of theirs.”

Chapter Five

ROBERT DE SOTO WAS NOT LOOKING forward to this impending conversation.

About two hours after Tuvok left, he had put in a formal request to Starfleet

Command to enter the Demilitarized Zone. He then awaited the call back from Admiral Nechayev denying the request. All according to plan. If Tuvok was able to find the artifact, or if the artifact made its presence known in some more overt manner, the plan might change, but for now Tuvok needed a clear path to get on the Maquis's good side.

Instead, Nechayev's small face with its even smaller features appeared on the screen on the desk of his ready room and informed him that she needed to get back to him, and she would contact him again in one hour on a secure channel, along with Gul Evek.

Voyskunsky had been in the ready room with him when Nechayev's call came in. She frowned. "That wasn't part of the plan, was it?"

DeSoto shook his head. "What's the old saying? The plan of action is usually abandoned three minutes into the mission?"

"Something like that, though my experience says that estimate is often generous."

Smiling, DeSoto said, "Obviously the board has changed shape somewhat."

The captain decided to take the second call alone in the observation lounge. A secure channel from Alynna Nechayev meant captain's eyes only—he'd judge afterward how much Voyskunsky needed to know, though his instinct would be all of it. It was never a good idea for a captain to have to keep things from his first officer.

The more spacious observation lounge, with its viewscreen on one of the walls, gave DeSoto more room to walk around, which he had a feeling he was going to need. Since this promised to be a long talk—Evek and Nechayev both were overly fond of the sounds of their respective voices—he wanted room to move to disguise

the fidgeting.

One hour and twenty-five minutes after Nechayev said she'd get back in touch in an hour, Dayrit said, "Incoming transmission from the U.S.S. Nimitz. It's Admiral Nechayev—priority alpha."

Voyskunsky grinned toothily. "Nice to know that the admiralty's reputation for promptness remains nonexistent."

Merely rolling his eyes in reply, DeSoto got up from the command chair. "Pipe it through to the observation lounge, Manolet, and make sure it's secure on our end, too. You have the bridge, Dina."

Still grinning, Voyskunsky said, "All our hopes and dreams go with you, sir."

DeSoto snorted. "That makes it all worthwhile."

As soon as he arrived in the observation lounge, DeSoto activated the viewscreen. It revealed a split screen, with Admiral Nechayev's pinched features on the left and the rectangular head of Gul Evек on the right.

"Thank you for waiting, Captain," Nechayev said.

DeSoto came within a hair of saying something offhand about needing the nap, but with Evек on the line, he needed to present the front of the outraged ship captain who'd lost an officer to the Maquis. "I didn't have much choice, Admiral."

"I understand. But I hope you understand that this is a delicate matter—even more delicate than you might realize. Captain Robert DeSoto, may I present Gul Evек of the Sixth Order?"

"From what Admiral Nechayev tells me, Captain," Evек said without any kind of preamble, "the catastrophe on Nramia relates to this artifact of yours."

DeSoto's head swam. Technically, he wasn't supposed to know anything about an artifact, since Tuvok's cover story had the information wiped from the Hood's

'ssensor logs. Conveniently, he also had no idea what Nramia was or what manner of catastrophe was involved. So his confusion was genuine when he said, "Excuse me?"

"My apologies," Evек said, sounding completely unapologetic. "I had assumed the admiral briefed you."

"That was the purpose of this call," Nechayev said primly. "Captain, it seems that another one of the Malkus Artifacts has surfaced. You're familiar with them, of course."

"Of course," DeSoto said.

"Apparently, the Maquis have discovered a third artifact. And it's capable—"

Evek shifted in his seat. "It's capable of destroying a planet, Captain. Right now, my entire fleet is engaged in rescue operations to evacuate Nramia because your terrorist friends warped the weather patterns sufficiently to make it uninhabitable. I can assure you, our response will be appropriate."

Nechayev said quickly, "They're not our 'friends,' Gul Evек."

"Not hardly," DeSoto said, trying to sound bitter. "They abandoned Federation citizenship. Admiral, I've already requested permission to enter the DMZ to pursue Lieutenant Tuvok. If a Malkus Artifact is in Maquis hands, that's two reasons. General Order 16 is very clear on the subject."

Before Nechayev could speak, Evек said, "The general orders of Starfleet are of little interest to Central Command, Captain. What we want is revenge for the indignities—"

"What you want is to escalate the situation," DeSoto said, "and start a war."

"You surprise me, Captain. The Maquis declared war on us when they blew up the Bok'Nor at Deep Space 9 months ago. It will end when they're all dead."

DeSoto didn't like the direction this conversation was taking. "Admiral—"

"Don't worry, Captain," Nechayev said quickly. "We don't plan to escalate this situation. Right now, I think it's in the best interests of both Central Command and Starfleet to send one ship from each fleet into the zone to try to locate the Malkus Artifact and confiscate it."

"I don't agree," Evek said sharply, then softened. "But I have been overridden. The Vetar will join you in the Demilitarized Zone in three days, once we have finished overseeing the evacuation of Nramia."

"Gee, Evek, I thought you were in a rush to get revenge." Despite DeSoto's tone, he was glad to see that the Cardassian was putting saving the lives of those on Nramia over vengeance. That kind of attitude was the only way there was to be any hope of peace along the Cardassian/Federation border right now.

"I think we all agree that safeguarding lives is of utmost importance," Nechayev said before Evek could respond.

"Bridge to Captain." That was Voyskunsky's voice.

"Hold on a second, please, Admiral, Gul." DeSoto then muted the video and audio feed to Evek. Nechayev's face now took up the entire viewscreen. "Go ahead, Dina."

"Captain, we've reacquired the emissions from the Malkus Artifact." Now DeSoto was glad he'd muted Evek. The use of the word "reacquired" would not have jibed with the cover story they'd given the Cardassians. "It's in motion, heading for the Slaybis system."

DeSoto turned to Nechayev's image with a questioning look. "Why do I know that name?"

"There are two Class-M planets in that system. One is a Cardassian colony. The other is a human colony." Nechayev hesitated.

“Slaybis IV,” DeSoto said, finally putting it together with a Starfleet Intelligence dispatch that he and Voyskunsky had read as part of their briefing prior to being posted to the Cardassian border. For that matter, they had shared the contents of that briefing with Tuvok prior to his departure. “SI has an operative there, doesn’t it?”

Nechayev nodded. “Obviously, this information should not be shared with Gul Evek.”

“Yeah, but the artifact going to Slaybis should. This might be just what we need to give him a kick in the tail.” He brought Evek back up on the screen. “Gul, that was my bridge. They’ve detected a signal that matches the records of the Malkus Artifact—and it’s heading for the Slaybis system. I believe there’s a Cardassian colony on the second planet?”

Evек spoke with a sarcastic disdain. “After a fashion. The colonists on Slaybis are a group of fanatics, Captain. Cultists who think that technology has ruined their lives. They flew to Slaybis in a spaceship that they proceeded to dismantle and now live a peaceful, agrarian lifestyle unsullied by the evils of replicators and other such equipment.” Evек hesitated. “Captain, do you mean to tell me that those murderers of yours are headed for Slaybis II?”

“We don’t know where they’re headed, just that they’re on course for that star system.”

“They’re not even a formal part of the Cardassian Union! They’ve rejected any form of aid from the government—it’s funded by a few rich eccentrics.” Evек spoke in a tone of voice that told exactly what he thought of oddball projects funded by wealthy civilians.

“That makes it less likely to be a target, if there’s no military value,” DeSoto

said. “Of course, there’s a human colony there, too.”

“I think we can safely rule out a Maquis attack on a human colony, Captain. If the Maquis are targeting a completely unmilitary—one might even say anti military—target, then—”

DeSoto saw an opening. “Then, Gul Evek, we need to go in now. We can’t afford to wait three days for you to finish your evac. Let the Hood go to Slaybis—we can be there within twenty-four hours.”

Until this moment, DeSoto had never seen a Cardassian grit his teeth. It was not a pretty sight. “Captain, the term ‘demilitarized zone’ means a zone with no military. The treaty—”

“—can be flexible up to a point,” Nechayev said.

“We cannot allow a Starfleet presence in the zone without an equivalent Central Command presence.” Evek’s words were sure, but his tone was weakening. DeSoto tried not to smile. His white pieces were surrounding Evek’s black ones oh so slowly but surely.

“What if we promise to share all intelligence we gather on the Maquis?” Nechayev said.

Evek leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. “What assurances do I have that you’ll share all your data gathered?”

Nechayev’s lips moved only infinitesimally, but it definitely qualified as a smile. “I never said we’d share all our data, Gul, only that we’d share our intelligence on the Maquis. You won’t have unexpurgated access to Captain DeSoto’s logs, but you will be provided with useful intelligence. And all we ask in return is for one ship to go unescorted into the DMZ just long enough to save a planetful of Cardassian cultists.”

Unfolding his arms, Evek glared at the screen. DeSoto once again had to keep

himself from smiling. The gul was making a show of thinking about it, but DeSoto knew when the other player was ready to resign. And, as little as Evek might have thought of the people who formed the colony on Slaybis II, it would be politically unwise to condemn them to death over a technicality in the treaty.

“Very well—but I expect a complete sharing of intelligence on the Maquis. I am determined to make sure this ragtag group of terrorists are wiped from the face of the galaxy once and for all!”

Evek punctuated his outburst by cutting off the communication at his end.

“Very dramatic.”

Nechayev actually chuckled. “I’m surprised. Evek doesn’t usually go for those kinds of histrionics. But this is a difficult situation.”

“True. If that’s all, Admiral, we need to get the lead out.” DeSoto moved as if to cut the connection.

“One thing, Captain.” DeSoto’s finger hovered over the control. “The most important thing right now is retrieving the artifact. We can’t afford to let it fall into Maquis or Cardassian hands. It’s far too dangerous.”

“We’ll get it back for you, Admiral. Hood out.”

As he walked out to the bridge, he shook his head. Gee, Admiral, thanks so much for explaining to me what I already knew.

“Dina,” he said to Voyskunsky as she vacated the command chair for him, “if I ever turn into a hidebound desk-jockey type, please don’t hesitate to shoot me in the head.”

“Noted and logged, sir.”

“Anyhow, we’ve got our free pass in the DMZ. Baifang, set course for the Slaybis system, warp nine. José, keep an eye on those readings. If the artifact changes

course even a micrometer, I want to know about it. Manolet, arm phasers and load torpedo bays.” He gave Voyskunsky a small smile. “We’re the lone white piece in a sea of black pieces.”

A chorus of “Aye, sir’s” flew about the bridge.

Hsu added, “Course plotted and laid in, sir.”

“Hit it.”

When the Liberator came out of warp, Cal Hudson was surprised to see an intact hull.

“Pull in to forty thousand kilometers,” he told Mastroeni, and then did a full scan. The sensors explained the seeming discrepancy between the hull-buckling sounds in Chakotay’s distress call and the image on the viewscreen: Hudson was reading severe damage to the inner hull, and also extreme temperature variations throughout the small vessel. “Looks like Tuvok’s weather controller got loose inside the ship.”

“The emissions are still in motion, about two light-years ahead and traveling at warp three.” She looked over at Hudson. “Their course takes them right to the Slaybis system.”

“Slaybis?” Hudson racked his brain, and then came up with a match. “There’s a human colony on the fourth planet and a bunch of Cardassian farmers on the second. Neither of them’s much of a target. Why would whoever has the artifact be heading there?”

“You can ask Chakotay himself,” Mastroeni said, looking down at her console.

“He’s hailing us.”

A dark face appeared on the tiny viewscreen. The captain of the Geronimo had determined features, accented by a featherlike tattoo over his left eye, and

close-cropped black hair. “This is Captain Chakotay of the Geronimo. You must be Captain Hudson.”

“Cal is fine,” Hudson said. He’d left ranks behind when he quit Starfleet, and being referred to as a captain—particularly given that he was “only” a lieutenant commander when he resigned—just brought back bad memories. Chakotay smiled grimly. “Normally, I’d be wary of the two of us talking like this.” Maquis cell leaders deliberately avoided contact with each other as a security measure.

Returning the smile, Hudson said, “Hey, if you want us to turn around. . .”

“That’s quite all right. We’ve got thirty-eight people here and a ship that’s buckling at the seams. My engineer tells me we’ll implode inside of fifteen minutes.”

“You can give me the details once we get you settled over here. Hudson out.” He then instructed the transporter room to start beaming Chakotay’s people over, as well as whatever cargo the Liberator had room for. There turned out to be very little of that; most of Chakotay’s people’s personal belongings were in a safe place that Hudson didn’t want to know the location of.

It only took ten minutes to complete the transfer. From the transporter room, Chakotay said, “If you’ve got the weapons to spare, Hudson, I’d like you to destroy the ship. I’d rather a stray Cardassian didn’t come across any useful remains.”

“Understood.” Hudson nodded to Mastroeni, who loaded the torpedo bays. Within two minutes, the Liberator’s photon torpedoes had reduced the Geronimo to components far too small to be of any use.

Hudson then joined Chakotay in the cargo bay, where thirty-five of his people

were gathered. The other three had been taken to sickbay—a small room that consisted of two beds, a medical tricorder, and a mishmash of medikits. Two had been stunned by phaser fire, and the other had three broken ribs.

“The ship’s been scuttled,” Hudson said. “I’m sorry we had to do that.”

Chakotay nodded. “That’s all right—it was my fault, really, for giving her that name. The real Geronimo fought the good fight, but came to a bad end. Next time, I’ll think more carefully.”

“So what happened?”

Quickly, Chakotay summarized his rescue of three of his people from a desolate planet in the DMZ, with the added bonus of a black box of some kind—the Malkus Artifact. The Geronimo then attacked Nramia, but what Chakotay had ordered as a strike against the capital city turned out to be a planetwide disaster.

“This Tharia person,” Mastroeni said, “doesn’t normally act like this?”

Before Chakotay could reply, a Bajoran woman stepped forward. “Like a complete lunatic? No, he doesn’t. That damn box must’ve done something to him.”

A woman with Klingon-like features spoke up. “He could’ve just cracked. The man lost his entire family.”

Hudson flashed on a mental image of Gretchen, which he forced out of his mind.

“What happened?”

“His three mates died in a Cardassian attack,” Chakotay said. “He took it fairly well—maybe too well. Sometimes it just takes a little longer to grieve—or to fall apart.”

“Or maybe just the right tool,” the part-Klingon woman said. “This weapon is incredibly powerful.”

Hudson nodded. “We saw what it did to Nramia. In fact, it’s why we found you.”

He then quickly filled Chakotay in on his own reasons for being here, and on

their prisoner and potential recruit in the mess hall.

“I’d like to meet this Tuvok,” Chakotay said.

“Of course.” Hudson was about to lead Chakotay to the mess hall when a Betazoid stepped forward.

In a soft voice, the dark-eyed man said, “Excuse me, sir, but there’s something I think you should know.”

“What is it, Suder?” Chakotay asked.

The Betazoid hesitated. “It wasn’t anything I could put my finger on, but—well, since you rescued Tharia, B’Elanna, and Gerron, there’s been something—”

“Spit it out,” Chakotay said impatiently. This Suder person spoke very quietly, and Hudson could see how his roundabout way of talking—unusual for a telepath—could be irritating.

“Tharia’s mind has been—different. It isn’t anything specific, but—you know that I’d never pry into your minds without permission, sir. But—Tharia was definitely changed, subtly, by that thing he found.”

Chakotay started to say something, then stopped. Hudson suspected that the large man was going to upbraid the Betazoid for not speaking up sooner—it’s what Hudson might have done under the same circumstances—but then he thought better of it. After all, there was little to be gained by recriminations now.

Instead, he simply said, “Thank you, Lon. Seska, B’Elanna, come with me. The rest of you, stay here. Hudson?”

Hudson and Mastroeni led the trio to the mess hall, where McAdams and Schmidt still stood guard. To them, Hudson said, “You two report to the bridge until Darleen and I report back.”

Nodding, the pair departed. Chakotay, meanwhile, gazed upon the Vulcan. “Hudson

says you know about this artifact.”

“Yes. I am Tuvok of Vulcan. My family was killed at Amniphon, and I have come to the Demilitarized Zone in order to join the Maquis. The information about the Malkus Artifact that I provided to Mr. Hudson was by way of—”

“Letting us think you’re legitimate, fine,” Chakotay said quickly. He obviously wasn’t interested in the preliminaries. “One of my most trusted comrades has gone from a sane, steady presence to a homicidal maniac thanks to this thing, Vulcan. I have a Betazoid who says that his thought patterns have changed. Can you explain that?”

“One of the Malkus Artifacts is reported to have the ability to control thoughts, but that is separate from the artifact that affects weather patterns.” Hudson frowned. “What about the other two people who wielded the artifacts?” Tuvok’s eyes almost seemed to turn inward for a half-second as he recalled the records of the artifact. “One was a citizen of a human colony. She was a disaffected civil-service worker named Tomasina Laubenthal, and had no history of mental illness prior to finding the artifact. However, she had recently gone through a life change that was believed to be the reason for her using the artifact to commit attempted mass murder. The second artifact was used by the Bajoran terrorist Orta.”

The Bajoran woman—Seska—snorted at that. “I’ve heard of him. He isn’t a model of mental health at the best of times.”

Tuvok steepled his fingers together. “However, the artifacts do not have any visible controls. They must function by reacting to the thoughts of the wielder.”

“Tharia seemed to simply will the device to do what it did,” Chakotay said.

“It may therefore be logical to postulate that the transfer of psionic waves

works both ways, as it were—that the artifacts are capable of, in essence, forcing the possessor to utilize them. This hypothesis is supported by a telepath noticing a change in thought patterns.” One of his eyebrows rose. “In the case of Ms. Laubenthal, it probably would have taken very little to convince her to do so, given the life change she had undergone.”

“In Orta’s case, it wouldn’t have taken any convincing whatsoever,” Seska said.

Nodding, Tuvok said, “It is an intriguing hypothesis.”

“It’s also pretty irrelevant.” That was B’Elanna, the part-Klingon woman. “We need to find Tharia—that shuttle can’t go higher than warp three. I assume this tub can do better?”

Mastroeni gave the woman one of her lesser snarls. “We hit warp nine to rescue you.”

“Tharia was headed for Slaybis. He’s got a head start, but we should be able to beat him there at warp nine.”

Hudson shook his head. “We can’t maintain it that long. But I’m not sure why he’d want to go there. The only Cardassians there are a bunch of civilians.”

Chakotay hesitated. “Actually, Slaybis IV was on our list.”

“That’s a human colony!” Mastroeni said angrily.

To Hudson’s surprise, it was Tuvok who responded. “However, it is a human colony with a Starfleet Intelligence operative working on it.” He turned to Chakotay and again raised an eyebrow. “Logically, that is the only possible reason why Slaybis IV would be a legitimate Maquis target.”

Hudson also turned to Chakotay. “Is this true?”

Slowly, Chakotay nodded. “We got word that one of our couriers, a young man named Elois Phifer, was working for SI.”

Tuvok added, "Lieutenant Phifer is, in fact, an SI operative, sent in six months ago to gather intelligence on the Maquis, though his information has been sporadic and less than useful to Starfleet."

Rubbing his chin, Hudson turned to Mastroeni. Her face was unreadable, which told Hudson all he needed to know. Tuvok gave up an SI operative before Chakotay had a chance to—that was a major point in the Vulcan's favor.

He tapped an intercom. "McAdams, set course for the Slaybis system, warp seven-point-five." He turned to B'Elanna. "I can't risk going any faster than that—we already strained our engines to get to you as fast as we did."

B'Elanna smiled. "Let me get a look at your engines. I'll coax warp eight out of them at least."

"Let her do it," Chakotay said. "She's the best. In fact, she's better than the best."

Chakotay didn't strike Hudson as the type given to hyperbole. "Darleen, take her to engineering."

Mastroeni fixed Hudson with a glare, but did so without comment.

"All right, Mr. Tuvok, I think you've shown plenty of good faith," Hudson said.

"I'm still not completely convinced that your desire to join the Maquis is legitimate, but I'm content to not shoot you for the time being. Right now, the main thing is to get that artifact back from Tharia. We'll figure out our next move after that."

"Agreed," Chakotay said.

Tuvok nodded. "Thank you."

"First thing we're doing is getting you out of that uniform. It won't go over well around here." Hudson smiled. "I think I've got something in my footlocker that'll fit you."

Tuvok's eyebrow practically climbed off his head. "That estimation may be optimistic." The Vulcan had a tall, lithe form, completely unlike Hudson's own bulkier frame. Tuvok's torso could practically fit in one of Hudson's shoulders.

"We'll figure something out. C'mon."

"Cal." It was Mastroeni over the intercom.

"Go ahead," Hudson said, looking up.

"I've got good news and bad news. Tell Chakotay he wasn't kidding about this Torres woman. We've got warp eight-point-five."

"The bad news?"

"Tharia's still going to beat us to Slaybis by about two hours."

Chakotay muttered a curse in a language Hudson didn't recognize. "With that weapon, two hours is a lifetime."

"It will surely be the remaining lifetime of Lieutenant Phifer," Tuvok said dryly.

Whirling on Tuvok, Chakotay said, "I don't give a damn about the life of a Starfleet infiltrator, Vulcan. He knew the risks when he went undercover. But Tharia can't tell what a legitimate target is anymore. He's lashing out at everything in his way. He's spent the last nine months pretending that the deaths of his mates didn't affect him, and now he's making up for it by killing indiscriminately."

As calm as Chakotay had been intense, Tuvok said, "Then logic dictates we do everything we can to stop him."

Chapter Six

ASMALL SHIP FLEW THROUGH THE REGION between star systems in a sector that currently was designated 22402 by the United Federation of Planets. Its registry

was the Sun, though it was, truthfully, not registered to any particular planet, only to its owner, a woman named Aidulac.

Various and sundry ships piloted by Aidulac and named the Sun had wended their way throughout the galaxy for millennia, with but one purpose: to find the Instruments of Malkus the Mighty. The four Instruments that she herself had helped create millennia ago. The four Instruments that Malkus had used to cause untold death and destruction. The four Instruments that the rebels who overthrew Malkus hid throughout the galaxy.

The four Instruments that Aidulac swore to destroy if it took her the rest of her life. And, since she was functionally immortal, the rest of her life was as long as it needed to be.

It was, for the most part, a tedious existence. But Aidulac persevered.

The universe, naturally, didn't make things easy on her. Perhaps it was its revenge for her having pried into so many of its secrets. Or perhaps she just hadn't noticed the universe's vicious sense of humor before. But for an obscenely long time, nobody unearthed the Instruments, and so she never found the wave pattern that would identify them. She went through hundreds of ships—all of which she named the Sun, after the vessel that had given her freedom from the Zalkat Union—and waited.

No one knew of the Instruments, even when questioned under Aidulac's irresistible mental charms. So she waited some more.

At one point, bored with waiting and insane with loneliness, she went to a world now called Pegasus Major IV and used her abilities to take on many lovers and bear many children. Her mental charms had lessened over the years, to her annoyance. Nowadays she could truly affect only males. But that was sufficient. She thought she wanted the company of children while she waited.

But she grew bored with that, too, and resumed her wandering ways.

And her waiting.

Finally, the universe gave her hope. She detected an Instrument on a human colony belonging to a governmental body that had taken over many of the worlds once ruled by the Zalkatians: the United Federation of Planets. They called it Alpha Proxima II. However, by the time she reached the world, two Starfleet ships had already arrived, and they would not permit her to land on the planet to take the Instrument—ironically, because the planet was quarantined thanks to the Instrument’s virus, which had infected thousands.

She might have been able to convince the two Starfleet commanders, Decker and Kirk, to let her take the Instruments, but many of her descendants on Pegasus Major IV had inherited her persuasive abilities. They had been nicknamed “Sirens” after some human mythological creature and gained a reputation—one that Decker and Kirk had used against her.

The second Instrument had proven just as elusive, again because of the interference of Starfleet. This time it was the energy weapon, which had been discovered on a moon of the planet Bajor.

Now, only a few short months later, she had been thrilled to find that the third Instrument—the weather controller—was in a region of space between the Federation and the Cardassian Union. Best of all, the region was demilitarized—there was no chance of interference from Starfleet.

The Instrument was in transit to a star system that the locals referred to as Slaybis. Aidulac put the Sun on course for that world.

This time, she thought, I will not fail.

“So what’s your story?” Darleen Mastroeni asked B’Elanna Torres.

Torres had just finished rerouting some of the power relays to coax some more speed out of the warp engines without straining the Liberator hull or shorting out its structural-integrity field. Mastroeni had been worried about the latter, since the SIF had taken a beating after their last throw-down with the Cardassians, but everything seemed to be functioning well. Torres was obviously very good at the type of seat-of-the-pants engineering that was required to survive in the Maquis, and Mastroeni had decided that she was going to do what she could to recruit this prodigy away from Chakotay.

“Story?” Torres asked as she checked over the readings.

“C’mon, everybody in the Maquis has a story.”

Smiling, Torres said, “Oh yeah? What’s yours?”

“You ever hear of Juhraya?”

“Of course,” Torres said with a nod.

“Did you know that the first contact between humans and Cardassians was on Juhraya? Most people don’t know that.”

“I certainly didn’t,” Torres muttered. “Is there somewhere I can get a drink on this boat?”

Mastroeni nodded and led the way toward the mess hall. “Sure. Follow me.” Tuvok wasn’t there anymore, so Mastroeni could go there to relax. “Anyhow, a Cardassian ship crash-landed on Juhraya about fifty years ago. Some people say it was a Starfleet ship that made the first contact—some kind of silly diplomatic thing—but that’s typical of their propaganda. It was us, and everyone who matters knows it.”

Torres laughed. “No love for Starfleet, huh?”

Snarling, Mastroeni said, “Not remotely. A bunch of arrogant prigs with no

conception of how the galaxy actually works.”

As they entered the mess hall, Torres said, “You won’t get any argument from me.

I went to that penal colony they call the Academy for a year and a half.”

Mastroeni nodded. “They kicked you out.”

“Let’s just say we all agreed that it wasn’t the place for me.”

“Well, that agreement turned out good for us. Coffee?”

Torres nodded, and Mastroeni approached the food replicator and ordered two coffees, black.

“How’d you know I took my coffee black?” Torres asked as she removed her steaming mug from the slot.

“You’re an engineer. Haven’t met one yet that didn’t drink it black.”

“Very observant.” She took a sip. “Anyhow, you’ve now heard most of my ‘story.’

I grew up on both Kessik IV and Qo’noS.”

“So you are part human?”

“Half and half,” Torres said with a nod. “My father’s human, but he left when I was a kid. After that, my mother and I moved to Qo’noS.”

“Which did you like better?” Mastroeni asked the question mostly by way of trying to find out what Qo’noS was like. She knew very little about the Klingons, but she always imagined that she would like it on their homeworld.

“I hated both of them pretty much equally, actually. Kessik was too pastoral for the Klingon side of me, and Qo’noS was too rough-and-tumble for my human side to deal with.” She laughed. “Or maybe I was just rebelling. Who knows? I was a dumb kid who resented her parents, like most dumb kids. So I went to the Academy, figuring they’d take just about anybody, and I hated that, too. Came to live out here and actually liked it until the treaty messed everything up, so I joined

Chakotay.”

“Who is now a man without a ship,” Mastroeni said, grateful for the opening.

Torres shrugged. “He’ll pick up another one. Probably some junk heap I’ll have to beat into shape, like usual.”

“You know, we could use a good engineer here. The Liberator obviously likes your touch.”

“I don’t think it’d work.” Torres grinned. “Chakotay and Hudson on the same ship would just get ugly.”

Mastroeni started to ask why they needed Chakotay, but she cut herself off.

Torres had thought the offer was being extended to the entire cell. “Yeah, that would,” she said slowly. “Of course, you could just come over yourself.”

Before Torres could answer, the door opened to reveal Tuvok. The Vulcan had changed into a shirt that was tailored for a person twice his size— probably one of Cal’s, Mastroeni thought—and pants that had been rolled up at the ankles. On anyone else such garb would have looked foolish, but, much as Mastroeni hated to admit it, Tuvok wore it with dignity.

Her hand automatically went to her phaser. “What do you want, Vulcan?”

“I was seeking out Ms. Torres. Ms. McAdams informed me that she would be here.”

“We’re having a private conversation,” Mastroeni said.

“That’s all right,” Torres said, setting down her mug and walking over to the

Vulcan. “What is it, Tuvok?”

Cursing, Mastroeni set down her own mug and also walked over to the Vulcan, who was holding a padd. Obviously, her attempt to recruit Torres had failed. Still, she didn’t trust the Vulcan—and she wasn’t at all happy that he was gallivanting around the Liberator unescorted. She made a mental note to talk to Hudson about that later.

“I have been perusing the data on the Malkus Artifacts from the Rector Institute—where the first two artifacts are being studied,” he added at Torres’s quizzical look, “as well as sensor data from the Odyssey, Rio Grande, Enterprise, and Constellation.”

Frowning, Mastroeni asked, “You got all that from the Hood?”

“Before I departed, yes, I made copies of all that data.”

“You expect me to believe that Starfleet ships carry around sensor data from hundred-year-old missions?”

“Of course,” Tuvok said as if such a colossal waste of computer storage were the most natural thing in the galaxy.

Torres nodded. “He’s right, actually. You never know when you may need a piece of information from an old mission. And Starfleet computers have a lot of storage space.”

Mastroeni still thought it a waste, but at this point she was staring a gift horse in the mouth. This information might help them deal with this crazed Andorian and his weapon. “What’ve you found?”

“The sensor data that the ships have been able to accumulate—combined with the usual advances in sensor technology—means that we might be able to get a transporter lock on the artifact when we find it.”

Tuvok handed Torres the padd. She studied the data on the screen, but shook her head. Mastroeni looked over her shoulder and saw that the screen had several different sensor readings on different sections of the viewing area, including recent readings from the Liberator’s own scans.

“These readings are too scattershot. Maybe—maybe—if you got the thing onto a transporter pad, then the two consoles working together could get a lock, or if

you put some kind of homing device on the thing, but that's the only way to do it."

"My combadge could easily serve such a function," Tuvok said.

Mastroeni snorted. That combadge was currently in Hudson's possession, surrendered to him when Tuvok changed clothes. She had been suspicious that he had left the device on—it was the easiest way for Starfleet to track him down—but simply said, "What does this mean in plain words?"

"I had hoped that we would be able to get a transporter lock on the artifact when we arrived at the Slaybis system and simply confiscate it that way.

Unfortunately, as we have seen, this will not be possible."

A thought occurred to Mastroeni. "Wait a minute, why don't we just lock in on those distinct emissions of yours? Isn't that how we know it's there in the first place?"

"Unfortunately, those emissions cannot be traced to the precise location of the artifact. A transporter lock requires a precise coordinate fix, and thus far the energy signature given off by the artifacts has not been able to provide that."

Torres looked up suddenly. "We might be able to do something sneakier than a combadge. Tharia's not stupid. I doubt we'd be able to sneak a combadge or a pattern enhancer or anything like that onto it. But I might be able to put together a mini-transponder." She turned to Mastroeni. "Mind if I paw through your parts? I know I've got some of what I'd need in my footlocker, but I'll need some molybdenum, some bits of ODN cable, and a solenoid transtator."

Tuvok's eyebrow came dangerously close to flying off his forehead. "I fail to see how a solenoid transtator would be of any use."

Grinning widely, Torres said, "Watch and learn, Tuvok."

I have simply got to get this woman to join our cell, Mastroeni thought as she

led the pair of them to the parts locker. Anybody who can make a Vulcan—especially that particular Vulcan—look that nonplussed is someone I want to keep around.

Chapter Seven

AS SOON AS THE LIBERATOR'S long-range sensors started picking up readings from Slaybis IV, Cal Hudson knew they were too late.

For starters, sensors were picking up the distinctive emissions of the Malkus Artifact on the planet itself, with no immediate sign of the Geronimo's shuttlecraft in orbit.

Then Mastroeni gave her report on what sensors were picking up on the planet:

“Temperatures in the equatorial regions are below freezing, with snow and ice storms. Temperatures in the polar regions are close to fifty degrees above freezing, with severe flooding. I'm picking up hurricanes on the coasts and tornadoes inland.” She looked over at Hudson with as grave a look as he'd ever seen on her face. “It's Nramia all over again.”

Hudson shook his head. “Prepare to come out of warp and plot a standard orbit.”

“Sure, I—” Then something caught her eye. “Uh, better make that an orbit of the third moon. I'm picking up a Starfleet ship, heading for Slaybis at warp eight.”

Again she turned to Hudson, but this time the grave look was replaced by fury.

“It's the Hood! That goddamn Vulcan betrayed us!”

“We'll deal with that in a minute,” Hudson said, more concerned with their immediate safety than the long-term—or even short-term—consequences of the Hood's presence in a demilitarized area. “Get us to the moon without their seeing us.”

“I know what to do,” she said through clenched teeth. It was risky, but they

could wait until the last possible second to come out of warp and slide right into orbit of the moon—currently on the far side of the planet. It involved dumping a lot of velocity in a short amount of time, and was difficult for any ship to pull off—a ship with a sufficiently small mass to be able to dump velocity that fast sometimes wasn't structurally sound enough to survive the maneuver, and a larger ship simply couldn't decelerate that quickly. Usually space was large enough for a huge margin of error when it came to dropping speed, but a standard orbit decreased that margin considerably.

“Decelerating—now!” Mastroeni said as she performed the maneuver. Alarms went off all around Hudson. Most were warnings of problems that could be tabled, or fixed quickly—except for the one that indicated the failure of the structural-integrity field.

“Engineering,” he yelled, tapping the intercom, “McAdams, we—”

Then the alarm stopped. SIF then read at one hundred percent. The lights did dim, however.

“McAdams, what just happened?”

“This is Torres. I was able to divert power from life-support to the SIF.”

Hudson blinked. “Are you out of your mind? Life-support—”

“—is nonessential in the short term. Just the air we've got will last us a day or two, and we can live with low lights for a while. We'll be able to get the SIF running on its own long before there's any kind of problem.”

“Uh, fine,” Hudson said, nonplussed. He wanted to rebuke Torres, but he found he had nothing to say that was in any way recriminatory. “Carry on.” He turned to Mastroeni. “Any way we can steal her from Chakotay?”

Mastroeni almost smiled. “Working on it.”

It figures. Hudson shook his head and put his mind back to immediate business.

“Did you read any Cardassian ships?”

“No. And I’m still not.”

“What about the Hood?”

“Not reading them either, but that’s because we’ve got a moon and a planet between us—and it also means they can’t see us, either. Hopefully they didn’t pick us up. If they stay on course, they’ll be in orbit in five minutes.”

Hudson checked his status board and saw that repairs were already under way on the lesser systems that had given out. He nodded, appreciative of his team. Then the comm systems indicated some traffic on the Starfleet channel. “The Hood’s sending a message.”

He put it on the speaker. “Slaybis IV Control, this is the Starship Hood. Respond, please.” A pause. “This is the U.S.S. Hood. We have been given special dispensation by Starfleet and the Cardassian Central Command to enter the Demilitarized Zone unescorted in order to comply with General Order 16. Please respond.”

“Hudson to Tuvok.”

“Go ahead,” came the Vulcan’s calm voice a moment later.

“Mr. Tuvok, the Hood has entered orbit around Slaybis IV. They claim to have gotten special dispensation to come here in order to confiscate the artifact. I’m wondering if they’re here for another reason.”

“You suspect me of leading them here.”

“The thought had crossed our minds,” Mastroeni said sharply.

“A reasonable supposition, but erroneous. I have no reason to lead the Hood here. It was inevitable that they would eventually detect the Malkus Artifact even after I wiped the sensor logs as long as it stayed in use within the

Demilitarized Zone. It is good that we destroyed the Manhattan. As it is, Captain DeSoto will no doubt use this excursion as an excuse to try to take me back.”

Hudson muted the intercom and shot Mastroeni a look.

She shrugged. “He’s saying all the right things, but I don’t like it.”

“They say Vulcans don’t lie,” Hudson said with a wry smile.

Mastroeni snorted. “Yeah, but it’s mostly Vulcans who say that.”

“Good point.” He de-muted the intercom. “All right, Tuvok, we’ll—”

“Cal, I’m picking up readings from the surface,” Mastroeni said suddenly. “The capital city is coming into range. According to our records, there should be a very large building that houses the government in the center of the city.” She looked up. “According to the sensors, there’s a pile of rubble in the center of the city.”

“This is Tharia ch’Ren,” said a voice over the comm channel, in response to the Hood’ shail, “representing the new face of the Maquis.”

Hudson and Mastroeni exchanged a glance. “I don’t like the sound of that,”

Hudson muttered.

Yet another new voice came on. “Mr. ch’Ren, this is Captain DeSoto. What has happened to the government of Slaybis IV? We haven’t been able to raise them.”

“That is because they’re all dead, Captain. As is the traitor, Elois Phifer. As are several dozen other people. And they’re only the first.”

“You said you’re the ‘new face’ of the Maquis. What does that—”

“What it means, Captain, is quite simply that we have been gentle—quiet. Until now. You have called us ‘terrorists,’ but you have not seen true terror before.

The citizens of Nramia know the meaning of terror now, and those who dwell on Slaybis IV will do likewise—followed by the farmers on Slaybis II, and everyone

else in the Demilitarized Zone.”

“Mr. ch’Ren, do you intend to—”

“We intend to exterminate all life in this sector, Captain. And if you stand in our way, we will exterminate you as well.”

“Well, I don’t like the sound of that,” Dina Voyskunsky muttered from behind DeSoto. She stood between Dayrit and Kojima. The captain silently agreed with her assessment from his vantage point in the command chair.

The image of an Andorian was on the main viewer. Tharia ch’Ren’s feathery white hair extended to the small of his back, and his antennae stood straight up out of his head. His watery yellow eyes seemed almost empty, which made his words all the more disturbing to DeSoto.

Ch’Ren had kept his end of the transmission tight on his face. Based on the sensor readings of the Malkus Artifact and the triangulation of the communication, he was in the capital city, and based on the fact that he wasn’t being rained on, he was indoors—according to Kojima, the capital city had gotten its entire average annual allotment of rainfall in the past two hours—but beyond that, there were no clues as to his precise location.

Dayrit whispered, “Captain, I have something.”

“Hold on a moment, please, Mr. ch’Ren, while I consult with my senior staff.”

The Andorian simply inclined his head.

DeSoto stood up and made a throat-cutting gesture. Once the transmission was muted, he said, “Report.”

“I’m picking up the wreckage of a shuttlecraft in the capital city. It doesn’t match the registry of any of the ships in the Slaybis port—but it does match the

configuration of a Maquis shuttle that attacked a Cardassian freighter a couple of days ago and made off with a weapons shipment. Central Command claimed the grenades were for a supply depot in the Chin'toka system, but SI was pretty sure they were earmarked for Dorvan V. It also matches the type of shuttlecraft that would be used on the vessel that attacked Nramia.”

Voyskunsky let out an annoyed breath. “Dorvan’s one of the Cardassian worlds in the DMZ. Captain, if Manolet’s right—”

“And he usually is,” DeSoto added with an appreciative smile at his tactical officer. Dayrit inclined his head in response.

“—then ch’Ren may have crashed his ride here. We’re not reading any other ships in the area—maybe we can use it as a bargaining chip.”

“Let’s hope so.” He sat back down in his chair—it gave him more of a sense of security. Besides, standing was a sign of respect, and DeSoto wasn’t feeling especially respectful for the person responsible for the carnage on Nramia, or the similar carnage the Hood’s sensors were picking up now.

“I’d like to avoid extermination if at all possible, Mr. ch’Ren,” DeSoto said slowly when ch’Ren’s face reappeared on the viewer. “Perhaps we can discuss a solution that is mutually beneficial to us both.”

“I see no reason to negotiate with you.”

“Right now, I’ve got four phaser banks and a dozen photon torpedoes trained on your location. I also have a means of getting you off-planet—we know your shuttle crash-landed. Besides, I’ve read up on your new toy. It has limitations. My guess is that you can’t do any further damage to the planet for a while. Until it recharges, you’re vulnerable. I don’t want to use force, but I will if I have to.”

“Do you expect me to believe that Starfleet would commit murder?”

“Do you expect me to believe that I won’t respond to your threats? You’ve already expressed a willingness to attack my ship—I’ve now expressed my willingness to respond in kind. Still, given a choice I’d rather talk this out like two intelligent beings.” He leaned back. “Of course, within a couple of days, the Vetar will be here, and I can assure you that Gul Evek will stop at nothing to destroy you after what you did to Nramia.”

“Your attempts to frighten me are pointless, Captain,” ch’Ren said in a hiss. “I have no fear of Gul Evek, nor of any other Cardassian. Do not mistake a minor vulnerability for weakness.” A pause. “However, I am willing to meet with you to discuss terms. I will transmit coordinates to you.”

DeSoto looked up at Kojima, who nodded.

“The room where we will meet will be encased in a forcefield that will prevent any communication signals from penetrating. You will not be able to summon reinforcements, nor transport out of the room. You will come alone, Captain. If you send surrogates or bring others, I will destroy your ship. And if you doubt my ability to do so, I challenge you to find the Maquis vessel christened the Geronimo—or, rather, its twisted hulk.”

With that, ch’Ren cut the signal.

Voyskunsky came around to the middle of the bridge to face DeSoto. “You’re not beaming down alone.”

“You heard him, Dina—if I don’t, he attacks. Maybe he was bluffing, maybe he wasn’t. If he’s willing to talk, maybe he isn’t as far over the edge as he looks.”

She frowned. “You shouldn’t put yourself—”

“—in danger, I know. You’re not the first first officer to give me this song and

dance,” DeSoto said, remembering an incident almost a decade earlier on this very same bridge with Lieutenant Commander William T. Riker. “But right now, I don’t have a choice.”

Voyskunsky’s wide lips pursed. “All right, but if you turn up dead, I’m putting you on report, sir.”

DeSoto grinned. “Noted.”

“Do you really think this is the ‘new face’ of the Maquis?”

Shaking his head, DeSoto said, “Doubtful. Especially if he’s telling the truth about the Geronimo. My guess is he’s gone rogue, and is using the Maquis name to make a bigger stink.”

“Sir?” Dayrit said. “I’ve got something.”

Both DeSoto and Voyskunsky walked around to the tactical console. With a pudgy finger, Dayrit pointed at a sensor reading. “I’m reading the forcefield that ch’Ren’s using. It is proof against communications—but not against transporters. The problem is, getting a lock would be difficult. But a standard-issue transponder should be able to penetrate with no problem. If we program it to send a constant low-level signal, I doubt that ch’Ren will pick it up—it should read as background comm traffic, especially with the additional EM activity from all the thunderstorms he’s been cooking up down there.”

DeSoto put a hand on the security chief’s shoulder. “Good work, Manolet. Have one ready for me in Transporter Room 3.”

“Yes, sir,” Dayrit said with a rare smile.

Turning to the ops officer, Voyskunsky said, “José, I want you tracking that transponder signal every second. If anything happens to the signal—it changes, it modulates, and especially if it goes away—beam him out of there immediately.”

“Will do,” Kojima said with a nod.

“Let’s hit it,” DeSoto said. “The bridge is yours, Dina. I hope to be back soon.

I still want a rematch of that Go game.”

Voyskunsky grinned her huge smile. “You’re on, Captain.”

Hudson gathered Chakotay, Tuvok, Mastroeni, Torres, Seska, and McAdams in the mess hall. Tuvok stood against one of the walls by the door, and both Chakotay and Hudson stood with their backs to the rear bulkhead. The other four sat around the largest of the tables. Torres had a padd in her hand, while Mastroeni’s hand hovered near her phaser. Hudson noticed that Mastroeni had made a point of sitting where she could keep an eye on Tuvok.

“Your friend,” Hudson said to Chakotay, “has gone over the edge.”

“And he’s going to take the rest of us with him,” Mastroeni added.

“These two colonies are peaceful—they’re not affiliated with the Federation, Cardassia, or the Maquis. If we let him—”

Chakotay interrupted Hudson. “We’re not going to ‘let’ him do anything. We have to get the artifact back. If we don’t, the Maquis will lose whatever sympathy we have in the Federation. Starfleet and Central Command will come out in force against us.”

Tuvok added, “In addition, such a radical departure from the usual methods will divide the Maquis itself. From what I have seen, the organization is already relatively fractious—in part by design. By committing genocide in the Maquis’s name—”

“We know what’ll happen,” Torres snapped. “Chakotay’s right, we have to get the artifact back.”

Mastroeni shook her head. “The nanosecond we come out from behind this moon, the

Hood' ll be all over us.”

Seska nodded. “She’s right. I for one have no interest in spending the rest of my life in a Federation prison.”

“Actually, we won’t have to leave our hiding place,” Torres said. “I can boost the gain on the transporter so we can get to the surface from here. We’ll have to go down one at a time, but I can do it.”

Chakotay nodded. “Good. Then we can go in, get the artifact, and get out before DeSoto even knows we’re there.”

“Even if he does know we’re there, it won’t matter much,” Seska said. “You heard his deal with Tharia—he’s going down alone. Starfleet captains are usually just stupid enough to actually live up to promises like that.”

Chakotay snorted in what Hudson supposed was agreement, then turned to Torres.

“Have you finished that mini-transponder to put on the artifact?”

Torres nodded. “I made four of them, just in case.” She grinned. “Amazing what you can do with a few solenoid transtators.”

“I have an additional suggestion,” Tuvok said.

“As if we care,” Mastroeni muttered.

Hudson shot Mastroeni a look, then said, “What’s your thought, Tuvok?”

“We do as Captain Chakotay suggests—but turn the artifact over to Captain DeSoto.”

“We’re not giving that thing to Starfleet!” Mastroeni said.

“Starfleet has a general order in place that compels them to confiscate the artifacts. If we take possession of it, then we become a target. The Hood will not leave the Demilitarized Zone until they have completed their mission: to retrieve the artifact.” He turned to Hudson and Chakotay. “In addition, it will show Starfleet that Tharia is, in fact, a rogue who does not speak for the

Maquis as an organization.”

Chakotay looked at Hudson. Unlike Mastroeni—or Torres or Seska, for that matter—Chakotay had, like Hudson, worn a Starfleet uniform. The Federation might have betrayed the people of the DMZ, but Hudson knew that, in some matters, Starfleet could be trusted. Hudson assumed that Chakotay felt the same.

“Much as I hate to admit it, Starfleet’s better equipped to handle that thing than we are,” Chakotay said after a moment. “They’ve already got two of them, and knowing them, they’ll probably dig up the fourth one before long. And frankly—I don’t want it. It’s already turned one of my trusted comrades into a psychotic killing machine. And Tuvok’s right about something else—Tharia’s done tremendous damage to the cause with what he just said to DeSoto. We have to nip that in the bud before the Hood reports back to Starfleet that we’ve all turned into maniacs. I think capturing the artifact and then handing it to DeSoto will accomplish that.” He smiled wryly. “Besides, I get the feeling we may have to rescue the good captain from Tharia before the day is out. Starfleet captains may be stupid sometimes, but they also usually are properly grateful.”

Hudson considered. Then he looked at Mastroeni and McAdams. The latter nodded quickly. “Darleen?” he prompted.

Predictably, she snarled. “I don’t want to do anything to help Starfleet.”

“I don’t see that we have a choice here.”

For the first time since he’d met her, Darleen Mastroeni smiled. “Oh, there’s always a choice, Cal—just a question of making the right one or not.” She then sighed. “All right, fine. We do it this way. I’m in.”

Chakotay gave his own people the same look.

“I’m in,” Torres said with no hesitation.

“We should just destroy the thing,” Seska said.

“It has been attempted,” Tuvok said.

Undaunted, Seska said, “Then I say we attempt it again.”

“And when we fail?” Chakotay asked.

Seska folded her arms. “Then we give it to Starfleet.”

“All right,” Hudson said. “Chakotay and I will beam down, along with Tuvok.” He cut off Mastroeni before she could object. “I know you don’t trust him, Darleen, but he knows these artifacts better than any of us.” He turned to the others.

“We’ll each wear one of Torres’s mini-transponders so she can pick us up again.

The fourth’ll go on the artifact, just in case we need to confiscate it for a while.” Looking at Chakotay, he said, “I want to keep my options open.”

“Agreed. Let’s do it.”

Chapter Eight

THE FIRST TIME CAL HUDSON went through a transporter, he was four years old and he thought it was the most wonderful sensation in the world. One second he was standing on an indoor transporter platform, the next he was in the middle of Central Park in New York City. His father had promised young Cal a ride on the famous carousel, but the four-year-old boy had found the mode of getting to the attraction more exciting. The entire time he sat going around on the artificial horses, he was waiting for it to end so he could go through the transporter again.

In the intervening years, he had tried to keep that same sense of wonder about this mode of travel, though years in Starfleet—where transporters were used almost as often as turbolifts—had dulled it somewhat. Still, he always loved that feeling of moving instantly from one place to another place, watching the world dissolve and re-form.

Beaming down to Slaybis IV from the Liberator, however, was more like watching the world dissolve and then dissolve further.

Rain pelted his face while intense wind slammed into his chest. Instinctively, his right arm went up to protect his eyes. Within seconds, his clothes were soaked through, sticking to his flesh. He was almost afraid to open his mouth to speak.

He squinted under his upheld arm—which was doing precious little to protect his eyes—and saw Chakotay and Tuvok in a similarly bedraggled state.

Just as he was about to scream out if there was shelter nearby, the wind started to die down and the rain lightened.

Hudson lowered his arm. “That Malkus Artifact doesn’t do things halfway, does it?”

Chakotay looked up just as the clouds started to clear. “This is definitely not natural.”

Within seconds, Hudson had to raise his arm again, this time to shield his eyes from the rays of Slaybis that now beat down on its fourth planet’s surface. “I hate to think what this is doing to the planet’s ecosystem.”

“Nothing good, I can tell you that.”

“I just wish Torres could’ve put us down indoors.”

“Look around, Hudson,” Chakotay said, indicating the area with one arm. “There’s not much indoors left.”

Following Chakotay’s gesture, Hudson took stock of his surroundings. He saw no evidence of habitation—whether people were dead or evacuated was impossible to tell—but plenty of evidence of damage. None of the nearby buildings were especially tall, but all were distressed to some degree or other: broken

windows, scarred façades, missing doors and parts of roofs. What especially concerned Hudson were the cracks in many of the buildings' superstructures. Assuming they were constructed from the usual building materials—plastiform, rodimium, and the like—they shouldn't have cracked like that. Yeah, Hudson thought after a second, and the Geronimo's hull shouldn't have buckled from the inside, either.

Chakotay turned to Tuvok, who had taken out his Starfleet tricorder. "Can you get any readings?"

"Give me a moment, please," Tuvok said as he peered down at the instrument. "I'm afraid the tricorder's response time is not what it was."

Hudson smiled, but made no apologies. When Tuvok came on board, Mastroeni had confiscated the tricorder, and wouldn't give it back to the Vulcan until after McAdams had literally taken it apart to look for bugs, transmitters, or anything else that could be used against the Maquis. It turned out to be clean, and McAdams—a moderately skilled tinkerer—had managed to put it back together, but apparently not at one hundred percent.

Sweat was now intermingled with the rainwater on Hudson's brow. Amazingly, there was very little humidity in the air, given the recent precipitation, but the temperature had shot up. Where moments ago he had felt like he was in the tropics during monsoon season, now he felt like he was in the middle of the desert.

"I am not reading any Andorian life signs in the immediate vicinity."

"Damn," Chakotay muttered. "Did he move?"

"Unlikely. I am also not picking up any Starfleet combadges in the vicinity—however, there is other evidence to suggest that both Captain DeSoto and Tharia ch'Ren are present. I am receiving the emissions from the Malkus

Artifact, as well as a low-level signal from a Starfleet transponder. Both are emanating from an area that has no life readings—or any other significant readings of any kind.” He looked up. “The logical deduction would be that Tharia is, as promised, using a forcefield. However, while the forcefield is able to keep out the relatively passive signals generated by bioreadings and combadges, it cannot deter the more active signals of the artifact or the transponder.”

Chakotay nodded. “DeSoto probably brought the transponder so his ship can keep in touch with him. Smart move.”

“Yeah.” Hudson turned to Tuvok. “How far are they?”

“Approximately half a kilometer northwest of here.”

“Let’s get to it, then, before the weather changes again,” Hudson said as he started to walk northwest.

That hope was in vain. Before they’d gone ten meters, the temperature plummeted and the skies clouded up. The sweat and rainwater cooled against Hudson’s skin.

Within two more steps, the snow started.

“I suggest we take shelter until this passes,” Tuvok said.

Hudson started to say that they couldn’t afford to wait, but then the snow reached the intensity level of the rain—as did the wind. He also found that he couldn’t speak because his teeth were chattering. So instead he simply ran toward the closest structure: what looked like a residential building.

The front door slid open about halfway, then made a screeching noise.

“The metal has been warped,” Tuvok said.

“G-g-get ins-side,” Hudson said, squeezing between the door and its frame.

Chakotay and Tuvok did likewise—both were smaller of build than Hudson, so they had an easier time of it—and then the door shut. The building’s lobby was a

utilitarian affair: a square room with walls painted beige. The back wall was lined with a series of turbolifts; a few hideous paintings sat dolefully on the two side walls, broken only by a computer interface that no doubt allowed visitors to communicate with residents. A plush beige carpet took up the entire floor. Hudson decided it was the most boring room he'd ever been in.

"W-wish we'd beamed down a medikit," Hudson said, trying to warm himself with his arms and failing miserably. His hair felt odd—no doubt the water there from the rain had frozen into ice—and his skin felt like one giant goose bump. "We'll get pneumonia at this rate."

Tuvok checked his tricorder. "It is a possibility—unfortunately, this is not a medical tricorder."

Nodding, Hudson turned to Chakotay. "Have you given any thought to what we might have to do today?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," he replied stoically, not looking at Hudson.

"Yes, you do."

"All right, so maybe I do," Chakotay snapped, turning toward Hudson, his jaw set. "If I have to, I'll kill him, but I'd like to avoid it if I can."

"I know that," Hudson said, grateful that he was now warm enough that he could talk normally without forcing himself to enunciate without stuttering from the shivers. "But it's never easy to take up arms against your comrades—or your friends." He hesitated. "Last year, right after we started the Maquis, I had to face off against my oldest friend—my best friend. He was in a runabout, I was in the Liberator—and I realized that I might be put in a position where I'd have to kill my friend."

"What happened?"

Chuckling, Hudson said, "Actually, it was never an issue. Ben won the fight. I

was in bad shape, turning tail and running.” Hudson looked at Chakotay. “The funny thing is, Ben did have the opportunity to fire on me. He could’ve disabled me, destroyed me—but he let me go. He faced the test and couldn’t do it. Funny thing is, I wasn’t sure I would’ve done the same thing in his place.”

“There’s a big difference,” Chakotay said. “I assume that ‘Ben’ is Commander Sisko of Deep Space 9?”

Hudson nodded.

“He’s not a freedom fighter—he’s just a soldier. He was doing his job, nothing more. You were fighting for a cause.” He smiled. “Besides, Starfleet’s always been big on the lost cause. There’s no problem they can’t solve—so they let you live, because they think you can be ‘cured.’” Chakotay sighed. “I wish they were right, most of the time.”

Hudson found he had nothing to add to that, so he turned to the Vulcan. “You picking up any life signs in the building?”

“Negative.”

“Hm.” He walked over to the computer interface, his clothes and hair dripping water onto the carpet. He touched the black surface, and it lit up.

“Computer, was this building evacuated?”

“Please identify yourself.”

“Calvin Hudson. I’m a visitor to Slaybis IV.”

There was a pause while that information was processed. “The municipality of Slaybis Central is in a state of emergency. All citizens have been evacuated. Your presence in this building is unauthorized. Please depart immediately or this unit will alert Law Enforcement.”

Tuvok looked up. “The temperature is once again rising, and the snow has

stopped. I would suggest that we follow the computer's directive.”

“Yeah.” As Hudson moved toward the door, he pointed at Chakotay's phaser. “Let's hope you won't need to use that—or make that choice.”

The door to the building didn't open any further than it had before, but they managed to get through. At least now they knew why the capital city—Slaybis Central? What bureaucrat thought that was a good name for a town? he wondered—seemed like a ghost town: it was.

Again, the heat of the sun bore down on the city streets, melting the snow that had already started to accumulate. Now, however, the humidity had not died down.

“This,” Hudson said, “is getting tiresome.”

“Isn't there an old joke about how if you don't like the weather, wait five minutes?” Chakotay said with a small smile.

“The quote is often attributed to a human author named Samuel Clemens, who wrote under the name Mark Twain,” Tuvok said without hesitating. “It was an attempt to humorously convey the inconsistent weather patterns of San Francisco—illogical, as that city has an unusually even climate for an Earth city.”

“Twain was big on illogic,” Hudson said with a grin. “C'mon, let's move.”

Why are you talking? You must destroy!

“Get out of my head,” Tharia muttered.

“Excuse me?” the Starfleet captain said, a frown on his face.

“Nothing,” Tharia said quickly. “There is nothing to say.”

“Then why am I here?”

“Not—never mind.”

Tharia started pacing across the room. The device continued to whisper in his mind. But he was having doubts.

It had all seemed so sensible at first. The Cardassians had to die, he knew that now —knew it, with a clarity he'd never had regarding anything in his life.

From there, he knew that all the traitors had to die: Chakotay and his stupid limitations, Elois Phifer—whose corpse he had been sure to identify—for betraying them, the people of Slaybis IV—

Why did they have to die?

Everyone must die. They must all pay for letting your mates die.

Tharia had been sure of that. At first.

No, more than sure. Certain. He had no regrets about what he did on Nramia.

...bodies broken, lying in the street...

(Don't think about it.)

Nor did he regret what he did to Chakotay and the others. They deserved it for trying to stop him. Chakotay upbraiding him—Seska actually criticizing him for killing Cardassians! And her a Bajoran, how could she do that?

But the people of Slaybis IV. Not to mention those farmers on Slaybis II, where he planned to go next. What of them?

What of them? Just think about revenge. That's all that matters.

“Yes. Revenge—it's all that matters.”

“Revenge against who, Mr. ch'Ren?”

Tharia looked up suddenly. He had actually forgotten about the Earther captain.

What was his name? Whoever he was, he had come and asked to talk—the alternative was for them to fire on him and kill him and destroy his gift.

They can't destroy me. Every method was attempted to destroy me. They failed. I am indestructible. Nothing can stop me.

“The Cardassians,” Tharia said, trying to ignore the voice. “They killed my

mates—took our land, betrayed us at every turn. They have to be stopped, Captain. All of them must pay for what they've done.”

“I can understand your feelings, Mr. ch'Ren, but—there aren't any Cardassians here.”

“No, no, there was something worse than a Cardassian here—there was a traitor. Phifer claimed to be one of us, but he betrayed our cause. He needed to be stopped, don't you understand? It's because of traitors like him that the Cardassians felt free to destroy our home! Athmin, Ushra, Shers—they're all dead because of them!”

“I understand your anger,” the captain said in a maddeningly calm voice—as calm as Chakotay had been when he dared to criticize Tharia on the Geronimo. “But there are thousands on this planet who did not betray you. They're civilians. They're not a part of this.”

He's lying. Don't listen to him. He must die with the others.

“No—no, you don't deserve to die, Captain.”

The captain half-smiled. “I'm relieved to hear that. Especially since I'm the only way you can get off this world.”

Tharia frowned. “Don't be insane. I've a ship.”

“Not anymore you don't.” The Earther gave him a quizzical look. “It was destroyed. Don't you remember?”

“We landed without incident, Captain. I will tolerate no more lies from you!”

“I haven't lied,” the Earther said quickly. “Check for yourself—the shuttle you came down on was wrecked.”

He is lying. Kill him.

Ignoring the voice, Tharia went to the computer from which he had contacted the Earther's ship earlier. He ordered the sensors to train in on the area where his

shuttle had landed.

His antennae stood up straight on his head. A building had collapsed nearby—no doubt the victim of Tharia’s own doings with the gift as he had used it to wreak havoc on this world as he had on Nramia—and horribly damaged the shuttle some time after he had taken over this building.

Tharia was no engineer. He could operate a computer with the best of them, make it do whatever he wanted it to, but he had no skill with actually putting the pieces together. That was B’Elanna’s job.

But B’Elanna was probably dead now, destroyed with the Geronimo.

He was trapped here.

No. You can go anywhere you want, be anything you want. I can help you achieve your goal.

“It seems you’re right, Captain. What do you propose?”

No! Do not negotiate! Kill him now! You can take his ship!

The Earther said, “If you turn yourself and the artifact over to us, I’ll make sure that you get a fair trial.”

“I can’t do that. The Cardassians must—must be—be destroyed.” Yes, they must be destroyed. “I can’t allow you to take my gift from me.” Together, we will achieve your goals.

“But there aren’t any Cardassians!” the Earther said. “And you have no way of getting off this world.”

“Yes, I do, Captain.” Of course. It all made sense again. This Earther had to die so Tharia could take over his ship. It was simple. Why didn’t he see it before?

Together, we will triumph.

Tharia unholstered his phaser.

“Drop it, Tharia.”

Whirling around, Tharia saw Chakotay, along with two others, an Earther and a Vulcan, whom he did not recognize. In fact, he barely recognized Chakotay—his clothes were in disarray, his hair was wet and sticking out in all directions, and he had mud smudged on his face. He was also pointing a phaser at Tharia, as was the other Earther. The Vulcan only had a tricorder.

“You’re dead,” Tharia said. “You can’t be real, I killed you.”

“Not quite.”

The Earther captain stepped forward. “Who are you?”

“My name is Chakotay, Captain DeSoto. Tharia’s my problem, not yours. Your best bet is to stay out of this.”

Smiling, the Earther said, “It became my problem the minute your friend started killing people. I can’t just walk away from that.”

“Shut up, all of you!” Tharia cried. He pointed his phaser at Chakotay. “Why aren’t you dead?”

The other Earther said, “I saved him.”

“Now we want to save you,” Chakotay said. “The artifact changed you, Tharia.

Turned you into something you aren’t. I know you—you’d never kill indiscriminately like that. You’d certainly never leave your comrades for dead.”

He stepped forward. “You have to let that thing go.”

Don’t listen to him. He just wants me for himself.

“Shut up! You’re not real!” Tharia himself was not sure to whom he directed the comment—the gift or the shade of Chakotay.

If shade it truly was. It was possible that the Geronimo was rescued. Yes, of course it was.

No! Kill him! Kill him now, before it's too late!

Thunder rumbled, shaking the building. The room they were in had no windows, but Tharia could hear the rain now pounding against the transparent aluminum of the windows in the outer rooms.

Tharia mentally instructed the gift to lighten up the rainstorm. He needed to think, and this noise wasn't helping.

The rain did not let up. In fact, it grew louder. The next wave of thunder was intense enough to knock all five people in the room to the floor.

"Stop it!" Tharia cried. "I command you to stop!"

"You don't give me orders, Tharia," Chakotay said.

"Not you!"

The Earther captain's face fell. "He's lost control of it."

If you will not do what needs to be done, I will do it instead.

Tharia screamed. "No! You will obey me! You're mine to command!"

"Chakotay," the other Earther said in a tone that sounded like a warning.

"Dammit, Tharia, stop doing this," Chakotay said.

"I'm not doing anything," Tharia said, running to the back of the room. He threw open a cabinet that was lodged under the computer console to reveal the gift. It still glowed green. "You have to stop doing this!"

...

"Why won't you obey me?"

...

It took Tharia a moment to realize the truth—the gift had gone silent. Whether he had lost control or not didn't matter. It had been taken away from him.

Just as Athmin, Ushra, and Shers were taken away from him.

Just as his life was taken away from him.

“Step away from it, Tharia.”

The building shook again, but this time it wasn't just from thunder outside—it was from lightning inside. A bolt smashed through the ceiling and struck the floor not two meters from where Tharia stood.

The noise from the accompanying thunder was deafening. Tharia could feel the increase in EM activity in his antennae. The noise from both filled his very being.

He looked over at the Earther captain, who had stumbled to the floor.

Then he looked over at the other three—the ones with Chakotay were fellow Maquis, probably. One of them—the Earther he didn't know—was on the ground, a wound in his head. The Vulcan had maintained his footing.

Chakotay was struggling to get up.

Rain started to pour in through the hole the lightning had made in the ceiling.

Tharia stared at Chakotay. His captain. His friend. His comrade.

His recruiter. The one who had convinced him to join his cell.

The one who told him he could get his revenge on the Cardassians by joining the Maquis.

If it hadn't been for the Maquis, this would never have happened.

The Cardassians attacked Beaulieu's World because of the growing threat from the Maquis.

Athmin, Ushra, and Shers died because of the Maquis.

Tharia found the artifact because of the Maquis.

Because of Chakotay.

“Because of you!” he cried, and fired his phaser at his erstwhile captain.

He fired again. And screamed again. And fired again. And kept firing and

screaming. He had no idea if he hit anything or anyone, he just kept firing.

It all made sense now. There was only one way to make everything right. Only one way to end all the pain, all the suffering, all the death.

For the first time, he realized the truth—the real truth. Everyone didn't need to die to avenge his mates. He didn't need to join the Maquis.

For the last time, he fired his phaser.

But this time, he had it pointed at his own chest.

Still, he kept screaming for as long as he could.

He no longer felt the rain on his chest, even though he felt the pain of the phaser hit. His antennae and ears had both fallen silent. He could no longer hear his own screams.

The one thing he could feel was his sense that at last—after doing so many things wrong—he had done the right thing.

I should have died with them was his final thought before he found he could no longer see, either.

And in his mind, he could hear screams, but they were not his own. . . .

DeSoto stood upright and straightened his uniform. Well, this has been something less than a howling success. While he had been grateful for the arrival of Tuvok, Hudson, and the other one—since ch'Ren seemed likely to shoot DeSoto—things deteriorated pretty quickly.

He looked across the room to see rain pounding in from a hole in the ceiling.

Ch'Ren, Hudson, and the third Maquis were all on the ground, getting progressively wetter. The Andorian looked dead. Hudson had a gash on his head that probably had rendered him senseless, and the other Maquis looked like he'd

taken a phaser hit as well. Both humans' chests were rising and falling, at least.

That left DeSoto and Tuvok. Neither of them were armed—DeSoto had come down unarmed, per ch'Ren's instruction, and Tuvok no doubt hadn't earned enough of the Maquis's trust for them to issue him a weapon.

"Good work, Mr. Tuvok," DeSoto said. The captain noted that the Vulcan was moving closer to the cabinet that held the artifact. "Uh, what, exactly, are you doing?"

"Ensuring our safety." He seemed to toss something at the artifact.

DeSoto didn't like the sound of that. "Whose safety?"

"That of the Maquis, of course."

"The Maquis?" DeSoto really didn't like the sound of that. "Don't tell me you've actually gone over to these traitors? How could you, of all people, do such a thing?"

"I respectfully submit, Captain, that you do not know me well enough to make such a judgment of my character."

"We'll discuss this later. Right now, I'm taking you, your new friends, and the artifact back to the Hood. You'll all be taken into custody." DeSoto started to move closer to Tuvok ever so slowly—and also toward Hudson's weapon, which lay on the floor about two meters from where the former Starfleet officer had fallen.

"I cannot allow that, Captain. You are welcome to take the artifact—it is too dangerous to be allowed in the hands of any but the researchers at the Rector Institute. But you will not take us in."

DeSoto knew that Tuvok was much closer to ch'Ren's weapon than he himself was to Hudson's—and that Tuvok was a Vulcan, and therefore much faster than a human.

But words were not going to win this conversation; Tuvok had either truly gone over to the Maquis, or was making far too good a show of his infiltration.

Either way, DeSoto couldn't take any chances.

"Watch me," he said, and then suddenly dove toward the weapon, grabbed it, and rolled over. The idea was to then rise to his feet on the upward roll, but he wasn't as young as he once was, and he stumbled twice as he rose.

He found himself facing the barrel of ch'Ren's phaser, held by Tuvok.

"It was worth a shot," DeSoto said with a smile. "So now what, Mr. Tuvok? You shoot me?"

Tuvok looked down at the floor. "That won't be necessary."

DeSoto couldn't help but follow Tuvok's gaze, especially once the Vulcan pointed his phaser at the same spot on the floor.

He saw his transponder about twenty centimeters from his foot. DeSoto had placed it in his boot, but it obviously had dislodged when he rolled over to pick up the phaser.

Oh, crap.

Tuvok fired at the transponder. It disintegrated in an instant.

For the first time, DeSoto cursed his crew's efficiency. Not a second later, he felt the familiar tinge of a transporter beam as José Kojima—reading the destruction of the transponder—followed orders and had the transporter room lock on to where the transponder had been and beam anything there up.

In less time than it took him to complete the realization that he was being transported, he found himself on the Hood's bridge. Voyskunsky got up from the command chair just as he yelled, "Beam me back!"

"What happened?" Voyskunsky asked.

“I’ll explain later.” DeSoto was yelling. Of all the times... “Beam me back, now!”

Kojima said, “Sir, the Malkus Artifact emissions have disappeared from the surface.”

DeSoto blinked. “Dammit. Pick it up, José.”

“Trying, sir.”

Voyskunsky smiled her toothy smile. “Still want to beam back down?”

Glowing at her, DeSoto said, “You’re between me and my chair.”

“Mine ’umblest apologies, sir,” she said, stepping aside and indicating the command chair with a flourish.

As he sat down, DeSoto said, “Manolet, can you get a life-sign reading from where I was beamed out?”

Dayrit shook his head. “Not reading anything, sir. The forcefield’s down, by the way—but there are no indications of life.” A pause. “We’re being hailed.”

DeSoto frowned. “By who?”

“It’s a ship in orbit of the third moon—they’re just coming into sensor range.”

“Sir,” Kojima said, “I’ve picked up the artifact—it’s now in orbit around the planet’s third moon.”

Voyskunsky let out a breath. “Gee, I wonder who they could be.”

“Baifang, intercept course for that ship, half impulse,” DeSoto said in a tight voice.

“Aye, sir.”

“Shields up, red alert, all hands to battle stations. Arm phasers and load torpedo bays. Can you identify them, Manolet?”

As the bridge was plunged into red lights and the alert klaxon started to sound, Dayrit said, “Configuration matches one of the ships that engaged Commander

Sisko and his forces at Bryma last year.”

DeSoto nodded. “Hudson. He was one of the Maquis I met down there, along with another human—and Tuvok.” He sighed. “Put the Maquis on screen.”

To DeSoto’s complete lack of surprise, Tuvok’s face appeared on the viewer. He appeared to be standing in a mess hall that looked fairly generic. No one else was with him—a wise precaution, as it meant that no one aside from Hudson and that other human could be identified. “My apologies for forcing your exit, Captain, but I could not allow you to take me or my allies into custody.”

“‘Allies,’ huh?”

“I would have thought, Captain, that my theft of the Manhattan made my intentions clear enough. Since it has not, let me officially tender my resignation now. I am a member of the Maquis.”

“Good. That’s another charge I can add when I arrest you. We in range, Manolet?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Fire phasers on the Maquis ship.”

Two seconds passed, and no phasers fired. “Sir, I’ve lost weapons control. And shields are going down!” Dayrit slammed his hand against the console. “Dammit! I’ve been cut off.”

Hsu said, “I’ve lost helm control.”

“Internal and short-range sensors functioning,” Kojima said, “but long-range is offline.”

“Again, my apologies, Captain,” Tuvok said. “It would have been wise to change the Hood’s prefix codes after my departure.”

DeSoto gritted his teeth. They hadn’t changed them because they hadn’t expected Tuvok to use that knowledge against them, or give it to the Maquis.

“Something’s being transported into Cargo Bay 2,” Kojima said. “Sensors are reading an explosive device!”

Dayrit tapped his combadge. “Security to Cargo Bay 2.”

“Is anybody in there?” Voyskunsky asked.

Kojima shook his head. “No, the bay’s empty.” Then an alarm sounded. “Explosion in Cargo Bay 2! Hull has been breached; forcefields sealing it off. And sir—now I’m picking up the Malkus Artifact in the cargo bay.”

“I attached a small explosive to the artifact, Captain,” Tuvok said. “I told you that Starfleet was welcome to the Malkus Artifact. That was the truth. Tharia ch’Ren did not speak for the Maquis. We have no interest in attacking civilian targets such as the two planets in the Slaybis system—or Nramia, for that matter. Nor do we have any interest in a weapon that would have such a corrupting influence.”

“You expect us to just let you go?” DeSoto said.

“Yes, sir, I do. Going to warp with a hull breach would be ill advised.”

Hsu turned to look at DeSoto. “They’re moving out of orbit, preparing to go to warp.”

“Czierniewski to bridge. I’m negating the override of the prefix codes.”

“They’re going to warp,” Hsu said.

Voyskunsky shook her head. “Too damn late.”

Tuvok said, “I suggest you examine the artifact, Captain. You may find it educational. Tuvok out.”

The Vulcan’s face disappeared from the viewer, replaced by the Maquis ship, which went into warp.

“Czierniewski to bridge. You should have full functions now.”

“Helm control active,” Hsu said.

Kojima added, "I've got long-range."

Voyskunsky waked around to the ops console. "Can you pick the Maquis up?"

He shook his head. "They're not on the same heading."

DeSoto sighed. "They beat us."

Bitterly, Dayrit said, "Tuvok beat us."

Voyskunsky raised an eyebrow. "I'm not sure he did. He went out of his way not to do any permanent damage to us. He had access to our systems, so he knew Cargo Bay 2 would be empty. He did enough damage to keep us from going to warp after him, but that's it. And he did all of it while consolidating his cover, because I'm sure that right now his Maquis buddies think he's the bee's knees."

Dayrit said, "Commander, they'd also think that if he really did join them."

"There's one way to find out," DeSoto said, standing suddenly. "Tuvok specifically told me to check out the artifact. Has your security team reported, Manolet?"

Checking his status board, Dayrit said, "Yes, sir. The cargo bay's secure—and there's a black box sitting on the deck near the hole in the wall."

"Good. You have the bridge. C'mon, Dina," DeSoto said, moving toward the turbolift. "Let's see if he really did leave us a message."

Within minutes, they arrived in the cargo bay. DeSoto tried not to look at the big hole in the hull that made it look like the bay was exposed to space. Right now, a forcefield was all that kept that look from being the truth.

Two of Dayrit's people, Weiss and Hayat, were also present, going over the room with tricorders.

Weiss said, "It's all secure, sir—but, uh, there's something attached to the artifact."

“Looks like some kind of mini-transponder,” Hayat added.

“Is that what it is?” Weiss frowned. “I’m reading a solenoid transtator. Who the hell still uses transtators?”

Voyskunsky’s wide smile split her face. “Maquis who have to scrounge for parts.”

She knelt down by the artifact and found a small, flat, circular object no more than a centimeter in diameter. It came off the black box with no difficulty.

Hayat’s eyes widened. “I’m reading an ODN chip in there.”

“How much you want to bet that’s Tuvok’s message?” Voyskunsky said with her trademark smile.

DeSoto returned the smile. “No bet.”

As they turned to leave, the artifact suddenly gave off a brief discharge of green light. DeSoto had to blink spots out of his eyes. “Report,” he quickly said.

Both Weiss and Hayat examined their tricorders. “No indication of anything harmful, Captain,” Weiss said.

“But the artifact’s now reading inert,” Hayat added.

Voyskunsky indicated the artifact with an inclination of her head. “Look, it’s not glowing anymore, either. Just a plain black box.” She scratched her chin.

“Come to think of it, I think the same thing happened to the other two after they were separated from their users. But there wasn’t anything in the records about ill effects suffered by the people involved with their mission.”

Blowing out a breath, DeSoto said, “Probably just some kind of shutdown procedure.” To the security guards, he said, “Stow that thing somewhere safe.”

Then, to his first officer, he said, “C’mon, Dina, let’s see what Mr. Tuvok has to say.”

Chapter Nine

CAL HUDSON FOUND CHAKOTAY SITTING in the mess hall of the Liberator. He was nursing a cup of tea that had gone cold and staring at the bulkhead. Hudson was standing halfway across the room from him, but he could smell the dirt and grime on his clothing even from there.

“I’ve gotten a request from the crew, Chakotay,” Hudson said after a moment.

“They’ve asked me to drag you—kicking and screaming, if necessary—to the cargo deck so you can get out a change of clothes.”

Chakotay shook his head, as if coming out of a daze, and looked over at Hudson.

“I’m sorry?”

“Your clothes, Chakotay. You haven’t changed since we beamed up from Slaybis.

And, after the multiple weather offerings we got, the ones you’re wearing are pretty ripe. People want to eat in here, but thanks to you, they walk right out with a lost appetite.”

“I’m—I’m sorry, I’ll change, of course. It, ah—it hasn’t been at the top of my list.”

Hudson smiled. “Wasn’t at the top of mine, either. But then, I was unconscious. Last thing I remember was a piece of wall falling on my head—then I’m lying on my bunk with a bandage on my head.” His hand involuntarily went up to the electronic bandage that still sat over the wound the debris had made when the lightning had shattered part of the building on Slaybis.

“That’s a better excuse than mine,” Chakotay said with a small smile.

“I’m not so sure about that. I assume you’re thinking about Tharia.”

Chakotay snorted. “Gee, how’d you guess?”

Deciding to brave the olfactory gauntlet, Hudson walked across the mess hall and sat across from Chakotay. The smell was almost overpowering, and Hudson wondered

how Chakotay could stand it.

“I keep going over what happened in my head,” Chakotay said, “trying to figure out some way I could’ve changed things. If I’d just stunned him as soon as we walked in the door—”

“And if you’d missed?”

“Then I’d have fired again.” Chakotay went to take a sip of his tea, realized it was cold, then put it back down. “We could’ve stopped him.”

“And when he woke up?”

“I don’t know, but he didn’t have to—” Chakotay cut himself off. “I’m sick of death, Hudson. Every time I turn around, I see people dying—more to the point, family dying. My family on Trebus, Tharia’s family on Beaulieu’s, hell, even Tuvok’s family on Amniphon. And it’s only going to get worse.”

Hudson nodded. “I know. I lost my wife, Gretchen, not long ago—not to the Cardassians,” he added quickly, “but—well, I wonder sometimes if I would’ve done what I did if she were still alive.”

Chakotay stood up just as the door to the mess hall opened again. “We should’ve been able to save him.”

“Perhaps,” said the new arrival: Tuvok. “But we were not. It is illogical to dwell on that which we cannot change.”

“Maybe, Tuvok,” Chakotay said, “but it’s just as illogical to ignore the past when you can learn from it.”

“True. However, my concern is not with the past, but with the future.”

Smiling, Hudson said, “You want to know if we’re going to let you join or shoot you down where you stand?”

“I had assumed the second alternative to be somewhat less dramatic than you describe, but you are essentially correct.”

Hudson had, in fact, been considering that very thing since he woke up. The Liberator was currently on course to the Badlands in order to make sure that they had truly shaken the Hood; then it would proceed to a Maquis safe house to off-load Chakotay's people. Torres had made noises about having to scrounge for another ship, but her grumbling had been good-natured—she seemed to enjoy the challenges of taking clapped-out old ships and making them work. Of course, Mastroeni hadn't stopped her attempts to recruit the half-Klingon woman, but Torres was apparently having none of it.

That left the question of what to do with their apparent new recruit.

"We can't deny," Hudson said after a moment, "that you kept your word—and you definitely fought for our side."

"He and DeSoto were in the room alone together. That was a perfect opportunity to turn both of us in, and he didn't take it. Instead, he did everything he could to make sure we got away from the Hood safely—and gave them that damned artifact while he was at it." Chakotay gave a lopsided smile. "It's not like Starfleet isn't chomping at the bit to get both of us into a prison cell, after all. They tend to get self-righteous about people who 'betray the uniform.'"

"Betray, hell," Hudson said, his expression sour. "I've done more to uphold what Starfleet's supposed to stand for since I joined the Maquis than I ever did as one of their officers."

"It is my hope," Tuvok said in a quiet voice, "to do likewise."

"I hope so, Mr. Tuvok, because unless Captain Chakotay here has an objection, I think you'd be a welcome addition to the ranks."

Chakotay shook his head. "No objections here. In fact, I'd like to offer you a place with me. After all, I—" His voice caught. "I just lost a hand at

operations, and I think it'd be nice to have someone in that position who was less—volatile than he was.” He turned to Hudson. “Unless you have any objections?”

“No, that’s fine. I don’t really have an open slot here—in fact, I’m looking forward to getting you people off here so we have some space again—and I don’t think Darleen’s ready to serve with our Mr. Tuvok just yet.”

Tuvok nodded. “I would tend to agree. Therefore, Captain Chakotay, I accept your offer.”

“Bridge to Hudson,” said Mastroeni’s voice over the intercom. “We’re entering the Badlands. Still no sign of pursuit.”

“Good. I’ll be right up.” He turned to Chakotay. “Speaking of space—will you please go change your clothes so people don’t have to stand three meters away from you?”

Tuvok added with as much emphasis as he was ever likely to use, “A most apt suggestion.”

Laughing, Chakotay said, “Fine, fine, I’m going.” He moved toward the door, then stopped and turned around. “By the way, when we make it to the safe house, I want to have a service for Tharia. I think it’s the least we can do. Will you join us?”

“Of course,” Hudson said.

“Thank you.” With that, Chakotay left. Hudson’s nose was relieved.

He turned to the Vulcan. “You realize there’s no going back, Mr. Tuvok.”

“I can assure you, Mr. Hudson, I am fully cognizant of the consequences of what I have done today. The only regret I have is that we were not able to save Mr. Ch’Ren. In retrospect, I should have realized that suicide was a danger. The first person to find the artifact also took her own life when confronted with

the possibility of capture.”

“Even if you had anticipated it, I doubt we’d have been able to get the phaser out of Tharia’s hands before he turned it on himself. Don’t tell me you’re having the same doubts as Chakotay?”

Tuvok’s eyebrow raised. “Doubts? No. As I said, it was merely a regret. And, as I told Captain Chakotay, dwelling on regrets is illogical. If you will excuse me, Mr. Hudson.”

“Of course,” Hudson said.

That man’s going to make an interesting Maquis, Hudson thought.

Captain DeSoto had already watched Tuvok’s recording, so he instead watched Kathryn Janeway’s reaction as she watched it.

They sat in the conference lounge on the Hood, the latter ship having returned to Sector 001 after a quick and fruitless search for the Maquis ship. Voyager had made it safely back to Utopia Planitia and was now undergoing repairs.

Janeway had taken a shuttle to rendezvous with the Hood at Earth, where

Voyskunsky, Dayrit, and a security detail had been tasked with delivering the

Malkus Artifact to the Rector Institute. In addition, Admiral Nechayev had sent

a sufficiently edited account of the mission to Gul Evек, thus keeping the

Federation’s side of the bargain that allowed the Hood access to the DMZ.

Tuvok’s message was being delivered in the corner of what appeared to be a cargo

bay. “While it is true that there would be short-term benefits in turning

Lieutenant Commanders Hudson and Chakotay over to Starfleet, it is my opinion

that more information on the Maquis can be gathered in a long-term infiltration

than any attempt at questioning the lieutenant commanders—who would not, I

believe, part with any useful intelligence. In addition, with the death of Lieutenant Phifer, we have lost a long-term operative. I am the logical replacement for him, especially given the level of trust that I believe I have engendered with the Maquis. I will attempt to make regular communications to Deep Space 9 to apprise Starfleet of my progress. Lieutenant Tuvok out.”

Janeway smiled and shook her head as Tuvok’s face faded from the screen.

“Typical.”

“What?” DeSoto asked.

“All of it. Everything Tuvok does is proper and logical—even by Vulcan standards. Notice how he referred to Hudson and Chakotay by the rank they each had when they quit Starfleet? Not to mention calling himself ‘Lieutenant Tuvok.’

That’s his way of reassuring us—or me, at least—that he hasn’t abandoned us.”

“Either that or he’s putting up a very good front.”

Shaking her head, Janeway said, “No chance of that, Captain.”

“Please,” DeSoto said, “it’s Bob. After over ten years in the center seat, I’ve gotten sick of the word ‘captain.’”

“All right, Bob,” she said with a small smile. DeSoto noticed that the smile didn’t change her face all that much—Janeway always seemed to be alert, her eyes always probing. “And I’m Kathryn.”

“Not Kate?” he said with a smile.

The smile widened, and this time it did change her face to a mischievously vicious expression. “Not twice.”

“Kathryn it is.”

“In any case, Bob, I’ve known Tuvok for a long time—he wouldn’t betray the uniform.”

DeSoto leaned back. “I hope you’re right. ’Cause I gotta tell you, he certainly

had me fooled.”

“Then he’s doing his job right,” Janeway said. “In any case, thank you for showing me this. Once Voyager’ 'sback up and running, Tuvok should have gathered enough intel to make the mission a success. Then we can start solving the Maquis problem once and for all.”

Remembering the chaos on Slaybis IV, DeSoto said, “I hope so, Kathryn. I truly hope so. This whole mess has gone on too long as it is.” He smiled. “When are you due back?”

“Tomorrow.”

“In that case, can I interest you in a tour of the ship—maybe some coffee, a meal, even a friendly game of Go?”

Janeway laughed. “Nice try, Bob, but I’m not about to get hustled by a champion Go player. Besides, I haven’t played in years. And even at my best, I wouldn’t stand a chance against you.”

Shrugging, DeSoto said, “Well, you can’t blame a guy for trying.”

“Besides,” Janeway said, standing up, “since I am back on Earth, there’s someone I have to go see.”

DeSoto recognized the glint in Janeway’s eye. He saw it in the mirror every time he was able to get back to the Rigel colonies where his wife lived. Also rising from his chair, he offered his hand. “Well, have fun, Kathryn. Once my people report back, we’re going to be heading off to Starbase 96 in order to take some supplies to Brackin’s Planet. But I hope to get some progress reports from you on how Mr. Tuvok’s doing.”

Accepting DeSoto’s handshake vigorously, Janeway said, “I’ll do my best. Oh, and say hi to Commander Ju’les for me when you reach the starbase.”

“I will.”

With that, Janeway departed the lounge. DeSoto sighed. I was really hoping to get her into a game of Go. Need to find someone besides Dina to go up against...

Dina Voyskunsky returned to her quarters after she and the security team had beamed back up from Earth. The people at the Rector Institute had been thrilled to see them—except, of course, for the wizened old Vulcan woman T’Ramir, who simply nodded. She had apparently been studying the Zalkat Union all her life, and had been trying (mostly in vain) to learn more about the Malkus Artifacts since the first one was brought back to Earth by the Enterprise a century earlier.

Voyskunsky had hoped to visit her aunt Irina in Estonia before they had to ship out again, but she only had time to send a quick message. Dayrit had expressed a similar regret regarding his sister in the Philippines.

As she entered, she asked the computer for any personal messages. She was off duty, so any official communiqués could wait.

“You have two personal correspondences. One from Irina Voyskunsky and one from Lieutenant Commander Aaron Cavit.”

She blinked. Then she smiled and sat down at her desk. “Put the message from Commander Cavit on screen.”

“Dina, it’s Aaron.” The look on Cavit’s face was one Voyskunsky hadn’t seen in a very long time: contrition. “Look, I’m sorry about how I behaved. I wasn’t expecting to see you again, and I—” He hesitated. “You were right, it was my fault. I’m the one who got cold feet on Pacifica. I guess I just wasn’t ready to deal with what it might mean for both of us, for our careers, if we kept going the way we were going and good God, listen to me, will you?” He suddenly burst

into a smile. “I’ve been in bad holonovels that weren’t this overdramatic. Let me try that again.” He looked right at the viewer. “I’m sorry. I made a mistake. Forgive me.” The smile came back. “How’s that?”

“Better than whining,” Voyskunsky muttered with a smile.

“Unfortunately, I’m stuck at Utopia Planitia for at least a few more weeks, and my sources tell me the Hood’s off to Starbase 96. And once we’re done here, we’ll be off to the Badlands to ferret out the Maquis. But once that’s done, I’ve got some leave time coming. The way these things usually go, it probably won’t be for another month or three, but maybe we can get together—on Pacifica or somewhere else—and see if we can make up for lost time.” He grinned, a facial expression she wouldn’t have credited him with being capable of based on his last visit. “Or, failing that, at least catch up on the last twelve years. I seem to recall your being an excellent dinner companion. What do you say? Let me know. I’ll be on Mars for quite some time.”

The screen went blank.

Voyskunsky stared at it for several seconds.

Part of her was sorely tempted not to respond. Let him twist in the wind the way I did on Pacifica. Three days I waited for him to show up...

Then she decided that she was too old for such pranks. Besides, much as she hated to admit it, she missed Aaron Cavit, and wouldn’t mind finding out what he’d been up to.

“Computer, reply to message from Lieutenant Commander Cavit. Simple text message: It’s a date.”

Aidulac piloted the Sun through the Demilitarized Zone.

For the third time, she had failed. Again, Starfleet had managed to get there before her. She had no idea how or why the Hood had been able to enter the DMZ unmolested, but there it was.

At least her biggest fear—that the people who found the Instruments would use them to re-create Malkus's tyranny—were unfounded. Starfleet had, at least, managed to confiscate the Instruments before the damage they did was too extensive. Given the number of people Malkus killed during his reign, the paltry few who died on Alpha Proxima II, Bajor's moon, Nramia, and Slaybis IV were minor.

Still, the most dangerous Instrument was still out there. Somewhere. And Aidulac was quite sure that the last would prove to be by far the most dangerous.

Especially if her suspicions were true.

The one thing that was different this time was that the Instrument had been moved from where it was found. She had never been able to examine the sites on Proxima or the Bajoran moon.

But she was able to backtrack to where, precisely, the Maquis had found the third Instrument—a moon surrounding a gas giant in the Grovran system.

The Sun pulled into orbit around the moon. Her scanners showed her a most uninteresting world: rocks, vegetation, more rocks. A pang hit her as she realized that it was much like the planetoid where she had lived before Malkus took her away to have her supervise the creation of the Instruments. Like that long-dead planetoid, this moon was of no interest or consequence to anyone. That was why she had chosen the planetoid then, and also no doubt why the rebels chose this moon as a place to dispose of the Instrument.

The only thing to mar the landscape was the wreckage of a shuttlecraft.

She landed the Sun near that wreckage. A fierce wind blew through Aidulac's hair

as she stepped out, but she paid it no heed. Instead, she checked the scanner she had built into her forearm, and found an area of ground that had a higher heat index than it should.

Approaching it, she found that the area had been fired upon by some kind of directed energy weapon. It was also the spot to which the trail of the Instrument led.

Her scanner found something else, as well. It was buried beneath the rock, and Aidulac needed to use her own weapon—a laser she had convinced a friend to give her years ago—to cut through the rock to get to it.

The component was small—probably too small for most eyes to see—and green and it glowed slightly. Aidulac recognized it as easily as she would have recognized a piece of her own flesh.

A segment from the weather controller.

Even her own work was subject to the ravages of entropy, it seemed. The component was a minor one, but it probably affected the Instruments' ability to interconnect.

For the first time in ninety thousand years, Aidulac smiled.

She placed the component in a pocket of her jumpsuit and walked back to the Sun.

For the first time, she retrieved a part of her legacy. Now it was just a matter of waiting for the final act to start.

The third planet in the Narendra system had been part of the Zalkat Union once.

It was called Horbin then, and it had been used as parkland. Few visited the world, and the parkland fell into disuse. It was an inconsequential part of the Union—which was why, when the rebels overthrew Malkus the Mighty, they chose

this as one of the places to hide one of the Instruments of his rule. After all, why would anyone wish to come to this place?

After the fall of the Union, it lay unoccupied for many millennia. Until the Klingons came and put a base there.

Decades passed. The planet that one government had made into an uninteresting parkland had been transformed by another into a thriving colony. Dozens of cities had been built, many thousands of Klingons lived long and fruitful lives on the world, and it had become a prosperous part of the Klingon Empire.

Yet, in the ground beneath the smallest of Narendra III's twelve continents, the fourth and final Instrument of Malkus the Mighty's rule lay undisturbed. The only clue to its existence was a mild green glow and the endless yet silent scream of the mind that occupied it.

Or, rather, one of the minds. The psionic impressions of seven others had been made on the Instrument, simply waiting for the time when it was unearthed.

Then four more were added.

This surprised the screaming mind. He had not realized that the third Instrument had been found. But apparently it had.

Still, if more minds had been imprinted, then whoever possessed the third Instrument had failed just like the first two.

And so the screaming continued....

Third Interlude

“CAPTAIN 'S PERSONAL LOG , U.S.S. Voyager, Captain Kathryn Janeway, Stardate 48391.7.

“While our mission to capture Captain Chakotay's Maquis cell and retrieve Lieutenant Tuvok from his undercover operation has technically been a success, everything else has gone to hell in a handbasket. Voyager is trapped in the

Delta Quadrant, Chakotay's ship has been destroyed, and several of my crew were killed when the Caretaker violently took us seventy thousand years across the galaxy to the Ocampa homeworld. We have now begun our long journey home, with members of Chakotay's Maquis cell replacing the Voyager crew that was lost. Chakotay will replace Aaron Cavit, who was killed, as my first officer and serve as liaison between the Starfleet and Maquis crew members. I don't know if terrorists and officers will be able to work together, but I have to give it a try if we're to have any hope of getting home.

"The details of our enforced exile are in my official log, but I would like to take this opportunity to note those under my command who lost their lives needlessly. Cavit was due to be reunited with an old friend when this mission was complete. My conn officer, Stadi, had family on Betazed. Chief Engineer Honigsberg had been chomping at the bit for months to take Voyager out into space. The entire medical staff...

"Computer, pause.

"Dammit.

"Computer, resume.

"I will get the rest of us home, one way or another."

Part 4: The Final Artifact

2376

This portion of the story takes place two years prior to Star Trek: Nemesis; it also takes place shortly after the Star Trek: Gateways book series, and a couple of months after the Star Trek: The Next Generation novel Diplomatic Implausibility.

Chapter Ten

J'LANG WISHED HE COULD REACH THROUGH the viewscreen and rip the Ferengi's ears off.

“The marble still hasn't arrived, Quark. We're breaking ground on the memorial today, and I don't have my marble. Why is that?”

“Captain Butterworth's freighter left Deep Space 9 yesterday,” Quark said. “They had a couple of delays—”

J'lang growled. “I'm a sculptor, not a navigator, but even I know that your space station is not on a direct course from the Sol system to the Narendra system.”

The Ferengi seemed unimpressed. “And if the freighter was only carrying your marble, that would be an issue, but they also supply me with various other items from Earth. There's a good number of humans on this station, and I like to give them a taste of home. That's how I know Captain Butterworth in the first place, and how I was able to get you your precious marble. In any case, he'll be in orbit of Narendra III first thing tomorrow morning, guaranteed.”

“Quark, throughout this business association, every time you have ended a sentence with the word ‘guaranteed,’ it has been preceded by words describing events that have never happened as you described.”

“Well, that won't be the case this time,” Quark said primly.

J'lang scowled. “I was given this commission by Chancellor Martok himself, Quark. Do you know what that means?” The Ferengi opened his mouth to reply, but J'lang didn't give him the chance. “It means that this could be the opportunity of a lifetime. If the chancellor likes my war memorial, then it's only a short step to doing something for the Hall of Warriors! Artists kill for chances like this,” he said, leaning forward, hoping that the Ferengi understood that he

spoke literally, “and I’m not going to let it be destroyed because a Ferengi petaQ was too inefficient to get me my marble on time!”

Now, finally, Quark looked concerned. In fact, he seemed to be quivering. “Look, I want this deal to go through as much as you—I just had a big land deal get yanked out from under me and honestly, I could use the latinum. Trust me, you’ll have your marble.”

“I’d better. Because do you know what will happen if I don’t?”

“I don’t get my commission,” Quark said matter-of-factly.

This time J’lang smiled. “Besides that. Are you familiar with Lieutenant Koth of the Tcha’voth?”

“Sure.” The Tcha’voth was the Klingon Defense Force ship assigned to the Bajoran sector. “He spends an hour a day in the holosuite killing things after he gets off-shift, and then drinks two mugs of that chech’tluth stuff before heading back to the ship.”

J’lang’s smile spread into a grin. That certainly sounded like Koth; you didn’t need chronometers on ships he served on, you just had to follow his routine, and you’d know what the time of day was. “He’s also my cousin—a member of my House, and quite happy to rip off your head and spit down your neck if I ask him to do so. Do I make myself perfectly clear, Quark?”

“Oh, quite clear, yes,” Quark said, nodding quickly and swallowing nervously.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me...” The Ferengi cut off the connection.

Of course, the truth was that J’lang and Koth hadn’t spoken in years. They were only distant cousins, and the sculptor seriously doubted that he could prevail upon the lieutenant to kill a Ferengi on his behalf. But, he thought happily, Quark doesn’t need to know that.

J'lang turned off his screen and turned to look outside the window of the small, cluttered office. It was part of a prefabricated structure built on this, the smallest continent on Narendra III, meant to be here only as long as it took J'lang's apprentices to construct the Dominion War Memorial and the workers to put together the other buildings that would accompany it—a restaurant, a museum, and some other things that were of no concern to J'lang.

The idea had been to honor those who died in battle defending the empire. But what Chancellor Martok had specifically requested was that it honor not just the Klingon dead, but all those who died in service of the fight against the oppressors from the Gamma Quadrant. So J'lang was instructed to build something that would honor not only the Klingon Defense Force, but Starfleet and even the Romulan military.

J'lang had taken the idea one step further. The memorial would consist of representations of ship captains from each of the three forces—but each would be constructed in a stone from the capital planet of each government.

The human element was proving to be most problematic. He still hadn't figured out what pose to put the Starfleet captain in. For the Klingon, he'd chosen a classic pose of standing upright and hoisting a bat'leth over his head. The Romulan would stand in a slight crouch and aim her disruptor forward (and if that made the Romulan stand a bit shorter than the Klingon or the human, J'lang had no real problem with that, and he doubted the chancellor would either). But what to do with the human? Perhaps just standing there with his arms on his hips. Standing around looking foolish is what humans do best, after all...

Out the window, J'lang could see several Klingons—some civilians, some volunteers from the Defense Force who wanted to aid in the construction of this dedication to their fallen comrades—laying the triceron explosives that would be

used to carve out the space for the statues. J'lang had chosen the top of the largest hill on the continent for the memorial's site. Since the statues would be west-facing, the sun would rise every morning behind the statues, illuminating the figures majestically from behind.

J'lang smiled. It will be glorious. After this, they'll be begging me to work on the next statue for the Hall of Warriors. The inductions into the Order of the Bat'leth are soon, and I know they haven't chosen the sculptor for that yet. If I can pull this off...

The visions of artistic glory that danced in J'lang's head were suppressed by the site of the various Klingons moving away from the blast site. Just as they did, his intercom beeped.

"J'lang," said the voice of his assistant, Perrih, "we're about to start the blasting. Do you want to come down to the observation room?"

"I can see it fine from here, Perrih. Tell Dargh he can blow up the hill whenever he wants." Dargh was the engineer the local government on Narendra had sent to oversee the mechanical aspects of the memorial. J'lang had found him to be prickly and irritating, with beady little eyes that never looked at the same thing for more than half a second. He seemed to have an endless supply of questions about inconsequential minutiae that were not J'lang's concern as an artist. So he left Perrih to deal with him. That was an assistant's purpose, after all.

The alternative was to deal with him directly, which would almost certainly lead to J'lang having to kill Dargh, and the project was already behind schedule as it was....

Within a few minutes, a most satisfying explosion erupted from the hill as the

triceron ripped through the dirt and grass and rock, pulverizing them to their component atoms and spreading them to the wind.

J'lang had never cared much for explosions—they usually resulted in damaged artwork—but he had to admit to admiring this one. And damn his beady little eyes, but Dargh had done his job superlatively well. When the dust and smoke cleared, J'lang saw a near-perfect L-shaped hole in the hill of just the right size. Oh, the edges would need smoothing, and the surface needed to be flattened and paved, but it was exactly what J'lang needed to start with.

The other thing he noticed as the smoke cleared was the small black box.

Then, suddenly, a sharp pain sliced through J'lang's skull.

Once, when he was a boy, serving as one of many apprentices to the great sculptor Dolmorr, J'lang had accidentally turned on a welder while it was facing his arm. The white-hot agony that shot through his forearm and wrist was greater than any pain J'lang had thought it was possible to feel. Decades later, he still sometimes felt phantoms of that pain when he closed his eyes.

The agony he felt now was a thousand times worse than that.

I AM FREE! AT LAST, AFTER AN ETERNITY OF TORMENT, I AM FREE!

The voice came from everywhere and nowhere. It only increased the pain in J'lang's skull.

Suddenly, the pain vanished. And with it, most of his other senses. He could no longer feel his body around him, no longer hear the hum of the generator that kept power in the prefabricated structure, no longer smell the plate of racht and bowl of grapok sauce that he'd abandoned an hour ago but never disposed of. He could still see, however. And what he saw was the black box. He could not control his movements, so he could not take his eyes off it.

Then, minutes later, he saw several Klingons moving as one—indeed, moving in

more perfect formation than any soldiers J'lang had ever seen—toward that black box.

And all J'lang could think was that the project was about to fall considerably further behind....

Patience. That had always been Malkus's watchword. He knew that all he needed to do was not rush anything, and it would come to him. Pressure brought sloppiness. When rebels started agitating on Alphramick, he simply waited for them to make a mistake. True, there was a cost in the lives of his soldiers, but they had already pledged their lives to Malkus, and he could always get new ones. But, by waiting, the rebels exposed themselves for the disorganized fools they were, and Malkus was able to crush them far more spectacularly than he would have had he rushed things.

When he had Aidulac supervise the creation of his Instruments, he did not give her any kind of deadline. He knew that in order for her to truly accomplish what he wanted, he needed to give her all the time and all the resources she needed. He ruled the universe. He could afford to wait.

Aidulac had outperformed even Malkus's expectations. Using his Instruments, and her team's other gift of immortality, he had ruled for many ages.

Until he was at last overthrown.

Even then, those who opposed him made one fatal mistake. They had been able to destroy his body, true—though Aidulac had given him the means by which to stave off entropy, he was by no means invulnerable—but first they placed his consciousness within one of the Instruments.

They had thought this would be the worst kind of torture.

They were wrong.

Oh, it was torture, true. To live for so long as nothing but thought was a hellish existence.

But it was still existence. And as long as Malkus lived in some form, he knew he would eventually triumph.

He just needed to wait.

First, he needed someone to colonize the world, as these Klingons finally did.

Then they had to unearth the Instrument.

As soon as they did, Malkus was able to reach out to their minds, just as the other shards of his consciousness had done with Tomasina Laubenthal, Orta, and the third being who had been enslaved without Malkus realizing it. But where the mental shadows of Malkus that inhabited the other Instruments were limited in scope, Malkus was whole in this Instrument, and his powers were manifold.

Once he took command of all the minds currently inhabiting the world now called Narendra III, Malkus went further. Eleven minds had been imprinted on Malkus when the other three Instruments shut down. He now reached out to trace those minds....

The first three were Guillermo Masada, Spock of Vulcan, and Leonard McCoy.

Masada's mental trail ended shortly after being imprinted, which meant that he had died in the interim. Malkus was disappointed, but such were the risks.

Spock's seemed to end and then start again, which confused Malkus, but his mental impression was still strong. McCoy's was also thriving.

Next were Declan Keogh, Joseph Shabalala, Benjamin Sisko, and Kira Nerys.

Keogh's and Shabalala's trails also ended shortly after imprinting, and Malkus found that Sisko's trail led to a place he could not go. It was not death—but Sisko's mind was no longer within Malkus's purview. However, Kira's impression

was quite strong, and she was as easily enslaved as McCoy and Spock.

The final four were Robert DeSoto, Liliane Weiss, Ellen Hayat, and Dina Voyskunsky—but of them, only DeSoto's trail did not end. His mind, too, now belonged to Malkus.

Four slaves where once there were eleven. Pity that mortals' lives are so brief.

But it did not matter. Soon, he would once again rule everything.

He gave instructions to his four new slaves. . . .

* * *

The bar on Starbase 24 didn't have any prune juice. It was the perfect ending to what had been a most wretched day for Worf, son of Mogh, former Starfleet lieutenant commander, and current Federation Ambassador to the Klingon Empire. He dolefully sipped the weak raktajino and looked over the screen of his padd, but the words were starting to blur. He hadn't slept in almost forty hours.

While Klingons did not share the human need for obscene amounts of sleep, he did need to rest eventually. Sadly, he was unlikely to get much chance to do so before the conference on Khitomer started.

In the months since the end of the Dominion War, the three major Alpha Quadrant powers, the United Federation of Planets, the Romulan Star Empire, and the Klingon Empire, had mostly settled down. A few crises had threatened to break the fragile peace, but each had been solved without plunging the quadrant again into war—or out-and-out destruction—and now the three powers felt the need to sit down and determine just what the future of the quadrant would be. So ambassadors from all three governments were going to assemble at Khitomer, a Klingon planet near the borders of the other two powers, in order to try to settle the inevitable differences that had come up: protectorate worlds, former

Cardassian planets that were now up for grabs, relief efforts throughout the quadrant, exacting reparations from the Breen, and a great deal more.

Worf, as the ambassador to Qo'noS and a Klingon who had lived most of his life within the Federation, had been one of many diplomats invited to attend, given his unique perspective on both governments.

Before he left Qo'noS, though, several matters had demanded his immediate attention. He had to sign off on the latest reports from Emperor Vall on taD, look over the fifth draft of the resolution between the Klingon Empire and the Tholian Assembly regarding the incident on Traelus II, approve half a dozen visas, read over an application from a Bolian opera company to tour the Empire, and several other niggling matters that had all started to blend in Worf's head.

Then he was informed that the Defense Force vessel that was supposed to convey him to the conference had been detained by an emergency. Worf's aide, Giancarlo Wu, had managed to get a Starfleet vessel to divert to the Klingon Homeworld. It couldn't go to Khitomer, but could at least drop him off at Starbase 24, which was only a few hours away by shuttle. Given that it was the nearest Federation base to Khitomer, Worf was sure he'd be able to get a ride from there.

Then another crisis reared its head, involving some Tellarites who had managed to get themselves arrested on Mempa V. It was the sort of trivial stupidity that Worf was usually happy to fob off on Wu, and indeed he did so this time as well—but it meant that Wu would not be able to accompany him to Khitomer. Worf had been ambassador for four months, and he was quite sure that he would have committed several dozen homicides by now if it hadn't been for Wu's organizational skills, cool head, and ability to deal with irritating minutiae.

So Wu went off to Mempa and Worf boarded the U.S.S. *Musgrave*, a Saber -class ship that was rather small and had no guest quarters. For an eighteen-hour trip

that was going through the ship's alpha and beta shifts, this probably didn't seem an issue to the Musgrave 'scaptain—a polite, if terse, human named Manolet Dayrit—but Worf had been hoping to take advantage of the opportunity to catch up on sleep. Instead, Captain Dayrit installed him in the conference lounge, and he spent the time catching up on paperwork.

On arrival at Starbase 24, Dayrit informed him that a runabout, the *St. Lawrence*, was already scheduled to take one ambassador to Khitomer, and they could take Worf as well. He still had an hour, so he headed for the bar hoping for a prune juice to settle him down.

Then again, his last trip to Khitomer had not gone as planned, either.

“Attention, Ambassador Worf. Please report to Landing Pad F. Ambassador Worf to Landing Pad F, please.”

Finally, he thought. He drained the rest of his raktajino, placed the padd in his jacket pocket, and strode out of the bar.

As he walked purposefully down the corridor toward the landing pad, a voice sounded out from behind him. “My goodness, if it isn't Mr. Woof!”

Worf felt a knot tie in his left stomach. Not her, he thought. Please let that have been my imagination.

No such luck. Worf stopped walking and turned around to see Lwaxana Troi, daughter of the Fifth House, Holder of the Sacred Chalice of Rixx, Heir to the Holy Rings of Betazed, and general bane of Worf's existence. For a time, Worf had pursued a relationship with Deanna Troi, one of his crewmates on the *U.S.S. Enterprise* and Lwaxana's daughter. That relationship had eventually ended, and one of the many benefits to that was that there was no danger of this woman becoming Worf's mother-in-law.

As always, Lwaxana was overdressed. Worf wore a simple brown tunic, black pants and boots, and a thick, ankle-length black leather coat decorated with both the Klingon and Federation insignias, in which he hid several weapons. Lwaxana, on the other hand, wore an elaborate fuchsia dress with numerous buttons and fastenings that probably took her hours to get into. The dress was decorated with a blue flower pattern—it gave Worf a headache just to look at it. Her hair was equally elaborate, held in an unnatural pattern with a variety of pins. The grooming rituals of most Federation races had always been incomprehensible to Worf, but he found ones involving hair to be especially ludicrous. Tying his own hair into a ponytail was as far as he was willing to go to accede to that custom. Lwaxana, of course, as with everything else, took it to an absurd extreme.

Bowing to the inevitable, Worf allowed Lwaxana to catch up. I might as well get this over with, he thought glumly. Like most Betazoids, Lwaxana was a telepath, so she probably picked up that thought, but Worf found himself unable to be too concerned with that. His negative thoughts had never even slowed her down in the past.

“What a pleasant surprise to see you here.” Lwaxana hooked her arm into Worf’s and led him onward down the corridor.

“Thank you,” Worf said, not meaning it, and looking at the arm as if it were a poisonous snake.

“So, Woof, you’re an ambassador now. I guess we’ll be seeing a lot more of each other at diplomatic functions like this conference on Khitomer.”

“It would appear so,” Worf said neutrally, long since having given up correcting Lwaxana’s perpetual mispronunciation of his name. For lack of anything better to say, he asked, “How is your son?”

“Doing as well as possible, under the circumstances,” Lwaxana said, with a notable dimming of enthusiasm. Betazed had been conquered by the Dominion during the war. In fact, both Lwaxana and Worf had both been involved in the planet’s liberation a little over a year ago—Worf had commanded the U.S.S. Defiant, one of the Starfleet ships involved in the mission, and Lwaxana had led the Betazoid resistance movement—though they did not encounter each other then.

“How is the rebuilding progressing?” he asked.

“Slowly. I just came from Earth, actually, and had a talk with the Federation Council about it. I spent two days wrangling with Minister al-Rashan and a tiresome little Cardassian who’s trying to get the Federation to commit more resources to Cardassia than to Betazed! Can you believe it?”

“No,” Worf said truthfully. Cardassia was the enemy. Betazed was part of the Federation, and deserved consideration before a foe.

“Neither did I. But this Eli Gark person, or whatever his name is, he’s a sneaky one,” Lwaxana said, not concealing her annoyance.

Worf started. “You mean Elim Garak?”

“Don’t tell me you know the little toad?”

Hiding a small smile, Worf said, “Oh yes.” And, he thought, if ever two people deserved each other, it is Garak and Lwaxana.

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that, Mr. Woof,” Lwaxana said testily.

Worf suppressed a growl.

There was an uncomfortable silence as they continued down the corridor. Worf was not looking forward to the next few hours. He doubted he would be able to contrive an excuse to use the St. Lawrence’s ‘saft compartment to grab a quick nap—not with Lwaxana accompanying him.

“Worf—” Lwaxana started.

This got Worf’s attention, both because she pronounced his name properly and because she was hesitant. He had known Lwaxana Troi for twelve years, and he would never have used that word to describe her before.

Against his better judgment, Worf prompted, “Yes?”

“You saw Odo before he—before he went home?”

Suddenly, Worf understood. Odo was the security chief on Deep Space 9; both he and Worf had ended their tenures serving there at the same time. For reasons Worf could never comprehend, the changeling and Lwaxana had formed a close friendship. In fact, they had even temporarily married—something involving the custody of her then-unborn son.

“Yes,” Worf said simply.

“I know what happened. He wrote me a very nice letter before he left explaining that he was returning to the Founders’ homeworld to be with his people. I know that that’s what he always wanted, but I need to know from someone who saw him.

Was he—was he happy?”

Worf would no sooner have used happy to describe Odo than he would have used hesitant to describe Lwaxana. But Worf had come to respect Odo during their time serving together, and while they were hardly friends, Worf felt he knew the changeling fairly well.

Choosing his words carefully, Worf said, “He was—content. He had found a mission, a—purpose. It gave him strength.”

They arrived at the landing pad. Lwaxana smiled and patted Worf on the biceps.

“Thank you, Worf. I needed to hear that.” She extricated her arm. “I need to get back to my room and meditate before my ship leaves tonight.”

“Tonight?” Worf’s heart almost sang. She’s not coming with me?

“No, I’m not coming with you. I’m just waiting for these idiot engineers to finish repairing the matter interflux broomihator or some other such thing on my personal transport. Then I can go on to Khitomer. I’d offer you a ride, but I suspect you’ll find your companion on the St. Lawrence more—entertaining.” She smiled enigmatically. “I look forward to seeing you at the reception, Ambassador. And good luck to you. I’m sure you’ll continue to serve the Federation with honor.”

Worf blinked. It was the nicest thing Lwaxana had ever said to him. In fact, it might have been the nicest thing Lwaxana had ever said in his hearing. “To you as well, Ambassador Troi. Betazed could have no better advocate.”

Lwaxana’s smile widened. “See, Woof, you just proved my point. You lie like a diplomat. You’ll do quite well.”

And with that, she turned and continued down the corridor, laughing.

Which raised the question of who it was that Worf was sharing the runabout with.

The landing-pad door slid open to reveal the inside of a standard Starfleet runabout. Two humans in Starfleet uniforms sat at the fore of the vessel, going through the preflight checklist. One turned around and said, “Ah, Ambassador Worf, good to have you aboard. I’m Lieutenant Matthew Falce, and this,” he indicated the person to his right, “is Ensign Hilary McKenna.” He indicated one of the side chairs. “Have a seat—we’ll be taking off within five minutes or so.”

Worf was about to ask if the other ambassador had reported or not when a surprisingly familiar voice came from the entryway to the aft compartment.

“Welcome aboard, Mr. Ambassador.”

The last time Worf had heard that voice, it was in a corridor on Deep Space Station K-7 a hundred years ago. The Defiant had gone after an elderly Klingon

spy who had traveled back in time to assassinate Captain James T. Kirk and restore his own lost honor. They had succeeded in stopping the spy without altering the time lines—which meant, among other things, that the person in the St. Lawrence had not known of Worf's clandestine trip to the past.

They had encountered each other on several occasions besides that, of course, but this was their first meeting as colleagues.

Inclining his head respectfully, Worf said, "Ambassador Spock. It is an honor, sir."

And he meant it. Like Worf, Spock had become an ambassador after serving in Starfleet, but both his military and diplomatic service were the stuff of legends—admittedly, as much due to the sheer volume of them by comparison to Worf's own much shorter career in both fields.

Indeed, the man standing before him seemed to carry the weight of his years. He was dressed in an austere black robe that covered him from neck to foot; his face—the features of which displayed only his Vulcan heritage—was heavily lined, his black hair thinner than Worf remembered it being in the long-ago corridors of K-7.

Then he spoke, and his lips rose in the tiniest of smiles—the first betrayal of the human half of his lineage. "The honor is mine, Ambassador Worf. Your accomplishments have been quite noteworthy."

"You flatter me."

"Not at all. You have had perhaps more impact on Klingon politics over the past decade than any other individual. And I speak as one who has some passing familiarity with the vicissitudes of Klingon politics."

Worf took a seat on one of the rear chairs of the runabout. "That is something of an overstatement of my accomplishments, Mr. Ambassador."

One of Spock's eyebrows climbed up his forehead as he took the seat opposite Worf. "Indeed? Given that your actions were directly responsible for the ascents of the last two chancellors, not to mention the installation of Emperor Kahless and the fall of the House of Duras, it is, if anything, an understatement."

"I simply have done my duty."

"As have I."

Falce and McKenna communicated with Starbase Operations to receive clearance to disembark. As they did so, Worf said, "An interesting statement, Mr. Ambassador, given that you have spent the last several years attempting to reunify Romulus and Vulcan. Some might argue that such an act was contrary to your duty as a Federation ambassador."

"And would you be among those?"

"My—experience tells me that any attempt to deal with the Romulans is one fraught with peril. I have witnessed Romulan treachery firsthand on far too many occasions—starting on the very planet we are heading toward."

Spock nodded. "Ah, yes, the so-called Khitomer massacre."

Worf tensed. "'So-called'?"

"My apologies—I did not mean to belittle your tragedy, Ambassador."

The words were a poor attempt at soothing Worf, and he was having none of it.

When he was six, he had accompanied his mother, father, and nurse to Khitomer for an extended stay. That stay had been cut short by a cowardly Romulan attack on the planet, one that wiped out thousands of Klingon lives. Worf and his nurse were the only ones who were not killed or taken prisoner. While his nurse returned to Qo'noS, Worf was raised by a Starfleet chief petty officer and his wife on Gault and Earth.

“Still,” Spock continued, “the symbolism of this particular planet is potent, wouldn’t you agree? The site of the first significant peace talks between the Federation and the Klingon Empire took place at Khitomer after Praxis’s destruct—”

“I’m aware of the planet’s history, Ambassador,” Worf said testily, “as well as your own role in the Khitomer Accords. What I have to wonder is if you truly intend to represent the Federation at this conference—or the Romulans.”

The runabout cleared the station and went into warp. As it did so, Spock’s head tilted. “An odd accusation, given that my presence at the conference is over the objections of the Romulan senate. They still view me as a criminal. In any event, the Romulans did ally with the Federation and the Klingon Empire during the war.”

“Eventually, and only when confronted with evidence of the Dominion’s treachery—treachery that we had to bring to their attention.” Worf leaned forward, aware that his voice was rising, but too tired to really care at this point. “And even so, they are demanding equal reparations from the Breen even though their losses were a fraction of those suffered by the Empire or the Federation.”

His calm in direct contrast to Worf’s rising anger—which served only to make it rise further—Spock said, “The Empire’s losses were as much due to the irresponsible troop allocations of Chancellor Gowron as anything. Given that you challenged him on that very basis, I should think you’d be aware of it. The Romulans should not be penalized for that.” Before Worf could respond to that, Spock held up a hand. “I do not dispute your points, Mr. Ambassador. May I humbly suggest that we table our debate until we reach the proper forum for it?” Worf bit back an instinctive reply. Why am I having this argument? he asked

himself. He had had no intention of engaging Spock this way—indeed, he had nothing but respect for the man, even if he personally found his mission of reuniting Romulus and Vulcan to be a useless cause that would probably do more harm to Vulcan than good.

Instead, he leaned back, again inclined his head, and said, “Agreed.”

“Good. I—” The ambassador cut himself off and put his hand to his forehead, closing his eyes.

Worf frowned. “Is something wrong?”

“Just an odd—” Again, he cut himself off, this time opening his eyes and letting his arms drop to his sides.

Almost robotically, Spock rose from his chair, turned, and walked toward the aft compartment.

“Ambassador?” Worf got up and went after him. Spock had a reputation for many things, but wandering off in the middle of a conversation—the middle of a sentence—was not one of them. And Worf had spent far too much time serving in Starfleet to be anything but completely on his guard when witnessing such behavior.

Worf followed Spock aft to find him opening the runabout’s weapons locker.

Taking a tiny palm-sized phaser out of a small pocket inside his jacket, Worf said, “Move away from there, now.”

Moving with surprising speed for someone of his age and encumbered by so large a cloak, Spock whirled and fired a hand phaser at Worf, who ducked out of the way and fired his own phaser. It glanced off the ambassador’s shoulder, but he barely seemed to notice. The hit should have stunned him—or at least slowed him down.

It did neither. Spock dove for Worf, his free hand reaching for Worf's shoulder.

The Klingon tried to twist out of the way, knowing full well what Spock intended, but the crowded confines of the runabout gave him little room to maneuver, and Spock was able to grasp at the nerve cluster in Worf's shoulder even through the thick leather of his jacket.

Worf's thumb spasmed on his phaser as he passed out.

"You call this a bed?"

Dr. B'Oraq smiled at the wizened old human who stared incredulously at the metal slab in the rear compartment of the shuttlecraft.

"Actually," she said, "I call it a QongDaq, and it's good for your back."

"Good for your back, maybe. Me, I'll take a feather bed any day of the week and twice on Sunday."

"Most humans with spinal difficulties have them because they sleep on surfaces that are too conforming. It encourages misalignment of the vertebrae."

"Look, little lady, you rationalize your Klingon excuses for hurting yourselves in the name of honor all you want, but what it comes down to is you folks just like pain too damn much. When you get to be my age, you start to appreciate comfort."

"Most Klingons don't get to be your age." B'Oraq tugged on the braid that extended down past her right shoulder. The hairs in that braid, which was secured at the end with a pin in the shape of her House's emblem, were the only ones of that length. The rest of her auburn tresses were kept at neck level.

"Good point." The human actually let out a smile at that one, which B'Oraq took as an encouraging sign. "Still, that'd go a long way toward explainin' why the state of your medicine's still so blasted appalling."

Smiling, B'Oraq said, "That's what I'm hoping to change, Admiral."

Leonard H. McCoy let out a noise that sounded like a bursting pipe. "Don't you start with that 'admiral' nonsense. I'm just an old country doctor tryin' to find reasons to keep on goin'. The name's Leonard."

Again tugging on her braid, B'Oraq said, "I could not be so—so familiar, sir."

"Poppycock. We're colleagues."

B'Oraq's eyes widened. "Hardly. You are—the same as a Dahar master, only in medicine. I am just a humble physician attempting to live up to your ideals. To call us colleagues would be like saying a third son of a lowlevel House is the same as a member of the High Council."

"Don't sell yourself short, B'Oraq," McCoy said, taking a seat in a metal chair next to the bunk. "You're doing some damn fine work."

The shuttle was the captain's personal transport from the I.K.S. Gorkon, B'Oraq's posting. Captain Klag had generously allowed his ship's physician to make use of it to escort McCoy to his speaking engagement on Qo'noS. The shuttle's aft compartment would normally serve as the captain's cabin, with the pilot, copilot, and up to four passengers using bunks lining the walls of the hallway between the cockpit and the rear.

Sitting on the edge of the QongDaq, B'Oraq said, "Perhaps. And perhaps one day, I will be able to call myself a 'colleague' of Leonard McCoy." She smiled. "After all, even the third son of a low-level House may get a seat on the Council—one day. But that day is not today."

He chuckled, a papery sound. B'Oraq was glad the elderly human was able to travel. He seemed fragile physically, even by the low standards of humans, but his mental acuity hadn't dimmed with age. When she had asked him to give a talk

on improving medical practices within the Empire to the High Council, he had happily accepted.

“May I offer you a drink, Admiral?”

“If you’re gonna insist on titles, stick with ‘Doctor.’ Just ’cause Starfleet promoted me out of lack of any better use to put me to doesn’t mean I have to like it. As for a drink, no thanks. I don’t think these old bones could handle your Klingon hooch—not to mention this old cardiovascular system.”

“Actually, I had something else in mind.” She turned to the replicator next to the QongDaq and said, “Bourbon.”

McCoy’s eyes went quite wide at that. Smugly, B’Oraq handed one of the mugs that materialized at her instruction to the human.

The old doctor took the mug and then gingerly sniffed its contents. He looked quizzically at B’Oraq. “Sour mash?”

She nodded. “One of the benefits of studying medicine at your Starfleet Academy.

An old medical-school friend gave me the replicator pattern when I saw him last.”

“Good ol’ Southern boy, huh?” McCoy asked with a grin.

“Actually, he’s a Trill, but he acquired a taste for the stuff during one of our post-finals pub crawls third year.”

Another papery chuckle. “Yeah, I remember several pub crawls like that during my med school days, back in the mists of prehistory.” He gave the mug a look, then raised it toward B’Oraq. “Mud in your eye.”

B’Oraq watched as McCoy took a sip, rolled it around in his mouth, then swallowed. He closed his eyes tightly, opened them, shook his head from side to side twice, then let out a long breath. His voice cracking, he said, “Smooth.”

He coughed once. “Not bad, as replicated mash goes. Course, back in my day, we

made this stuff ourselves.”

“Unfortunately, the ingredients are hard to come by, and I didn’t have the time to acquire them and brew them before you arrived, otherwise I would, of course, have provided that.”

McCoy grinned. “Don’t worry about it, B’Oraq. This is as fine a gift as you can give me. ’Sides, given what I’m about to face, I might be better off with a few of these in me.”

“Don’t be so sure. I had expected more resistance from the High Council when I first proposed this, but they were surprisingly receptive.” She tilted her head.

“Then again, Chancellor Martok spent many years stationed at Deep Space 9 with access to Federation medicine. That may have colored his perceptions. Besides, the Empire has become more receptive to advanced medical treatment over the past few years, especially thanks to the war.”

“Really?” McCoy asked, then took another sip. B’Oraq noted that the second swallow was less of a struggle than the first.

“It’s much easier to insist that you can survive with an injury and that having it treated shows weakness when you are just fighting alongside other Klingons. But when your Federation and Romulan allies are fully recovered from more devastating injuries in less than a day, you start to learn the value of being able to return whole warriors to the field of battle.”

McCoy held up his mug again. “I’ll drink to that.”

“After the talk, I will take you back to the Gorkon—you’ll be able to see in person the new medical ward I designed. It’s not up to Starfleet standards, of course, but we’re getting there.”

“That mean I’ll get to meet your patient?”

B'Oraq tugged on her braid. "I'm not sure who you mean."

"Klag. I read up on that transplant procedure on your captain after you invited me to hold this little kaffeeklatsch. I'm not sure whether to be impressed or appalled."

Chuckling, B'Oraq said, "Either will do. It took me a month to convince him to even replace his arm at all. He'd lost it while winning a heroic battle at Marcan V, and you know how my people love their heroic battles." That elicited a like chuckle from the human. She continued. "However, I did talk him into it—but he absolutely refused a prosthesis." In a passable impersonation of Klag's deep voice, B'Oraq said, "'It must be the arm of a warrior or no arm at all!'" Back in her own voice: "I thought I would go mad. Finding a donor that met both the necessary biological qualifications and his parameters for what constituted 'the arm of a warrior' was nigh impossible."

"So what happened?"

"An odd bit of luck—if you can call it that. Klag's father died. I was able to have the body preserved in stasis until the Gorkon could return to Qo'noS. Then I performed the procedure."

McCoy shook his head. "A transplant. What'd you do, sew it on with needle and thread?"

B'Oraq laughed. "The captain might've preferred that—without anesthetic, of course. But no, the ancient nature of the procedure notwithstanding, it was done with proper modern technique—and in the Gorkon's state-of-the-art medical ward, not some chamber of horrors on the Homeworld. I'm hoping that each new class of ship that the Defense Force constructs will improve on my designs."

Snorting, McCoy said, "So what the hell you need me for?"

"Because hope isn't always enough. You are a revered figure in Federation

medicine.”

“Yeah, but my history with Klingon medicine isn’t exactly what you’d call stellar. My most famous operation was when I failed to save the life of the chancellor that your ship’s named after.”

B’Oraq sighed. “Perhaps, but that was hardly your fault, and I think people know the true political motivations behind your subsequent imprisonment.”

“Don’t remind me,” McCoy said, taking another sip of his bourbon and not even seeming to notice this time. “Took me months to stop shivering after they rescued us from Rura Penthe.” The ice planet where the empire sent their worst criminals had a deserved reputation as a hellhole. Worse, he and Captain James Kirk had been sent to Rura Penthe not due to any crime they had committed, but as part of an elaborate frameup designed to prevent a Klingon-Federation alliance.

“Still,” B’Oraq said, “I’ve seen the footage of your attempts to revive Chancellor Gorkon after he was shot. I can assure you that your efforts were more successful than any contemporary Klingon doctor’s would have been. In fact, your efforts then were probably more than most Empire physicians would have done now, eighty years later.”

After draining his mug, McCoy said, “Maybe. In any case, B’Oraq, I hope you succeed. And I’m—well, honored to be part of your efforts.”

“The honor is mine, Doctor.” She frowned. “Doctor?”

The human seemed to fall into a daze for a moment, then blinked twice. “Just gettin’ old, B’Oraq. I think I’d better see just how good that QongDaq is on my sacroiliac.”

Wincing at his pronunciation, B’Oraq said, “I think it would be best if you just

called it a bed, Doctor.”

“Put a feather mattress and some cushions on it, and I’ll call it a bed. Not befo—”

He seemed to fall into a daze again.

“Doctor?” Now B’Oraq got up from the QongDaq and went over to McCoy. “Are you all right?”

McCoy made a grunting noise, but said nothing. Then he got up, went over to his luggage, and started going through it.

“Dr. McCoy, what is wrong? Can I help you with something?” He hadn’t mentioned any specific illnesses or other difficulties that he might need aid for. Then again, that didn’t preclude the possibility that he had them. Physicians, after all, were notoriously awful patients, and he doubted that the elderly human would trust a Klingon doctor—even B’Oraq—with any kind of detailed information about any condition he might be suffering from.

Still, this sudden total silence from him as he rummaged through his bags was bizarre—and out of character.

She walked up to him and put a hand on his shoulder. “Doctor, are you—”

Before she could complete the sentence, McCoy whirled around with a speed she never would have expected from even a Klingon of his age, much less a human, and injected her arm with a hypospray. “What are you—?”

The depressant took hold in her bloodstream almost instantly. She tried to activate the communicator on her wrist, but her arms felt like dead weight. Her vision clouded over, and she managed to somehow ask “Why?” before unconsciousness overtook her.

Chapter Eleven

“SIR , WE ARE RECEIVING A PRIORITY CALL from General Talak,” Lieutenant Toq said

from the operations console on the bridge of the I.K.S. Gorkon.

Finally, Captain Klag thought.

“He wishes the communication to be private,” Toq added.

Klag couldn’t imagine why that was necessary, but he was hardly about to question a general. Not even this one. “I will take it in my office.”

Then he had to get up.

Not, on the face of it, a difficult chore, but one that had presented more of a challenge these last few months.

It was a simple maneuver, one that Klag had performed without a conscious thought for most of his life: brace himself on the arms of the chair with his hands and push upward into a standing position. Then came Marcan V and the crash of the I.K.S. Pagh that had severed his right arm at the shoulder. He’d spent several months getting used to doing things with just the one arm—and eventually coming to the conclusion that he was a lesser warrior with only one good limb.

Then M’Raq, Klag’s father, died.

It had taken him just a few weeks to adjust to having only one arm after Marcan V, but it had been months since Dr. B’Oraq had grafted M’Raq’s right arm onto Klag’s shoulder, and still he was not accustomed to the new limb. For one thing, M’Raq was built differently from his son: shorter, squatter, and with a right arm that was three centimeters shorter than Klag’s left.

So now getting up from a chair became a major production. His left elbow bent more than his right elbow in order to brace himself. And no matter how many times he got up, he always listed to the right when he rose upward. Of course, he was conscious of this, tried to avoid it, failed, and listed even more to the right when he did so.

All this was magnified tenfold when he was on the bridge. He was the commander of a ship full of warriors. He had not had a say in his command crew when he was given the Gorkon, and they left much to be desired—at first. But over the months he had been their leader, they had turned into a crew that Klag would match against any in the Defense Force.

They deserved better than a captain who got out of his chair like an old woman. Sure enough, he pushed himself upward and listed to the right. He did not, at least, stumble. Taking advantage of this, he quickened his gait toward the door to his office, keeping most of his dignity intact.

I will conquer this, he thought with anger. He had considered simply remaining standing when on the bridge, but that would be akin to admitting defeat. He had not admitted defeat when facing a Jem'Hadar squadron without benefit of a right arm on Marcan V; he was damned if he was going to do it now for so simple a thing as getting up from his chair.

“Commander Tereth, you have the bridge,” he said.

The crew said nothing, of course. One of the bekk 'sat the sciences station to Klag's extreme left had snickered the first time he'd been on duty when Klag rose from his chair. Klag had not seen the bekk since.

He had Tereth to thank for that.

There were many reasons the Gorkon crew had come together over the past few months, but Klag gave Tereth most of the credit. With the welcome departure of Drex—the son of Chancellor Martok, and who had inherited none of his father's honor—from the first officer's post, and with his second officer, Toq, still too new to the position to be considered for promotion, Command sent Tereth, daughter of Rokis, to be his new second-in-command.

Klag entered his office and sat in the chair behind his desk—a much less onerous

task, since the ship's artificial gravity was on his side and he could simply fall into the seat without the use of his uncooperative limbs.

Putting it out of his mind, he activated the small viewscreen on his desk. The face of General Talak appeared on it. Klag controlled his reaction. Talak was of the House of K'Tal, the same House that produced Captain Kargan— may he suffer in Gre'thor for all eternity, Klag thought—the captain's hated former commanding officer. The general had the same crest as Kargan, and the same perpetual scowl, though not nearly so fat a face.

“Captain Klag. Your request to search for your private craft has been granted—after a fashion.”

Klag frowned. That was unusually vague. “What do you mean?”

“The disappearance of your craft would normally not be worth taking you off your current assignment, but it is part of a larger problem.”

“It is not the loss of my craft that concerns me, General, but the loss of my chief physician, not to mention a Federation dignitary.” Klag did not mention the fact that their current assignment was hardly a priority. Kinshayan pirates had been raiding the border for centuries, and Defense Force ships had been putting them down for just as long. It mattered little whether the Gorkon or some other ship performed this duty.

“Ah yes,” Talak said with a snort, “your ‘surgeon.’ The one who put that—that thing on your right shoulder.”

Talak paused, perhaps hoping Klag would rise to the bait, but there was nothing to be gained by antagonizing the general, and quite a bit to lose.

Realizing that his gambit was fruitless, Talak went on. “As I said, there is more to this. For one, that Federation dignitary.”

Klag smiled. “I imagine Ambassador Worf has expressed his concerns with the disappearance of a Starfleet admiral?” Klag would have expected no less from Worf. The Gorkon had escorted the Federation ambassador to his first mission, on the planet taD, and the ambassador had earned Klag’s respect during that mission—a coin Klag did not part with easily.

To Klag’s surprise, Talak said, “No, he hasn’t—because he has disappeared as well. He was on his way to that summit meeting on Khitomer along with Ambassador Spock. Their runabout has also disappeared—at approximately the same time as your shuttle, from what we can tell.”

Klag leaned back in his chair and rubbed his bearded chin with his left hand.

Spock was a legend, of course, for his pivotal roles in both the Organian Peace Treaty and the Khitomer Accords, though the rumors about the Vulcan’s undercover work on Romulus led Klag to think the old ambassador had lost his sanity.

“There is more,” Talak said. “A Bajoran colonel named Kira Nerys and a Starfleet captain named Robert DeSoto have also disappeared—as have a trio of artifacts from the human homeworld. These are powerful devices from the Zalkat Union—and Ambassador Spock, Colonel Kira, Admiral McCoy, and Captain DeSoto all have had interaction with these artifacts.”

Though he’d heard of the Zalkat Union, he knew nothing of the artifacts Talak spoke of. “What are my orders?”

“It has been decided,” and Talak’s phrasing made it sound as if the decision was made over the general’s head and against the general’s better judgment, which pleased Klag no end, “to cooperate with the Federation on this matter. Therefore you are to rendezvous with a Starfleet ship and begin an investigation. The High Council will not lament the loss of a tedious lecture on pointless medical procedures, but it says little for the Empire if we cannot guarantee the safety

of three dignitaries of an allied power within our borders. This entire business has also thrown the Khitomer conference into disarray.”

“I’m surprised the Romulans haven’t insisted on sending a ship of their own.”

“The Romulans are just as happy to be rid of the Vulcan and your friend Worf,”

Talak snapped. “They have no interest in pursuing this.”

Klag thought it interesting that Talak referred to Worf—a member of the House of Martok, after all—in such a way. Martok was a very popular chancellor. To go against him at this stage was tantamount to suicide, and disparaging Worf publicly was an invitation to incur the chancellor’s wrath.

“The coordinates of the rendezvous and all the details about these missing artifacts are being transferred to you now. Command out.”

Talak’s face faded from the screen. Klag leaned forward and activated the intercom. “Bridge.”

“Tereth.”

“Commander, we should be receiving information on our new assignment, as well as coordinates for a rendezvous with Starfleet.”

“Coming in now, sir.” A pause. “We’re to meet with the Enterprise at Terra Galan in three hours.”

Klag blinked. He had expected the rendezvous to be somewhere closer. Terra Galan was a useless lump of rock, with no real significance beyond its proximity to the Federation/Klingon border. Neither government had even bothered to claim it. In any event, the Gorkon would barely make it at maximum warp. “Best speed to Terra Galan, then, Commander.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Out.”

He closed the connection, then once again leaned back. The Enterprise, he thought happily. It will be good to see Riker again. Over a decade earlier, Klag had served with Riker on the Pagh, as second officer to the human's first officer as part of an exchange program. They had formed a bond during the human's brief tour, and Klag considered Riker a true comrade-in-arms. Perhaps at last we will get to die together.

Klag read over the records that had been sent. The Malkus Artifacts were impressive devices. They had been found within Federation and Bajoran borders, as well as in the Demilitarized Zone between the Federation and Cardassia.

The assignment of the Enterprise made a certain amount of sense. They were still the cream of Starfleet's crop, and Riker's previous post to the Enterprise was under DeSoto on the Hood. Plus, of course, both ambassadors and Admiral McCoy had served on previous ships called Enterprise.

Klag did not know DeSoto, but he had met Kira Nerys at her command on Deep Space 9—and both of them were heroes of the Dominion War. Klag particularly remembered the Hood's 'sheroic efforts at Chin'toka. Both of them had been alone when they disappeared, the captain never returning to the Hood from a vacation on Earth, the colonel never returning to her station from a meeting on Bajor.

And then there was B'Oraq, his revolutionary physician. The woman who had convinced him to restore his two-limbed status, and also allowed him to try to regain his father's lost honor.

Klag, son of M'Raq, vowed that he would do whatever it took to find them.

When the Gorkon's beams deposited him, Captain Klag, and Commander Tereth in the transporter room of the U.S.S. Enterprise, NCC-1701-E, it was only the second time that Toq had ever set foot on a Starfleet vessel. And ironically,

the last one was also called Enterprise.

Toq was born on Carraya on a secret prison planet run by a Romulan and populated by the survivors of the Khitomer massacre and assorted Romulan guards. The two species managed to live in peace for two decades, some even having children—Toq was one such. It was not until the arrival of Worf, son of Mogh—then a Starfleet lieutenant—that Toq and the other children even knew what being a Klingon truly meant.

The prison planet was, as far as Toq knew, still there. He, Worf, and the others had sworn to keep Carraya's secret, which Toq was happy to do. He was eager to forget the place ever existed. He had been content on Carraya, but he had thrived once he came to live in the Empire. The House of Lorgh had taken him in—Lorgh himself had even made R'uustai with Toq, bonding the young man to the House. With the onset of the Dominion War, Toq had joined the Defense Force, and his position as a member of Lorgh's House enabled him to study to be an officer. He had risen quickly in a short time, culminating in becoming second officer on the Gorkon after he slew Lieutenant Kegren when the latter's incompetence endangered the ship.

Until now, though, even with the war, he hadn't set foot on a Federation starship since that day Worf brought him on board the previous Enterprise.

That occasion had been Toq's first encounter with humans, and he hadn't been impressed. Humans seemed—unfinished, somehow. As if the designers of their bodies couldn't be bothered to give them any actual distinguishing features.

Round tiny ears, smooth foreheads, uninteresting hair, skinny bodies—and they all looked the same.

Now three of them sat around a table, and the only way Toq could tell them apart

was that one of them had no hair. That had to be the famed Jean-Luc Picard. The other two were the captain's old friend Riker and the android Data, but Toq wasn't sure which was which. Supposedly the android was the paler one, but they were all so pale it was not really possible to distinguish.

Picard stood. "Captain Klag, it's good to see you again—I'm sorry it isn't under more pleasant circumstances."

"Such circumstances are difficult to come by, Captain," Klag said.

Gravely, Picard said, "Indeed." He indicated one of the other humans with his hand. "Of course, you know Commander Riker, and this is my second officer, Commander Data."

Good, Toq thought with relief. Data is the one with the yellow collar.

"Commander Tereth, my first, and Lieutenant Toq, my second," Klag said.

Picard nodded to Tereth. "Commander." Then he turned to Toq. "It's good to see you again, Lieutenant. I'm glad to see you're doing well."

"Thank you, Captain." Toq was surprised that Picard remembered him. It had been many years, and Toq had been but a beardless youth then.

As everyone took their seats, Klag asked, "Is there any new information you have?" Klag sat at the opposite end from Picard, with Tereth on his right and Toq on his left. That put Klag in an equivalent position at the table to Picard, which was only fitting.

The android replied. "Starfleet Command has conducted an investigation of both the Rector Institute and the Hood shuttlecraft's last known position. The evidence points to Captain DeSoto being responsible for the removal of the Malkus Artifacts from the institute."

Tereth bared her teeth. "So the captain has gone rogue."

"No," Riker said with conviction. "Captain DeSoto's one of the most stable

people I've ever known. He'd never do something like this willingly."

"You served with DeSoto, didn't you, Commander?" Tereth asked.

"Yes."

"Over a decade and a half ago? And have you seen him since the war?"

"What's your point, Commander?" Riker asked, folding his arms.

"My point," Tereth said, leaning forward, "is that humans are particularly susceptible to mental trauma following war. It is one of your species' unfortunate weaknesses. It is quite possible that he went mad."

Picard spoke before Riker could say anything. "The Dominion War was hardly the captain's first military engagement, Commander Tereth. And I don't see what is to be gained by assassinating the man's character. We're here to determine what happened, not why."

"I agree," Klag said, which earned him a look from Tereth. Turning to her, Klag continued: "Picard and Riker know DeSoto—I know them. Their word is enough for me."

Tereth smoldered, but said nothing.

A brief awkward silence was broken by the android. "There is a much more likely scenario, which relates to the Malkus Artifacts themselves. There is a fourth artifact still undiscovered: the one that can be used to control people's minds.

The range of the device is unknown, but it is not beyond the realm of possibility that exposure to the other artifacts made both Captain DeSoto and Colonel Kira—not to mention Admiral McCoy and Ambassador Spock—susceptible to it."

Toq spoke up. "In the records Command forwarded to us, there was mention of a Zalkatian archaeological dig begun a year ago on Beta Lankal. One of the records

there indicated that, when combined, the Malkus Artifacts become much more powerful. If someone has uncovered the fourth artifact, they may be using these thralls to bring them together.”

Data nodded. “That would fit the pattern, Lieutenant. May we see those records?”

Rather than answer, Toq turned to look at Klag—it was his decision, after all.

Klag nodded. “We will, of course, share all data.”

“Of course,” Picard said. “In addition to Starfleet Command’s scans on Earth and near Starbase 24, we’re awaiting a call from Deep Space 9 regarding their investigation into Colonel Kira’s disappearance. All that information will be sent over as soon as this meeting is finished.”

“Sir, if I may,” Data said. “There was a discrepant sensor reading in the data from Starfleet Command.”

Picard frowned. “Discrepant in what way?”

“I cannot say without further investigation.”

Tereth turned to Toq. “You shall also investigate this discrepancy, Lieutenant.”

Smiling, Klag said, “What is that human saying? ‘Two heads are superior to one’?”

Riker returned the smile. “Something like that.” Then he grew more serious. “I suggest we split up and do our own scans where the St. Lawrence and the shuttle carrying Admiral McCoy were last seen.”

“We should also officially declare the four vessels missing,” Tereth said, “if they haven’t been already. Even to civilian ships. Someone may come across them.”

Klag said, “I will also alert all Defense Force ships to search for these Malkus Artifacts. I understand they give off a particular emission?”

“Yes,” Data said. “Starfleet ships are under general orders to confiscate a

Malkus Artifact should they detect that emission.”

Riker rubbed his chin. “I think we might be better off making that a more active scan. General Order 16 says that if anyone happens to find it, they should confiscate it. Until we find out what happened yesterday, all Starfleet and Defense Force ships should be on the lookout for those emissions.”

Picard put his hand on Riker’s arm, a familiar gesture that Toq thought to be horribly inappropriate. “Good idea, Number One. Captain?” he added with a look to Klag.

“Agreed.”

Toq was about to speak with a thought of his own, but before he could, a female voice sounded from the intercom. “Vale to Picard.”

Picard tapped the communications device on the emblem attached to his chest. “Go ahead.”

“Incoming call from Commander Vaughn on Deep Space 9, sir.”

Turning his chair to face the viewer behind him, Picard said, “Put him through, Lieutenant.”

The viewer flickered, changing from a simple display to that of a human face. He looked just like all the others to Toq, though this one had a beard.

“Jean-Luc, we simply have to stop meeting like this,” the human said with a smile.

Toq shook his head. What is it about humans? Toq wouldn’t have minded their obsession with humor at odd times, if the attempts were actually funny.

“Such is the nature of our business, Elias, sad to say,” Picard said. “I believe you know Captain Klag?”

“Of course,” the human said with a simple nod to the captain, who returned the

gesture.

“What news do you have for us?”

“Nothing good, I’m afraid. There’s too much traffic between Bajor and the station to filter out the warp signature of the Rio Grande from all the other ships that went back and forth yesterday. We’re questioning some of the ship captains and going over the sensor data. That’s being forwarded to you. Oh, and we found an odd sensor reading that we haven’t been able to nail down.”

Picard nodded. “Starfleet Command found something similar on Earth.”

“In the meantime, I’m going to take the Defiant out to search the area, try to find the runabout’s warp signature. We’ll keep you posted.”

“Excellent. Picard out.”

At almost the precise moment that the screen went blank, the Vale woman’s voice came over the intercom again. “Bridge to Picard. Sir, we’ve got another transmission, this time from Commander Buonfiglio on the Hood.”

“Put it through,” Picard said.

Yet another indistinguishable human face appeared on the viewer.

“Captain Picard, I’m contacting you to let you know that the Hood is at your disposal.”

Frowning, Picard said, “I was told that the Hood was assigned to Sector 817.”

“We were, but I managed to talk Admiral Koike into cutting that assignment short. He then told us to contact you—said you were handling the investigation.”

The human’s eyes seemed to blaze with an almost Klingon-like fury that Toq admired. “That’s our captain who’s gone missing, sir. We’re not about to sit around mapping quasars. We want to help.”

Toq saw this as the perfect opening for what he had been about to say when Commander Vaughn called. “Sir, there is, perhaps, something the Hood might be

able to accomplish.”

All eyes at the table turned to Toq—even that of the human on the viewer. Toq turned to Klag, who nodded his approval for Klag to continue.

“It is possible that the location of the fourth artifact can be determined using the locations of the three previous artifacts as a base.”

The android pursed his lips. “All indications are that the artifacts were hidden at random points on the out-skirts of what was then Zalkatian territory, Lieutenant.”

“There still could have been a pattern—even an unconscious one,” Toq said stubbornly.

“It is worth looking into,” Tereth said, and Toq was grateful for the implied approval.

Picard nodded. “The location of the fourth artifact is a likely place for the missing people to have gone. Very well. Commander Buonfiglio, your assignment is to try to locate the fourth artifact.”

Data added, “You will need to compensate for stellar drift. The calculations will be imprecise, as we do not know the exact date when the artifacts were hidden.”

Buonfiglio smiled. “We’ll figure it out, Commander. And thank you, Captain. We lost a lot of good people during the war—including my predecessor as first officer. We’re damn well not going to let them take our captain from us, too. Hood out.”

Again, the screen went blank. Tereth gave Toq an approving look, which Toq basked in.

Passing an intense gaze around the table, Picard asked, “If there is nothing

else?” No replies were forthcoming. “Very well, then, let us make it so.”

It was even harder to get out of the irritatingly soft and decadent Starfleet chair than it was any of the chairs on the Gorkon. But somehow Klag managed it. And he didn't even stumble.

To Tereth, he said, “Wait for me. I will be along shortly.”

Tereth's eyes widened, but she said nothing and simply left with Toq.

As the three humans moved toward the other door, Klag said, “Riker. I would speak with you.”

Riker looked to Picard, who gave a brief nod. Picard and Data then exited, leaving Klag and Riker in the room together.

Smiling, Riker said, “Seems every time I see you, Klag, you've got a different number of arms.”

Klag returned the smile. “It is good to see you again, Riker—even if you insist on remaining beardless.”

“Same here, Klag.” Riker rubbed his smooth chin. “As for the beard—for the time being, at least, it's still a thing of the past.”

Throwing his head back, Klag laughed. “I will take that as an encouraging sign.”

“So where'd the arm come from?”

“I do promise, my friend, that when this is all over, I will tell you the full story over a case of bloodwine, but for now—Do you remember what I told you all those years ago on the Pagh about my father?”

Nodding, Riker said, “You said he was on Qo'noS. ‘Waiting for death.’”

“His wait is now over.” He held up his right arm. “This is all that remains.”

Riker started. “You mean—that's—” He shook his head. “I have to admit, Klag, I'm confused. That's not biosynthetic?”

Klag didn't even try to hide his distaste at the very thought. "Of course not. I would never attach a machine to my shoulder and call it my arm. No, I have decided to restore my father's honor in a way that he refused to: by living on in his son."

"An interesting solution," Riker said slowly. "How long have you had it?"

"Dr. B'Oraq performed the procedure approximately three weeks after the last time we saw each other." Klag placed his right hand on Riker's left shoulder.

"As I said, it is a long story—and if we survive this mission, I shall tell it."

Then he smiled. "And if we do not, we will at last have the chance to die together."

Riker's face split into one of those foolish human grins of his. "I look forward to either one, Captain."

"As do I, my friend—as do I." He let out a quick breath. "And now I must go. We have people to find—or perhaps their deaths to avenge. Either way, we go to glory. Qapla', Riker."

Riker nodded. "Qapla', Klag."

Klag left the observation lounge then, content. Riker was one of the few people who knew the whole story about M'Raq, and he deserved to know the details regarding his new right arm now.

He arrived at the transporter room to find Tereth and Toq waiting for him, along with the Enterprise's transporter operator and a security guard.

"Your business is concluded, Captain?" Tereth asked.

Klag simply nodded and stepped onto the platform. His first and second officer did likewise. To the operator, he said, "Energize."

Chapter Twelve

THE LAST OF MALKUS 'S SLAVES FINALLY ARRIVED .

Robert DeSoto had had the farthest to come, and the most to do before his arrival. His was by far the most important task: he had to bring the other Instruments.

Now he was here.

Now all the pieces would come together.

Now the campaign could truly begin.

Even Malkus's great power was limited, after all. He was able to control the entire population of Narendra III, but not the occupants of the ships in orbit as well. So he had several hundred Narendrans place themselves into confinement—an enclosed sporting arena on the planet's largest continent served the function; the thralls created a forcefield to keep everyone in—and then he loosed control of their minds.

Then he took command of the four Klingon Defense Force ships in orbit, as well as a human freighter that was bringing supplies of some kind.

Soon thereafter, Leonard McCoy and Spock of Vulcan arrived. They had had company in their conveyances—three drugged Klingons with McCoy and a Klingon and two humans, all victims of some kind of nerve damage, with Spock—and Malkus had them imprisoned in McCoy's conveyance, after having all the ship's power neutralized and a forcefield placed around it.

Kira Nerys arrived alone, and then, finally, DeSoto came with the other Instruments.

Malkus knew that the wind was blowing through this piece of a hill that had been excavated by the Klingons only because he could feel the wind blow through the hair of his four thralls, but he could not feel it himself. If his thralls were cold, Malkus did not permit them to show it. They simply stood obediently,

awaiting instruction, hands at their sides. In front of DeSoto was a sack containing the other three Instruments.

Bring them to me.

DeSoto picked up the sack and walked over to where his Instrument sat on the cold ground of Narendra III.

Put the Instruments together. Then my power truly shall be an awesome thing to behold.

Kneeling down, DeSoto fit one Instrument next to Malkus's. The two sides of the Instruments came together as if magnetized.

Malkus felt the power surge through him.

Then DeSoto fit another onto the side perpendicular to the one Malkus's Instrument was attached to. Again, they came together, and again, Malkus felt the power sing within him. Aidulac and her team had done their job so well.

Soon, his power would be all-encompassing. No one would be able to resist him—none could escape his mental domination; he could infect an entire world with the adrenal virus, not just a few hundred; and he could destroy suns with the beam of force.

The unthinkable happened when DeSoto moved to attach the final Instrument into the corner that would fill out the Great Rectangle. A much less pleasant surge went through Malkus—feedback on an incredible scale. If the other two attachments were like magnets coming together, the final Instrument repelled the other like magnets of the same pole.

Malkus had thought himself beyond feeling pain, but he was wrong.

That pain was transmitted to his thralls, as all across the planet and in orbit, thousands of beings screamed in agony.

The moment passed, then, and Malkus surveyed the ground before him. The four thralls had collapsed to the ground in great pain. One of them—McCoy—was frail and had difficulty getting back up, but the others rose to their feet with little difficulty.

Three-quarters of the Great Rectangle was assembled, at least. His powers had been boosted—his control was even greater. To test it, he infected all those imprisoned in the sports arena on the largest continent with the adrenal virus. They would die before long. In fact, knowing this species, they would probably react to the heightened adrenaline levels by massacring each other long before the virus did its work.

But something was wrong with the last Instrument. And he could not inspect it for himself.

Of his four thralls, only Spock had had any opportunity to study the Instruments, so Malkus instructed him to examine it. Malkus suspected that there was a flaw in it, since he had not been able to feel when that particular Instrument had been uncovered. According to DeSoto's memories, an Andorian named Tharia ch'Ren had used it to sow chaos in a then-disputed region of space.

Malkus wished he had been able to see the destruction that had been wrought in his name.

Spock hesitated. Examine the Instrument! Malkus mentally bellowed, and this time the thrall obeyed.

It was odd that the half-breed had been able to hesitate so. Malkus's control should have been complete. Perhaps that feedback was worse than he thought. . . .

"There is a flaw," Spock said, and with the halfbreed's eyes, Malkus saw that he was correct. There was a small opening in one of the corners of the Instrument, virtually undetectable unless one was actively seeking it out—he was glad he had

chosen the half-breed Vulcan, as his eyesight was superior to that of the two humans or the Bajoran.

Kira had a scanning device in her possession, and Malkus instructed her to use it on the Instrument.

As he had surmised, there was a component missing.

Unfortunately, a scan of DeSoto's memories showed that the human captain did not know precisely where the Instrument had been found. The best it could be narrowed down to was a particular area of space.

Worse, it was an area of space that was currently politically unstable: on the border between a once-great power that had recently lost a war and a still-great power that had won it.

He had to have the component.

Of the four thralls, Kira was by far the most skilled pilot, and she also knew the region of space well. He instructed her to take one of the conveyances—the one marked with the name St. Lawrence—and travel to that region of space to find the component.

A part of Malkus bridled under the delay, but it was a small part. Patience.

That was, and always would be, his greatest asset. He had waited this long, after all. The time it would take Kira to find the last component and complete the Great Rectangle was infinitesimal by comparison.

Soon...

A confusing mass of light and sound assaulted B'Oraq as she regained consciousness. Half-formed noises and blurred images started to slowly coalesce into something she could justifiably interpret as real or familiar—up to and

including a dull ache in the top of her skull.

I truly hate being sedated, she thought. The curse of being a physician was that she knew precisely what the drugs did to her and what the potential long-term effects were, so she was hyperaware of the precise damage to her bloodstream—and, thanks to the headache, her cranium—caused by the sedative that Admiral McCoy had given her.

McCoy. It was absurd on the face of it. Why would a century-and-a-half-old human in the middle of a shuttle journey from the base on Tynrok to Qo'noS subdue the doctor who had invited him in the first place?

“Are you all right, Doctor?”

Finally, B'Oraq focused on what it was her eyes told her, especially since she recognized the voice—which matched the face that stood over her prone form, looking vaguely concerned.

“Am—Ambassador Worf?”

“Yes.”

“What are you doing here? How did you get on board?” She sat up, which only made her headache worse. She had been lying on the very QongDaq that McCoy had been whining about.

“I do not know,” Worf said. “I was in a runabout en route to Khitomer when Ambassador Spock subdued me with the Vulcan neck attack. I awoke on this shuttle.”

“I need to check on the pilots—” She started to get up from the QongDaq, but Worf put a restraining hand on her shoulder.

“They are both fine—as are my pilots. They are attempting to dismantle the forcefield that surrounds the runabout.”

She got up anyhow, despite the ambassador's hand. “Where are we?”

“The shuttle’s systems are offline. However, according to the readings we have been able to obtain with hand scanners, we are on Narendra III.”

B’Oraq shook her head in confusion. “Narendra III? Why would McCoy bring us here?”

“I do not know,” Worf repeated.

“Didn’t Spock and McCoy serve together in Starfleet?”

Worf nodded. “For many years on the U.S.S. Enterprise.”

A half-remembered history course came back to her. “And the Enterprise was destroyed at Narendra III. Perhaps this is connected?”

“Unlikely,” Worf said. “The Enterprise that sacrificed itself on this world was not the same one that the ambassador and the admiral served on.” He took a breath. “If you are all right, Doctor, I will continue to aid the others in attempting to bypass the forcefield.”

“Of course. I’ll—I’ll help.”

B’Oraq had expected some kind of objection, but the ambassador simply nodded, and they both exited the aft chamber of Klag’s personal craft and went to the fore. She found herself admiring the ambassador. She had only met him once before, when the Gorkon brought him to his mission on taD, but she had had very little interaction with him then. He’s quite attractive, she thought. And if memory serves, his mate died during the war. Perhaps when this is over...

She cut the thought off, filing it away for later use, assuming they got out of whatever mess McCoy had put her into.

She saw her two pilots—Davok and G’joth—and two humans in Starfleet uniforms all bent over a console.

Upon Worf and B’Oraq’s entrance, the human male stood up. “The forcefield’s

definitely being powered from the outside, sir. And all this ship's systems are completely dead."

B'Oraq looked over at the viewport. She hadn't even realized that the only light source in the aft compartment had come from the viewport in there, and now she realized the same was true of the flight compartment up front. When night fell on Narendra III, they'd be plunged into darkness. Although, she thought, there was light in the corridor, too. She then inhaled; the air didn't seem to be stale. "Is life-support also cut off?"

G'joth said, "Yes, ma'am. However, the forcefield is air-permeable, and the rear hatch is still open."

That explained the light in the corridor—she had only to have looked behind her to have seen that.

"How soon until sunset?" Worf asked.

Davok answered. "Five hours."

Nodding, Worf said, "Then we have that long to come up with a way to overload the forcefield. I will need all the weapons on board this ship, and any handheld devices—scanners, communicators, anything with an independent power source."

"What are you planning?" B'Oraq asked.

Before Worf could answer, the human female said, "You want to try to create a pulse to knock out the forcefield?"

"That is my intention, Ensign McKenna."

Making a snorting noise, Davok said, "That may work on Starfleet forcefields, but these are Klingon fields. They are made of sterner stuff."

"I would suggest, bekk, that you hope your assumption is incorrect if you wish to get out of here."

Davok snarled, but said nothing.

The five of them worked, cannibalizing anything they could lay their hands on—even some of the dead equipment from the shuttle itself. B’Oraq’s medical equipment had been removed—along with the shuttle’s armory stores, though Davok, G’joth, and Worf all carried weapons on their persons that had not been taken—so she felt particularly helpless. Her technical skills were nonexistent—that’s what engineers were for. Her only use would be if someone was injured. And then what? I can tell them to put pressure on their wound or watch helplessly if they need more than that. I have no bandages, no scanners, no alcohol—

Suddenly, a thought occurred. She went back into the aft compartment, and found what she had hoped would be under the QongDaq: half a case of bloodwine.

Worf had followed her. “What did you find?”

“Bloodwine. I’m attempting to assemble what medical equipment I can, and this is the closest to a disinfectant we have.”

The ambassador looked pensive. “We may be able to use that as well—for weaponry.”

B’Oraq frowned. “You’re going to drink your enemy to death?”

“No.” Worf almost smiled.

He was remarkably taciturn for a Klingon. She wondered why that was. A by-product of living among humans, no doubt, she thought. Having lived among them herself during her time at Starfleet Medical, she knew how fragile they could be—most were physically incapable of handling Klingon passion.

He continued. “Have you ever heard of a human weapon called a Molotov cocktail?”

“Uh, no.”

“It involves lighting a fire on a rag attached to the neck of a bottle of alcohol.”

Understanding, B’Oraq nodded. “Of course. You get a fire grenade.”

“Of sorts, yes. Since we have needed to use the weapons to power our—device.”

Now B’Oraq smiled. “‘Device’?”

“We have yet to come up with a name for it,” Worf said dryly. “Lieutenant Falce wishes to call it ‘Fred.’”

“As good a name as any,” B’Oraq said with a shrug.

“I prefer more—direct terms.”

“Yes, but ‘forcefield overloader’ doesn’t have much poetry to it.”

“True. Shall we return to the fore?”

“I will be right there,” she said. “I want to see if there is anything else I can use in case someone—”

A scream came from the fore compartment.

B’Oraq sighed. “Gets hurt.”

Both doctor and ambassador ran back up front to find the human male—what was his name? Falce?—on the deck convulsing.

The woman—McKenna—said, “There was feedback— somebody didn’t align the circuits properly.” This last was said with a look at Davok.

Predictably, Davok responded by unsheathing his d’k tahg. “Are you accusing me of something, human?”

B’Oraq knelt down beside Falce. He was a young human of considerable height for his species—which made him average by Klingon standards—with close-cropped black hair. At present, all that hair was standing on end, thanks to the shock he’d received. B’Oraq felt naked without her scanner, but the galvanic response of Falce’s skin was already lessening. She suspected this was an intense, but brief, surge of electricity through his system.

“What—what—what—what happened?” Falce managed to ask.

“This idiot didn’t align the circuits the way he was supposed to,” McKenna said.

“That is enough, woman!” Davok cried, and lunged at McKenna with his blade.

G’joth made no move to stop him, but simply stood smiling.

Worf started to move to intercept the bekk, but before he could, McKenna herself deflected the attack and, in one smooth motion, relieved Davok of his d’k tahg.

Then she twisted his arm around to his back, immobilizing him. It looked to B’Oraq like a poorly executed mok’bara maneuver—probably something from some human martial art.

Then she threw Davok to the floor. G’joth bent over, picked up Davok’s d’k tahg, and handed it to his fellow bekk with a smile. “I think you dropped this, Davok.”

Growling, Davok snatched the blade and started to get up, when a deep voice rang out in the shuttle.

“Enough!” It was Worf. “If you wish to squabble like children, do it another time! We have work to do!” In a quieter voice, he said to Davok, “If you wish to challenge Ensign McKenna, do so after the crisis has passed. But not now.”

“When a woman spreads lies, there is always time for a challenge!”

Worf then grabbed Davok by his chestplate and pulled him close with one hand.

With the other, he held the device that they had been working on. B’Oraq hadn’t even noticed Worf picking it up.

“You were aligning these circuits when I went aft moments ago. They are now misaligned, and Lieutenant Falce is injured. Did she spread lies or simply state facts?”

Davok’s face contorted, but he said nothing.

Worf let go of him and turned to B’Oraq. “How is he?”

“I think he’ll be fine.” B’Oraq hoped her voice carried more confidence than she felt. “He needs to take it easy for a bit—and stay away from any live current—but he should recover.”

“Good.” He turned to the others. “We will finish this so we can overload the forcefield and leave this shuttle. Then we will find who has done this to us and we will defeat them. Personal issues can wait. Am I understood?”

“Perfectly,” G’joth said jovially and with a large grin.

“Understood, sir,” McKenna said.

Davok said nothing. Worf turned to him. “Am I understood?”

“You don’t have any authority over me, petaQ. You are a traitor to the empire twice over who gave up a life of glory to be an ambassador of fools. I will not follow your orders.”

“Very well,” Worf said.

Then he reached into an inner pocket of his jacket, took out a tiny hand phaser, and fired it on Davok, who collapsed to the deck.

B’Oraq dashed over to the fallen bekk. “It was on stun,” Worf said. The doctor checked Davok over and saw that he showed all the outward symptoms of a phaser blast on the stun setting—which meant that he’d sleep not-very-peacefully and wake up at some point in an even worse mood.

But that was for later. “I take it,” she said, “that you figured stunning him was better than his getting in the way?”

Worf nodded. “Something like that.”

“Good plan,” G’joth said. “Davok is not a true warrior. He is simply a boor.

Shall we continue working? I believe we should start by realigning these circuits.”

“I like that plan,” Falce said, sitting up and moving over to the workstation

they had set up. Looking at Worf, the lieutenant asked, “By the way, Mr. Ambassador—how many weapons you have on you?”

Again, the not-really-a-smile. “Enough.”

While the quartet worked, B’Oraq picked Davok up—not making any effort to be gentle—and laid him down on the QongDaq in the rear. With the power out, she couldn’t seal the room, but at least he’d be out of the way there.

“Doctor,” McKenna said when she came back to the fore, “this thing is set to give off a level-four nelaron pulse. Will that have any negative impact on us?”

B’Oraq thought a moment. “For how long?”

Falce said, “As long as it takes to bring the forcefield down.”

Closing her eyes, B’Oraq juggled figures in her head. Then she opened them. “At level four, we should be fine as long as you don’t go over five minutes.”

G’joth laughed a hearty laugh. “That is hardly an issue. This thing will burn out after three minutes.”

“In that case, Ensign, I’d say no negative impact whatsoever.” B’Oraq smiled.

A few minutes later, Worf announced that they were ready. B’Oraq noticed that the phaser Worf had used on Davok was now part of the device, as well.

McKenna placed the device—which looked like nothing else to B’Oraq but a piece of surrealist sculpture she’d seen on Earth—next to one of the bulkheads. The forcefield went all around the ship, so the device could apparently be placed anywhere.

“Activating nelaron pulse—now.”

On now, McKenna touched a control. A low-level hum started to build in intensity.

Forcefields were generally only visible when they were interfered with: when

they turned on, when they were turned off, and when someone or something touched them. So when B'Oraq saw a flicker in the field, she felt a similar flicker of hope.

Then the forcefield crackled and went offline.

Half a second later, the device that they had constructed exploded in a shower of sparks and a small fire.

G'joth immediately reached for the fire extinguisher that sat under the copilot's seat and used it to put the small fire out. The chemicals probably weren't good for the device, but an explosion was far worse.

"Well, the good news," Falce said, "is that we got the field down. The bad news is that there's no way in hell we'll be able to reconstruct this thing—and we lost some of our most potentially useful equipment—including all our weapons."

B'Oraq smiled grimly. "Isn't there some kind of human expression about lemons and lemonade?"

"What is a lemon aid?" G'joth asked. "For that matter, what is a lemon?"

"A foul drink made from a foul fruit." With a more playful smile at McKenna and Falce, B'Oraq added, "No surprise from a race that can't even handle bloodwine."

"Hey, I like bloodwine just fine, thanks," Falce said, returning the smile. "It makes a dandy lubricant when I have engine trouble."

"Enough," Worf said, though in a gentle voice. "Let us see what we can find outside." He turned to B'Oraq. "Doctor, it might be best if you remained behind."

"I can take care of myself, Ambassador. And I want to know what is going on here, and I can't very well learn that sitting here."

"You are just a doctor," G'joth said dismissively.

"I can use my d'k tahg just as well as you can, G'joth. Better, probably, since

I'm trained in, shall we say, surgical strikes?"

McKenna snorted. Falce tried to hide a grin.

G'joth stared at her for a second, then burst into laughter. "Very well, Doctor.

We shall face—whatever it is that has taken us together."

Nodding, Worf said, "Let us proceed."

B'Oraq was glad no one had argued. On top of everything else, she had no desire to be alone in the shuttle when Davok woke up.

Worf led them out through the open—and now usable—rear hatch. Behind him were Falce and McKenna, then B'Oraq, with G'joth bringing up the rear.

PAIN!

The moment they were all out of the shuttle, she felt intense pain in her skull that made her earlier headache seem meaningless.

As she fell unconscious for the second time in as many days, she decided that staying in the shuttle might not have been such a bad idea. . . .

Chapter Thirteen

COMMANDER TEREETH GAZED OVER THE BRIDGE of the Gorkon and was content.

She had requested this posting the instant she knew that it was available.

Tereth had gone far in her career because she had always had a good instinct for picking winners. It had been a necessary survival skill. The House of Kular was not an especially powerful one when Tereth was a girl, and she was the only child left. Her parents had hoped she would mate well and bring the House glory that way, but she had been mated twice to men who subsequently died before they had a chance to forge a path of honor that would bring Kular to greater glory.

But neither of those mates had made her crest ache. They were adequate par'machkai, but nothing spectacular.

So, though her doddering father was the ostensible House head, she took over running the House herself—behind the scenes, of course, since women were not permitted to be House heads without special dispensation from the High Council, which Kular was hardly in a position to get.

When Gowron—an outsider and political agitator—campaigning to be considered a worthy successor to the aging Chancellor K'mpec, Tereth had insisted that Kular back him, even though Duras—a councillor from a most influential House—seemed the favorite. Her parents had argued, but she insisted. Besides, their debts were huge, their prospects growing dimmer with each turn. They had very little to lose.

Sure enough, Gowron eventually became chancellor, Duras died in disgrace, and the House of Kular reaped the benefits. Gowron forgave many of Kular's debts, paved the way for others to be easily repaid, and also sponsored Tereth's application to become an officer in the Defense Force.

Since then, she had flourished. She had served with Captain Akhra when he took the Cardassian world of Hranish. Given the opportunity to serve directly under General Talak, she chose instead a less prestigious post with Captain Huss as part of the general's armada. Once again her instincts proved prophetic: Huss was soon inducted into the Order of the Bat'leth, then went on to win several major campaigns against the Dominion.

Her crest ached again when she encountered Klag on Qo'noS when the latter was recovering from Marcan V. She kept an eye on him, and he soon was given one of the mighty Qang-class ships. He, too, was destined to join the Order, and within a month of his shakedown cruise, he had an opening for a first officer and no viable candidates on-ship.

As with so many others Tereth had chosen as patrons, Klag seemed odd on the face

of it. He had served on the Pagh for an absurdly long time without promotion or attrition, and even though he was rewarded for his actions on Marcan V, he was also given no say in his own command crew. His exploits to date were satisfactory, but he had won no great victories, defeating only simple foes—Kreel, Kinshaya pirates, jeghpu'wl' rebels. Still, Tereth's instincts had not failed her yet.

The Gorkon pilot, a newly assigned youth named Vralc, recently promoted to lieutenant and still with a sad excuse for a beard dirtying his face, said, "We are at the last known position of the captain's shuttle, Commander."

"Full stop." Tereth strode to her position on the captain's right. To Toq, who stood at the operations console behind the captain's chair, she said, "Report."

"I am picking up the shuttle's warp signature, Commander," Toq said. "Its heading is 156 mark 7—right on course for Qo'noS. They were traveling somewhere between warp five and warp seven-point-five."

Tereth nodded and turned to Vralc. "Set course 156 mark 7, execute at warp five."

Vralc acknowledged the order and set a course.

"Toq, inform me if the warp signature changes."

Within a few minutes, Toq said, "Warp signature lost, Commander."

That was fast, Tereth thought. "Feed the coordinates where you lost it to Lieutenant Vralc. Bring us to that position and then full stop, Lieutenant."

Both Toq and Vralc acknowledged and carried out their orders.

At the coordinates, Vralc said, "All stop, Commander."

Tereth got up and walked over to the operations console. "Toq?"

"I have the signature, Commander." He looked up from his readings. "The heading

is 211 mark 1.”

Vralk turned around to look at Toq. “That brings them right to the Laktar system.”

Tereth blinked. The Battle of Laktar was one of the more vicious skirmishes of the Dominion War. Captain Huss’s fleet had arrived at the tail end of it, but the battle was over by then: it was a victory for the Empire, but the radiation that infused that system from the sheer volume of destroyed ships made any kind of sensor scan impossible.

Anticipating Tereth’s question, Toq said, “The warp signature goes right through the radiation, Commander. We cannot track them any farther.”

Tereth muttered a curse.

“Something else, Commander,” Toq said. “The discrepant reading that was found on Earth and Bajor is also here. It was not present when we first encountered the shuttle’s warp trail, but it is here now.”

“Have you determined what that reading is?”

Abashedly, Toq said, “Not yet, Commander.”

Tereth kept her smile to herself. Toq took great pride in his work, something Tereth had done her best to encourage. He had the makings of greatness in him.

“The next time I ask that question, Lieutenant, I expect a different answer.”

“Yes, sir!” Toq said.

Leaving Toq to his work, Tereth walked over to the helm control. “Vralk, project the shuttle’s course ahead. I want to know all the possible places they could have gone.”

Vralk punched up a display on his console. “I am afraid that list is very long, Commander.” Tereth was pleased that Vralk had already projected the course, but had not been foolish enough to volunteer the information before Tereth was ready

for it. “The course takes them directly through the Ch’grath Stellar Cluster.”

Tereth growled low in her throat. Vralk said, “Commander, I—”

She waved him off. “It’s not your fault, Vralk.” She bared her teeth. “If my displeasure was with you, you would not be able to apologize.”

“Yes, sir,” Vralk said quickly. The boy had only been assigned to the Gorkon for a week. He will learn the protocols soon enough, she thought, or he will be reassigned. She smiled, remembering Bekk Kelad’s thoughtless burst of laughter at Captain Klag’s unfortunate—and temporary—difficulties adjusting to his new limb. Tereth had thought her captain to be courageous in putting his own ability to fight over outmoded medical practices and allowing Dr. B’Oraq to give him a new limb. An adjustment period was to be expected, and it hadn’t affected his ability to lead them so far. If it did, Tereth would deal with it, as any first officer would—and as long as it didn’t, any who dared to mock the captain would pay for it.

Kelad certainly had been paying. His assignment to waste extraction was not due to end for another two months.

Since Toq was occupied with his sensor sweeps, Tereth went directly to the ensign at the communications console to Toq’s left. “Send to all ships, planets, and outposts in the Ch’grath cluster to be on the lookout for the captain’s shuttle.”

“Yes, sir,” said the ensign.

Again, Tereth looked around the bridge. Vralk kept the ship in position for Toq to make his sensor sweeps. Next to Toq’s operations station, Lieutenant Rodek stood impassively at the gunner’s position, presumably ready to go into battle if needed. Behind the two of them, the four gunner positions sat empty for the

moment. The other secondary stations remained staffed and occupied.

At this point, Tereth realized, she needed to inform Klag of their progress.

Until Toq found something substantial—or something else happened—there was nothing more to be done without orders from her commander.

“You have the bridge, Toq. I will be with the captain.”

Toq’s head was pounding when Tereth walked up behind him.

“Lieutenant, why are you still here?”

Toq looked around the bridge. He was currently sitting at one of the two science consoles, taking advantage of its ability to do more in-depth study than the more general applications of his operations station. Ironically, it was the same post on the bridge that he had served at when he came on board the Gorkon—and from which he warned the second officer, Lieutenant Kegren, that there might be an explosive device in the debris of a Breen ship. Kegren ignored this warning, and the ship was almost destroyed by such an explosive. Toq challenged Kegren, with Klag’s support, and defeated him; Klag rewarded him with the post of second officer.

As he looked around, he realized that none of the same people were on the bridge anymore—aside from himself and Tereth. He checked his chronometer and saw that his shift had ended almost half an hour earlier. Since he had been in charge of the bridge, he should have noticed that. And, for that matter, noticed Tereth returning from the captain’s office. . .

“I have not yet determined what this sensor reading is, Commander,” Toq said in answer to the first officer’s question.

“And you will not if you die of starvation. You have not eaten since you came on-shift, and you are of no use if you collapse from hunger. Go eat.” Toq

started to object, but Tereth didn't give him the chance to speak. "You have been staring at those waveform patterns for over an hour, Lieutenant. You need a distraction. This is not a request."

Tereth had an odd style of giving an order in such a way that it felt like she was doing you a service by giving it. Toq wasn't sure how she did it, but he found himself getting up from the science console and exiting the bridge via the turbolift.

He was late for the evening meal, but since tonight was B'Elath's turn to sing the traditional song before dinner, Toq didn't consider that a hardship. B'Elath always sang the dreadful "Campaign at Kol'Vat," and always sang it very badly. She finished the song just as Toq walked in. She had ended on the tenth verse instead of singing all fifteen, which no doubt pleased all the inhabitants of the mess hall.

Toq grabbed a plate of pipius claw and bregit lung, then tossed some gagh into a bowl, grabbed a mug and poured it only half full of bloodwine—he was going right back on duty after dinner—and went to sit with Rodek and Vralc.

As he sat, Toq asked, "Why do we keep letting that woman massacre that awful song?"

"You mean she has done that before?" Vralc asked with revulsion.

Rodek nodded. "Many times."

"And she has not been killed to spare our ears the damage?"

Toq laughed at the young pilot. "Not yet, no."

"I do not know if you've noticed, Toq," Rodek said, "but every time she sings before dinner, the next day we are victorious in battle."

Frowning, Toq said, "That is ridiculous."

“It is the truth.” Rodek ate a piece of skull stew, but kept talking as he chewed. “The first time she sang was the night before we arrived at taD and destroyed those rebel ships. The second time, we engaged those marauders on Galtra the following day. The third—”

“You are right,” Toq said, as he thought back on their missions. Then he smiled.

“No doubt it is better to die gloriously than to risk hearing her sing again.”

All three shared a laugh at that, though Toq noticed that Vralk’s laugh was strained. “I suppose that bodes well for my abilities.”

Swallowing his bok-rat liver, Vralk asked, “How?”

“I will soon determine who our foe is, and we shall defeat them tomorrow.”

“So you haven’t unlocked the secrets of the sensor reading?” Rodek asked before sipping his own mug of bloodwine.

“No,” Toq said with annoyance. “Commander Tereth ordered me to get dinner.”

Muttering into his liver, Vralk said, “That is all she does is give orders.”

Rodek barked a laugh. “She is the first officer, fool. Giving orders is her duty.”

“Her duty is to find a mate and provide him with sons.”

Toq rolled his eyes. Vralk was the third pilot they’d had on the Gorkon since Lieutenant Leskit was rotated back to the Rotarran, and each one made Toq miss the old toDSaH even more. Leskit had been a fine dinner companion and a good comrade. Vralk was the latest in a series of idiots Command had sent to poorly fill his boots.

“Feel free,” Toq said, “to challenge her authority, Vralk. I am sure she could use the d’k tahg practice on your hearts.”

Rodek joined Toq in a laugh. Rodek, Toq noticed, had lightened up considerably these past few months. When Toq first signed on, he would happily have taken the

humorless gunner's life as he had Kegren's, but Rodek had shown signs of acquiring both a sense of humor and a zest for life. He still performed his duties as gunner with all the passion of dead racht, but he did his job well.

Vralk, on the other hand, looked like someone had poisoned his bok-rat liver.

"Laugh all you wish, but we could not possibly have a less worthy first officer than a woman."

"Spoken like someone who never served under Drex," Rodek said, wiping grapok sauce off his face with his sleeve.

At that name, Vralk's eyes grew as wide as saucers. "The son of Martok? You served with him?"

"He preceded Tereth as first officer," Toq said as he chewed on his pipius claw.

"The captain had him transferred off the ship as fast as he could."

"Then the captain is a fool," Vralk said unhesitatingly.

Vralk had spoken just as Rodek was sipping his bloodwine, and the gunner gave out a bark of laughter that caused the wine to spill all over the table. Rodek set the mug down and said, "Perhaps you should challenge the captain, then, since you think him to be so—unworthy."

At that, Vralk squirmed. "Well, no, but—Drex is the son of the chancellor! He deserves respect!"

"Respect must be earned, boy," Rodek said.

"And your commanding officers deserve respect, as well," Toq added. "Klag and Tereth have led us well, and you will find no one on this ship to support your cause."

"Really?" Now Vralk sounded more sure of himself. "You mean to tell me that all twenty-seven hundred warriors on this ship support a captain who mutilates his

body and a female first officer?”

Toq looked at Rodek. “He sounds like a Ferengi, doesn’t he?”

“Laugh if you want,” Vralak said. “But if I did challenge the authority of those in charge, do not be so sure that I would be acting alone.”

With that, Vralak swallowed the last of his liver and got up and left.

Rodek laughed as heartily as he ever did. “Yet another fool pilots the ship. I never thought I would wish for Leskit’s return.”

Toq, however, did not return the laugh. “Is he truly a fool, Rodek?”

“Of course he is. Only a fool would challenge Klag—they’d be dead before they could get near him.”

“On the bridge, perhaps. But what of the troops? The engineers? We do not know their thoughts.”

Polishing off his bloodwine, Rodek said, “Troops are loyal to their commanders unless given good reason not to be. Has Klag given such a reason?”

“His arm.”

Rodek snorted. “He has made himself a better warrior. Don’t tell me you believe that stupidity about ‘hiding the scars of battle.’”

“No,” Toq said quickly, and he meant it. On Carraya, he had grown up with Romulan medicine. Indeed, the one aspect of life in the Empire that Toq did not appreciate was the appalling state of Klingon medicine. One of the many reasons for his contentment on the Gorkon was the fact that their physician studied in the Federation. “But if a young fool like Vralak believes it...”

Rodek looked sour—or, rather, more sour than usual. “I will speak with Lokor.”

Lokor was the head of on-ship security, and generally knew everything that occurred on the Gorkon. Rumor had it that he was also with Imperial

Intelligence, but Toq had always discounted those rumors. Surely there was an II

operative or two on the ship, but Toq doubted that II would place someone in so obvious a position as security. Indeed, Toq suspected that Lokor himself spread those rumors for his own purposes.

“And what if Lokor is one of the people who is against the captain?”

“Then I will kill him,” Rodek said simply. “And anyone else who is disloyal.”

Toq dropped some gag into his mouth. As they wriggled down his throat, he said in as grave a tone as he could muster, “And I will help you.” He wanted Rodek to know he was serious. Toq felt more at home on this ship than he had anywhere else since he left Carraya, and he would not let a young petaQ like Vralk ruin it.

Klag was on the holodeck, about to commence his first bat’leth drill since getting his new arm, when the call from the bridge came.

“We are receiving a hail from the Enterprise , Captain.”

That was Toq, Klag noted, still on duty. The young second officer had taken a dinner break, but otherwise refused to rest until he determined what the odd reading was at the shuttle’s divergent point. Every resource of the Gorkon’s considerable sensor power had been trained at this region of space, thus far to no avail. But Klag had confidence in the young man.

“I will be right there. Summon Commander Tereth as well.” A pause. “Progress, Lieutenant?”

“All I have been able to determine, sir, is that there are some superficial similarities between this energy reading and the one given off by the Malkus Artifacts.”

“Which tells us nothing we do not already know,” Klag said as he shut down the

holodeck.

“No, sir.”

“Continue scans. Out.” He let out a breath. In a sense, he was grateful. He had been hoping that B’Oraq would be present for his first drill. If the call from the Enterprise was good news, perhaps they’d rescue her before he’d have the chance to engage in the drill, and she could indeed be there for it.

Klag didn’t bother changing into uniform, since he didn’t want to keep Picard and Riker waiting, so he went to the bridge dressed only in mok’bara clothes—a tight-fitting white cloth shirt and pants.

Ensign Morketh, currently staffing the gunner position, gave Klag an odd look as he entered. The look was mostly directed at the captain’s shorter, lighter, squatter right arm, which was more visible in the mok’bara shirt than it was in his more elaborate uniform.

“Speak, Ensign Morketh,” Klag said.

Morketh seemed surprised at the instruction. “I—have nothing to report, sir.”

“Good. Mind your post, then.”

“Yes, sir,” he said quickly.

“Enterprise standing by,” Toq said. Klag nodded in reply.

Tereth—in full uniform—entered the bridge a moment later. As she did, Klag sat in his chair—as usual, falling rather than sitting with his arms. “Screen on,”

Klag said to Toq.

The bridge of the Enterprise replaced the starfield on the main viewer. Picard and Riker were present, with Data and a Trill female visible in front of them, and a human female behind them.

“Progress, Captain Picard?”

“After a fashion, Captain Klag. We’ve picked up the St. Lawrence’s warp

signature, but it takes it to the Ch'grath Stellar Cluster. There are hundreds of possible destinations.”

Klag filled Picard in on their own discoveries. “It seems likely that both ships are going to the same place.”

“The question being where.”

“We have found the same peculiar reading that was at the other sites, as well.

The reading does not appear until right before my shuttle changed course. Thus far, we have only been able to learn that it is similar to the Malkus Artifact energy.”

“That was true of the St. Lawrence as well, and Mr. Data’s conclusions were similar.”

Klag wondered if Toq took any pride in the fact that his accomplishments were the same as those of Starfleet’s legendary android officer.

Speaking of whom, Toq said, “Sir, we’re receiving a message from the U.S.S. Musgrave.”

On the viewer, Riker frowned. “If memory serves, the Musgrave was the ship that took Ambassador Worf from Qo’noS to Starbase 24.”

“Tie the communication in, Lieutenant,” Klag said.

The viewer went to a split-screen image, with the much smaller bridge of the Musgrave now occupying the right-hand side, and the Enterprise bridge confined to a smaller space, focused on Picard, on the left-hand side.

The Musgrave captain, a round, blocky human with thick black hair and an indeterminate neck, said, “This is Captain Dayrit of the Musgrave. I see I got both of you—good, saves me from having to call you both.”

“I am Klag of the Gorkon. You have something to report, Captain?”

“Yes—we’re on our way to an emergency in the Trivas system, so we can’t investigate this ourselves, but—we found the St. Lawrence while en route to Trivas. It’s headed toward the Dorvan system.”

Tereth started. “That’s in the old Federation/Cardassian Demilitarized Zone.”

“And, ironically, one of the subjects of discussion at the Khitomer conference,” Picard said with a nod.

Riker added, “It’s also not especially close to the Ch’grath cluster.”

Dayrit let out a breath. “As I said, we’re answering an emergency call, or we’d investigate it ourselves.” He made some kind of odd human noise. “Now I’m sorry I didn’t take the time out to drop the ambassador off at Khitomer.”

“I doubt that would have made a difference, Captain. We’ll investigate this further.”

“Thanks, Captain. Captains,” he amended with a nod to Klag. “Musgrave out.”

The screen returned to just the image of the Enterprise.

Tereth walked over to the pilot’s station. “Vralk, set course for the Dorvan system, maximum warp.”

“Yes, sir,” Vralk intoned.

“Ensign Perim,” Riker said with a smile, “do likewise, if you please.”

“Aye, sir,” the Trill said.

“When will we arrive?” Klag asked.

“Six hours, ten minutes at warp nine,” Vralk said.

Klag looked at his first officer. “Impress upon Commander Kurak the need for warp nine-point-eight. And have the cloaking device standing by.”

Tereth smiled. “Of course, Captain.”

As the first officer headed for engineering, Riker said, “You’re gonna beat us there by a couple of hours, Captain. More if your first officer is a good

impresser.”

“She is,” Klag said with a grin.

“Our chief engineer is something of a wiz himself, so it might be less. We’ll see.”

“We will,” Klag said, trying not to smile at Riker’s use of the word wIj.

Somehow, he didn’t think Riker meant to say that the Enterprise chief engineer was a farm. “But I’m sure our mighty vessel can handle one Starfleet runabout without your aid. We shall see you there.”

“Indeed,” Picard said. “Enterprise out.”

Chapter Fourteen

KIRA NERYS GATHERED EVERY BIT OF WILLPOWER she possessed and instructed her right arm to touch the control on the runabout console before her that would bring the St. Lawrence out of warp and discontinue its journey to the former DMZ.

Her right arm remained where it was.

I will not succumb to this.

Once, two years earlier, Kira had willingly allowed her body to be a vessel for the Prophets in order to aid in the coming about of the Reckoning. But she had spent her life in devotion to the Prophets and was more than happy to give herself over in service to them.

She was considerably less willing to do so for a ninety-thousand-year-old tyrant.

It had started on the way back from a committee meeting at the Chamber of Ministers. The Defiant had returned from its mission to Trill, so Kira had left Vaughn in charge while she went through her least favorite chore: chatting with

politicians.

The meeting started an hour late, went on for two hours longer than it should have, and accomplished absolutely nothing of substance. Mentally exhausted and physically restless, Kira boarded the Rio Grande, looking forward to a very long bath.

So when she found herself changing the runabout's course toward Klingon space, she was rather surprised.

That surprise increased when she tried to stop herself, but her body no longer responded to any mental directives. As she got closer to her destination—Narendra III, based on the course she'd laid in—her control lessened. Even such simple functions as blinking and swallowing were out of her purview.

She remembered the Malkus Artifact that Orta had found six years ago, of course, and had heard that another one was found in the DMZ a few months later, though she had chosen not to dwell on it much in the ensuing years. Thinking of that just reminded her of the Odyssey and its crew, and of sitting helpless in the Orinoco while she watched a Jem'Hadar ship do a suicide run into the Galaxy-class vessel's deflector dish, annihilating both the ship and its crew.

Kira hated being helpless.

With every fiber of her being, she fought Malkus's influence.

With every fiber of her being, she failed.

Yet, she kept trying, even as Malkus had her get into the St. Lawrence—the runabout that had brought Ambassador Spock to Narendra—and take it to the former DMZ to try to locate the missing piece of the third artifact. Kira had no idea why she had been sent in this ship rather than the one she had arrived in—perhaps Malkus couldn't tell the difference between the two ships, which

were, after all, virtually the same.

The runabout came out of warp in an area of interstellar space. It was here that the Hood and the Voyager had first detected the third Malkus Artifact on the Maquis ship Geronimo, and it seemed as good a place as any to start the search. Except Kira didn't wish to search for the component. She wished to open a hailing frequency, to bring the St. Lawrence to DS9 and then take the Defiant to Narendra III, along with any other ship she could corral, and blow Malkus into his component atoms with the Defiant's considerable weaponry.

She gathered every bit of willpower she possessed and instructed her right arm to touch the control that would open a hailing frequency.

Her right arm moved toward the comm panel.

I've done it! Kira thought with surprise. She opened a channel.

Then she tried to talk, but found that she could not.

However, even opening the channel was a small victory. It would serve as an additional beacon to her location, and maybe—just maybe—someone would notice. Of course, given what this region of space was like these days, that “someone” could be anyone from a clappedout Cardassian military ship limping on its last antimatter pods to Yridian privateers to Ferengi merchants to civilian supply ships. But getting in touch with anyone was a bonus at this point. Someone needed to be informed about what Malkus had done on Narendra.

Then a sensor alarm went off. She looked up to see a Klingon vessel decloaking.

No! They've found me! Malkus had apparently sent one of the Klingon ships in orbit around Narendra to tail her under cloak, and stop her if she threw off Malkus's control.

That doesn't make sense. Why not send them in the first place?

Look at them. That's one of those new Chancellor-class ships. That would draw a lot more attention than a little runabout. Malkus probably kept it around in case of emergencies.

Stop talking to yourself and do something!

Kira raised the shields and armed the phasers. She did that, not Malkus. Another victory. She also recognized the ship: the I.K.S. Gorkon, commanded by Captain Klag. She directed her hail to them—but she was still unable to make her voice work.

Well, the hell with it—it's not like I have anything to say to them anyhow.

She fired phasers.

Then the ship hailed her. "Attention runabout. This is the I.K.S. Gorkon. If you do not lower your shields immediately, we will fire upon you."

Gee, Klag, thanks for the warning.

Wait a minute. Why would they give a warning? That doesn't make sense.

She tried to lower the shields, but this time she couldn't. Malkus was attempting to reassert his control.

You've spent enough time in my head. Get out!

Then the Gorkon fired on her.

She had no idea if it was her will or Malkus's that made her take evasive action, and ultimately it didn't matter. The one goal she and Malkus shared was a desire to keep her body intact.

However, her maneuver came too late. The blast didn't penetrate the shields, but reduced them to a mere ten percent.

She continued the evasive maneuvers, laying down covering fire.

Covering fire, right. I'm about as overmatched here as our old Bajoran sub-impulse raiders were against Cardassian warships.

Then again, we beat them eventually.

After several decades.

I have got to stop talking to myself.

The Gorkon fired again, though this time with a beam at a much lower power level. It was just enough to wipe out the runabout's shields.

They want me alive.

Why do they want me alive?

She got up and went back to the aft compartment to get a phaser.

As she did, her mouth almost fell open from the shock. "How did I—?"

Then she grinned. She had control of her movements and her voice. She could still feel Malkus's presence in her mind, but it was not as strong. Maybe he's got limits. Maybe I'm out of his range. Or maybe I'm just better than him.

"Whatever," she said aloud, reveling in her ability to do so once again.

"There's no way I'm letting him take me back."

The next step was expected. She felt a transporter beam start to envelop her. It was neither the raw pins-and-needles sensation of Deep Space 9's Cardassian transporter nor the gentle vibration of a Federation transporter. In fact, it didn't feel like much of anything.

A moment later, she was standing in a darkened room full of Klingons, all pointing weapons at her. She counted five aiming at her, with another one behind the transporter console. She didn't recognize any of them, but the one time the Gorkon had been to DS9, Kira had met only the ship's captain.

Kira pointed her own phaser at the tall one who moved toward her as she materialized. "You're not taking me back to Narendra."

This seemed to confuse the Klingon, whose hair was waist length and in a series

of intricately tied braids. “You have been to Narendra recently?” The Klingon had a surprisingly pleasant voice.

This did confuse Kira. “You didn’t follow me from there?”

“I’ve never even been there, Colonel. Now lower your weapon, or I will order my people to open fire on you. Disruptors do have a setting that leaves the victim alive, but it is not nearly as—bloodless as your Federation’s ‘stun’ setting. I do not recommend it.”

Kira hesitated. It could be a trick, she thought. But then, what possible reason would this Klingon have to trick her?

She lowered her weapon. “How did you find me?” she asked, noting that, though the lead Klingon did likewise, the other four did not.

“The captain can explain that.” He touched the communicator on his wrist. “Lokor to bridge. We have the Bajoran.”

“Bring her to the wardroom,” came a deep male voice that Kira recognized as Klag’s.

Lokor nodded to the quartet of warriors, who finally lowered their weapons. Then he turned to Kira. “Come with me.”

Klag sat in the wardroom and listened to Kira Nerys’s tale. With him were Tereth and Toq and, on the viewscreen, Picard, Riker, and Data. Upon learning that Kira had come from Narendra III, Klag had immediately had Vralk set a course for that planet. Once the St. Lawrence was taken on board and placed in the Gorkon’s shuttlebay, they proceeded at warp nine-point-eight, with instructions to Commander Kurak to attempt a greater speed.

The Enterprise was, of course, alerted, and they too had changed course. Indeed, they had only been twenty minutes away when Klag had contacted them. “Told you

our chief engineer was a wiz,” Riker had said with one of his human grins.

“One last thing,” Kira said after telling her story. “Malkus couldn’t control the entire planet, and the ships in orbit, so he had a large chunk of the population imprison themselves somewhere. Once Captain DeSoto started putting the artifacts together, Malkus gave the prisoners the disease that the first artifact gave off. If we don’t get back to Narendra soon, those prisoners will die.”

There was a pause. Finally, Picard said, “You did well, Colonel.”

“Thank you, Captain, but it wasn’t easy. If you don’t mind my asking, how’d you find me?”

“The St. Lawrence was listed as officially missing,” Tereth said. “You were sighted by a Starfleet ship that couldn’t stop to investigate. When we arrived we found a Bajoran in a runabout last known to have a Klingon, two humans, and a Vulcan/human hybrid.”

Riker smiled. “Needless to say, that set an alarm bell or two off.”

“I can—” Kira hesitated, then shook her head. “Dammit. I think Malkus is starting to reassert himself.”

Toq said, “The only tales of Malkus using this artifact involve him controlling people on a world where he was present. His range may not extend this far.”

“Bajor is farther from Narendra III than the region where Colonel Kira was found,” Data said.

“Yeah, but I wasn’t fighting him tooth and claw on Bajor,” Kira said grimly. “He caught me off guard. I may have just worn him down.”

“Earth is even farther away, yet Captain DeSoto was sufficiently enthralled to steal the artifacts,” Data added, sounding nonplussed. Klag had heard that the

android was emotionless, so this almost petulant tone was something of a surprise.

Tereth bared her teeth. “While I am sure he is a fine leader, Captain DeSoto is not a warrior.”

Klag nodded. Unlike Klag, Tereth had never met Kira, but they both knew her reputation.

“And for all we know,” Picard said, “DeSoto is fighting control just as hard.”

Klag smiled at Picard’s attempt to come to the defense of his friend. “Such speculation, however, is irrelevant for the moment. Colonel, how many ships are defending Narendra III?”

“I’m not sure. At least three were in orbit when I took the St. Lawrence out, but there could have been more. And there was a civilian ship. I wasn’t exactly in a position to do a full scan. But all those ships were under Malkus’s control.”

“Understood. Captain, I suggest we rendezvous at the Narendra system’s Oort cloud. We can survey the system from there, then plan our next move.”

Tereth cast a disdainful glance at the viewer. “There is only one next move, Picard—to attack this Malkus and destroy him, so we can rescue those he has enslaved and cure those he has infected.”

“Yes, but Picard is right,” Klag said. “We need to reconnoiter before charging in.”

“Of course,” Tereth said, conceding the point.

“Have you made any progress regarding the sensor readings, Captain?” Klag asked.

“No.” Picard spoke with a certain amount of annoyance.

“Nor have we, though Lieutenant Toq has, at least, eliminated several possibilities. We will send you what we have done so far.”

“We will do likewise.”

“Good.” Klag stood up. “We are due to arrive at Narendra in seven hours. We shall speak again then. Gorkon out.”

Kira stood up as the viewer went blank. “Captain, I think it might be best if I was sedated in your medical ward.”

“You anticipate Malkus reasserting his control?” Tereth asked.

“He might. And if he does, he’ll know everything I know. That’s too much of a security risk, if we’re going to catch him off guard.”

Klag considered. “A wise move. My physician is, of course, not available,” he said with a wry smile, “but I’m sure her nurse can handle so simple a task as administering a sedative.” Klag opened the door to the wardroom and said to one of the guards posted outside, “Take the colonel to the medical ward and have Nurse Gaj attend to her.”

The guard nodded and Kira headed toward the door.

As she reached the threshold, Tereth said, “Colonel?”

Kira turned around.

“Should we live through this, I would be honored if you would share a drink with us. There is a song you might wish to hear.”

Kira frowned. “Really?”

“We do not often immortalize our defeats, but—after the war, a song was written called ‘The Battle for Deep Space 9.’ It was about Gowron’s failed attempt to take your station four years ago. The third verse is primarily about you and the way you slew ten warriors in your operations center while mortally wounded.”

Kira gave her an odd look. “Actually it was only five, and the reason it wasn’t more was because the fifth one stabbed me, but—” She broke into a smile. “Thank

you, Commander. I look forward to hearing it.”

Toq also stood up. “With your permission, Captain, I will transmit data to the Enterprise and see if theirs is of any use.”

Klag dismissed him with a nod. Once he departed, Klag was left alone with Tereth. She had a look on her face that Klag had learned to recognize over the past few months. He was also quite sure that Tereth herself didn’t realize that Klag could read her so easily. “You are concerned?”

Tereth looked up suddenly in surprise. Klag hid a smile.

“Picard is known for many things,” she said after a moment’s hesitation.

“Warfare is not among them. In single engagements, he has performed well, but—I am not sure how useful an ally he will truly be if we have to go into battle against multiple Defense Force ships.”

“I think,” Klag said, “the person who twice drove back Borg invasions of the Alpha Quadrant and liberated Betazed from Dominion control is someone I am proud to have by my side.”

“He turned back the Borg because he used their assimilation of him against them—that is not an advantage he will have today. He liberated Betazed with the aid of four other vessels, including that warship of theirs, the Defiant.”

Before Klag could respond to that, Tereth held up a hand. “I’m not saying he is not a worthy ally, Captain, but I do think that you should take the lead.”

Klag stared at his first officer for several seconds. He wondered if she was attempting to curry favor with him or if she truly believed what she said. Or, perhaps, both. She had been a superlative first officer—though anyone would have been an improvement on Drex—but she also had far more ambition than Klag was always entirely comfortable with.

“Perhaps you are right,” he finally said. “But Picard has been commanding

starships since before either of us was born. I would no more presume to lead him into battle than I would Chancellor Martok. However,” he added, standing up from his chair, “I will not defer to him, either. This mission has been a cooperative effort from the beginning. If we learned nothing else from the war, Commander, it is that a united front is strongest.”

Tereth smiled. “Which applies to arms as well as battles, it would seem.”

Frowning, Klag asked, “What do you mean?”

“You just rose from the chair without stumbling, Captain. Congratulations.”

Klag turned around and stared at the chair. He hadn’t even thought about it. He was too busy focusing on what he was saying to Tereth. . . .

He threw his head back and laughed. Then he turned to his second-in-command.

“May it be the first victory of many this day.”

The second time B’Oraq awoke from unconsciousness in Klag’s shuttle was much worse than the first. For one thing, where McCoy had apparently gently laid her on the QongDaq, whoever their latest attacker was had simply tossed her unceremoniously onto the deck of the fore compartment. For another, this time the headache extended to her feet.

Once again, she awoke to Ambassador Worf’s face, and once again he asked, “Are you all right, Doctor?”

“No. My head feels like a targ’ srunning loose in it. What happened?”

Worf helped her to her feet. B’Oraq noted that G’joth was still unconscious and propped up against one of the bulkheads, and McKenna and Falce were standing and rubbing their temples, looking like they were in considerable pain.

“We were victims of a telepathic attack,” Worf said. “Our captor rendered us

unconscious, placed us back inside the shuttle, and reactivated the forcefield.”

B’Oraq tugged on her braid. “I assume that we won’t be able to cobble together another miracle device to wipe out the forcefield?”

“No.” Worf masked his anger well, but B’Oraq could feel the undercurrent in his voice. She found it oddly appealing.

“So what do we do now?”

Falce muttered, “Panicking might not be a bad idea.”

“Oh, cut that out, Matt,” McKenna said. “There’s got to be a way out of this.”

A voice came from the still-open rear hatch. “Perhaps there—there is.”

B’Oraq turned to see a Vulcan male standing on the other side of the hatch.

After a moment, she realized that it was Ambassador Spock. After another moment, she remembered what Worf had told her.

“Are you responsible for this?” she asked.

“Not—as such, no. I do not have much time. Malkus will reassert his control over me—soon.”

Falce frowned. “Who’s Malkus?”

“A—tyrant from many millennia ago. Are you familiar—with Starfleet General Order 16, Lieutenant?”

B’Oraq knew nothing of the regulation, of course, but Worf immediately said,

“The fourth artifact?”

Spock nodded. “It was unearthed—here. Apparently, my exposure to—to one of the other artifacts made me—susceptible to Malkus’s control. Three others—Dr. McCoy, Colonel Kira Nerys, and Captain Robert DeSoto—are also enthralled. And, Ambassador—I must apologize for my actions against you, Lieutenant Falce, and Ensign McKenna. I was—not in my right mind at the time.”

“How are you able to resist now?” Worf asked.

“I am—not sure. Possibly because my brain chemistry has—changed since I encountered the first artifact—when I died and was reborn on the Genesis Planet.”

“Of course,” Worf said matter-of-factly, as if people talked about being resurrected every day. B’Oraq looked at both of them as if they were insane. McKenna saw the look, and gave the doctor a smile. “Trust me, this sort of thing is normal for those two,” she said in a whisper. “Read any six random captain’s logs for any ship named Enterprise, and you’ll see what I mean.”

“Malkus sent me,” Spock continued, “to place you back in the shuttle and—reactivate the forcefield. I must—return soon or he will notice—that I have taken too long—or that his control is not what it should be.”

Falce started fidgeting. “So why don’t you just deactivate the forcefield?”

“Great idea, Matt,” McKenna said. “Then we can get zapped again.”

“The ensign—is correct. I had hoped that another—possibility might present itself.”

Spock, B’Oraq noticed, was giving Worf what seemed to be a very significant look. Is this some kind of diplomat code or something? she thought.

Then she recalled her studies of Vulcan anatomy—particularly as related to the Vulcan brain. “You’re suggesting a mind-meld, aren’t you?”

“I am—not, no,” Spock said. “However, it would—be a useful tool for allowing two of us to resist—Malkus’s control.”

Worf stepped forward. “I will volunteer.”

“I don’t like this, Mr. Ambassador,” Falce said. “I’m not so sure he should be trusted.”

“Perhaps,” Worf said. “But I would be the most—logical choice. I was the first

to recover from the psionic attack earlier, and I have felt no ill effects from it. You are still obviously in pain, as are Dr. B'Oraq and Ensign McKenna—and G'joth is still unconscious.”

B'Oraq hadn't realized that her headache was so bad that the ambassador could see it in her face. “I agree with Ambassador Worf,” she said. “His quick recovery makes him the best choice. It means he's more likely to be able to retain his own self, and not be lost in the melding.”

Spock regarded B'Oraq. “You are—familiar with the mind-meld?”

She smiled. “I studied medicine at Starfleet Academy. It included a primer on the medicinal applications of psionics, particularly as related to Vulcans, Betazoids, and other telepathic races.”

“Indeed. We are—fortunate, then, that you are here to monitor.”

“I'm not sure how much I can monitor without equipment,” B'Oraq said ruefully, “but I will try my best.”

The Vulcan ambassador removed a control from the folds of his robes and pressed a button on it. The forcefield fell and he stepped inside the shuttle. “We must—we must hurry. I can feel myself beginning to lose control once again.

Malkus has—spread himself fairly thin, which has—aided in my ability to resist.

But that ability—may weaken without the extra support—from Mr. Worf's mind.”

Turning to Worf, B'Oraq put a hand on his arm. “Have you ever experienced a mind-meld before?”

“No.”

“It can be a very—overwhelming experience. Try to focus on one particular thing—a favorite song, a face, an image, anything—before you start. Use that as a mental anchor.”

Worf nodded. “I understand.”

I hope so, she thought.

“Are you—are you ready?” Spock asked.

B’Oraq took a look at the older ambassador and thought that question applied more to him. He looked horrible; the strain of trying to resist this Malkus person’s control was obviously wearing on him. She hoped that this worked, because if it didn’t, Spock would be in Malkus’s thrall again, and they’d be back stuck in the shuttle with no way out. Or he might just decide we’re better off dead....

In answer to Spock’s query, Worf simply said, “Yes.”

I don’t like this, B’Oraq thought. Usually the participants have some time to get ready—a half an hour at least, especially if Spock is going to attempt a meld as deep as I think he’s going to.

Spock stood face-to-face with Worf and placed his fingers on the areas of Worf’s face that were closest to the neural pathways to the cerebellum.

“My mind—to your mind. My thoughts—to your thoughts. Our minds—become one...”

Chapter Fifteen

YOUNG WORF STOOD IN THE DOORWAY of his ancestral family home on Vulcan. His father, Sarek, demanded to know where he’d been.

“I have been in the mountains,” Worf said.

“You are not to travel to the Llangon Mountains,” Sarek said.

Confused, Worf started to say that Father had taken his brother Sybok to the Ural Mountains only last week.

“Come,” Sarek said. “It is time.”

Young Spock stood in the doorway of the Rozhenko home in Minsk. His adoptive

father, Sergey, demanded to know where he'd been.

"I have been in the mountains," Spock said.

Father laughed. "We just went to the Ural Mountains with your brother Nikolai last week."

Confused, Spock started to say that Father had forbidden him travel to the Llangon Mountains.

"Come," Sergey said. "It is time."

(My mind...)

"Oh, look, it's the little human boy!"

"Stinking half-breed!"

"Why don't you go back to Earth?"

"You're not a real Vulcan!"

Young Worf was angered at the insults the other Vulcan children threw his way.

He wanted to kill them all—it wasn't his fault that Mikel had died. He hadn't sufficiently restrained himself in the soccer game, but it wasn't his fault that their collision resulted in a broken neck!

"My God, he killed him!"

"Murderer!"

"Mikel's dead!"

"Klingon savage!"

Young Spock was confused at the epithets the human teenagers on Gault threw his way. He wanted to fight back—it wasn't his fault that his mother was human and that he couldn't be like the other, full-blooded Vulcans.

(...to your mind...)

“Why do you reject the ways of logic, brother?”

Sybok smiled indulgently at Worf’s question. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

“Vulcan is your home, even more than it was ever mine!” Worf cried.

“You have made this your home,” Sybok said, putting a hand on Worf’s shoulder.

“But I never truly belonged here.”

With that, Worf’s half-brother turned on his heel and left the house at ShiKahr.

Worf would not see him again until many years later while serving on the

Enterprise....

“Why are you leaving Starfleet Academy, brother?”

Nikolai smiled indulgently at Spock’s question. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

“You belong here, even more than I do,” Spock said calmly.

“No, this is where you were meant to be,” Nikolai said, putting a hand on

Spock’s shoulder. “But I never truly belonged here.”

With that, Spock’s foster brother turned on his heel and left the grounds of the

Academy. Spock would not see him again until many years later while serving on

the Enterprise....

(...my thoughts...)

Images of K’Ehleyr’s broken, bloody form filled Worf’s head as he lunged at Jim

Kirk. As they tumbled, Worf wrapped the ahn-woon around his old friend's neck.

He had failed with the lirpa, but he would not fail now. As he lifted Kirk off of him and all but dragged him to the coal fire, his mind was ravaged with but one thought: K'Ehleyr will be mine forever! The needs of the Pon farr would be fulfilled.

Kirk made a last, desperate lunge, which saved him from the heat of the coals, but Worf never lost his grip on the ahn-woon. The light died in Jim Kirk's eyes.

Victory was his....

Images of T'Pring's serene face filled Spock's head as he lunged at Duras. Spock deflected Duras's tik'leth strike with his bat'leth.

He had failed to save T'Pring from Duras, but he would not fail now. As he parried another tik'leth strike and then moved onto the offensive, his mind was ravaged with but one thought: T'Pring will be avenged! The right of vengeance would be fulfilled.

Duras made a last, desperate parry, but it did him no good. Spock knocked him to the ground and then slammed his family's bat'leth into his enemy's chest. The light died in Duras's eyes.

Victory was his....

(...to your thoughts...)

There were many days in Worf's life that he would have defined as happy, though he doubted he would have admitted it aloud to anyone. But to stand there on Vulcan's Forge and to marry Saavik right there with T'Lar officiating and all of his crewmates from Deep Space 9 present was one of the moments he would treasure

until the day he died....

There were many days in Spock's life that he would have defined as happy , though he doubted he would have admitted it aloud to anyone. But to stand there in Quark's bar and to marry Jadzia right there with Sirella officiating and Sarek, McCoy, and Uhura present was one of the moments he would treasure until the day he died....

(...our thoughts...)

It was small comfort as Worf stood there in the caves beneath Romulus, but at least Jean-Luc Picard was there by his side—his lone support when he was discommendated from the Klingon Empire.

* * *

It was small comfort as Spock stood there in the Great Hall on Qo'noS, but at least Jean-Luc Picard had been able to mind-meld with Spock—his last connection to his now-dead father, Sarek.

(...are becoming...)

Worf had thought that studying Kolinahr on Vulcan would be the answer to what had ailed him since the Enterprise -D was destroyed on Veridian III. But then came the siren call of V'Ger, and he knew he had to go back.

Spock had thought that studying under the clerics at Boreth would be the answer

to what had ailed him since he resigned from Starfleet at the end of the Enterprise 's five-year mission. But then came the orders to report to Deep Space 9, and he knew he had to go back.

(...one.)

The news that Jim Kirk had been lost on the Enterprise -B to some kind of energy ribbon had saddened Worf more than he thought it would. At least Kirk had sacrificed himself to save the people of Bajor....

The news that Benjamin Sisko had been lost in the fire caves on Bajor had saddened Spock more than he thought it would. At least Sisko had sacrificed himself to save the el-Aurian refugees they'd rescued....

"It is done."

B'Oraq stared at Worf and Spock. They'd only been "connected" for a minute or so, though it had felt like hours. "Are you both all right?" she asked.

Spock nodded. "I am well. I cannot feel Malkus's influence."

"Good," B'Oraq said.

Worf also nodded. "We shall have to hope that we will be able to continue our resistance."

"Great," McKenna said, stepping forward, "let's go, then."

"No," Spock said, putting a hand on McKenna's shoulder, "you must stay here. As soon as you leave this shuttle, you will once again be attacked by Malkus's psionic blast."

"The ambassador is correct," Worf said. "Logically, the best course of action

would be for you to remain here.”

“Agreed,” Spock said.

It took all of B’Oraq’s willpower to keep from laughing. Worf was now standing in a much more relaxed posture than usual, with his arms resting in front of him in a serene manner. In other words, the body language of a Vulcan. Spock, on the other hand, was like a coiled spring. He no longer had the haggard look he had come in with, and he seemed ready to attack at a moment’s notice.

Spock turned to Worf. “I don’t suppose you have any weapons?”

“No,” Worf said. “We were forced to cannibalize all of our weapons in order to overload the forcefield earlier.”

“A wasted effort,” Spock said with disdain. “Our tactical position is much weaker.”

“It was our best course of action at the time,” Worf said calmly. “What kind of resistance can we expect?”

“Most of the planet’s population has been mentally enslaved by Malkus. He could, in theory, turn them all against us.”

One of Worf’s eyebrows rose. “Then we shall have to use guile.”

“So it would seem,” Spock said.

“Indeed.” Worf turned to McKenna. “Ensign, remain vigilant. I will take Davok’s communicator and use it to contact you should we feel that it is safe.” McKenna was the only one of the two Starfleet officers who still had a combadge, since Falce’s was used for the device.

Impatiently, Spock said, “Let us go.”

“Qapla’,” B’Oraq said.

“Good luck,” Falce added.

Again, Worf raised an eyebrow. "I do not believe in random chance."

This time, B'Oraq couldn't hold in her laugh.

"I did tell you, did I not?" Rodek said to Toq. "B'Elath sang that wretched song yesterday, and today we go into battle."

Toq looked up at Rodek. It took him a moment to focus on the gunner's presence, much less what he had said. He had been completely focused on the energy readings that he'd been studying for so many hours now. Stealing a glance at the chronometer on his console, he saw that it was time for the morning duty shift, which meant Rodek was reporting back to the gunner's position. In theory, Toq would have been doing so now as well, had he ever actually departed the bridge since returning here after last night's dinner.

"Oh, yes, of course," he said distractedly. "B'Elath."

"You've been on duty all night?" Rodek asked. The question was asked matter-of-factly.

"Yes. I still have not learned what these strange emissions are."

Rodek took up his position to Toq's right at the gunner's station. Toq was back at his operations console, since the ship was on alert status as they headed to Narendra.

"Take heart, Toq," Rodek said as he checked over his own console. "The famous android of the Enterprise has not figured it out, either. In fact, there is still the chance that you may find it first. That is a victory worth celebrating."

Toq laughed bitterly. "At this point, I would be just as happy if he did find it—just so it would be found."

"Interrogations are always easier when you know that the subject will talk

eventually.”

“Good point,” Toq muttered. “The universe is usually much more reluctant to talk than your average prisoner.”

Tereth walked by just then. Toq had been worried that she might reprimand them, but she said, “The universe is not our prisoner.”

Rodek regarded her. “Are you saying that we are prisoners of the universe, Commander?”

“We are Klingons,” she said quickly and with a menacing undertone, “we are no one’s prisoner. We bend the universe to our will—which is why we will always be victorious. We do not succumb.”

Toq entered a new scan into his console. “I wish the universe was our prisoner right now.” He laughed. “In the old days, we could use the mind-sifter on—” He cut himself off. “toH!”

“What is it?” Tereth asked.

“Computer!” he bellowed, not answering the first officer directly. “Call up complete specifications for a mind-sifter.”

A security override flashed in front of him. Viewing such files required a clearance he didn’t have.

“Why do you want to know about mind-sifters, Lieutenant?” Tereth asked in her most serious tone. “They were banned by the Khitomer Accords.”

“Yes, but if I’m right, those readings are similar to the emissions given off by a mind-sifter.”

Rodek gave him a look. “Mind-sifters don’t give off emissions.”

“Everything electronic gives off an emission of some kind. You just have to know how to look for it.” Toq did not look at Rodek as he replied, as he was still

looking at Tereth. “Please, Commander, I think this is it.”

“Since such knowledge is restricted, how did you even know to recognize a possible connection?”

Toq had been hoping the commander wouldn’t ask that. “I cannot say, Commander, except that I gained the knowledge before I joined the Defense Force.” That much, at least, was true. Living in the House of Lorgh for four years had been a—complex experience, to say the least.

Tereth gazed at Toq for three seconds with an impenetrable expression. Then she looked up. “Computer, grant Lieutenant Toq access to mind-sifter files, by authorization of Commander Tereth.”

The computer recognized her voice pattern and the screen showed what Toq had asked for.

“Thank you, Commander,” he said, gazing hungrily at the readings. “If I am right, this may be the solution to our problems.”

“What problems?” Rodek asked.

“Colonel Kira told us that Malkus was able to take over the minds of the entire population of Narendra III. If we can identify how he controls people, we might be able to defend against it.”

Toq then studied the readings. The waveforms were very similar, as he had thought, but...

“Commander,” he said, suddenly looking up at Tereth, “permission to contact the Enterprise. I would like Commander Data to verify this and confer with him on a possible solution.”

“Granted.”

Within minutes, Data’s face occupied the bridge’s viewer, and Toq had filled him in. Tereth had, in the meantime, left Toq in charge of the bridge while she

briefed the captain.

“An interesting theory, Lieutenant,” Data said with enthusiasm. “However, we do not have any records of the mind-sifter apparatus, as your government never shared them with us.”

“I am sending along the relevant portions of the schematics now,” Toq said; having anticipated this request, he had partitioned out the portion of the schematics that dealt specifically with the emissions. Even the famed android wouldn’t be able to construct a mind-sifter with the limited information Toq was transmitting, so there was no security breach. “It is a very close match.”

“Datalink established,” Data said, looking down at his console. “Information incoming.” He looked up. “If I may ask, Lieutenant—what led you to this train of thought?”

“An accident,” Toq said with only mild embarrassment. Several chuckles went around the bridge, prompting Toq to add, “Most of the greatest discoveries ever made were accidents.”

“Indeed. Zalkatian ruins have been found on many Klingon worlds over the centuries. It is possible that the mind-sifter was created from technology adapted from one of those sites.” Something grabbed his attention on the console. “Data transfer complete. Accessing.” A pause. “I believe you are correct, Lieutenant.”

The screen changed to a more general view of the bridge in response to another speaker: Picard. “What does this mean in practical terms, Commander?”

Data turned to face his captain, leaving his back to the viewer. “I believe that we can modify the tractor beams of both the Enterprise and the Gorkon to emit a psilosy-nine wave that matches the amplitude and frequency of the energy

emissions from Narendra III.”

Klag chose that moment to walk on the bridge, Tereth behind him. “You’re assuming, Commander, that such emissions are coming from Narendra.”

“Yes,” Data said, turning back to the viewer, “but it is a reasonable assumption under the circumstances.”

“Can’t we make a portable psilosynine wave guide?” Toq asked. “Then we could bathe individuals in the frequency—it would modulate their electroencephalogram to make them resist Malkus’s control.”

Klag smiled at his second officer before taking his command chair. “That would give us the advantage we need.”

“Agreed,” Picard said. “Mr. Data?”

“It can be done, sir. I believe that Commander La Forge and I can replicate such a device by the time we reach Narendra.”

“Good,” Klag said. “Then, when we arrive at the Oort cloud, you can beam over here and test it on Colonel Kira. If it frees her from Malkus’s control, then it will work.”

Picard nodded in agreement. “Make it so, Mr. Data.”

Getting up from his station, Data said, “Aye, sir,” and moved out of the viewer’s range.

“We will speak again when we arrive, Captain Picard,” Klag said. “Screen off.”

Toq deactivated the viewer. Then he looked up to see Klag smiling at him from his command chair. “Well done, Lieutenant. A true warrior goes into battle with the proper weapon—and you may have given us the best possible one.”

Beaming with pride, Toq said, “Thank you, sir.”

Rodek leaned over. “And if we live this day, we will celebrate your victory over the android.”

Laughing, Toq said, “Oh, the bloodwine will flow very freely tonight!”

Vralk was late for his shift. He had overslept, like a fool. It was all well and good to think poorly of one’s commanding officers, but it was better to proceed from a position of moral certitude. If Vralk was to get any kind of support from the crew for his planned overthrow of the Gorkon command structure, he’d need his own record to be above reproach.

Today, in fact, was when he intended to begin his campaign. He’d spent his time aboard getting the lay of the land, and he knew that there needed to be a change.

Vralk’s father had raised him to be a better Klingon than one who simply stood by and let such deterioration of values go unchallenged—unlike Toq and Rodek. And Vralk knew that there simply had to be others who supported him. Lokor, for one. He was a Housemate of Vralk’s, so he knew—

“Vralk! I will speak to you!”

The deep voice that halted Vralk in the corridor was Lokor himself, the chief of security for the Gorkon. Vralk had always admired Lokor growing up.

“It is good to see you, Lokor, but I am late for my shift, and—”

“Then be late.”

Finally, Vralk realized just how furious Lokor was. His black eyes smoldered, his long, elaborately braided hair seemed to cover his head in a black flame, and all his teeth were bared. If it were anyone else, Vralk would fear that he’d be challenged. “What is it, cousin?”

Lokor spit. “Cousin—pfagh! You are no cousin of mine, you are an idiotic petaQ of a child!”

Vralk found his mouth falling open in shock. “I—I don’t understand!”

“What kind of idiotic things are you saying to the rest of the bridge crew, boy?”

“I—”

Lokor leaned in close. Vralk could smell the raktajino and gag on his breath, and he imagined he could hear the blood roaring in Lokor’s veins. “I just had a talk with Lieutenant Rodek. He wanted to know if there was dissatisfaction with Captain Klag in the ranks. If there was concern about having a man such as him in command and having a female as his first.”

Vralk let out a breath in relief. “I assume you told him the truth, cousin.” He turned to continue walking toward the bridge, assuming Lokor would accompany him. “You of all people know that this kind of perversion has to be stopped before—”

His words were interrupted by Lokor’s meaty hand punching him in the back. Vralk stumbled forward onto the deck. Lokor then picked him up and slammed him into the bulkhead.

“I—I don’t understand,” Vralk managed to cough out. It was suddenly very difficult to breathe. “You—you grew up with—with Grunnil just as—as I did! You’re the only thing that has made assignment to this cesspool tolerable!”

“In that case,” Lokor said—and now he was smiling, but it was a smile that filled Vralk with tremendous dread—“this cesspool is about to get much much worse.” He leaned in close, his arm pressing Vralk against the bulkhead, making it even more difficult to breathe. “Understand something, Vralk. You’re only still alive right now because of me. And the only way you’re going to stay alive is to—”

Vralk knew where this was going. “Betray Grunnil’s teachings?” He couldn’t

believe that a Klingon was saying these words to him.

“No, toDSaH—the only way for you to stay alive is to get off this ship as fast as you can. Trust me, you will find no allies to rally to Grunnil’s antique causes here. You’re in the real world now, boy, and it’s time you acted like it. Trust me—keep your head down, your mouth shut, and I will see to it that you are transferred before your hearts become targets for d’k tahg practice.”

With that, Lokor stood up straight, relieving the pressure from Vralk’s chest. However, since that was also all that was holding him up against the bulkhead, he fell to the deck.

“This is the only warning you’ll get, boy. And do not expect being part of my House to protect you any further.”

Lokor walked back down the corridor the way he had come. Vralk coughed once and struggled to his feet.

As he now ran to the turbolift, he thought, This place is worse than I imagined. My work is cut out for me. . . .

No, I cannot afford to be the idiot Lokor thinks me to be. I am in no position to effect change—yet. I must be patient. He entered the turbolift. I shall take that transfer, and work my way up the ranks. Eventually, I will be able to show everyone what it truly means to be Klingon.

Kira was having a strange dream.

She was walking all over Deep Space 9, but it had been abandoned. Yet every once in a while, out of the corner of her eye, she saw someone familiar. First there was her father. Then Commander Vaughn. Then Kai Opaka. Then Quark. That led her to run into Quark’s Bar, where she found Jake Sisko, Odo, Morn, and both Jadzia

and Ezri Dax all drinking through straws from a vat of kanar.

Jadzia looked at her and said, “Colonel, you awake?” But she said it in a man’s voice.

Then the bar started to congeal and melt into an amalgam of random colors and lights that, after a second, coalesced into the more familiar sight of the Gorkon medical ward.

The last conscious thought she remembered having was the unpleasant face of Nurse Gaj standing over her. Now, though, there were four different people gazing intently at her. She knew all of them: Klag and Toq from this ship and Data and Geordi La Forge from the Enterprise. In fact, in her dream Jadzia had spoken with La Forge’s voice.

“You all right?” La Forge asked.

What is going on here? “I’m fine—I think.”

Toq asked, “Do you feel the influence of Malkus?”

Kira was about to instinctively answer in the affirmative when she realized that, in fact, she didn’t feel Malkus at all. She hadn’t noticed it until Toq mentioned it, but—“No, he’s—he’s gone.” She broke into a smile. “It’s nice to have my head to myself.”

“It worked!” Toq said.

“What worked?” Kira asked.

Klag smiled. “You, Colonel, are the beneficiary of the genius of the other three men in this room. We have found a way to combat Malkus’s telepathic influence.”

“That’s the good news,” La Forge added.

Frowning, Kira asked, “What’s the bad news?”

“We are presently in the Narendra system’s Oort cloud,” Klag said. “Sensors are detecting seven Defense Force ships and one Federation civilian ship in orbit of

Narendra III—and they are in defensive formation. The civilian ship is a part of the formation, which leads us to think—”

“That they’re all under Malkus’s control,” Kira finished. “Dammit.”

Klag nodded. “Three of the ships are birds-of-prey under the command of Captain Huss. I know for a fact that they were at Ty’Gokor only yesterday.”

“It is likely,” Data said, “that they came to Narendra III and were also enthralled by Malkus.”

“So it’s four-to-one odds,” Kira said. “Assuming Malkus doesn’t enslave the rest of us.”

La Forge smirked. “Well, thanks to Toq here, that won’t be an issue for us. The thing is, we can neutralize Malkus altogether with our modified deflector—we’re gonna rig it so that it broadcasts a large-scale version of what we hit you with. I was hoping to modify both ships, but the Gorkon’s deflector won’t take to the modification, at least not in the time we’ve got. But if we’re under fire...”

“Reinforcements?” Kira asked.

“The seven ships in orbit comprise all the Defense Force ships assigned to this sector,” Klag said bitterly. “Others are en route, as are Starfleet ships—including the Defiant and the Hood—but no help will arrive for at least two more days. And we cannot afford to wait.”

Data said, “Dr. Crusher has replicated the cure for the disease, based on the records from the Constellation and the Enterprise a century ago, but we cannot administer it until Malkus is neutralized.”

La Forge put a hand on Data’s shoulder. “I need to get back and rig up the deflector.”

Nodding, Data said, "Lieutenant Toq and I will inoculate the Gorkon crew against Malkus's influence. Then I shall return to the Enterprise and do the same for our crew."

"How long will that take?" Klag asked.

"About an hour," La Forge said. "And at that, we'll be pushing it, but Beverly said we can't afford to wait much longer than that if we're going to have any chance of curing those people."

"Get to it, all of you," Klag said, and the trio departed the medical ward.

Kira got up from the biobed. Klag shot her a look. "What are you doing?"

Standing at attention, she said, "Colonel Kira Nerys, reporting for duty, Captain."

Klag threw his head back and laughed a loud, hearty laugh. "You are not a member of the Defense Force, Colonel."

"No, but I'm sure as hell not gonna sit around and let you do all the work," she said with a smile. "I'm ready, eager, and damn willing. So give me a post, Captain."

Still smiling, Klag touched his communicator. "Klag to Rodek. Lieutenant, has a new fore port gunner been assigned?"

"Bekk Lojar was to be assigned, sir."

"Is there some reason why he shouldn't be?"

"He is a half-blind yIntagh with the gunnery skill of a grishnar cat. Otherwise he is perfectly adequate for the job. Sir."

Kira smiled. This Rodek person spoke in a very simple tone, conveying none of the invective of his words.

"We have someone else for the position, Lieutenant. Out." Klag cut the connection. "The Gorkon has four secondary gunnery positions for the twelve

rotating disruptor arrays. One of the warriors assigned to the position died in a duel a week ago, and—as you heard—his replacement is inadequate.”

Breaking into a grin, Kira said, “Not anymore, she isn’t. I’ll report to the bridge right away.”

“Good,” Klag said, leading her out of the medical ward. “Our controls may be strange to you. I suggest taking the next hour to familiarize yourself.”

“Captain, I’ve flown Bajoran sub-impulse raiders, Starfleet starships, Klingon birds-of-prey, and Jem’Hadar strike ships. I think I can handle a rotating disruptor array.”

“Then report for duty, Colonel,” Klag said as they arrived at a turbolift. “I will see you on the bridge.”

Kira entered the lift and headed to her temporary new post.

Chapter Sixteen

MALKUS SEETHED —AS MUCH AS A disembodied mind could seethe, in any case.

It was impossible for one consciousness to maintain control over thousands of minds. But if the Instrument could allow control over only a few people at a time, it was functionally useless to Malkus. So Aidulac’s team had hit upon a way of sending out shards of the user’s telepathic essence to the person being controlled. That sliver of Malkus—independent, yet connected—provided the control. Malkus himself could monitor assorted shards and make adjustments as needed, but it was not required that he himself maintain constant oversight.

That ability had many good points. It meant that he was able to imprint shards of himself in the other three artifacts, and it enabled the number of people he could enslave to be in the thousands. The one bad point was that pawns could sometimes slip out of his control without his knowing it right away.

Most frustrating was his inability to hold on to Spock. The ambassador had been able to resist control practically from the beginning, and it had taken Malkus a great deal of effort forcing the shard of his consciousness to maintain its grip.

Then, when he checked on Kira Nerys, he found that his shard was nowhere to be found in her mind. Somehow, she had managed to expel it.

Unfortunately, until he was able to attach the fourth Instrument to the Great Rectangle, he did not have sufficient power to reestablish his control over her.

As it was, he barely had enough to control the people on this planet and the ships in orbit. The former were busy constructing new buildings and structures and weapons for Malkus's use, as well as an android body for him to transfer his consciousness into.

When Spock had yet to return from dealing with the people in the shuttle, he connected with the shard in the ambassador's mind—only to find that it, too, was nowhere to be found.

No, wait—it was there, but it was cowering in an astral “corner” of Spock's consciousness, helpless. Malkus tried to take direct control, but he could not.

There was something—different. The mental impression from Spock should have enabled Malkus to have complete control.

Then he realized that the mental impression was divided—split into two beings.

Spock had performed some kind of telepathic trickery with the other ambassador he had traveled with in order to gain an advantage.

At that moment, Spock and his fellow diplomat—Worf—became more trouble than they were worth. As useful as they might have been, they now needed to die—as did their fellow prisoners in the shuttle. In retrospect, Malkus never should have let them all live in the first place.

Malkus sent out ten Klingons.

He also maintained personal control on one of them—J'lang was his name.

Through J'lang's eyes, Malkus observed the Klingons moving toward the shuttle.

Six of them broke off to take care of the four in the shuttle. The other four could take care of two diplomats with ease, Malkus was sure of that. . . .

Malkus was able to use his pawns' natural abilities for himself, so the Klingons he had enthralled all did what came naturally—they unholstered their weapons as they moved through the tree-lined route between the hill where Malkus had been uncovered and the shuttle. They all had at least one bladed weapon, and some had energy weapons as well.

The six continued onward to the shuttle, while J'lang and the other three held back. Spock and Worf were nearby, Malkus knew that much. But he could not pinpoint where. They were not in sight, but the trees and bushes provided plenty of cover. It had been a long time since Malkus had coordinated a ground campaign—before his rise to power, in fact, since after that, he had generals to do the work for him—but he remembered enough to know that the two ambassadors were probably hiding behind one of the larger trees or one of the bushes. It was only a matter of flushing them out.

He split the foursome up, each taking a compass point for direction. At a certain distance beyond the field in which Malkus knew Spock and Worf had to be, they would turn back.

J'lang was carrying a weapon that was apparently used for the sculpting of rock into artwork, but it would work just as well to rend flesh. He also had a dagger of some kind—apparently, most Klingons carried one; they called it a d'k tahg. Both were one-handed weapons, so Malkus had J'lang have both at the ready.

Unfortunately, a search through the bushes and trees to the west revealed nothing. He turned J'lang back. When he arrived at the starting point, he saw two of his other pawns. Making contact with them, he learned that they had found nothing, either.

So where can they—?

Before Malkus could complete the thought, a bottle of some sort flew through the air and broke apart upon impact with the ground. When it did so, it burst into flames—and the fire quickly spread around the clearing.

Spock swung down from one of the branches in a kicking motion, his feet colliding with the back of one of the other Klingons' heads. As he fell, the other Klingon turned to fire his disruptor on the ambassador.

Before he could take the shot, however, a dark hand gripped his right shoulder.

The Klingon convulsed and fell to the ground. Only then did Malkus see that the other ambassador had used the flames as cover to sneak up behind him and apply the same maneuver to the Klingon that Spock had used on Worf earlier.

I had thought that to be a Vulcan technique.

Then the fourth Klingon, who was named Roka, returned, and immediately charged Spock. He had instinctively attacked with his bat'leth—an edged weapon, but one favored by some Klingons over energy weapons. With astonishing speed, Spock grabbed one of the branches that had caught fire, and used it to hold Roka off.

Meanwhile, Malkus instructed J'lang to charge Worf. The sculpting tool could indeed be deadly, but it was not a distance weapon.

The Klingon that Spock had downed also had a bat'leth, and the half-breed was able to keep Roka at bay with his torch long enough to grab the weapon and use it to parry.

Malkus noted that Spock was using a fighting style that he recognized from the

other Klingons he'd possessed—it was based on their form of combat called mok'bara. Malkus also knew that Spock had never studied the mok'bara. Then again, he thought as Worf calmly dodged and weaved out of the way of J'lang's two-pronged d'k tahg and sculpting-tool attack, this Klingon ambassador had likely never learned the nerve pinch.

Malkus enjoyed a worthy foe as much as the next tyrant, but enough was enough.

He needed to end this and get back to the business of rebuilding his empire.

It was then that he discovered that two ships were approaching Narendra III: a Starfleet vessel and a Klingon Defense Force vessel. Both were large—considerably more powerful than any of the eight ships Malkus had in his power. He reached out to the two new ships' captains—while he could not enslave the entire complements of the vessels, if he could at least take over their leaders....

But he could not. Somehow, the minds of all the people on both ships were unavailable to him. That had never happened before.

So he sent his ships off to attack and destroy the vessels, then turned his attention back to J'lang—

—just as Worf knocked the sculpting tool out of J'lang's right hand with a chopping motion. He then converted that motion into a jab with his elbow to J'lang's face. As J'lang stumbled backward, Worf grabbed J'lang's left wrist, effectively neutralizing the d'k tahg, then yanked J'lang forward. J'lang stumbled toward Worf; Malkus tried to put up some kind of defense, but Worf then stopped J'lang's forward motion by grabbing J'lang's right shoulder with his left hand.

Malkus retreated from J'lang's mind as the sculptor lost consciousness, another

victim of that be-damned Vulcan attack. He transferred his active control to Roka.

Spock and Roka seemed to be evenly matched with the bat'leth, at least. Roka had mostly been on the offensive, but Spock had parried each blow with the ease of the expert that Malkus knew full well he wasn't.

With a downward slash, Roka managed to entangle Spock's bat'leth and drive it to the grassy ground. He used his left elbow to jab Spock in the jaw, then disentangled his weapon from Spock's and swung upward.

However, Spock was able to duck backward and not be struck. Then he raised his own bat'leth in defense of Roka's next thrust.

They sparred for a moment, neither side gaining the offensive. Roka used Kilog's gambit against Spock, followed up by B'Arq's defense. According to Roka's memories, B'Arq's defense was impenetrable.

With an underhanded swing, Spock penetrated Roka's use of B'Arq's defense, knocking the bat'leth out of Roka's hands. Spock then slammed the leading edge of the bat'leth into Roka's side.

Malkus cursed as Roka fell to the ground, unable to move. He gazed upon the two ambassadors with fury as they stared at each other.

Worf raised an eyebrow. "Fascinating. Your penetration of B'Arq's defense was—familiar."

Spock half-smiled. "It should be, since I learned it from you. An excellent technique, if I may say so."

"Thank you. We should continue. Malkus may send more of his thralls against us."

You don't know the half of it, Klingon, Malkus thought angrily. He reached out to the pawns that had gone to the shuttle—

—only to find that five of the six were still engaged with the quintet from the

shuttle. The sixth was dead, a d'k tahg having slit his throat. If the remainder broke off their attack to go after Spock and Worf, they too would be cut down. Then Malkus laughed to himself. The solution was simple: the four Klingons who had been defeated here and the one dead at the shuttle were of no use. So Malkus sent those shards of his consciousness to B'Oraq, Davok, G'joth, Matthew Falce, and Hilary McKenna.

That gave him a full ten pawns to send after Spock and Worf.

Soon they'll all be dead. . . .

“New course, 287 mark 9—execute!”

“Train disruptors on the Rikmok.”

“Weapons locked.”

“Vralk, execute course now!”

“Prepare to fire on my mark.”

Kira heard the voices in the background, but barely focused on who was talking. Her primary concern was the field of range belonging to the fore port disruptor array. There were three of them, each had four viewscreens, one large and three small. Each screen showed a ninety-degree field, with the large one showing the ninety-degree area that the disruptor was currently trained in, the other three showing the remaining two hundred and seventy degrees. Her job was a simple one—identify any targets that came in range of any of the three disruptors under her purview, train the weapon on that target, and fire. Of course, with the speed at which ships moved and the comparatively limited range of the disruptors, that didn't leave her—or her three counterparts—many opportunities to fire, but they were only a small part of the Gorkon' 'arsenal.

She tried not to think about what the Bajoran Resistance could have done with a ship like this against the Cardassians. Hell, this thing even puts the Defiant to shame.

Klag's deep voice penetrated the wall of sound that the bridge had become.

"Remember, shoot to disable, not destroy. There is no glory in defeating mind-controlled warriors, nor any honor in dying in such a state." A pause. "But don't be fools, either. No matter what, we shall be victorious!"

Tereth said, "Captain Huss's ships are entering range. I suggest waiting—train weapons at 185 mark 9. She's likely to attempt a bIng maneuver—it was a favorite of hers when I served with her."

Kira realized that one of her disruptors fell into that range. She immediately trained her number-three disruptor on that area—currently bereft of any ships.

Toq said, "Nukmay, Khich, and Jor changing course!" A pause. "A perfect bIng maneuver."

All three ships came right into Kira's sights, just as predicted.

"Fire!" Klag bellowed.

Kira trained her array on the wing of the Nukmay, the lead ship. It, combined with the disruptors fired by Rodek, slammed through the bird-of-prey's shields and tore a hole through the wing. That sent the ship into a spin that caused it to collide with the Khich. The latter ship's shields were disrupted into oblivion, though there was no hull damage.

A cheer went up from around the bridge, and the gunner closest to Kira—a bekk named Klorga—said, "Well done for a first shot, Bajoran."

"You ain't seen nothin' yet," Kira muttered. There was still the Jor, which fired its disruptors at the Gorkon. Looks like they're aiming for the engines, Kira thought.

“Shields down to eighty percent,” Toq said.

Kira fired on the Jor, taking the ship’s shields out with three shots before it left the range of her disruptors.

“We’re being hailed by the Enterprise,” said the ensign at the communications console.

“On audio,” Klag said.

“Klag, we need you to draw off some of these ships,” Picard said. “We can’t use the deflector modification without lowering shields.”

Kira stole a glance at the tactical display on the main viewer. The Enterprise was more than holding its own against the other four ships—the Sovereign -class vessel had only suffered minor shield damage, whereas two of the Klingon ships were in pretty bad shape and the other two were on their way to more of the same. But that wouldn’t last forever, especially since the Enterprise and Gorkon were doing their best to minimize casualties and their foes were working under no such constraint.

“Vralk, change course toward the Enterprise,” Klag said.

Tereth added, “Rodek, give us covering fire on the birds-of-prey.”

That instruction, Kira knew, would be passed on to the two at the aft disruptor arrays.

A part of Kira liked the simplicity of it—all she was responsible for was three small three-hundred-and-sixty-degree fields of fire. No more, no less. Given the awesome responsibilities she had as the commanding officer of one of the more strategically important starbases in the quadrant, accountability for so little came as a relief.

But a part of her hated it for the same reason she hated what Malkus did to her.

It was Klag who directed the battle, Tereth who commanded the troops, Rodek who carried out those commands, and only then did Kira get involved if those commands happened to relate to her tiny area of control.

And Kira Nerys never liked having limited control.

It had taken Aidulac two days to work her way across Narendra III.

With the aid of the component she'd found from the third Instrument, she had been able to trace the final Instrument to this planet, but frustratingly, not to where on this planet. She had to wait until someone unearthed the Instrument before she would be able to locate it more precisely.

So she settled on a remote island, converted the Sun to a shelter, and used its resources to survive. Her ability to influence men's minds was sufficient to keep prying eyes away from her—especially given the location she'd chosen in the middle of Narendra III's largest ocean—and she waited.

She'd waited ninety thousand years. She was prepared to wait another ninety thousand.

As it happened, she only had to wait for five years. A major war was fought in the interim, though the fighting never actually reached Narendra despite its position near both the Romulan and Federation borders.

Aidulac continued to wait.

Then, finally, the Instrument was exposed.

Naturally, it was on the other side of the planet.

From here on, Aidulac had to be careful. She could not afford to use the Sun, as it would be detected. Besides, Malkus's consciousness had, as she had feared, been imprisoned within the Instrument. Now he planned to rebuild his empire.

The fools. The unmitigated fools. The thought was directed at the well-meaning

rebels who had overthrown Malkus. They should have just killed him and had done with it. But no, they had to teach him a lesson, to imprison him, to make him suffer.

They don't understand him. No one ever did. Not even me.

Especially not me. If I had, I would have just killed myself when he came to me.

First she took a boat to the mainland. Then she needed to find a groundcar to take her to where the memorial was being built. That had proven difficult, but not impossible. Her own immunity and invisibility to Malkus's telepathic control enabled her to move freely, but avoiding visual detection was a lot harder. Her own talents for persuasion were helpful, but not always reliable.

Now, though, she was less than an hour away on foot from the memorial site where he'd been uncovered.

Then, she thought, this will all finally be over.

Vralk maneuvered the Gorkon into position, hoping to draw fire away from the Enterprise so they could use their device to neutralize Malkus.

It doesn't surprise me, Vralk thought with disdain. Klag would leave the glory to the weaklings of the Federation, even though it was we who learned the secret for defeating this Malkus thing. He turned to glance at the secondary gunner positions, specifically the one where the Bajoran woman sat. He even lets inferiors serve on his bridge. He is so unworthy of this vessel, it makes me ill.

"Bring us around," Tereth shouted, "187 mark 9. Now, Lieutenant!"

Vralk changed course to 187 mark 9 and restrained himself from telling Commander

Tereth to stop blathering at him. As Rodek had said, she was the first officer, even if she didn't deserve it—after all, as Lokor had said, he would find no allies for his cause on this ship.

“Hard to port,” Tereth said. “Try to get the Rikmok off the Enterprise's saucer.”

“Shields failing,” Toq said. “The birds-of-prey are continuing to fire!”

“Covering fire,” Klag said. “Drive them off with the rear weapons, but try not to destroy them.”

Vralk could not help himself. “We show weakness before the enemy?”

Klag turned angrily on Vralk. “They are not our enemy. When a Klingon truly takes up arms against me, then I will kill him or die without hesitation, but I will not destroy mind-controlled slaves unless I have to. And I do not have to—yet.”

Disruptor blasts and torpedoes continued to slam into the Gorkon's shields.

Vralk found he could not avoid all of them, especially now that they were close to the Enterprise—some of the Defense Force ships simply fired on both targets.

While the Enterprise and Gorkon were far more powerful, they were also larger and less maneuverable than their eight foes.

“The QaS DevwI have all reported in,” the ensign at communications said. “All ground troops are standing by.”

“Good,” Tereth said.

Again, Vralk found he could not help himself. He turned to Tereth, who was standing between the com console and Vralk's own helm control. “The QaS DevwI will not be able to lead the troops into battle if we are blown up before they can be deployed!”

Another impact. Several consoles went down.

“Shields have failed!” Toq cried.

“You are a fool to continue this!” Vralk said, getting up and walking toward

Tereth. “We must—”

Tereth suddenly leapt at Vralk, tackling him.

As Vralk fell to the deck his heart sang out with joy. At last, the fool woman has tipped her hand! She feels the need to silence me in public! Now I can truly challenge her and show everyone that she is unworthy!

He clambered to an upright position, unsheathing his d’k tahg.

Tereth remained on the deck, with a very large chunk of what was once a piece of the ceiling bulkhead now embedded in her back.

She had not been challenging him, she had saved his life at the cost of her own.

He dropped his d’k tahg to the deck.

Had he remained at his post, the shrapnel would not have hit him or Tereth. But because he abandoned his post in a conflict, a superior was dead.

What have I done?

“Vralk, you’re relieved,” Klag said. “I will kill you later. Koxx, take the helm! Bring us around, 241 mark 6. Rodek—full weapons!”

Turning toward the turbolift, his d’k tahg still on the deck, Vralk thought, I suppose now he has to use deadly force. If he had done it sooner, Tereth might not be dead now.

And if I had not been such a fool, she would not be dead, either.

Aidulac checked the readings on her scanner. She had less than an hour’s walk to where Malkus was keeping himself. And then—one way or another—it would all be over.

This was parkland now. Aidulac had never been to this world when it was part of the Zalkat Union, nor in the millennia since, so she had no idea what it might have been like then. Probably some backwater—otherwise, why hide the Instrument away here?

She hadn't expected to be tackled by a crazed Klingon in military garb.

The Klingon knocked her to the ground, knelt down on her chest, then swiped at her face with some kind of edged weapon. Aidulac raised her arm to defend herself, and the blade sank into her forearm. She cried out in pain as the Klingon yanked the blade out and started to take another swipe.

Before he could, a hand gripped the Klingon's shoulder, and he fell to the ground, unconscious.

Another Klingon, this one wearing a floor-length coat that, from what Aidulac knew of Klingon traditions, meant he held some kind of high office, rolled Aidulac's attacker off her. "Thank you," she said. "I wasn't aware of any Klingons who knew the Vulcan nerve pinch."

"It is a long story," he said. "I am Worf, son of Mogh. You do not appear to be in Malkus's thrall."

"No," she said, putting pressure on her wound. "I am Aidulac, and I'm here to stop Malkus."

Worf's eyebrow rose—another Vulcan gesture. "Fascinating. How do you intend to accomplish this?"

Before she could answer, a Vulcan approached, wearing once-elegant robes that had not weathered travel through this forest particularly well—the black cloth was spattered with dirt and grass stains. Bloodstains were present as well, but they were not green, so they did not belong to him. His movements were also odd, for a Vulcan—and he was carrying a Klingon weapon.

“Two of our foes—” the Vulcan started, then noticed the other one on the ground.

“Three of our foes have been defeated. We must hurry, before the others catch up.” He looked at Aidulac and then spoke irritably. “Who is this?”

“I am Aidulac. I am here to stop Malkus—forever. I’ve waited ninety thousand years for this day.” She frowned. “You two have mind-melded?”

“Yes,” Worf said. “It was the logical way to resist Malkus’s control.”

“Very wise.”

“I am Spock,” the Vulcan said. “We don’t have much time. The mind-meld will start to fade soon, and both Ambassador Worf and I will be helpless if that should happen. Do you have a method of neutralizing Malkus?”

Aidulac nodded. “I believe so. I have had many millennia to construct the device, but no way to ever test it. My attempts to do so with the previous artifacts met with resistance.”

Spock raised his eyebrow in the exact same manner that Worf had done a moment ago. “I do recall a report of a woman named Aidulac attempting to land on Alpha Proxima II when the first artifact was found there. Are you the same woman?”

“Yes.”

“Fascinating,” both Worf and Spock said simultaneously.

Worf continued, “But not relevant at this time. We must press forward before Malkus’s thralls catch up to us—or he sends more.”

“We don’t have far to go,” Aidulac said. Keeping the pressure on her wound, she started walking.

After a moment, the Vulcan and the Klingon followed.

Within a few minutes, they had arrived. They took up position behind a large tree that overlooked the hill. Aidulac saw two humans—a younger one in a

Starfleet uniform, and an older one in a variation of the same—standing near a table on which sat all four Instruments.

Three of them, Aidulac noted, were connected. The fourth was separate. She smiled. “I see he tried to construct the Great Rectangle.”

Worf turned to her. “We have received no resistance since we met you. Why is that?”

“I am invisible to Malkus thanks to this.” She removed the component from the third Instrument from her belt.

“That is the missing component from the third artifact,” Spock said.

Aidulac nodded. “I found it five years ago. Then I waited here for the final Instrument to be unearthed.”

Just then, two humans and three Klingons approached Malkus from the other side of the clearing.

“You were right,” Worf said to Spock. “He did enslave our fellow prisoners.”

“It seemed a reasonable hypothesis,” Spock said. “How close do you need to be to the artifacts in order for your device to work?”

“Closer than this,” Aidulac said ruefully. “We shall have to go out into the open.”

“Wait,” Worf said. “Look.”

The humans and Klingons all left—including one of the two Starfleet officers who had already been present—leaving only the elderly human to guard Malkus.

“They’ve probably gone to keep searching for you two.”

“Indeed,” Worf said. “Leaving only Dr. McCoy—and as the admiral himself might say, he is a doctor, not a fighter.”

Worf unsheathed a disruptor pistol, and Spock hefted the Klingon blade. They exchanged a nod, and then charged, Aidulac behind them.

Unsurprisingly, by the time they reached the Instruments, some of the thralls had returned. Worf, however, took two of them out with his disruptor, and the one that charged in at close quarters was dealt with by Spock. They covered her approach to Malkus quite well.

McCoy made a halfhearted attempt to attack Worf, but the human was far too aged to be any real threat. Worf grabbed his neck and said, “Sorry, Doctor, I have no time to discuss this logically.”

As Worf gently set the elderly human on the ground before turning his attention to other mind-controlled foes, Aidulac deactivated the component from the third Instrument. She no longer needed its protection from Malkus’s influence. “It’s been a long time, Mighty One.”

You! Then she felt his laughter in her mind. Of course, you survived. I should have known.

“I only survived for one reason, Mighty One—to see you and the Instruments I made for you destroyed.”

She switched on the device. In theory, it would neutralize all four artifacts.

NOOO!

Both the Klingon warrior that Spock was sparring with and the Starfleet officer that Worf was wrestling with stopped fighting. Spock was able to disarm the Klingon, and Worf knocked the Starfleet officer to the ground.

The Starfleet officer frowned. “What happened? Ambassador Worf? What the hell’s going on?”

“My apologies, Captain DeSoto,” Worf said, offering the man a hand up.

The Klingon warrior stared at Spock. “Why am I fighting a Vulcan?”

“All will be explained in due course,” Spock said, then turned to Aidulac. “It

seems you were successful. Malkus's telepathic hold appears to have been broken."

Aidulac smiled.

"Captain, the birds-of-prey have broken formation!"

Klag whirled around at Rodek. "What?"

"The other ships as well—they have ceased firing."

Toq said, "Sir, we are being hailed—by all the ships. They wish to know what is going on."

Getting up out of his command chair—once again not stumbling—Klag thought,

Something must have happened to Malkus. "Get me Picard, now!"

"Channel open," Toq said.

"Activate your deflector now, Picard!"

"Understood, Klag."

Klag watched the viewer as the Enterprise lowered its shields. Then its deflector dish lit up with a harsh light as the Starfleet vessel changed position.

To the new pilot, the captain said, "Koxx, keep us between the Enterprise and any threats, in case Malkus reasserts himself."

Toq said, "The Enterprise is firing!"

The device exploded in Aidulac's hands.

Unfortunately, the explosion took Aidulac's hands with it.

She screamed in pain and collapsed to the ground. Never, in all her millennia of life, had she ever felt anything remotely like the agony she felt now.

But the physical pain was as nothing compared to the mental anguish of her

failure. All my work for naught. I was a fool to think I could defeat the Mighty One. I never could then—why would it be different now?

She heard Malkus's laughter in her mind.

It was a brave attempt, Aidulac, Malkus said to her. But I am Malkus the Mighty.

With but a gesture, I destroyed entire solar systems. You are as nothing to me.

The galaxy is as nothing to me. Soon, I will—

Then she heard nothing. It was as if someone had simply turned Malkus off in midsentence. His presence was completely gone from her mind, as much as it was before she deactivated the component.

Looking over at the table that the four Instruments sat on, she saw that they had suddenly gone dead.

The voice of the android Data sounded over the Gorkon's speakers. "I am reading no emissions from the Malkus Artifacts. They have been rendered inert."

Toq added, "Confirmed. None of the mind-control readings are present, and neither are the Malkus emissions."

The ensign at the engineering station cried, "Victory!" Several others followed suit.

Klag ignored the cries. Instead, he walked over to the body of Commander Tereth, still lying on the deck next to the helm control. Turning her body over, Klag pried open her eyes.

She had been the best of them, serving him well, working with the crew, being his eyes and ears and hands on the Gorkon. He doubted he would ever be able to properly replace her.

And how did she die? In battle, covered in glory?

No. She died saving the life of an undeserving animal.

Rearing his head back, Klag screamed.

Next to him, Koxx did the same.

After a moment, so did everyone on the bridge—almost a score of warriors, screaming to the heavens. Klag’s ears rang with it, and it prompted him only to scream louder.

The Black Fleet in Sto-Vo-Kor now knew that Tereth, daughter of Rokis of the House of Kular, was crossing the River of Blood to join them.

The screams finally subsided. Klag looked down at the empty shell that was once his first officer. Then he looked up to see Colonel Kira standing over them.

“I would have liked to have shared that drink with her,” she said.

“You and I shall share it in her honor,” Klag said as he got to his feet.

He did so by bracing himself with his right arm, and got to his feet gracefully.

Chapter Seventeen

WORF TOOK A LONG SIP OF PRUNE JUICE , wishing that the human beverage were more useful for driving out splitting headaches.

The ambassador sat in the Ten-Forward lounge of the Enterprise, perusing the report that Giancarlo Wu had sent along from Qo’noS. Wu had attended to the difficulty on Mempa V with his usual efficiency—the Tellarites were freed after paying a hefty fine, and escorted out of the Empire with all due haste—and the fifth draft of the Klingon/Tholian resolution had apparently met with approval by both sides.

“May I join you?” said a familiar voice.

Worf looked up to see Ambassador Spock, looking much as he had when Worf first saw him on the St. Lawrence. He had cleaned up and put on fresh robes to replace the blood-and-dirt-stained ones from the surface. In addition, he was walking

like a Vulcan again instead of the ready-to-fight demeanor that Worf himself favored.

“Of course,” Worf said, happily putting the padd down as Spock took the seat opposite him.

“Forgive the intrusion, but I wished to inquire after your health. The mind-meld can sometimes be difficult even for native-born Vulcans, much less outsiders.”

“I am fine,” Worf said. “Although—” He hesitated.

“Yes?”

Worf took a bracing sip of prune juice before continuing. This wasn't easy for him to say. “I would like to apologize for my behavior on the St. Lawrence. I should not have questioned your motives. The mind-meld has given me—a new perspective on your position. Your thoughts are not of the Romulan government, but of the Romulan people—the ones who lost their brothers and sisters to the war. Those are—noble goals.”

“I have spent a great deal of time over the last few years with the Romulan people. They should not be punished for the shortsightedness of their government—or of someone else's. However,” Spock said quickly, “I too feel the need to offer an apology. I now understand the crux of your argument: that, while the Klingon Empire and the Federation went to war with the Dominion in order to preserve the Alpha Quadrant, the Romulan Empire went to war to preserve the Romulan Empire. A subtle distinction that I, in my zeal to protect the Romulan people, lost sight of.”

Worf shook his head. “Not at all. I believe that both arguments have merit.”

“Indeed. And we shall have many opportunities to present them at Khitomer.”

Spock paused and regarded Worf with a penetrating gaze. “You have led a

most—intriguing life, Mr. Ambassador. If you have time—and the inclination—I would like to discuss certain elements of it with you.”

Had anyone else made the request, Worf would have refused. But, just as Spock had obviously been intrigued by Worf’s life, so too was Worf by Spock’s. The man was truly a living legend, and Worf had gained some—there was no other word for it—fascinating insights into the man behind that legend. It left him with a great desire to learn more.

Then he remembered something. “Computer, time?”

“The time is 1105 hours.”

“I am sorry, Mr. Ambassador. I would like to have those discussions—but not at the moment. I have an—appointment on the Gorkon.”

Spock inclined his head. “Of course. We will have ample opportunities to converse over the next few days in any event.”

Worf stood up and drained the rest of his prune juice. “I look forward to it.”

Truly, he did—had he not made the promise to Klag, he would have stayed to talk with Spock for as long as the Vulcan ambassador wished. Leaving aside his interest in discussing the things Spock had seen, the battles he had fought, it was also an infinitely preferable alternative to the mindless drudgery of Worf’s life as Federation Ambassador to Qo’noS. Khitomer promised plenty of that as it was—talking with Spock would be a welcome palliative.

Leonard McCoy was tired.

Less than a year from his hundred and fiftieth birthday, McCoy got tired fairly easily these days. On top of the usual fatigue of daily existence as a cranky old man, he had to put up with Malkus invading his cranium. Admittedly, dealing with it was less of an issue than it might have been for a younger person. After

all, your limbs not doing what you intend them to do was a fact of life the longer you spent on the wrong side of the century mark. Still, it wasn't usually the whole body.

McCoy sat in the Enterprise' sTen-Forward lounge, sipping a syntheholc mint julep that tasted about as dreadful as he expected. But his cardiovascular system couldn't really handle the real thing all that much these days—especially after the exertions Malkus put him through.

“How are you feeling, Doctor?”

The sudden voice at his back almost made McCoy drop his glass. He turned around to see Spock standing behind him. Only a few minutes ago, McCoy had noticed Spock sitting with Worf. The doctor looked over to see that their table was now empty.

As his old comrade sat down across from him, McCoy said, “I hate it when you do that. And to answer your question, I was fine until you scared the daylight out of me. How 'bout you?”

“The effects of the mind-meld have almost faded. There will always be a residue of Ambassador Worf inside me and of me in him, but that is to be expected.”

McCoy chuckled. “After all the melds you've done in your time, your cerebral cortex is probably more crowded than Paris on Inauguration Day. As for me, I like to keep my head to myself, thanks. It was bad enough when I had to share my brain with you way back when. Malkus was a helluva lot worse. One thing I don't get, though.”

“Only one thing?” Spock asked in his usual deadpan.

“Don't start with me, bucko, we're both too old,” McCoy muttered. “Back when you core-dumped your brain into mine before you died, I couldn't do that damn neck

pinch of yours. Worf only had some of your marbles, and he was distributing neck pinches right and left.”

“The mind-meld is not a precise tool, as you well know, Doctor. It would seem that Worf was simply luckier than you.”

“Got that right,” he said, taking another sip of the julep.

“However, that experience from ninety years ago is a primary reason why I was able to resist Malkus’s control enough to perform the mind-meld in the first place. My death and resurrection on Genesis altered my brain chemistry sufficiently to make Malkus’s grip on my mind tenuous at best.”

“As opposed to your grip on reality, which is completely tenuous,” McCoy said with a smile.

Spock’s eyebrow shot up. “I thought we were too old for this sort of thing?”

McCoy shrugged. “I lied.”

Before Spock could reply, Picard entered the lounge and headed to their table.

“Gentlemen, may I join you?”

“Of course, Captain,” Spock said, indicating one of the seats between them.

“How’re things dirtside?” McCoy asked.

“Settling down. Captain Klag’s ground troops have been able to restore order. Dr. Crusher was able to cure as many of the Klingons imprisoned in the sports arena as were still alive.”

“Still alive?” McCoy frowned. “There wasn’t time for the virus to—Oh, hell. A virus that pumps adrenaline into Klingons.”

“Yes,” Picard said gravely. “I’m afraid that the virus combined with the enclosed space to cause no small amount of violence, even by Klingon standards.”

McCoy shook his head, thinking about all those who died before he and Lew Rosenhaus came up with the cure the last time it reared its ugly head on Proxima

a century earlier.

“How is Aidulac, Captain?” Spock asked.

“Dr. Crusher has fitted her with prosthetic hands. She has requested that she be allowed to take the artifacts into her personal custody.”

“Makes sense—she helped build the damn things,” McCoy said.

Picard’s head tilted to one side slightly. “Unfortunately, she also has several warrants out for her arrest—some dating back over two hundred years. For obvious reasons the Federation is not very interested in turning over four powerful weapons to her—and very interested in fulfilling those warrants.”

“Understandable,” Spock said.

“In any event, the artifacts will be returned to the Rector Institute—with security heightened, obviously,” Picard added with a wry smile.

“DeSoto’s not gonna get in any hot water, is he?” McCoy asked.

“I doubt it,” Picard said. “There will be a hearing for formality’s sake—”

McCoy muttered into his julep. “Right, ’cause heaven forfend there not be paperwork for the bureaucrats to play with.”

“—but I’m sure he’ll be cleared of any theft charges. The Hood is still en route to pick him up—as is the Defiant to retrieve Colonel Kira. We’ve loaded the St. Lawrence into our shuttlebay, and we shall convey you,” he glanced at Spock, “and Ambassador Worf to Khitomer this afternoon, along with your pilots. You’ll be happy to know that the opening meetings have been delayed until our arrival, despite objections from the Romulans. Captain Klag will remain behind with the Gorkon to oversee putting Narendra III back together. Apparently he has also offered to repair Captain Butterworth’s ship.”

“Who?” McCoy asked. That for damn sure doesn’t sound like any Klingon name I’ve

ever heard.

“The civilian freighter that was part of Malkus’s fleet,” Picard said. “They sustained heavy damage during the conflict.”

“What the hell was a Federation civilian freighter doing here anyhow?” McCoy asked.

Picard gave a half-smile. “They were providing marble for the Dominion War memorial that is being built on Narendra—in fact, it was the groundbreaking for that memorial that led to the artifact being unearthed.”

“Figures,” McCoy muttered.

“In any event, Admiral,” Picard said, “I believe Klag is arranging for you and Dr. B’Oraq to travel to Qo’noS as soon as you’re ready. The High Council doesn’t like to be kept waiting,” he added with a smile.

Snorting, McCoy said, “Hell, they’re probably teed off that I made it through this alive. Now they’re stuck with me giving them their lecture.”

“Surely a fate worse than death,” Spock said dryly. Turning to Picard before McCoy could reply to the jab, he said, “The arrival of yourself and Captain Klag was most timely. It was greatly appreciated, since eventually Ambassador Worf and I would have succumbed—either to Malkus’s thralls or to his telepathic attack when the mind-meld deteriorated.”

“Your interference also gave us the opportunity to use our psilosynine wave, Ambassador, so I’d say we’re even.”

“Actually, Captain, it was Aidulac who truly provided the distraction.”

Picard’s eyes widened. “Did she? Well, perhaps that will be a mitigating factor in her defense. In any case, you should be thanking Colonel Kira more than anyone. She was the one who led us here.”

“Where is the colonel, anyhow?” McCoy asked.

“I believe she had some final business on the Gorkon.”

Lokor sat at the desk in his quarters, reading over the daily reports from his guards. The reports were shorter than usual by dint of most of the Gorkon’s ground troops being on-planet. The biggest security headache on a ship this size was when the ground troops went for an extended period without actually being put to use. Of course, they had drills and exercises and tasks to perform, but unless they were off the ship and doing their jobs—which boiled down to fighting and dying for the Empire on a planet or base or enemy vessel—they tended to go stir-crazy.

And stir-crazy troops meant difficulties for the person in charge of maintaining order.

But Lokor had done his job well, he thought. The incidents were kept to a minimum—little beyond the usual maimings of daily life in the Defense Force. And, with the Narendra situation, a comparatively quiet day for a change.

His door chime rang. “Enter.”

The door opened to the smell of adanji. At first he thought one of his deputies had confiscated some incense. He looked up to say that he didn’t want that foul-smelling stuff in his quarters, when he saw that it wasn’t one of his deputies, it was Vralk.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, he was wearing not his uniform but the ceremonial robes of the House of Grunnil. A mevak dagger was holstered in his belt.

“What is it you want, boy?” Lokor asked, though he could guess the answer.

Vralk hesitated, then spoke in a solemn voice. “I have dishonored our family name—our House. I know that captain Klag will condemn me for my dishonorable

actions, and so I wish to reclaim my honor in the next life. I have come for Mauk to'Vor."

Lokor stood up and walked around his desk. He was a full head taller than Vralk.

He put his hands on the boy's shoulders and looked solemnly down at him

Then he burst into hysterical laughter.

"Truly you are the biggest imbecile in a House of imbeciles."

Vralk looked like he'd swallowed dead gagh. "You—you're not—" He shook his head.

"You must fulfill my request to kill me honorably! It is your duty as my cousin!"

"And what of your duty to your ship? In case you have forgotten, boy, you got the first officer killed. A first officer, I might add, who was a great deal better liked by the crew than you. If by some miracle the captain does not have you killed, you still won't live to see your next duty shift."

"I—I don't understand." Vralk shook his head. "I have lived an honorable life. I have striven to be the best Klingon I know how to be. I do not deserve to go to Gre'thor!"

The sight of Vralk was pitiful, and Lokor couldn't help but laugh again. "If this is the best Klingon you know how to be, than it is preferable that you die quickly and make room for someone who can do it right." He shook his head and turned his back on his cousin. "Now get out of my sight—and take that odoriferous taHqeq with you."

Lokor waited until he heard the door open and the scent of the adanji faded from his nostrils before he turned around.

Then he sat back down at his desk and looked at his security reports.

* * *

Robert DeSoto stared at the Go board game. The replicator in his guest quarters

on the Enterprise had been happy to provide one. It would have been equally happy to provide him with the stones, but DeSoto hadn't been able to bring himself to ask for that as well.

The door chime rang. "Come on in," he said.

The tall form of Will Riker stood on the other side of the door. DeSoto couldn't help but smile broadly. "Hey, Will. How's everything going?"

Riker came into the quarters, an equally broad smile on his beardless face.

"That was going to be my question for you, Captain. After all, I wasn't mind-controlled by a ninety-thousand-year-old tyrant."

"Good point."

"Just by the way," Riker said, pointing at the Go board, "I've already warned the crew about you, so if you're planning to hustle anyone—"

"No, I'm not," DeSoto said, unable to keep his tone jovial. "In fact—honestly, this is the first time I've even looked at a Go board in a year and a half. Ever since Chin'toka." He sighed. "It's funny, the last time one of those Malkus Artifacts got dug up was five years ago. Since then, I've pretty much lost everyone who was on the Hood then—the only one who didn't die in the war or leave Starfleet is my old security chief, and he's got his own ship now. But the worst was losing Dina."

"She was your first officer?" Riker asked.

DeSoto nodded. "She actually used to beat me at Go."

"You're kidding."

At that, DeSoto did actually laugh, just from the sheer incredulousness in Riker's tone. "Yup. She went from a handicap to whupping my tail in less than a year. I've taught lots of people to play—including, if memory serves," he added

with a look at Riker, “a young lieutenant commander who said he didn’t like games where he couldn’t bluff—but she was the only one who got to be as good as me. Hell, she was probably better.”

DeSoto got up from the desk and walked over to the replicator. “You want anything?”

Riker shook his head.

“Water, cold.” As the replicator provided the glass of water, DeSoto said, “The worst part is, she wasn’t even supposed to still be on the ship. For Chin’toka, I mean. Her promotion’d come through, but her post, the Tian An Men, was still in the yard for repairs. She insisted on coming along for one last hurrah on the Hood.” He took a sip of the water. “It was a last hurrah, all right. It’s funny, she died the same way that first officer on the Klingon ship went. A plasma conduit blew, and the shrapnel would’ve shredded one of the junior officers. She knocked the ensign out of the way, took it all herself.” He gulped down the rest of the water. “I haven’t played Go since.”

Riker didn’t say anything for several seconds. Then: “You doing anything right now, Captain?”

DeSoto shrugged. “Just waiting for the Hood to show up and take me to a starbase so they can do my disciplinary hearing.”

“I’m sure that’ll be fine.”

“Yeah.” DeSoto sighed. “You know, Malkus sat in that artifact for ninety thousand years—and that Aidulac woman wandered around the galaxy for ninety thousand years waiting for him. That’s a helluva long time to basically do nothing. And you know what? I’m not going to be like that.” He smiled. “How’d you like a game?”

“Much as I would love to humiliate myself before your Go prowess, Captain,”

Riker said with a grin, “I have another engagement. And I’d like you to join me.”

* * *

Aidulac stared at the four walls of her cell.

Well, three walls, truly. The fourth was a forcefield.

She was no more concerned now than she was the last time she’d been put in prison after a defeat to Malkus. Her skills weren’t what they once were, but she still had them. She would be able to escape.

The cries of the dead continued to haunt her. It had been ninety thousand years, and still the corpses that Malkus had created with Instruments she helped create would not leave her mind’s eye.

Not to mention the corpses of her team.

A very large part of her thought that it was time to simply end it all. She’d waited for ninety thousand years, traveling the galaxy in a variety of ships waiting for the Instruments to be revealed and Malkus to be reawakened, only to fail utterly in her endeavor to destroy both Malkus and the Instruments once and for all.

On the other hand, she knew precisely where they all were now. And they’d already been stolen once....

Klag sat alone in his office, staring dolefully at the bottle of bloodwine and the six empty mugs on his desk, when the door chime rang. “Enter,” he said.

Kira, Riker, Worf, B’Oraq, and DeSoto all came in.

“Ah, good,” he said. “Come in, all of you.”

The quintet gathered around Klag’s desk. Klag himself remained seated, the

others remained standing, even though there were two guest chairs. Klag suspected that they were all too polite to take a seat over one of the others.

From Riker, DeSoto, and Kira he'd expect such— though the ambassador was raised among humans, and the doctor studied with them, so they no doubt picked up bad habits, too, he thought with an internal smile.

“When she first came on board the Gorkon, Commander Tereth gave me this bottle of bloodwine. It was made by House Ozhpri.”

Only DeSoto seemed confused—the others, even Kira and Riker, knew the name of one of the Empire's best vintners and looked suitably impressed. And at those looks, DeSoto seemed to guess what Klag meant, and he nodded.

“I asked her for what occasion she honored me with this bottle. She said when the time was right, I would know. Now she is dead, and while it is not the death I would have wished for so fine a warrior, she died in uniform. She died in battle. She died defending the Empire.” As he spoke, he poured the bloodwine into each of the mugs, ending with the quote, ““In death there is victory and honor.”” He looked at each of them. “The time is right now. And you are the right people to share it with.”

Klag held up a mug as he addressed each person without getting up from his chair. “Worf, son of Mogh, whose actions on taD enabled me to find an excuse to get rid of Drex, thus paving the way for me to bring Tereth to the Gorkon.”

Worf nodded as he took the mug from Klag's outstretched hand.

“B'Oraq, daughter of Grala, who gave me a new right arm and helped me to restore my own family's honor, and to whom I never gave proper thanks. I thought I'd take this opportunity to do so before you are once again kidnapped by a ninety-thousand-yearold megalomaniac.”

Laughing, B'Oraq accepted the mug and said, “An understandable precaution,

Captain.”

“Riker, my old comrade-in-arms—at last we have been reunited in battle, and been victorious. And we lived, giving us another chance to fight and die together.”

Grinning, Riker took the mug. “Let’s hope for lots of those chances.”

“DeSoto, Riker tells me that you lost your own first officer during the war. He thought this would give you an opportunity to celebrate the releasing of her spirit.”

DeSoto nodded and took the mug. “He thought right. Thank you—both of you.”

“And Kira. As promised—the drink you and Tereth pledged to share.”

“Thank you,” the colonel said, taking the mug.

Klag raised the last mug and cried, “Raise your drinks! Today a new warrior enters Sto-Vo-Kor! May her battle be endless, her glory be eternal—and may we all join her in due course! To Tereth!”

Together, they all cried, “To Tereth!” Then they each gulped their bloodwine—Worf, B’Oraq, and Klag enthusiastically, Riker, DeSoto, and Kira somewhat more cautiously.

Klag felt the oily liquid coat his mouth and throat. It was a marvelous sensation—as one would have expected from Ozhpri bloodwine. It was the finest vintage he’d ever had.

Worf took a second gulp, finishing off his mug, then started to sing in a deep bass voice. “Qoy qeylls puqloD. Qoy puqbe’pu’.”

B’Oraq joined him for the next line. “yoHbogh matlbogh je Suvwl’.”

Klag threw his head back and bellowed out the next: “Say’moHchu’ may’ ’Iw. maSuv manong ’ej maHo-Hchu’.”

Together, the three of them—joined here and there by Riker, DeSoto, and Kira,

who obviously did not know the words, but got into the spirit as best they could—sang the rest of the Warrior’s Anthem in Tereth’s memory.

Klag drained the last of his bloodwine. “Thank you all, my friends. You have honored me with your presence, and honored Tereth as well—not to mention,” he added with a look to DeSoto, “Commander Voyskunsky.”

“It was my pleasure,” Kira said.

“Oh, Colonel,” Klag said, reaching into a drawer in his desk, “Tereth left something for you.” He removed an optical chip and handed it to Kira. “A recording of ‘The Battle for Deep Space 9.’”

Kira grinned and took the chip. “I look forward to hearing it.”

Riker set his mug down on Klag’s desk and looked at Worf. “We need to get back—we still have to get you to Khitomer.”

“Yes. It is good to see you again, Captain,” the ambassador said to Klag.

“Qapla’, all of you,” Klag said.

They all returned the salutation: “Qapla’!”

With that, the four of them departed, leaving Klag and B’Oraq alone.

“Have you requested a new first officer yet?” B’Oraq asked.

“No,” Klag said. “In truth, I fear for what Command will send me this time.” He stared at the now-empty bottle. “We shall never see her like again.”

“Perhaps,” B’Oraq said. “Perhaps we will see better.”

Klag threw his head back and laughed. “Ever the optimist, Doctor?”

“Naturally, Captain. I’m trying to improve Klingon medicine—if I weren’t an optimist, I’d have given up years ago.”

“An excellent point.” Klag braced his hands on the arms of his chair and got up.

Then he stumbled to the right, not adequately compensating for his shorter right arm.

“Qu’vatlh!” he cursed in anger.

Malkus had been in the middle of excoriating the hapless Aidulac when he was interrupted.

His sensory input was, of course, limited to telepathic contact, but that contact included an entire world and beyond. Suddenly, without any kind of warning, that contact just stopped.

He no longer felt the presence of his pawns.

Worse, he no longer felt the presence of the other Instruments.

In fact, he couldn’t even feel the presence of the Instrument he was trapped within.

How, he did not know, but he had been cut off from everything.

For ninety thousand years, he had been trapped with only the most minimal contact with the galaxy.

Now it seemed he was trapped once again with even less than that.

Desperately, he reached out, trying to find some connection to another mind, another Instrument, Aidulac, anything.

Utter silence was his only answer.

Malkus started to scream a silent scream that no one would hear.

A scream that would never end.

Technical Specifications of the Qang -Class Vessels in the Klingon Defense Force

by Tammy Love Larrabee

Statistics

Classification Heavy Cruiser

Class Qang (Chancellor)

Number Constructed Classified

Number Destroyed Classified

Ship's Complement 2725 crew

Brigs 110

Transporters 35 6-person

Holodecks 1

Ship Size

Length 479.40m

Width 364.44m

Height 105.24m

Displacement 1 123.0102mt

Weapons

Disruptor Arrays 12 360o

Disruptor Output $9.0 \times 10^{11} \text{w} / 4.0 \times 10^{11} \text{w}$

Continuous

Disruptor Cannon 1

Cannon Output $7.8 \times 10^{12} \text{w} / 3.7 \times 10^{12} \text{w}$

Continuous

Photon Torpedoes 102

Quantum Torpedoes 36

Defensive

Shield Holdoff $8.87 \times 10^{12} \text{w}$

Shield Refresh $3.45 \times 10^{12} \text{w}$

Reactive Armor/

Damage Deflective Plating

Speed

Optimum SpeedWarp 7

Cruising SpeedWarp 8

Maximum SpeedWarp 9.82

ECM

Cloaking Device

Electronic Jamming

Equipment

Hull Separation Capability

Emergency separation of the primary hull section from the secondary hull is possible. The secondary hull houses the disruptor cannon and is able to function at sublight speeds. The main bridge section is also capable of separation from the primary hull, and is maneuverable at impulse speeds using emergency impulse engines.

Weaponry

The Qang class has one forward-facing disruptor cannon, mounted in the “head” of the ship, with an output of $7.8 \times 10^{12} \text{w} / 3.7 \times 10^{12} \text{w}$ continuous. There are 12 360° disruptor arrays on the Qang. Six are top-mounted and six are bottom-mounted with an output of $9.0 \times 10^{12} / 4.0 \times 10^{12} \text{w}$. All disruptors are set for a variable modulation every 10–12 seconds with a repetition rate of 300,000 cycles; this feature was added to combat the Borg. The photon-torpedo tubes are located on the bottom of the ship. Standard complement of torpedoes for this ship is 102 photon and 36 quantum torpedoes.

Deflector Shields and Plating

Advanced deflector emitters create an energetic deflecting shield around the ship. Emitters are located in various sections of the ship and provide overlap shielding, causing attacks and collisions to “glance off.” When the deflector shields fail, the ship relies upon its damage deflective plating, which enhances standard hull integrity to absorb damage until the deflector shields can be reengaged.

Cloaking Device

The cloaking device utilizes a gravitational field to bend light around the ship, while using warp-bubble technology to bend space-time, making the ship appear invisible. The field generators are located in the lower midsection of the ship.

ECM

The ECM hampers enemy communications, scrambles sensors, and even creates false images to confuse enemy craft and installations.

Tractor Beams

The tractor-beam system utilizes an energy field generator to either surround and pull, or push against objects the ship needs to capture/move. The inertial dampers and impulse drive must be online for this system to work during flight, inertial dampers for unexpected bumps and collisions and the impulse engines so that when the ship is moving something larger than itself the object moves and the ship does not. The tractor beam is located in the lower fore section of the ship.

The tractor-beam inflight sequence is as follows:

Tractor beam activated

Inertial dampers to 100%

Impulse engines engaged

Tractor beam charged and ready

Holodeck

The holodeck uses a combination of holographic, replicator, and transporter technology. The holocomputer calculates the three-dimensional divergent patterns of light that would be cast from any given hypothetical or real object submitted by the person writing the program, and projects it as a hologram. Simultaneously the holodeck matter replication and transport beam utilizes "holodeck matter" to form a holobeing or object with substance. Holobeing personalities are preprogrammed and controlled by the holocomputer as defined by the program. Projected holograms are used on the walls of the holodeck to give the illusion of a three-dimensional environment that extends to the horizon. Holodeck matter owes its form and solidity to the pattern held within the holodeck replication and transport buffer and therefore is disassembled when the emitters are turned off or the holomatter is removed from the holodeck. Klingon holodecks are used to heighten hunting and fighting skills. There are no safety protocols; any damage done is the real thing.

Transporters

There are 35 six-person transporters with three separate molecular/informational signature pattern buffers per transporter. The transporter platform is slightly raised to reduce the chance of occasional static discharge. Destination coordinates are relayed via computer from the destination or are directly input by the operator. Targeting scanners located in the sensor arrays determine the coordinates and provide environmental information on the target site. A standard transporter has a range of 40,000km.

The annular confinement beam (ACB) creates a spatial matrix from the primary

energizing coils overhead, four redundant molecular imaging scanners in the overhead pads make the memory file of the transporter's quantum state. An individual's molecular/genetic pattern is scanned and old records are updated with current information. Or, for a firsttime transport the new individual's molecular/genetic patterns are stored, allowing for emergency molecular reconstruction during subsequent transports. The pattern is stored in the buffer as a retrievable trace, while a transporter log records the beamout. All signatures are stored until purposefully purged by transporter personnel.

Using a widespread quark manipulation field, the phase transition coils in the lower pads disassemble the body by unbinding the energy at a subatomic level; once converted to a subatomic matter stream the transporter is diverted into a pattern buffer. This is due to the Doppler effect (any relative motion between transporter and target must be taken into account). The pattern buffer is used for Doppler shift compensation. A buffer may hold the entire matter stream for up to 420 seconds before permanent pattern degradation occurs. Once beamout is secured, an ACB "carrier" directs each pattern's matter stream through an emitter array on the hull of the ship, toward the target coordinates. A booster set of coils and scanners then work in reverse within the ACB to reassemble each pattern into its original form. These arrays work in such a way as to provide 360° coverage in all directions, as well as intraship transports. The ACB can be used to remove weapons and other "non desirable" items from incoming transporters, and the transporter's biofilter automatically detects and removes all active forms of known harmful viruses and diseases.

Propulsion (Impulse)

The impulse engines utilize collector arrays, situated in the foresections of the ship's wings, to gather available energy of any type from the surrounding

space, which is then filtered through a series of energy replicators, where it is changed into the deuterium atoms needed to cause the fusion reaction that powers the impulse drive unit.

At full impulse speed, the ship is traveling at 1/4 light speed, or 125,000 km/sec. If it wasn't for the inertial damping systems, at those speeds most creatures would be torn apart...including Klingons.

Inertial Dampers

This system uses warp technology to generate a limited "soap bubble" effect, which falsifies a planetary atmospheric environment. There are set openings in the "bubble" at the impulse ports, allowing the impulse engines to push the ship along without gravitational/impact damage to the interior and crew.

Inertial dampers are on a continuous setting of 50% to allow for unexpected impacts, advancing as the impulse engines/tractor beams are activated, or impact happens.

Impulse sequence is as follows:

Impulse Engines 0% 25% 50% 75% 100%

Inertial Dampers 50% 70% 90% 100%

Propulsion (warp)

The warp drive unit allows for faster-than-light travel without the time dilation and matter density problems involved in traveling "near light" to light speeds. Inside the warp core, deuterium gasses and antimatter in the form of antihydrogen, regulated and controlled by dilithium crystals, are forced together, causing a small controlled matter/antimatter explosion, which is

contained within the reaction chamber of the main warp core. The explosion creates an energy stream, which is collected by power converters and routed via conduit to the warp nacelles. Inside the nacelles the routed plasma is used to energize the verterium cortenide warp field generators. Verterium cortenide causes the plasma frequencies to shift into subspace, creating fields of warped space. The field coils inside the nacelles are arranged in rows, each layer exerting controlled force against its outermost neighboring coil. The cumulative force of the nested fields drives the ship on a spatial wave. The coils are energized in sequential order, the number of times each coil is energized controls the overall warp speed factor of the vessel.

Acceleration is as follows:

Speed KPH x light

Standard Orbit 96000.00001

Full Impulse 270 million 0.25

Warp 11 billion 1

Warp 211 billion 10

Warp 342 billion 39

Warp 4109 billion 102

Warp 5230 billion 214

Warp 6421 billion 392

Warp 7703 million 656

Warp 81.10 billion 1,024

Warp 91.62 billion 1,516

Warp 9.21.77 billion 1,649

Warp 9.62.05 billion 1.909

Warp 9.93.27 billion 3.053

Dilithium Crystals

Dilithium is currently the only matter known to be porous to antimatter. Each individual crystal is a crystalline latticework composed of dilithium, diallosilicate, and heptoferranide. When diverted through the crystal, antimatter remains at a centralized distance from all sides of the latticework. Sonic vibration is used to expand and contract the crystals, regulating the flow of antimatter into the reaction chamber.

Afterword

I first got the idea for *The Brave and the Bold* in 1999. It had its origins in the 1967 *Star Trek* episode “The Doomsday Machine.” I always liked the character of Matt Decker—William Windom’s layered performance had a lot to do with that—and I wanted to know more about him. He and Kirk obviously knew each other—they were on a first-name basis—so I started thinking about the idea of a previous adventure that had Kirk and Decker working together.

This got my brain going on the idea of “starship team-up.” Wouldn’t it be cool to pair up the familiar crews with some unknown—or barely known—other ships, and do it from the POV of the other ships? Goodness knows we’ve met enough other captains in guest shots. Why not see how they view *Our Heroes*? Having already had the jones to put Kirk and Decker together, I used the settings of *Star Trek*:

Deep Space Nine and Star Trek: Voyager to answer more questions. With DS9 there was the intriguing dislike between Jadzia Dax and Captain Keogh of the Odyssey, as seen in “The Jem’Hadar.” That episode made it clear that the Odyssey had just stopped over at Deep Space 9 recently and that Dax and Keogh didn’t exactly hit it off—so why not chronicle that adventure? It also gave me the opportunity to bring back one of the first Bajoran terrorists we ever met, Orta, from Star Trek: The Next Generation’s “Ensign Ro.” And, while several novels (Double Helix: Quarantine by John Vornholt, Pathways by Jeri Taylor, and the Voyager segment of Susan Wright’s The Badlands) dealt with the Voyager crew prior to “Caretaker,” none of those tales told the story I was curious about: How and why did Tuvok infiltrate Chakotay’s Maquis cell in the first place? The “team-up” motif necessitated setting the story prior to the Voyager’s disappearance into the Delta Quadrant in any case, and to my mind, that was the most compelling untold tale from that time period. It also gave me the opportunity to show more of TNG’s Captain DeSoto, Riker’s former CO, and considered a good friend of Picard’s as well. We’d heard good things about him in “Encounter at Farpoint,” met him briefly in “Tin Man,” but hadn’t gotten a good look at him. This was a chance to do so, and also take another gander at the first Maquis we ever met, Cal Hudson (from DS9’s “The Maquis Parts 1–2”), and have him join forces with Chakotay.

With the TNG segment, I had the opportunity to revisit a crew I’d developed—that of the I.K.S. Gorkon. In my TNG novel, Diplomatic Implausibility, I’d established the Gorkon, commanded by Klag (first seen in TNG’s “A Matter of Honor”). Reader response to the Gorkon and its crew (made up of both original characters and past TNG and DS9 guest stars) was outstanding, so I was given the go-ahead to use them again in this duology and continue their stories forward

(look for the first two books in the Star Trek: I.K.S. Gorkon series, *A Good Day to Die* and *Honor Bound*, in late 2003).

And, naturally, I couldn't resist the best team-up of all: the "fighting ambassadors," Worf and Spock.

This duology also has the distinction of being the first story to feature all five Trek TV franchises. The story called for a prelude to get the story going, and what better place to set it than on Captain Archer's *Enterprise*?

Several people require thanks and praise for their help in writing these two books:

Top of the list are the nifty-keeno folks at Pocket Books, particularly John J. Ordovery, who not only said yes but told me how to make it better, and Carol Greenburg, who molded the shapeless mass (or should that be "mess"?) of my first drafts into good pieces of work, as well as Scott Shannon, Marco Palmieri, Jessica McGivney, Margaret Clark, John Perrella, and most especially Pocket's unsung heroine, Elisa Kassin. Not far behind them are Paula M. Block and John Van Citters at Paramount, who are truly deities among licensing folk.

As always, Gene Roddenberry, who got this whole schmear started; Gene L. Coon, Rick Berman, Michael Piller, Jeri Taylor, Ira Steven Behr, and Brannon Braga for keeping it going; and the screenwriters who gave us the guest captains: Norman Spinrad (Decker), Ira Steven Behr (Keogh), James Crocker (Hudson), Dennis Putman Bailey & David Bischoff (DeSoto), and Burton Armus (Klag).

You can't do a TV tie-in without thanking the actors—or at least you shouldn't.

They provide the voice you use to write the characters. So hearty thanks to (deep breath): Rene Auberjonois (Odo), Scott Bakula (Archer), Majel Barrett

(Chapel and Lwaxana), Robert Beltran (Chakotay), Jolene Blalock (T'Pol), Avery Brooks (Sisko), LeVar Burton (La Forge), Bernie Casey (Hudson), Michael Cavanaugh (DeSoto), Stephen Collins (Will Decker), Roxann Dawson (Torres), Michael Dorn (Worf), Brad Dourif (Suder), Terry Farrell (Dax), Jonathan Frakes (Riker), Martha Hackett (Seska), Jeffery Hayenga (Orta), Michael Jace (Shabalala), Scott Jaeck (Cavit), Dominic Keating (Reed), De-Forest Kelley (McCoy), Sterling Macer (Toq), Derek McGrath (Chell), Colm Meaney (O'Brien), Kenny Morrison (Gerron), Kate Mulgrew (Janeway), Leonard Nimoy (Spock), Stephanie Niznik (Perim), Natalia Nogulich (Nechayev), Alan Oppenheimer (Keogh), Linda Park (Sato), Richard Poe (Evek), Tim Russ (Tuvok), Armand Schultz (Dalby), William Shatner (Kirk), Armin Shimerman (Quark), Brent Spiner (Data), Patrick Stewart (Picard), George Takei (Sulu), Brian Thompson (Klag), Tony Todd (Rodek), Connor Trinneer (Tucker), Nana Visitor (Kira), and William Windom (Matt Decker). David Henderson for timeline assistance with the prelude.

The University of Colorado's Hypertexts for Biomedical Sciences on the Web (<http://arbl.cvmbs.colostate.edu/hbooks>), especially their section on the adrenal gland, and the directory of compounds at <http://www.allatoms.com/CompoundWebSites.htm>.

Dayton Ward, Dave Galanter, and Allyn Gibson for reassuring me that I got Kirk's voice right.

Roy L. Post, for setting me straight on how to make a moon into arable farmland.

Mindy McAdams for all her help with the details of the Game of Go. For more on this ancient game of strategy, check out the American Go Association's Web site at <http://www.usgo.org>.

The Maquis Index at Janet's Star Trek: Voyager Site

(<http://www.star-trek-voyager.fsnet.co.uk>) for help in identifying the Maquis

members of Voyager' 'screw. (Also thanks to Todd "Scavenger" Kogutt for pointing me to it.)

John M. Ford, for his seminal Star Trek novel *The Final Reflection*—still the definitive Klingon novel—and S. D. Perry and Robert Greenberger, for giving Captain Klag a couple of cameos in *Avatar Book 2* and "The Other Side" in *What Lay Beyond*, respectively.

Michael A. Martin for useful and handy editorial guidance.

Tammy Love Larrabee for taking the vague idea of what the Gorkon looked like in my head and turning it into an actual set of specifications.

GraceAnne Andreassi DeCandido, aka The Mom, aka Editorial Goddess The Elder, who worked her usual magic on my drafts.

The Magical Starbucks of Good Writing in midtown Manhattan. Thanks to owning a laptop, I can write pretty much anywhere, and *The Brave and the Bold* was written in a variety of locations across the United States (not to mention Montréal)—but, for whatever reason, I was most productive at this particular Starbucks. Go fig'.

CITH, the best writers' group ever, who kept me on track and gave invaluable feedback that made the book far better than it would've been without them; the Malibu Group and the Geek Patrol, just 'cause; the Fore-bearance, for decades of encouragement; and the ever-encouraging fans on the assorted Internet bulletin boards, but most especially those at Psi Phi's Star Trek novels board (www.psiphi.org), the Trek BBS's Trek Literature board (www.trekbbbs.com), Simon & Schuster's Star Trek novels board (www.startrekbooks.com), and the Yahoo! Star Trek Books group.

Most of all, though, to the love of my life, Terri Osborne, who makes it all

worthwhile.

—Keith R.A. DeCandido

somewhere in New York City, 2002

About the Author

After a trip to the galactic barrier in order to save an injured Klingon, Keith R.A. DeCandido found himself seventy thousand light-years from home and put on trial for the crimes of humanity, after which he was declared Emissary.

Eventually, after switching bodies with an insane woman, he was able to become one with the Prophets, stop an anti-time wave from destroying the multiverse, and get home with the help of his alternate future self. These days, he writes in a variety of milieus. His other Star Trek work ranges from the Star Trek: The Next Generation novel Diplomatic Implausibility to the Star Trek: Deep Space Nine novel Demons of Air and Darkness to the TNG comic book Perchance to Dream to the award-winning DS9 novella “Horn and Ivory.” In addition, he is the co-developer of the Star Trek: S.C.E. line, and has written or cowritten over half a dozen eBooks in this series of adventures featuring the Starfleet Corps of Engineers (some reprinted in the volumes Have Tech, Will Travel and Miracle Workers in early 2002). The year 2003 will see the debut of Star Trek: I.K.S. Gorkon, books starring Captain Klag and his Klingon crew—the first time Pocket Books has published a series focusing on Star Trek’s most popular aliens. To say Keith is thrilled at this opportunity would be the gravest of understatements. He will also be contributing to the summer 2003 Star Trek: The Lost Era series.

In addition to all this Trek kin’, Keith has written novels, short stories, and nonfiction books in the worlds of Gene Roddenberry’s Andromeda, Farscape, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Doctor Who, Marvel Comics, and many more. He is also the

editor of the upcoming anthology of original science fiction Imaginings and the author of Dragon Precinct, an original fantasy novel to be published in 2004.

Keith lives in the Bronx with his girlfriend and the world's two goofiest cats.

Find out even more useless information about him at his official Web site at the

easy-to-remember URL of DeCandido.net, or just e-mail him directly at

keith@decandido.net and tell him just what you think of him. You can even join

his fan club at www.kradfanclub.com.

Look for STAR TREK fiction from Pocket Books

Star Trek®

Enterprise: The First Adventure • Vonda N. McIntyre

Strangers From the Sky • Margaret Wander Bonanno

Final Frontier • Diane Carey

Spock's World • Diane Duane

The Lost Years • J.M. Dillard

Prime Directive • Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens

Probe • Margaret Wander Bonanno

Best Destiny • Diane Carey

Shadows on the Sun • Michael Jan Friedman

Sarek • A.C. Crispin

Federation • Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens

Vulcan's Forge • Josepha Sherman & Susan Shwartz

Mission to Horatius • Mack Reynolds

Vulcan's Heart • Josepha Sherman & Susan Shwartz

The Eugenics Wars: The Rise and Fall of Khan Noonien Singh, Books One and Two •

Greg Cox

The Last Round-Up • Christie Golden

Novelizations

Star Trek: The Motion Picture • Gene Roddenberry

Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan • Vonda N. McIntyre

Star Trek III: The Search for Spock • Vonda N. McIntyre

Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home • Vonda N. McIntyre

Star Trek V: The Final Frontier • J.M. Dillard

Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country • J.M. Dillard

Star Trek Generations • J.M. Dillard

Starfleet Academy • Diane Carey

Star Trek books by William Shatner with Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens

The Ashes of Eden

The Return

Avenger

Star Trek: Odyssey (contains The Ashes of Eden , The Return , and Avenger)

Spectre

Dark Victory

Preserver

Captain's Peril

#1 • Star Trek: The Motion Picture • Gene Roddenberry

#2 • The Entropy Effect • Vonda N. McIntyre

#3 • The Klingon Gambit • Robert E. Vardeman

#4 • The Covenant of the Crown • Howard Weinstein

#5 • The Prometheus Design • Sondra Marshak & Myrna Culbreath

#6 • The Abode of Life • Lee Correy

- #7 • Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan • Vonda N. McIntyre
- #8 • Black Fire • Sonni Cooper
- #9 • Triangle • Sondra Marshak & Myrna Culbreath
- #10 • Web of the Romulans • M.S. Murdock
- #11 • Yesterday's Son • A.C. Crispin
- #12 • Mutiny on the Enterprise • Robert E. Vardeman
- #13 • The Wounded Sky • Diane Duane
- #14 • The Trellisane Confrontation • David Dvorkin
- #15 • Corona • Greg Bear
- #16 • The Final Reflection • John M. Ford
- #17 • Star Trek III: The Search for Spock • Vonda N. McIntyre
- #18 • My Enemy, My Ally • Diane Duane
- #19 • The Tears of the Singers • Melinda Snodgrass
- #20 • The Vulcan Academy Murders • Jean Lorrah
- #21 • Uhura's Song • Janet Kagan
- #22 • Shadow Lord • Laurence Yep
- #23 • Ishmael • Barbara Hambly
- #24 • Killing Time • Della Van Hise
- #25 • Dwellers in the Crucible • Margaret Wander Bonanno
- #26 • Pawns and Symbols • Majliss Larson
- #27 • Mindshadow • J.M. Dillard
- #28 • Crisis on Centaurus • Brad Ferguson
- #29 • Dreadnought! • Diane Carey
- #30 • Demons • J.M. Dillard
- #31 • Battlestations! • Diane Carey

- #32 • Chain of Attack • Gene DeWeese
- #33 • Deep Domain • Howard Weinstein
- #34 • Dreams of the Raven • Carmen Carter
- #35 • The Romulan Way • Diane Duane & Peter Morwood
- #36 • How Much for Just the Planet? • John M. Ford
- #37 • Bloodthirst • J.M. Dillard
- #38 • The IDIC Epidemic • Jean Lorrh
- #39 • Time for Yesterday • A.C. Crispin
- #40 • Timetrapp • David Dvorkin
- #41 • The Three-Minute Universe • Barbara Paul
- #42 • Memory Prime • Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens
- #43 • The Final Nexus • Gene DeWeese
- #44 • Vulcan's Glory • D.C. Fontana
- #45 • Double, Double • Michael Jan Friedman
- #46 • The Cry of the Onlies • Judy Klass
- #47 • The Kobayashi Maru • Julia Ecklar
- #48 • Rules of Engagement • Peter Morwood
- #49 • The Pandora Principle • Carolyn Clowes
- #50 • Doctor's Orders • Diane Duane
- #51 • Enemy Unseen • V.E. Mitchell
- #52 • Home Is the Hunter • Dana Kramer-Rolls
- #53 • Ghost-Walker • Barbara Hambly
- #54 • A Flag Full of Stars • Brad Ferguson
- #55 • Renegade • Gene DeWeese
- #56 • Legacy • Michael Jan Friedman
- #57 • The Rift • Peter David

#58 • Faces of Fire • Michael Jan Friedman

#59 • The Disinherited • Peter David, Michael Jan Friedman, Robert Greenberger

#60 • Ice Trap • L.A. Graf

#61 • Sanctuary • John Vornholt

#62 • Death Count • L.A. Graf

#63 • Shell Game • Melissa Crandall

#64 • The Starship Trap • Mel Gilden

#65 • Windows on a Lost World • V.E. Mitchell

#66 • From the Depths • Victor Milan

#67 • The Great Starship Race • Diane Carey

#68 • Firestorm • L.A. Graf

#69 • The Patrian Transgression • Simon Hawke

#70 • Traitor Winds • L.A. Graf

#71 • Crossroad • Barbara Hambly

#72 • The Better Man • Howard Weinstein

#73 • Recovery • J.M. Dillard

#74 • The Fearful Summons • Denny Martin Flinn

#75 • First Frontier • Diane Carey & Dr. James I. Kirkland

#76 • The Captain's Smith Daughter • Peter David

#77 • Twilight's End • Jerry Oltion

#78 • The Rings of Tautee • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

#79 • Invasion! #1: First Strike • Diane Carey

#80 • The Joy Machine • James Gunn

#81 • Mudd in Your Eye • Jerry Oltion

#82 • Mind Meld • John Vornholt

#83 • Heart of the Sun • Pamela Sargent & George Zebrowski

#84 • Assignment: Eternity • Greg Cox

#85-87 • My Brother's Keeper • Michael Jan Friedman

#85 • Republic

#86 • Constitution

#87 • Enterprise

#88 • Across the Universe • Pamela Sargent & George Zebrowski

#89-94 • New Earth

#89 • Wagon Train to the Stars • Diane Carey

#90 • Belle Terre • Dean Wesley Smith with Diane Carey

#91 • Rough Trails • L.A. Graf

#92 • The Flaming Arrow • Kathy and Jerry Oltion

#93 • Thin Air • Kristine Kathryn Rusch & Dean Wesley Smith

#94 • Challenger • Diane Carey

#95-96 • Rihannsu • Diane Duane

#95 • Swordhunt

#96 • Honor Blade

#97 • In the Name of Honor • Dayton Ward

Star Trek®: The Original Series

The Janus Gate • L.A. Graf

#1 • Present Tense

#2 • Future Imperfect

#3 • Past Prologue

Errand of Vengeance • Kevin Ryan

#1 • The Edge of the Sword

#2 • Killing Blow

#3 • River of Blood

Star Trek: The Next Generation®

Metamorphosis • Jean Lorrh

Vendetta • Peter David

Reunion • Michael Jan Friedman

Imzadi • Peter David

The Devil's Heart • Carmen Carter

Dark Mirror • Diane Duane

Q-Squared • Peter David

Crossover • Michael Jan Friedman

Kahless • Michael Jan Friedman

Ship of the Line • Diane Carey

The Best and the Brightest • Susan Wright

Planet X • Michael Jan Friedman

Imzadi II: Triangle • Peter David

I, Q • John de Lancie & Peter David

The Valiant • Michael Jan Friedman

The Genesis Wave, Books One , Two, and Three • John Vornholt

Immortal Coil • Jeffrey Lang

A Hard Rain • Dean Wesley Smith

The Battle of Betazed • Charlotte Douglas & Susan Kearney

Novelizations

Encounter at Farpoint • David Gerrold

Unification • Jeri Taylor

Relics • Michael Jan Friedman

Descent • Diane Carey

All Good Things... • Michael Jan Friedman

Star Trek: Klingon • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Star Trek Generations • J.M. Dillard

Star Trek: First Contact • J.M. Dillard

Star Trek: Insurrection • J.M. Dillard

Star Trek: Nemesis • J.M. Dillard

#1 • Ghost Ship • Diane Carey

#2 • The Peacekeepers • Gene DeWeese

#3 • The Children of Hamlin • Carmen Carter

#4 • Survivors • Jean Lorrh

#5 • Strike Zone • Peter David

#6 • Power Hungry • Howard Weinstein

#7 • Masks • John Vornholt

#8 • The Captain's Honor • David & Daniel Dvorkin

#9 • A Call to Darkness • Michael Jan Friedman

#10 • A Rock and a Hard Place • Peter David

#11 • Gulliver's Fugitives • Keith Sharee

#12 • Doomsday World • Carter, David, Friedman & Greenberger

#13 • The Eyes of the Beholders • A.C. Crispin

#14 • Exiles • Howard Weinstein

- #15 • Fortune's Light • Michael Jan Friedman
- #16 • Contamination • John Vornholt
- #17 • Boogeymen • Mel Gilden
- #18 • Q-in-Law • Peter David
- #19 • Perchance to Dream • Howard Weinstein
- #20 • Spartacus • T.L. Mancour
- #21 • Chains of Command • W.A. McCay & E.L. Flood
- #22 • Imbalance • V.E. Mitchell
- #23 • War Drums • John Vornholt
- #24 • Nightshade • Laurell K. Hamilton
- #25 • Grounded • David Bischoff
- #26 • The Romulan Prize • Simon Hawke
- #27 • Guises of the Mind • Rebecca Neason
- #28 • Here There Be Dragons • John Peel
- #29 • Sins of Commission • Susan Wright
- #30 • Debtor's Planet • W.R. Thompson
- #31 • Foreign Foes • Dave Galanter & Greg Brodeur
- #32 • Requiem • Michael Jan Friedman & Kevin Ryan
- #33 • Balance of Power • Dafydd ab Hugh
- #34 • Blaze of Glory • Simon Hawke
- #35 • The Romulan Stratagem • Robert Greenberger
- #36 • Into the Nebula • Gene DeWeese
- #37 • The Last Stand • Brad Ferguson
- #38 • Dragon's Honor • Kij Johnson & Greg Cox
- #39 • Rogue Saucer • John Vornholt

#40 • Possession • J.M. Dillard & Kathleen O'Malley

#41 • Invasion! #2: The Soldiers of Fear • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

#42 • Infiltrator • W.R. Thompson

#43 • A Fury Scorned • Pamela Sargent & George Zebrowski

#44 • The Death of Princes • John Peel

#45 • Intellivore • Diane Duane

#46 • To Storm Heaven • Esther Friesner

#47-49 • The Q Continuum • Greg Cox

#47 • Q-Space

#48 • Q-Zone

#49 • Q-Strike

#50 • Dyson Sphere • Charles Pellegrino & George Zebrowski

#51-56 • Double Helix

#51 • Infection • John Gregory Betancourt

#52 • Vectors • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

#53 • Red Sector • Diane Carey

#54 • Quarantine • John Vornholt

#55 • Double or Nothing • Peter David

#56 • The First Virtue • Michael Jan Friedman & Christie Golden

#57 • The Forgotten War • William R. Forstchen

#58-59 • Gemworld • John Vornholt

#58 • Gemworld #1

#59 • Gemworld #2

#60 • Tooth and Claw • Doranna Durgin

#61 • Diplomatic Implausibility • Keith R.A. DeCandido

#62-63 • Maximum Warp • Dave Galanter & Greg Brodeur

#62 • Dead Zone

#63 • Forever Dark

Star Trek: Deep Space Nine®

Warped • K.W. Jeter

Legends of the Ferengi • Ira Steven Behr & Robert Hewitt Wolfe

Novelizations

Emissary • J.M. Dillard

The Search • Diane Carey

The Way of the Warrior • Diane Carey

Star Trek: Klingon • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Trials and Tribble-ations • Diane Carey

Far Beyond the Stars • Steve Barnes

What You Leave Behind • Diane Carey

#1 • Emissary • J.M. Dillard

#2 • The Siege • Peter David

#3 • Bloodletter • K.W. Jeter

#4 • The Big Game • Sandy Schofield

#5 • Fallen Heroes • Dafydd ab Hugh

#6 • Betrayal • Lois Tilton

#7 • Warchild • Esther Friesner

#8 • Antimatter • John Vornholt

#9 • Proud Helios • Melissa Scott

#10 • Valhalla • Nathan Archer

#11 • Devil in the Sky • Greg Cox & John Gregory Betancourt

#12 • The Laertian Gamble • Robert Sheckley

#13 • Station Rage • Diane Carey

#14 • The Long Night • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

#15 • Objective: Bajor • John Peel

#16 • Invasion! #3: Time's Enemy • L.A. Graf

#17 • The Heart of the Warrior • John Gregory Betancourt

#18 • Saratoga • Michael Jan Friedman

#19 • The Tempest • Susan Wright

#20 • Wrath of the Prophets • David, Friedman & Greenberger

#21 • Trial by Error • Mark Garland

#22 • Vengeance • Dafydd ab Hugh

#23 • The 34th Rule • Armin Shimerman & David R. George III

#24-26 • Rebels • Dafydd ab Hugh

#24 • The Conquered

#25 • The Courageous

#26 • The Liberated

Books set after the series

The Lives of Dax • Marco Palmieri, ed.

Millennium Omnibus • Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens

#1 • The Fall of Terok Nor

#2 • The War of the Prophets

#3 • Inferno

A Stitch in Time • Andrew J. Robinson

Avatar, Book One • S.D. Perry

Avatar, Book Two • S.D. Perry

Section 31: Abyss • David Weddle & Jeffrey Lang

Gateways #4: Demons of Air and Darkness • Keith R.A. DeCandido

Gateways #7: What Lay Beyond: “Horn and Ivory” • Keith R.A. DeCandido

Mission: Gamma

#1 • Twilight • David R. George III

#2 • This Gray Spirit • Heather Jarman

#3 • Cathedral • Michael A. Martin & Andy Mangels

#4 • Lesser Evil • Robert Simpson

Star Trek: Voyager®

Mosaic • Jeri Taylor

Pathways • Jeri Taylor

Captain Proton: Defender of the Earth • D.W. “Prof” Smith

The Nanotech War • Steven Piziks

Novelizations

Caretaker • L.A. Graf

Flashback • Diane Carey

Day of Honor • Michael Jan Friedman

Equinox • Diane Carey

Endgame • Diane Carey & Christie Golden

#1 • Caretaker • L.A. Graf

- #2 • The Escape • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch
- #3 • Ragnarok • Nathan Archer
- #4 • Violations • Susan Wright
- #5 • Incident at Arbuk • John Gregory Betancourt
- #6 • The Murdered Sun • Christie Golden
- #7 • Ghost of a Chance • Mark A. Garland & Charles G. McGraw
- #8 • Cybersong • S.N. Lewitt
- #9 • Invasion! #4: The Final Fury • Dafydd ab Hugh
- #10 • Bless the Beasts • Karen Haber
- #11 • The Garden • Melissa Scott
- #12 • Chrysalis • David Niall Wilson
- #13 • The Black Shore • Greg Cox
- #14 • Marooned • Christie Golden
- #15 • Echoes • Dean Wesley Smith, Kristine Kathryn Rusch & Nina Kiriki Hoffman
- #16 • Seven of Nine • Christie Golden
- #17 • Death of a Neutron Star • Eric Kotani
- #18 • Battle Lines • Dave Galanter & Greg Brodeur
- #19-21 • Dark Matters • Christie Golden
- #19 • Cloak and Dagger
- #20 • Ghost Dance
- #21 • Shadow of Heaven

Enterprise®

Broken Bow • Diane Carey

Shockwave • Paul Ruditis

By the Book • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

What Price Honor? • Dave Stern

Star Trek®: New Frontier

New Frontier #1-4 Collector's Edition • Peter David

#1 • House of Cards

#2 • Into the Void

#3 • The Two-Front War

#4 • End Game

#5 • Martyr • Peter David

#6 • Fire on High • Peter David

The Captain's Table #5 • Once Burned • Peter David

Double Helix #5 • Double or Nothing • Peter David

#7 • The Quiet Place • Peter David

#8 • Dark Allies • Peter David

#9-11 • Excalibur • Peter David

#9 • Requiem

#10 • Renaissance

#11 • Restoration

Gateways #6: Cold Wars • Peter David

Gateways #7: What Lay Beyond: "Death After Life" • Peter David

#12 • Being Human • Peter David

Star Trek®: Stargazer

The Valiant • Michael Jan Friedman

Double Helix #6: The First Virtue • Michael Jan Friedman and Christie Golden

Gauntlet • Michael Jan Friedman

Progenitor • Michael Jan Friedman

Star Trek®: Starfleet Corps of Engineers (eBooks)

Have Tech, Will Travel (paperback) • various

#1 • The Belly of the Beast • Dean Wesley Smith

#2 • Fatal Error • Keith R.A. DeCandido

#3 • Hard Crash • Christie Golden

#4 • Interphase, Book One • Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore
Miracle Workers
(paperback) • various

#5 • Interphase, Book Two • Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#6 • Cold Fusion • Keith R.A. DeCandido

#7 • Invincible, Book One • David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido

#8 • Invincible, Book Two • David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido

#9 • The Riddled Post • Aaron Rosenberg

#10 • Gateways Epilogue: Here There Be Monsters • Keith R.A. DeCandido

#11 • Ambush • Dave Galanter & Greg Brodeur

#12 • Some Assembly Required • Scott Ciencin & Dan Jolley

#13 • No Surrender • Jeff Mariotte

#14 • Caveat Emptor • Ian Edginton & Michael Collins

#15 • Past Life • Robert Greenberger

#16 • Oaths • Glenn Hauman

- #17 • Foundations, Book One • Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore
- #18 • Foundations, Book Two • Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore
- #19 • Foundations, Book Three • Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore
- #20 • Enigma Ship • J. Steven and Christina F. York
- #21 • War Stories, Book One • Keith R.A. DeCandido
- #22 • War Stories, Book Two • Keith R.A. DeCandido

Star Trek®: Invasion!

- #1 • First Strike • Diane Carey
- #2 • The Soldiers of Fear • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch
- #3 • Time's Enemy • L.A. Graf
- #4 • The Final Fury • Dafydd ab Hugh

Invasion! Omnibus • various

Star Trek®: Day of Honor

- #1 • Ancient Blood • Diane Carey
- #2 • Armageddon Sky • L.A. Graf
- #3 • Her Klingon Soul • Michael Jan Friedman
- #4 • Treaty's Law • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

The Television Episode • Michael Jan Friedman

Day of Honor Omnibus • various

Star Trek®: The Captain's Table

#1 • War Dragons • L.A. Graf

#2 • Dujonian's Hoard • Michael Jan Friedman

#3 • The Mist • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

#4 • Fire Ship • Diane Carey

#5 • Once Burned • Peter David

#6 • Where Sea Meets Sky • Jerry Oltion

The Captain's Table Omnibus • various

Star Trek®: The Dominion War

#1 • Behind Enemy Lines • John Vornholt

#2 • Call to Arms... • Diane Carey

#3 • Tunnel Through the Stars • John Vornholt

#4 • ...Sacrifice of Angels • Diane Carey

Star Trek®: Section 31™

Rogue • Andy Mangels & Michael A. Martin

Shadow • Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Cloak • S.D. Perry

Abyss • David Weddle & Jeffrey Lang

Star Trek®: Gateways

#1 • One Small Step • Susan Wright

#2 • Chainmail • Diane Carey

#3 • Doors Into Chaos • Robert Greenberger

#4 • Demons of Air and Darkness • Keith R.A. DeCandido

#5 • No Man's Land • Christie Golden

#6 • Cold Wars • Peter David

#7 • What Lay Beyond • various

Epilogue: Here There Be Monsters • Keith R.A. DeCandido

Star Trek®: The Badlands

#1 • Susan Wright

#2 • Susan Wright

Star Trek®: Dark Passions

#1 • Susan Wright

#2 • Susan Wright

Star Trek®: The Brave and the Bold

#1 • Keith R.A. DeCandido

#2 • Keith R.A. DeCandido

Star Trek® Omnibus Editions

Invasion! Omnibus • various

Day of Honor Omnibus • various

The Captain's Table Omnibus • various

Star Trek: Odyssey • William Shatner with Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens

Millennium Omnibus • Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens

Starfleet: Year One • Michael Jan Friedman

Other Star Trek® Fiction

Legends of the Ferengi • Ira Steven Behr & Robert Hewitt Wolfe

Strange New Worlds , vol. I, II, III, IV, and V • Dean Wesley Smith, ed.

Adventures in Time and Space • Mary P. Taylor, ed.

Captain Proton: Defender of the Earth • D.W. "Prof" Smith

New Worlds, New Civilizations • Michael Jan Friedman

The Lives of Dax • Marco Palmieri, ed.

The Klingon Hamlet • Wil'yam Shex'pir

Enterprise Logs • Carol Greenburg, ed.

The Amazing Stories • various