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On 11 September 2001, I was in the midst of writing Part 1 of this book when the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were brutally attacked. The WTC was destroyed, killing thousands, and scarring the skyline of my hometown forever.

This book is sadly but emphatically dedicated to those whose lives were lost on that awful day.

Prelude Discovery

2151

This portion of the story takes place shortly before the Enterprise first-season episode Breaking the Ice.

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, TPol? 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 TPol 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 Unions another one of those races were 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, TPol 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 Unions 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

TPol, 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 TPol'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. TPol, 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' 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, TPol 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. Id say hes earned another chance to run free in the great outdoors for a while.

After a brief pause, TPol said slowly, If youd let me finish, sir, youd 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 cant see why you two havent 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 senior most crew members off-ship.

Travis can handle the conn while were gone. And Trips an engineer. Theyre good at opening things that dont want to be opened in fact, thats a particular talent of Trips.

Really? The dubiousness practically dripped from TPol s voice.

Really. Well be down within the hour. Archer out. After cutting off that connection, he opened another. Archer to Tucker.

Tucker here.

Howd you like to take a little trip, Trip?

There was a pause, then a snort of what might have almost been laughter. Capn, however long you been wait into 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. Trips 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 Reeds 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 hed 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.

TPol 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 Archers 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 TPol and the ships 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 TPol, 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 thats the one for story. Its got to be more of those Malkus Chronicles.

TPol, her hands also gloved, took the cube. The evidence does seem to point to that conclusion.

The word mighty shouldnt be a clue all by itself, Archer said. I mean, this Malkus guy cant 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 its a proper name, and belongs to a great personage.

TPol added, The word mighty written in that particular style has thus far been exclusively found in relation to Malkus. It would seem that Ensign Satos hypothesis was correct.

Smiling, Sato stood up. Told you.

This is an even greater find than you might think, TPol 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, thats probably why that box was so bloody hard to get into. If it was related to such an important figure TPol nodded. That is a logical deduction.

Pristine or not, Archer said, it doesnt do us any good if we cant read it. I dont think we have anything on board thatll 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 dont care if you dipped yourself in a vat of decon gel, youre not touching my artifacts without gloves on.

Your artifacts? Tucker said with a laugh. You said they had this Malkus fellas 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 Tuckers drawl, Keep your shirt on.

Archer managed to maintain a straight face, as, naturally, did TPol. Sato had somewhat less discipline, and burst into a giggle.

Tucker turned to Archer. Yknow, if I wanted abuse, I coulda stayed home. Next time, open yown 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. Itll take a couple hours, though and Ill need to take one of these with me.

All right, take them back up to Enterprise, Archer said. TPol, go with him and give him a hand.

Captain, Sato said, request permission to go back

Denied for now, he added at the ensigns forlorn look. Once theyve rigged the reader up, then Ill want you in orbit translating whats on these cubes, but until then, with TPol going back to the ship, I want you down here cataloging what we find.

Yes, sir.

You will be remaining as well? TPol asked Archer.

The captain nodded. Not quite a first contact, but close enough for me. Id 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 Archers lap). An hour prior to that, TPol 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. TPol 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.

TPol 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, youre remarkably enthusiastic for someone whod never heard of the Zalkat Union two days ago.

Its a fascinating culture, Captain, Sato said, now sounding a bit more sheepish. I could spend days just listening to their languageit 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-commanders shown me in some other records its just amazing.

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

After a brief nod, TPol 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, TPol 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 Unions 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 Unions 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 didnt obey, they had their choice of dying by disease, tornado, or being blasted into oblivion.

Thats quite a combination. Archer knew his words didnt 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 shogun 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 havent found that part, yet, Sato said. She had moved to stand next to TPol. Captain, each of the cubes we found had different things on it, but the information were giving you about Malkuss devices is on all of them. I think thats why the box was so well preserved the Zalkatians wanted someone to find these chronicles in the future.

Why?

TPol 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 didnt 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 whatd 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 were 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, TPol 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 Archers face. The Zalkatians have a thing for ordinary-looking boxes, dont they?

Sato also smiled.

TPol, of course, did not, but simply went on as if Archer hadnt 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.

TPol 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, TPol 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 TPol 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.

TPol 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.

Pirenes 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.

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

But someone new shouldnt have taken over, didnt 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. Youll feel better, they said.

Right now, she didnt 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 wasnt as if she had a job to go home to and shed 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 hadnt 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.

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

The cold and the snow and the wind somehow didnt 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 couldnt 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.

Yknow, 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 Borcks adjutant.

Its space, son, its

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'mna have to sleep all the time. Cause, in space its always night!

Cmon, son, its 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. Wont 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. Ill talk to you later, okay, Dad?

Thats 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 Deckers desk faded to black. The commodore leaned back in his chair. He was proud of his son. The boys record was spotless. Truth be told, it was cleaner than his old mans, 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 wasnt expected to advance all that far. Most of his commanding officers considered him to be insubordinatethough never to the point of court-martialand overly opinionated.

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

Will, though, was a Starfleet poster boy. Although Decker hadnt 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, Deckers 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, were 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. Ill 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 coffeemilk, 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 didnt 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 officers question. The communications officer touched the receiver in his ear. Im 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 Deckers 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. Deckers sole impression of the young man so far was that he was a bit too eager. He also hadnt 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. Lets 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 hadnt bothered to change into uniform, and his wavy red hair was sticking up in all directions. He was still wearing his pajamasilk, Decker noticed, or something similar.

Whats happening? the young man asked. Lieutenant Masada said it was some kind of medical crisis. We dont 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 dont 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 planetpart 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 Masadas voice, and knew he was dying to add, Unlike, say, a neutron star. Guillermo, knock it off.

Sounding nonplussed, Masada said, Sir?

We know youre 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 regions the only place thats really comfortable for humansrest of the planets 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, Ill pass, thanks.

Then Masadas console beeped. What the?

Report, Takeshewada said.

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

Decker frowned. I dont remember that one.

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

Masada snorted. Honestly, if the computer hadnt just shoved it in my face, I wouldnt 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 Ill 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 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 IIa 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 near-strangers 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 Kirks service record. Although the commodore was appalled to see that Kirk was only a few years older than Deckers son, he was also impressed with the young mans service record. Kirk had several citations besides the ones Takeshewada mentioned.

Still think hes 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 officers wearing blue? What the hell kind of ship is this kid running? The ships 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. Were 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 youve 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 whos down for the count what were 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 whats the problem? Rosenhaus asked.

No ones 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. Theyre treating with sedation and anti-adrenal medications, but thats only temporary. The virus works past that eventually. It also inhibits any attempt to put the body into stasis. Even under sedation, it wont 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 brolamine?

McCoy frowned. You cant use brolamine in these cases.

Of course you can according to

Both Kirk and Decker said, Gentlemen, simultaneously. Decker smirked and added, You twoll 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.

Is it 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. Spock 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 overcrowded 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 Stephopoulos 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, 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?

Im afraid so, maam.

She found herself looking helplessly at Kirk and Decker. Decker was inscrutable, but Kirk looked sympathetic. Im barely able to do my job, now Im supposed to do the whole governments?

Trachsel was holding out a copy of the executive order and a stylus. Please, maam, 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, theyll 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. Shed 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? Ill 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 didnt have a sense of humor, which wasnt true. She just didnt 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 Pirenes 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 couldnt 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 Ill use it on the rioters. That would be so wonderfully ironic, wouldnt it?

Again, she laughed.

Soon, theyll 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 Kirks 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 Kirks 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 Kirks 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 Kirks words were a physical attack. Are you joking?

Not about something like this, believe me.

Kirk, we cant

I dont make this request lightly, Commodore, Kirk interrupted. Ive lived under martial law. You familiar with Tarsus IV?

Of course, Decker said. Kirk didnt 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 Federations founding a century earlier.

You were there? Decker asked. After Kirk nodded, Decker did the math. You mustve only been a teenager.

Again, Kirk nodded. Ive 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 were looking at is anarchy. Under regulations, our only recourse is to declare martial law. He took a deep breath. Its your call, Commodore youre the ranking officer. But just because this has been done wrong by people like Kodos doesnt mean it cant be done right. It isnt martial law thats evil, its those who abuse it. Id 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 captains age. Or maybe Im just not being fair being under forty doesnt 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 ships 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

Thats an order, Number One! Decker barked. Then he took a breath. Hiromi, believe me, this way is best. Kirk and Ill stay down here. Youre 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 were-going-to-talk-about-this-later tone. Well, at least shes 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 wont that go over like a lead balloon, Decker muttered. I doubt most folks even know that the governments been laid low by the virus.

With a small smile, Kirk said, Its a challenge, Commodore.

Chapter Four

LEWIS ROSENHAUS could barely contain himself as he beamed over to the Enterprise. He had copies of several notes and papers with him, including case studies hed 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. Wait a second, you're Christine Chapel? The one who cowrote that paper on practical applications of the records found in the Orion ruins, 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 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 problem. 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.

Im sure theyll be heartbroken at your disapproval, McCoy muttered. To answer your question, Im 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 wouldnt go scrambling a sick persons molecules all over creation. But thats what shuttles are for.

Thatll take hours. Doctor, weve got all the reports, and we can do simulations here without disturbing a live patient.

What the hellre they teaching you at Starfleet Medical these days, boy, medicine or computer programming?

They teach us medicine, Rosenhaus said, standing up, and Im really getting tired of your attitude, Dr. McCoy. Im a certified physician, just like you. Im a chief medical officer on a starship, just like you. Id appreciate being treated with something other than condescension. Or, at the very least, not being called boy. I think Ive earned that much at least.

McCoy's face did soften a bit. Im sorrythat was uncalled for, Doctor. Crises tend to bring out my unprofessional side. Theres 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 itthe 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 Id rather do that here, seeing as how down on Proxima theyre having riots and all.

Rosenhaus found he couldnt 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 werent 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 didnt workthe virus fought past them or prevented them. The one exception was the most general method sedation. Unfortunately, people couldnt 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 didnt 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 dryest scientific report hed ever seen why do they let Vulcans write these things? he wondered plaintivelyand 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 whoevers doing this, and fast. Then he sighed. Thats Masadas 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. Im such an idiot.

He dug through the notes hed brought over from the Constellation. Cmon, cmon, he thought as he riffled through the not-as-organized-as-he-wanted-it-to-be pile, I know youre in here somewhereaha!

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 zhEthre. 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 Vrathev 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 programs 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 Pireennes 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 out.

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 programs 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 as 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 anaesthetic 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 shed 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 wouldnt have bothered him all that much, except that he always called him Doctor in a tone of voice that indicated that the nurse didnt 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 hadnt had the chance to thoroughly look over.

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

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

The communications officer a friendly young lieutenant named George Howard nodded. Hes 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?

Ive got a good line on a cure. Im going to test it now.

The communications officers face split into a grin. Lew, if thats true, itll 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 havent tested it yet.

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

Good, Rosenhaus said with a smile. Sickbay out.

Howards 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 wasnt practical. His junior physician was back on the Enterprise, and McCoy was still on Proxima. Besides, hell probably just come up with sixteen reasons why it wont 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, youll 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 couldnt 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 hadnt risen to the bait.

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

He continued. Ive 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. Youre the doctor, after all.

Sighing with relief, Rosenhaus handed her the data. The words, youre 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 Brakers chart. Everything seemed to be in order but for the presence of the virus, shed 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 Ive 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 hadnt 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 cant help but think of the old saying about abused children growing up to become abusers. She took a very deep breath.

Well, wouldnt the commodore keep him in line?

Takeshewada pursed her lips. Rosenhaus didnt 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 hes impulsive. Once he gets an idea in his head, he tends to jump into it feet first and figure out the consequences later. Hes made it work for him so far through a combination of stubbornness and dumb luck. I just hope today isnt the day his luck runs out.

Grinning, Rosenhaus said, Not likely. After all, Im on the job, and I think Ive got us something.

Eyes widening, Takeshewada said, Oh?

Ive 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 its ready, I can test it on her.

Smiling a small smile, the commander said, Best news Ive heard all day, Doc. Hell, wish youd told me sooner, it probably wouldve 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 wasnt a cranky voice. Ill be right there.

Now Takeshewadas smile was wider. L.R.?

Dont ask. Rosenhaus shuddered. The last thing he wanted to do was get into the sickbay politics hed been dropped into the middle of. Then again, she is the first officer Or rather, dont ask now. Id actually like to sit down with you and talk about some issues I have regarding sickbay.

Fine by me, she said with a nod. Well set something up after you perform your miracle.

Rosenhaus's Miracle. I like that. Thats 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 couldnt 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 didnt wish to take chances.

Yes, please do.

Youre the doctor.

Damn right I am, he thought triumphantly as he took the hypo that Shickele had prepared, and went to

Brakers bedside. He checked to make sure the dosage on the hypo was set properly, took a deep breath, and applied the hypo to Brakers neck.

Then he let out the breath he was holding.

Over the course of the next hour, he and Jazayerli monitored Brakers progress, watching as the virus 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. Whats this I hear about a cure?

Rosenhaus blinked. Howd 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. Whatd you use?

Its 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. Derubbios 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 shouldnt 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 annoyance, handed it to McCoy, who applied it to Brakers neck.

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

We dont know that the serum is causing this, Rosenhaus said. It could be

McCoy interrupted. Nurse, get me eighty CCs of dicloripin. Then he turned to Rosenhaus. Dave Derubbios serum is fatal to humanswhen it interacts with human blood, it creates xelaxine.

Rosenhaus face fell. What? Xelaxine was toxic to humans. For that matter, it was toxic to Andorians, but it didnt

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, Didnt 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 didnt 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 Brakers vitals were returning to normal.

They may call em artificial intelligence, son, but trust me, they aint that bright. You tell em to test the virus and the gland, thats all theyll check! You didnt check how this might affect the blood cells or any of the organs it came into contact with!

Rosenhaus closed his eyes. Youre right. I didntI mean, I He sighed. Im sorry, Doctor, I

You dont 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 dont go off half-cocked.

McCoy took one last look at Brakers vitals, then ran a Feinberger over her. Times like this, Doctor, we have to be extra carefulboth with what we do and who we say it to. Shipsre like small towns. Word spreads like wildfire. He looked up. And another thingyou dont 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 Brakers 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 were both chief medical officers, but at heart, we were 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 Litwackshes 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'dve 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 slots 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 Kirkyounger, 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 Deckers heart. Surely you can at least let me land one shuttle?

Kirk asked, Why not transport it down?

It cant 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 couldnt recall what Aidulac looked like, even though hed been looking at her for the past minute. More to the point, his head cleared and he realized just what hed been thinking during that minute. And then he remembered the Constellation '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 dont understand, why have you

Dont 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 Deckers shoulder. Commodore, what are you doing? This woman has a simple

This woman, Kirk, is a Siren.

A blank expression came over Kirks face. A what?

Can I assume, Decker said, addressing himself to the darkened viewscreen, that the Sun 'sregistry is to the Peladon Affiliation, Captain Aidulac?

The silence that met the question spoke volumes.

As I expected. Captain Kirk, maybe youre 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, theres 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 theyve encountered that has men in it have succumbed. The first Federation captain to deal with one called them Sirens.

Commodore, youre being horribly unfair. I just want

Still there, Aidulac? Id have thought youd 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.

Aidulacs voicenow 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 desks speakers.

Therell be no need for violence, Commodore. But I can assure you, I have friends at Starfleet

All men, Im sure, Decker muttered.

and theyre going to hear about this. Trust me, these arent men you want to have as enemies.

Theyll have to get in line, Captain, Decker said with a snort, thinking back on all the people hed pissed off in his decades of service. Proxima out.

As he cut off the connection, Takeshewada said, Shes leaving orbit now, Commodore. She was a Siren, wasnt she?

Decker blinked. You knew?

It was a guess. I wasnt entirely sure. Best way to be sure was to gauge your response. If you gave in, Id know for sure.

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

Of course, sir. Again, Decker could envision his first officers not-a-smile. Constellation out.

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

Im sorry, Commodore. I cant believe I fell for such aa cheap parlor trick.

Easy, Kirk, its 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, its 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, howd the address go?

Well enough, Kirk said after a hesitation. The captain obviously didnt 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, Deckers 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 communicatorpeople shouting, mostly, and the occasional sound of soft impacts. Vascogne here, Commodore, said Deckers security chief. Weve got a situation.

You still at SCMC?

Yes, sir. Vascogne 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 everyones trying to get into the hospital to get it. Request permission to pacify the crowd, Commodore.

Deckers eyes grew wide. Vascogne wouldnt 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. Its my opinion, sir, that no other option is viable.

Commodore, wait, Kirk said before Decker could give the order. Id like to try something else.

I really hate my job, Lieutenant Etienne Vascogne 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.

Shouldve 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.

Vascogne was glad that Captain Kirk had apparently come up with some kind of alternative to shooting these poor people down. He hadnt 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 couldnt 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. Thats quite the loud crowd, he thought, if they can drown out a transporter. Either that or Im just getting old

The crowd noise abated slightly at Kirks utterance, but not much. Dont gimme that! We know theres 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 plaguebut whatever youve heard, its just not true! Kirk raised his hands as if he were trying to push the crowd back. Now please, return to your homesyour 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; 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, Well 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 communicators 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. Im going to need one of you to give an address to the people down here fill them in on your progress.

I dont have time to be giving press conferences. Besides, thats how rumors get started, and weve got enough of that going on here.

Frowning, Kirk asked, What do you mean?

Ah, its 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 Vascognes own people.

Bones, does that mean?

It means were on a track, Jim, but I dont have any idea whether its the right track, or how far we have to go on it. Ill keep you posted. McCoy out.

Decker regarded Kirk with a quizzical look. Kirk, I cant help noticing that that doctor of yours didnt actually agree to give a statement.

He thinks itll distract from his work. All things considered, its 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, Dont worry, Vascogne, Im sure well all work to make sure he doesnt live it down.

Chapter Six

G UILLERMO MASADA blinked as he entered the sensor room and saw Lt. Commander Spock sitting at one of the consoles. Whatre you doing here?

Spocks 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 youd, yknow, 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 dont require large amounts of break-time.

Really? Masada said with a smile. And thats because youre a Vulcan.

Correct.

Except youre not entirely. Youre half-human. He grinned. That explains two things, actually. One, youre 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 thats the Vulcans secret for repressing their emotionsthey channel them all into that one eyebrow. Thats why you guys raise them so oftenits the focal point of all those emotions youre 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, its 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 its called a ponytail.

A misnomer, given that ponies actually have much longer tails.

Masada laughed. Thats the second thing that you being half-human explains. You, Commander Spock, are a laugh riot.

To Masadas 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. Its an old expressionit just means youre funny. One of my staff is a Vulcanthat Ensign Sontor I mentioned. Ive worked with a bunch of other Vulcans, and youre the only one of em thats 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, Dont you see, though, thats exactly what makes it funny? The literal-mindedness, that dry tone of yoursby 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. Its the inherent contradiction of human existence. The difference between the interpreter and the interpreted, the He cut himself off. Sorry, I guess Im still tired. I only get philosophical when Im 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.

Its another expression, Masada said with a sigh.

Another contradiction of human existence?

Sort of. More like a metaphor. You make me laugh so hard, Im in dangerwell, metaphorical danger, anyhowof 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 ifshould something amuse you in the futureto 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. Youre too much, Commander.

Too much what?

He started to answer, then said, Never mind. Turning to his console, which showed him the lateral sensor arraypresently detecting many things, with the irritating exception of the precise location of the Malkus ArtifactMasada then asked, Hows 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 theyd get back to it anytime sooneven if they solved the problem here in Alpha Proxima within the next hour, there was no way theyd be able to return to Beta Proxima to do any significant work on the star before theyd have to go off to that silly conference at Crellis.

And at the rate were going, he thought, its 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 life signs? 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 TRamir, 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 artifacts' 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. Derubbios 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.

Im 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, Derubbios 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, its 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 didnt 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 acids raw form. The question is if its 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 dont 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. Well have to monitor their CO₂ levels probably need to flush it out of most peoples systems before they can be safely discharged and of course theyll all need to be re-inoculated for encephalitis.

Rosenhaus nodded. Well have to make sure everyone is inoculated first. If they havent been, well 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 were on the right track here. He turned to Rosenhaus and smiled. Nice work, Doctor.

What nice work? I made a dumbass suggestion. Youre 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 hadnt 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. Cmon, Lew, lets 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 couldnt 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 wasnt an actual war on.

Then again, he thought, for all intents and purposes, we are fighting a war. Were 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 hadnt 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 Kirks little speech at the SCMC.

As the sun started setting on Proxima, things seemd to have quieted down.

Right now, Commodore Matthew Decker needed a good nights 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 Wills 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, Deckers 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 not without small risks, but nothing as life-threatening as the virus itself.

Kirk stepped up. How soon can they administer 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 something. 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 life signs, 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, 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, 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 Karsays 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 were-going-to-talk-about-this-later tone. Takeshewada out.

Decker closed his communicator. At this rate, he thought, Hiromi and Ill be talking for hours when this is done.

Dont worry, Commodore, Kirk said as he grabbed his phaser from out of the drawer of the desk where hed been keeping it, well have this taken care of by the time you wake up.

Like theres a chance in hell Im 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 dont know what were dealing withfor all we know, theres an army down there. Even if its just one nutcase, its someone whos attempted mass murder. Be careful.

For one second, Jim Kirk looked just like Will did the day he got his commissionsober, calm, yet obviously ready to face whatever was coming. Thanks, Matt. And dont worry.

As soon as he left, Decker let out a long breath that sounded more like a snort. Dont worry, he says.

Whatm I supposed to do, sleep?

He fell more than sat into the chair behind his desk and called up a report from one of Bronsteins 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. Its 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 indoorswhether on planets or in starshipsshe 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 didnt bother, figuring shed do so the next time.

If her promotion hadnt come through, there wouldnt have been a next time.

So she stood now in Posada Circlelike 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 Proximas governmentsurrounded by a detail of Constellation and Enterprise security. As she waited for Kirk and Vascogne to arrive, she made sure she took a moment to bask in the sunlight. Because the Constellation could be destroyed tomorrowor the next dayor 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 Kirks 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 gamea 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.

Were just waiting on Vascogne. Hes supposed to have the information on our suspect. Right now, we just know that her name is Tomasina Laubenthal. Ive 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. Didnt realize you were joining the party, sir. Or are you here to give another speech?

This time Im 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.

Whatve 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, shes 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 secretarys 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.

Thats the real fun partshe took a vacation to Pirennes Peak. Its in a mountain range about a hundred kilometers south of here. It only recently became a popular spot because the weathers 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. Thats 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. Hed 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. Nobodys 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. Lets go!

As a unit, they moved toward Laubenthals 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 colonys 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 this

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. Darndest 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 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 led 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

MATT DECKER 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, Vascogne and I were all set to

stun em and sort it out later. Instead, you talked em out of it. Thats a rare gift youve got there, my friend. All right, so it didnt work on Laubenthalbut 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, Youre right, MattI know youre right in my head. But Ive still got this sense of failure.

Decker stood up and put an encouraging hand on Kirks shoulder. Keep that sense of failure, Jim. But dont let it overwhelm you. Just make sure you try to do better next time. Thats what separates the good captains from the great ones.

Kirk stood up and chuckled. Im hardly a great anything, Commodore.

Maybe not yet. Give it time. So, you done sulking? Youve got a planet and a ship waiting for you.

That I do, Commodore. Lets go.

As they walked toward the aircar Decker had arrived in, Kirk asked, So whats next on the Constellation 'sagenda?

Well, we have to spend the next few hours getting everything together for handing power back over. And theres a memorial service tonight that I think you and I should attend.

Agreed.

So, by the time thats all finished, well 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. Hiromis handling most of it, but I still need to at least be visible.

Im barely gonna have time to shave, he added with a rueful rub of his stubble-filled cheek. As it is, I havent slept in two days.

Actually, Matt, Ive 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, Dont believe in no-win situations, huh? You mustve just loved the Kobayashi Maru test back at the Academy.

Oh, it was a challenge, Kirk deadpanned.

Frowning, Decker asked, Whats that supposed to mean?

The night before, I reprogrammed the simulation so I could rescue the Maru and get away from the Klingons. He smiled. Youre not the only one who doesnt like to lose, Matt.

Decker didnt know whether to be outraged or amused. The bark of laughter that exploded from his mouth settled the debate. Youre a piece of work, you know that? he said as the aircar took off.

Thats what the instructor said when she gave me the commendation for original thinking.

You got off easyand Ill bet that wasnt all she said, either. Decker shook his head, then offered his hand.

Its 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 Artifactcurrently cradled in Masadas armsinto orbit. The Enterprise 'snext 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. TRamir 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 Its 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 Vascogne, 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. Im 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 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 Id rather have the captain back. Wed 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. Its 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 shouldnt keep Captain Keogh waiting. Shall we?

After you, Commander.

They walked in companionable silence to the captains quarters. Sisko suddenly seemed a bit skittish. As they approached Keoghs quarters on deck nine, Shabalala asked, Is everything all right, Commander? Sisko shook his head as if trying to shoo away a fly. Its 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 Keoghs quarters. Come, came the captains 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 hed 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 Simons easygoing manner.

Still, hed lasted three months she was halfway to tying the Odyssey 's record for tenure by a first officer.

The ship had left Utopia Planitia 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. Im 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 moments consideration.

Keogh looked expectantly at Shabalala, who shook his head. He could have asked for what he wanted a synthetic 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 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 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 Siskos 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. Ive found that Captain Keoghs 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 thingOrtas record isnt exactly spotless. Hes not the only former resistance member whos stayed away from Bajor, but he is the most vocal.

I know, Ive seen some of his speeches. At Siskos surprised look, Shabalala shrugged. Captain Keogh isnt the only one whos studied Cardassias enemies. Orta a borderline anarchist. He makes those Kohn-Ma fellows you put down last year look positively calm by comparison. I just dont 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 wantedand they wouldnt approve the farming plan if Orta wasnt part of it.

I thought Bajor needed this farm. Why would they jeopardize it just to please someone like Orta?

Sisko smiled. Theyre politicians.

Snorting, Shabalala said, An excellent point.

Seriously, they need to pull all the old factions in. If Bajors going to get back on its feet, it needs all of Bajoreven the anarchists. They cant afford another internal squabble like that mess earlier this year.

The Circle? Shabalala remembered reading about the Alliance for Global Unityor, simply, the Circlethat had attempted a coup dtat, leading to Starfleet temporarily abandoning Bajor and Deep Space 9. Sisko and his crew had exposed the Circle as being supplied by Cardassiasomething even the Circle themselves did not knowand 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.

Well 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 smoothlyOrta 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 didnt work as well underground, and the darkness was better for Ortas guerilla tactics than Central Commands more overt ones.

But this time they used that predilection against him. They got the Yridian to make the deal, and made the weaponsstolen Starfleet phaser riflesimpossible 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 hed set foot on his homeworld since he stowed away in the cargo hold of a Ferengi trader at the age of ten. His foster parentsOrta 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 Bajoran 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 Cardassian 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 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 Chintoka.

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 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 terrorists' 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 themselves. 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 Chintoka. 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 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

ENTERING BAJORAN 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 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.

Bajoran 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.

Im sorry, Captain, Im 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 Keoghs relief, neither Shabalala nor Gonzalez nor Talltree visibly reacted to Daxs 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. Ill deal with that later, he thought angrily. Were 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 wasnt sure he would.

Honestly, Major, neither was I. I still doubt his intentions. But hes here, as are his followers.

Good. Next to her, the Trill started manipulating controls. Lieutenant Dax is transmitting beam-down coordinates for both Ortas people and your team.

Excellent. Well 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 majors 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 dont 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 Keoghs 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 Kiras 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 Keoghs right was a large expanse of equally barren land, but without the markers. Most of this would be the actual farmland, once the Odyssey 'ssoon-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 months timethe 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 months time, the moons 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. Doesnt 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 were 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 its important. And I dont want it messed up because a Starfleet captains ego is larger than the quadrant.

Shabalala laughed. Dont worry, Major. Part of my job description is to keep Captain Keoghs ego at least planet-sized. Well get this done.

So theres 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. Its good to see you again, Nerys though Im surprised to see you in that uniform. Im doing what I can to help our home, Orta. Now, so are you. And if you ask me, its 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 hed 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. Im not questioning anything, Orta except for what took you so long to come home.

Im here now. And Im 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. Itll 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 Im preparing ground for farming. Some would call that tragic.

Really? Shabalala said. Id call it progress.

Im sure you would, Commander. Id think that you have never had to fight for your very survival.

Unbidden, images from the final mission of the Fearless entered Shabalalas head. He banished them quickly. Youd think incorrectly. Its true that Ive never had to live in caves, or wonder where my next meal was coming from. Ive never been physically tortured or mutilated. But dont think Ive never had to fight, and dont think I dont 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 youve 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 youll excuse me, Major, Ill 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 Shabalalas part, he winced at his own phrasing. Save my captain indeed, he thought. You arent 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 captains mouth and then we can fire away.

Thats ridiculous! Daxs voice was not quite as loud as Keoghs, 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 captains 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 phasering? 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 like 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 didnt 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 hed ordered a Saurian brandy a real one instead of raktajino. Captain Keogh? In a ponytail?

Dax nodded. And you know, looking back, he wasnt 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 Daxs 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?

Older 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? Im 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. Its funny, these days, he wouldnt 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 youll excuse me, Im going to go wash my mind out with soap. Thank you for the drink.

Daxs face never lost that little smile of hers. Youre welcome.

Chapter Ten

WE 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, were 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 chiefs image had been replaced by the standby screen. What the hell? Then Gonzalezs round face appeared. Captain, we have a bit of a problem. Theres a civilian ship entering orbit, and her captain wants to speak to you.

Were a little busy down here, Commander. Tell her

Ive 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, shes threatening to fire on us and the Rio Grande. Its crazy she couldnt 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, Im sorry, its just

Never mind. Lets just get this over with so we can move on. Put the captain on the viewer down here. Switching.

Gonzalezs face was replaced by the most amazing sight Declan Keogh had seen since he first met his now-ex-wife twenty years ago.

Im Aidulac, captain of the Sun , the woman said with a bright smile that seemed to light up the viewer. I have this problem that Im sure you could easily solve.

Of course, Captain, Keogh said happily. Anything you want.

Captain Dax started, but Keogh ignored her.

Im afraid youll have to wait a while. Were in the midst of an operation that requires phasing the surface of the moon were on. As soon as thats done, I promise to do whatever I can to solve your problem.

Captain Dax started again, but Keogh waved her off.

Thats very kind of you, Captain, Im extremely grateful to you for your help but Im afraid Im in a bit of a rush. Do you think I could land on the moon before you start your operation?

I suppose its 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 dont see

Then his head cleared.

He tried to reconstruct the last minute or so, and found that he couldnt. What just happened?

Captain Keogh, please, you must believe me, I need to come down there. Keogh heard Aidulacs words, but refused to look at the viewer.

Lieutenant, what the hell is going on? he whispered.

Shes a Siren, Deco, and shes 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 had 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. Talltrees guesses is accurate.

Very well, Captain. Ill leave. Aidulacs tone was petulant. But youll 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 had 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. Well begin the operation momentarily.

If you say so, Captain. Rio Grande out.

Smiling sweetly at Keogh, Dax said, Dont worry, Deco. It couldve 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 didnt bring up the details of what just happened.

Dax looked down at her console, still with that damned smile of Curzons. 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 Prez told me a few weeks later, it wasnt really worth mentioning.

Keogh closed his eyes. I knew she was going to bring something up sooner or later, either the holodeck or Curzons 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 Daxs 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 Ive 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 theyve atrophied, she admonished herself. Its been how long? She couldnt 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 wasnt 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 Unions 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 clams. 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 Girones, 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 Girones, 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 Ones 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 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 naive 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 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 phasing went off without a hitch.

Orta had watched from a safe distance along with the others as the Federation starships 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 Id 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 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 were 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 freed. 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 had 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

IT'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.

Its 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 wed followed my plan, wed 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.

Weve 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.

Well 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 Im staying behind with the scientific team.

Yes, sir. Odyssey out.

Keogh turned to a confused Shabalala. Youre in charge of the Odyssey. Next to him, the first officer saw Dax frown and Kiras eyes widen in surprise, both reasonable reactions to Keoghs surprising announcement.

Sir, Im sure that

Youre not questioning my orders, are you, Mr. Shabalala?

Of course not, sir, but

Good. Ill accompany Major Kira and Lieutenant Dax back to Deep Space 9 when they report back there in two days. I assume youll 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 didnt like but didnt wish to annoy, either. Captain, it really isnt 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.

Im not doubting your abilities or even yours, Lieutenant, he added to Dax. Its not the project Im concerned about. He pointed to the scarved individual presently inspecting one of the hoeing machines, which appeared to have some kind of fault. Its him.

Kira pursed her lips. I cant stop you from staying, Captain, but Im 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. Ive had these concerns about Orta since the mission started, as your Commander Sisko can attest. Since they are my concerns, I feel its 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 Kiras reaction. This is her project, and shes never been a hundred percent happy with the Federations involvement in Bajor. Hell, from all accounts, she views Starfleet as little more than a necessary evil. Shes 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 theres nothing else, Ill 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's phasers. 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 tricorders 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 wont, Orta. I cant 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.

Whats 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 didnt 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 Keoghs presence much of a secret, but Keogh didnt care. As far as he was concerned, he was in charge of this project, at least from Starfleets 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 hasnt reported back yet.

Keogh frowned. Thats odd. Can you locate him?

Thats just it, sirthe tricorder isnt 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, Im not picking it up, either. Where was he last?

Keogh gave the precise coordinates. Its 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.

Im 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 Daxs 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.

Whats 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 signaturepresumably this Malkus Artifact the computer mentionedto confiscate said item, but he didnt 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.

Youre picking up that signature now? Kira asked.

Mhm.

Frowning, Kira said, So you know about this because of Emony, right? Two hundred years, thats 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 Academyfascinating 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 were 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 its necessary now for you to drop your weapons.

Id do it if I were you, Dax said quickly, throwing her own phaser to the ground. Pointing at the box in Ortas hands, she added, Thats one of the artifacts.

The Trill speaks the truth, Orta said. Commander Rodzinski didnt 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 werent 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 Rodzinskior, 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 werent any people in the house, but he was also quite sure that Orta didnt know that. Worse, Orta obviously didnt care.

Keogh wanted nothing more than to wipe the smug look off of Ortas facepreferably with a phaser.

Instead he threw his phaser to the ground. Next to him, Kira did the same.

Youre making a mistake, Orta, Kira said.

Orta laughedit 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 Akwars Ninth Prophecy?

Based on the way Kiras 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 cant 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.

Its 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 couldnt be trusted, Orta. Of course, I never expected anything like this. But you can rest assured, whatever you have planned, you wont get away with it. Ill stop you if its the last thing I do.

The foul rictus masquerading as a smile grew wider. Im certain it will be, Captain.

Chapter Twelve

O DYSSEY TO S HABALALA ! 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 Talltrees frantic message. That it was so frantic by itself was worrisome Jason Talltrees 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 monks 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 Bajors second moon was functional primarily meant to provide a service to Bajor New Bajor was to be these peoples 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 monks retreat where Shabalala was standing had been designed in the Jarrovian style from some three centuries previous. Shabalalas 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 Talltrees communiq 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 everyones 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 didnt even bother docking.

Within three more minutes, Sisko and two other members of the stations senior staff the Bajoran security chief, actually a shapeshifter named Odo, and the chief of operations, Miles OBrien had beamed on board, and met with him and Gonzalez in the observation lounge.

OBrien 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 Jolare—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? OBrien asked. He won. Id think hed want to keep the peace.
Im not convinced he was fighting for peace, Odo said. Many of the Resistance fighters were indeed struggling for Bajors independence, but plenty of them just wanted revenge against the Cardassians. Shabalala nodded. Revenge can be a great motivator.
I suppose youre right, OBrien 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, thats where well find Captain Keogh and the others.
He dismissed the meeting and they adjourned to the bridge. Sisko took Shabalalas usual seat next to the command chair, while Odo and OBrien went to the aft of the bridge.
As he sat in the command chair, Shabalala thought, Ill find you, Captain. Im 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 techniqueOrta 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 knotsand 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, Id 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. Akwars Ninth Prophecy states that when Bajors moons align, then peace will reign. The thing is, the moons arent 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 its 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 thats not what the prophecy says, Kira said. So I dont see how

The artifact, Dax said simply.

Kiras 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 dont expect you to believe it, Dax said snippily. But what you believe doesnt matter a whole lot. The point is, Orta believes it, and Im 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 Ortas mechanized voice from the hatch to the fore section. That is, in fact, my precise plan.

Theres no way that thing of yours can accomplish this, Keogh said.

Oh, youre 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 moons orbit just by firing a big gun at it?

I know I canespecially 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. Im quite sure that this ships

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.

Id pretend to be shocked at your navet, 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 didnt was the fortuitous discovery of the wormhole. And even with that, the Circles 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 theres 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 Akwars Prophecy is fulfilled.

The prophecies arent there for you to make happen, Orta, Kira said.

Nonsense. If the Prophets have shown us anything, Nerys, its 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 alignit says nothing about them aligning naturally.

Theres something I dont understand, Keogh said.

The sound that came out of Ortas vocoder was probably a laugh. I daresay there are several, Captain. Keogh ignored the barb. You dont strike me as the kind of person who gloats over his victims. Youre telling us all of this for a reason. Im not a very patient man, OrtaId 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 Im trying to achieve. The prophecy is very clear.

Prophecies are never clear, Keogh said angrily, and you cant 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 cant see any good reason why I should.

Orta nodded. Understandable. So Im sure I cant count on you to provide me with the access codes to this runabout?

You havent tried to access any of the runabouts systems? Kira asked.

Laughing a mechanical laugh, Orta said, I didnt 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 dont? Kira asked.

Orta held the box proximate to Keoghs head. Then the captain dies.

Dont do it, Major! Keogh shouted. Thats an order!

You do have a death wish, dont 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, Ive seen combat against Romulans, Tzenkethi, Cardassians, Tholians, and alien races that Im quite sure youve never heard of. Each time, I was ready to diebecause 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 Ill 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, Captainor 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, dont you, Nerys? You know what the Prophets are capable ofif we just seize the moment. They gave us

the prophecies for a reason. And we can make it work for us to 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.

Dont kill him, Kira said in a small voice. Ill give you the codes.

Furious, Keogh started, Major, I gave you a direct

I dont 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 wont regret this.

Orta turned and headed back to the fore chamber. Within seconds, Keogh could feel the thrum of the runabouts 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 cant believe youd be so stupid! Hes a terrorist! Starfleet doesnt 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 couldnt believe what he was hearing. Trust you? Major, you just handed over a Starfleet runabout to a lunatic! And why? Because hes quoting some nonsense?

To Keogh's surprise, it was Dax who spoke. It isnt nonsense, Captain. Dont forget, Ive met the Prophets. I was with Benjamin when he discovered the wormhole, and Ive had an Orb experience.

Eyes wide, Keogh said, Since when, Lieutenant, do you subscribe to the Bajoran faith?

I dont, Dax said in a tone Keogh found to be unconscionably smug, Im a scientist. And I dont let narrow-minded prejudices get in the way of empirical evidence.

With a snort, Keogh said, Im not the one who just handed a weapon of mass destruction to a madman.

Kira sighed. I dont 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 hes alerted DS9 and theyve alerted the *Odyssey*. And when this is over, assuming we survive, I can assure both of you that youll face the full disciplinary wrath of Starfleet for what youve done today.

Chapter Thirteen

J O E , W E L L B E A T B A J O R in ten minutes, Gonzalez said. Coming into range now.

Shabalala hadnt 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. Cant get a solid fix on it theres interference, Gonzalez said, shaking her head in annoyance. I can tell you that there are four humanoid life-forms on the runabout, but Im not picking up any combat badges.

Whats 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, Id say that. Its not perfect resolution, unfortunately, but Id say whomever 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. Im 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 havent turned up a trace of them, or Ortas people.

Shabalala muttered a favorite curse of his mothers.

Odo, standing next to Talltree at tactical, said, We have to assume that theyre 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 Odos words.

The captain may be dead.

He shook his head. We dont know that yet. We cant assume its happened again. Even if it has, it isnt 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 whomever 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 didnt know them, Sisko said. But I agree with the constable. We need to find out whats 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, Ive 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 dont know anything, Lieutenant, Sisko snapped. And Id advise you to be careful of who you accuse of betraying the uniform.

Thats 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 dont like this, Gonzalez said.

Shabalala walked over to her console and stood next to her. Dont like what, Maritza?

Im picking up some modifications to the weapons systems.

What kind of modifications?

Grimly, she said, Well, thats the fun part the interference is strongest there. To my mind, that says that theyre hooking the artifact up to the weapons array.

If they have the energy weapon, Odo said, then they could be attaching it to the runabouts systems.

Thats my guess, too, Gonzalez said.

Again, Shabalala muttered his mothers curse. Prepare to fire, Mr. Talltree.

From one of the aft science consoles, OBrien said, Excuse me, Commander, but Im picking up fluctuations in the Rio Grande 'spower signature.

Both Sisko and Odo shot OBrien 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, Its just a minor power fluctuation.

Thats all its supposed to be, Sisko said. Commander, dont fire on the Rio Grande.

What?

Trust melet them power up the weapon.

Less than a year ago, a Patniran doctor he didnt 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 Simons last words to him, Shabalala stared at Siskos intense brown eyes.

Stand by, Mr. Talltree, he finally said.

Talltree didnt sound happy as he said, Yes, sir.

In Declan Keoghs 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 aroundBrand, Haden, and Satie. No, wait, Satie had resigned in disgrace. Maybe Nechayev. Alynnas 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, shell be perfect.

Keogh imagined some useless JAG officer defending the major and lieutenant. He remembered some lieutenant commander or other whod defended Keoghs 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 wasnt 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 didnt even need to meet to discuss it. The three admirals just glanced at each other and nodded. Keoghs case was, after all, airtight.

Then Keogh amended the situation. After all, they were entitled to some defense. Kira pointed out that she wasnt in Keoghs 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 TNira 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 personthat 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 ships presence nearby and, as soon as she did, she smiled. What is going on here?

What makes you think I havent told the truth, Nerys? Orta asked.

Dax spoke up before Kira could. Because weve seen your type before. You think the Federation is as bad as Cardassia, and youre trying to get rid of us by blowing up a Bajoran moon with a Federation runabout. You figure thatll be enough to get the Federation out of Bajor.

Is that what you think? Orta said with a sneer.

It wont work, Dax said. With the wormhole there, the Federation wont pull out easily.

Ortas laugh was chillingly sterile. They already did once, when the Circle threatened your precious space station. Im quite sure they could be convinced to do so again, given the right circumstances. But youre wrong. Youre 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 dementedcertainly Keogh was starting to believe that.

Something amuses you, Nerys? Orta asked. That got Keoghs attention, because the smug, supercilious tone was gone. Now Orta sounded angry.

Keogh wasnt 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 youre doing.

Dax blinked. Excuse me?

Keogh took a certain satisfaction out of the hurt look on Daxs face.

Kira, though, ignored her. Come on, Orta, I know you. Hell, I used to be you. You dont want peace. If you did, youd have been the first person to come back home, not the last. Youve been sitting in that cave on Valo IX waiting for the war to start up againhoping and praying to gods you dont even believe in that the Cardassians were kidding. That theyd come back so you could blow up more of their ships and depots and outposts. And, after two years, when that didnt happen, you figured youd manufacture your own war.

Keogh looked aghast at Kira. He wants to start a war with the Federation? Thats insane.

In a low voice, Orta said, Thats 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 destroynot 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 meand having the lieutenant support me was an added bonus.

Kira laughed again. Youre 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 moons orbit was deadly enough to actually destroy it will cause uncounted changes to Bajor, none of them for the good. The planets entire ecosystem will be thrown off-kilter. The planets barely recovered from the Cardassians. You wont be starting a war, youll be committing genocide.

Bajor survived Cardassias occupation, Captain, Orta said. I survived having my throat cut. For that matter, QonoS survived Praxis destruction eighty years ago. Your attempts to frighten me are fruitless. Dont even bother, Captain, Kira said with disdain. Youll never convince him. Go ahead, Orta, fire up your weapon. See how much good it does you.

Major! Keogh barked. He couldnt believe this fool woman was encouraging him to destroy the moon. And why the hell is the Odyssey just sitting out there? Why dont 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 couldnt 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 didnt 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 hed 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 faceit 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 dont know if youve kept abreast of activity in the DMZ, but the ranks of the Maquis are growingparticularly 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 workafter a fashion. A coded message is sent, embedded in the power signature so the saboteurs wont 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.

OBrien put in, The ideas 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, OBrien added hesitantly.

Sisko smiled toothily. We hadnt tested ituntil now, that is.

Fair enough, Shabalala said, though he did not return Siskos smile. Mr. Talltree, get over there with a security teamMr. OBrien, go with them.

Talltree nodded. Yes, sir. They still didnt know the captains fate, after allthis wasnt over yet. He tapped his combadge as he headed toward the turbolift, OBrien walking alongside. DeNoux, Hyzy, report to Transporter Room 3.

He then heard Odos 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 hed rather have Odos 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 OBrien 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 OBrien set their phasers, Talltree noted that Odo wasnt armed. To the transporter chief, he said, Get the constable a phaser.

No need. I dont carry weapons.

You dont? The idea of a security chief who went about unarmed was incomprehensible to Talltree.

Trust me, OBrien said with a smile, he doesnt 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 Talltrees 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? OBrien asked.

Talltree followed the path of OBriens wristlamp to one of the side consoles. Talltree wasnt completely familiar with runabout design, but he was fairly certain that a small black box attached to one of the consoles wasnt standard.

Thats probably the artifact, he said. I assume you want to disconnect it?

Definitely, OBrien said emphatically.

Smiling, Talltree said, Get to work, then. DeNoux, stay with him. The rest of you, lets check the aft

The security chiefs 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 wasnt about to argue, either.

Cmon, 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 couldnt scream.

But when the Rio Grande went dark, mutilated throat notwithstanding, Orta screamed.

This cant be. It was all in my grasp. It cant go wrong now!

Its 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 couldve 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 didnt have the skill to untie Ortas knots. You have ruined everything! You have betrayed Bajor!

Im trying to help Bajorhelp our people, Kira said, sounding winded.

Orta clambered to his feet. Then youll 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 trickshe 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 mechanisms 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.

Youre like all of them! Mother, Father, Syed, Starfleet, the provisional governmentbetrayers, all of them!

In his now-silent rage, Orta kicked at Kira, who was knocked off him by the impact.

The devices 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 togetherbut 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 Bajorans 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 Hyzys shot, which stunned him.

Just as the Bajoran whom Talltree realized had to be Ortahit the deck, the lights came on. Thank you, Chief, Talltree muttered.

Talltree looked around and saw the Bajoran Militia woman Major Kirarubbing 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 wasnt sure, but he thought that Keogh got an unusually sour look even by his high standards at that.

Its 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. Its 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, Shabalalas 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. Were all fine, Commander.

Its very good to hear your voice, Captain. We were worried that youd been killed.

Negative, Commander, though Mr. Rodzinski wasnt so lucky. Ill 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 ships own shuttles having been moved out of the way to make room for the larger Rio Grande. OBrien 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 youd 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 mightve saved us all some embarrassment.

I am sorry about that, Captain, Kira said, but I couldnt very well let Orta run loose, and I couldnt clue you in without cluing him in as well.

Besides, Sisko added with a smile, Im sure your bickering helped keep Orta in the dark so to speak.

Keogh grudgingly conceded the point. Perhaps.

Im 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 Rodzinskis 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 Rodzinskis 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. Ill see you all back at the station in a few days.

Just as she started to walk toward the runabout, the artifact in Siskos 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 computers 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 isnt being used.

I hope thats 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.

Shes a bit on the well, arrogant side. I know shes a friend of yours, but

Its hard not to be arrogant after three hundred years, Captain. With a small half-smile, he said, Ill 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, Its good to have you back, Captain. You had us worried.

Im afraid the center chair is going to remain occupied for a while longer, Commander, Keogh said, allowing himself a smile.

And youre welcome to it, sir. Im just glad I didnt 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 wasnt so sure.

As they entered Ten-Forward, he said, I suppose youll want that Saurian swill of yours.

Actually, sir I think Id like to share a whiskey with you. Shabalala broke into a grin.

After blinking in surprise, Keogh then smiled again. Id be honored, Commander.

Within minutes, they sat at a table, sharing a bottle of syntheholc whiskey.

Captain, if you dont mind my asking what happened?

Again, Keogh frowned. What happened when, Commander?

What happened to make you decide not to let anyone call you Decoor even say the name in your presence?

Instinctively, Keogh started to shoot down this line of conversation, but then stopped. If he isnt 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 awell, 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 someones birthday I dont 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? Wasnt that when Keogh nodded. The coup, yes. All five of my people down there died when the an-Jirok attacked including Ensign Manojlovich, who shouldve 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 cant 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 didnt 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. Thats not the point, Keogh said angrily. I was going to attend, and the only reason I didnt was because I thought a party was more important than being ready to do my duty.

Maybe. Shabalala hesitated, then put a hand on Keoghs shoulder a familiar gesture that surprised Keogh, and angered him slightly. And certainly youre not going to change your ways now. But you still cant 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 Im 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 dont regret what I did. It needed to be done, I did it, and if I had to go through it again, the only thing Id do differently is that I wouldnt have hesitated before firing the phaser. Life is far too short to waste on might-have-beens, Captain.

Keogh then heard a sound he hadnt 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 hadnt realized that what I said was so amusing, Captain.

Its not that, Commander, its just one of the reasons why I told you about the Lexington was that I wasnt 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 wouldnt go signing up for sessions with Counselor Zumsteg just yet. Another hesitation. But Im 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.

Ill 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'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 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.

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