

STAR TREK

S.C.E.

#23

WILDFIRE

Book 1 of 2



David Mack

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WILDFIRE
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David Mack



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Chapter

1

Captain Lian T'su tightened her grip on the armrests of her seat. The *Orion* main viewer showed another huge web of lightning bolts tear through the roiling, red-orange clouds of the gas giant's atmosphere. The electrical discharges rendered the clouds visible for little more than a second and were followed immediately by a bone-rattling boom of thunder that reverberated through the decks of the *Steamrunner*-class starship.

"Do you have a lock on that signal yet?" T'su said to her tactical officer, raising her voice slightly to be heard over the din of the ship's groaning outer bulkheads.

"Negative, Captain," said Lieutenant Ryan. "Atmospheric interference is still too heavy. Switching to a delta-channel isolation frequency."

The hull of the *Orion* had begun shrieking in protest soon after they had descended ten thousand kilometers into the gas giant's turbulent lower atmosphere. Now that the ship had dived below twenty-five thousand kilometers, one-fifth of the way to the planet's core, the eerie sounds of fatiguing metal were becoming almost constant, and the vibrations through the hull were growing more severe by the minute.

Twelve years ago, when T'su had been an ensign, she had been at ops aboard the *Enterprise-D* as it skimmed the upper atmosphere of Minos while under fire by an automated attack drone. At the time she'd thought that was a rough ride. *Compared to this, that was nothing*, she thought, wiping the sweat from her palms.

T'su turned back toward the main viewer, which now showed only a dim outline of the thermal disturbance they were speeding toward. The test of the Wildfire prototype had been about to commence when Lieutenant Sunkulo, her operations officer, had detected an unknown energy signature that mysteriously vanished the moment sensors had been trained on it. If there was another ship in the atmosphere, following the *Orion*, the mission's security was at risk. T'su had orders to keep the prototype out of the wrong hands at all costs, and she was well aware of the potential for disaster if she failed.

Right now, however, she was more concerned about the threat to her ship posed by the planet itself. "Current hull temperature and pressure?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady. *Always project confidence*, she reminded herself.

Sunkulo tapped a few keys and answered calmly. "Temperature is eleven thousand four hundred degrees Celsius. Pressure is twenty-two million G.S.C." Anticipating his captain's next request, he added, "Structural integrity field still holding."

T'su nodded. Around her, the rest of the bridge crew was quiet, intensely focused on their work. Lieutenant Fryar was making constant, minor adjustments at the helm to keep the ship steady while Ensign Yarrow relayed his data from the science station to Ryan at tactical. They were using active tachyon scans to map the atmosphere's thermodynamic layers and currents in order to plot the course the Wildfire device would take to the planet's core. The data was being constantly uploaded to Lieutenant Ch'Kelavar, the ship's Andorian second officer, who was in the forward torpedo room with the Wildfire development team.

Another lightning flash caused the main viewer to flare white for a split second. Another thunderclap, magnified by the density of the gas giant's atmosphere, drowned out the sounds of the *Orion's* groaning hull plates and shook the ship violently. The lights on the bridge flickered for a moment, and several display screens became scrambled and failed to recover even after the shaking ceased. T'su winced as the acrid odor of burned-out isolar chips assaulted her nostrils.

Commander Dakona Raal, the ship's imposing first officer, placed a reassuring hand on T'su's shoulder. She silently smiled her thanks to him, and he nodded almost imperceptibly in return and moved his hand away before anyone else on the bridge noticed it had been there.

A native of Rigel V, Raal had been mistaken for a Vulcan by almost every member of the crew when he first came aboard last year. He had responded by shaving his head bald, growing a goatee, and making a point of leading a Klingon folk music sing-along during the crew's last shore leave. He also had learned to cook a *hasperat* so spicy it could knock the nasal ridges off a Bajoran, and Dr. Cindric, the ship's chief medical officer, had described Raal's unrestrained laughter as "infectious."

Raal was unorthodox, brash, and sometimes a bit too obviously attracted to T'su for her comfort, but at times like this she was glad to have him close by. This was her first command, and although ferrying a contingent of Starfleet Corps of Engineers specialists wouldn't have been her first choice of assignments, the past month had taught her it was rarely boring. Through it all, Raal had proved himself to be an exemplary first officer, the one T'su could always count on in a crisis.

But this crisis was getting too close for comfort.

"Lieutenant Ryan, stand by to deploy the Wildfire device on my mark. Helm, as soon as it's away, get us out of here, best possible speed."

Ryan and Fryar both acknowledged and continued to tap keys. "We're ready, Captain," Ryan said. T'su leaned forward in her seat, about to give the order, when the image on the main viewer changed.

The low hum of activity on the bridge ceased as everyone turned toward the viewscreen. A latticework of glowing colors seemed to be growing around the ship like a coral reef; grids of light, parallel and perpendicular rows, surrounded the *Orion* like a cage of energy. T'su snapped her crew back into action. "Tactical, what is that? Is it Tholian?"

"Negative, Captain. The energy signature doesn't match any known configuration."

T'su swiveled toward her science officer. "Yarrow, tell me something useful."

Yarrow studied his display. T'su could tell something was wrong; when Yarrow was alarmed, his

mane puffed out and his whiskers twitched. Right now, his mane was twice its normal size. “It’s photonic energy grid, Captain, source unknown. I can’t determine its—”

“It’s shrinking!” Sunkulo said. T’su spun back toward the main viewer in time to see the image dissolve into static. Sunkulo’s console was rapidly dominated by warning lights. “We’re losing power all over the ship!”

T’su clenched her jaw as a powerful shock wave rattled the ship. “All decks! Damage reports!”

“We just lost comms,” said Ryan. He pressed futilely at his console, which was stuttering its way into darkness like every other panel on the bridge. T’su found herself barraged with reports from every direction at once. Helm wasn’t answering, auxiliary power was failing, tactical was offline. The voices overlapped, frantic and hoarse, struggling to be heard over the din of wrenching metal. One voice came through the clamor, firm and quiet.

“Captain,” Raal said gravely. “We’re about to lose the structural integrity field.” T’su looked at Raal, saw the hardness of his expression, and realized this was the no-win scenario she’d been warned about at the Academy all those years ago. “Recommend we release the log buoy, sir.”

T’su nodded curtly, and felt her thoughts turn inward as Raal bellowed the order to Sunkulo. Seconds later, the buoy was away. T’su shivered from adrenaline overload as the bridge lights faded and the bridge slipped into total darkness. She covered her ears as the shrieking of the hull became deafening and the atmosphere’s turbulence hammered her ship.

As a flash of lightning a hundred times larger than anything T’su had ever seen on Earth tore through the bridge, the last thing she felt was a hand on her shoulder.

Chapter

2

Bart Faulwell strolled into the *da Vinci's* mess hall and passed Carol Abramowitz on his way to the replicator. He glanced at the short, dark-haired woman, who was so deeply engrossed in whatever she was reading on a Starfleet-issue padd that she had allowed her raisin oatmeal to go cold and congeal into a hardened mass in the bowl in front of her.

"The butler did it," he said. Abramowitz seemed not to notice his comment. Then, with some effort, she pulled her attention away from her reading material.

"Huh?"

"I said, 'The butler did it.'" He noted the complete lack of comprehension in the cultural specialist's expression. "You were so entranced," he said, "I figured you must be reading a mystery of some sort."

"No, no. Actually, I've been fascinated by Keorgan art ever since that mission we went on with Soloman a few months ago. I had no idea their photonic cloud sculptures could be so elaborate. Understanding their aesthetic is like opening a door into their collective psyche."

"Sounds fascinating," he said. "Want to see something completely different?" Abramowitz looked up at the bearded, middle-aged cryptographer and linguist. He was keenly excited about his latest endeavor and was certain that if he didn't show someone soon, he'd simply burst. Carol put down her padd and sighed.

"My answer makes no difference, does it?"

"Not really." Faulwell turned to the replicator. "Computer: Faulwell Test One." With an almost musical hum of activity, a swirling vortex of molecules began to reorganize themselves inside the replicator's service area. A few seconds later, a dog-eared and coffee-stained leather-bound copy of Melville's *Moby-Dick* had formed.

Faulwell picked up the book, flipped it open to its title page, and handed it to Abramowitz. She examined it and saw his signature, the ink seemingly as fresh as if he had just signed it. "Perfect, right?" he said. "Accurate down to the indentation the pen made in the page. It even has the same smell as the original," which, he noted with pleasure, was a comingling of old paper and worn leather.

She looked back up at Faulwell. "So?" He picked up the book and snapped it shut in one hand with a theatrical flourish.

"The point, my unobservant friend, is that for the past year, I've been a fool."

“I could have told you that.”

“More specifically,” Faulwell said, ignoring her remark, “I’ve been writing my letters to Anthony on paper and reading them to him in subspace messages. Then, on those rare occasions when I get to see him in person, I’ve been giving him letters he’s already heard me read to him.”

“So you’ve decided to start reading him chapters from *Moby-Dick*? That’s romantic,” she said, deadpanned. He sat down across from her and held up the book in both hands.

“What if I told you this book is actually still in my quarters right now? Or, I should say, the *original* is still in my quarters.”

Abramowitz caught on. “You made a replicator pattern of your book.”

“Exactly. And I can do the same for my letters to Anthony and send them to him, attached to subspace messages.”

She took the book from him and began flipping through it. “Very clever. You worked this out yourself?”

Faulwell shrugged. “I had some help from Diego,” he said, referring to the *da Vinci*’s transport chief, Diego Feliciano. “He seemed happy to have a project to work on,” Faulwell said. “I think he’s as bored as the rest of us, going around in circles out here.”

“You see, that’s your problem: you don’t know how to appreciate downtime.” She put down the book, stood up and placed her bowl of now rock-hard oatmeal back into the replicator for maintenance reclamation. She touched the control pad, and the bowl vanished in a whirlpool of dissociated atoms. She turned back toward Faulwell. “Gomez and her team are having a grand old time building their whatever it is—”

“It’s a mobile mining platform and refinery.”

“Whatever. There’s no one trying to steal it, kill us, or start a war. Do you *want* Gold to send us off to some remote planet? With no backup or hope of rescue when our supposedly simple mission inevitably goes tragically wrong?”

He pretended to think about that for a moment, even though he knew the answer was obvious. “No.”

Abramowitz leaned in close and whispered into his ear with an intensity that was only half in jest. “Then *shut up*.”

* * *

Captain David Gold lay on his back on the biobed, with his arms folded behind his head, admiring the details of the ceiling of the *da Vinci* sickbay. Dr. Elizabeth Lense, the ship’s chief medical officer, stood beside the bed and methodically waved her medical scanner back and forth above the commanding officer’s torso. The scanner’s high-pitched oscillations rose and fell in a steady cadence.

“Three minutes you’ve been scanning the same spot,” Gold said. “Maybe something I should

know?"

"No, sir. Physically, you check out in perfect shape."

"You mean, for a man my age."

"No, I mean you're in perfect shape." She put away her medical scanner and entered some notes on a padd. "Though I am considering putting you down for a psychiatric consult."

Gold sat up slightly, supporting himself on his elbows. His white eyebrows were raised in an expression of displeased surprise. "Excuse me?"

Lense held her poker face for a very long two seconds, then broke into a wide grin. "You might be the first captain in Starfleet history to volunteer for his annual physical." Gold's expression softened and he swung his legs off the bed and sat up. "Most skippers," Lense added, "have to be hounded like a Ferengi on tax day to show up for their exam."

Gold stood and stretched his lean, thin body. He let out a relieved groan as the crick in his back went *pop* and vanished.

"How do you think I stay in such good shape? Not by ignoring my doctors." Gold picked up his uniform jacket from on top of the console next to the bed. He put it on and studied Lense as she walked to her desk and transferred her notes into the computer. "And how have *you* been, Doctor?"

"You mean physically?" she said, in a tone that let Gold know she understood exactly what he was really asking. A few weeks earlier, he had had to call her to task for letting her work slip because of problems with depression. She had begun relying too much on Emmett, the ship's Emergency Medical Hologram, to handle her everyday patient care. Gold, fortunately, had stepped in and helped Lense get back on track.

"I mean, in general," he said.

Lense sat down in her chair, her posture straight yet relaxed. "Busy, believe it or not," she said. She folded her hands in front of her. "With security and engineering escalating their little practical joke war over the past two weeks, I've had to deal with some interesting cases. Lipinski and Robins came in with the ends of their hair fused together at a molecular level." She chortled softly and shook her head. "The smell was horrendous. Separating them without shaving their heads made for a very entertaining afternoon."

Gold chuckled. "I'm sure it did. Any idea who the culprit was?"

Lense nodded. "My best guess would be Conlon."

"Mine, too. And you avoided answering my question."

Lense tapped her index finger on the desktop for a moment. "You're right. But I think what you need is a second opinion. Computer, activate Emergency Medical Hologram."

A blurry, humanoid-shaped holographic image appeared between Lense and Gold and quickly

formed into the trim, dark-skinned, and friendly visage of Emmett. He came into focus, surveyed the serene sickbay, and smiled at Gold. “Good afternoon, Captain,” he said, then turned his head to offer a friendly nod to Lense. “Doctor.”

“Hi, Emmett,” Lense said warmly. “The captain requires an update on my medical status.”

Emmett turned to face Gold. “Doctor Lense has shown marked improvement over the past few weeks, sir. Her sleep patterns have returned to normal, and her energy level has increased. Overall, I would evaluate her psychological status as stable. Emotionally, she seems to be in good spirits.”

Gold cocked an eyebrow and flashed a crooked grin at Emmett. “Really? Good news. Very good news.” Gold stroked his chin. He hated to continue this line of inquiry, but he needed to be sure she was really recovering and not simply masking her symptoms. He respected Lense, but he couldn’t afford to be too trusting. “What percentage of sickbay’s walk-in cases have you treated over the past six weeks, Emmett?”

“Actually, sir, I haven’t attended a patient in the past four and a half weeks, since shortly after we arrived in the Tenber system. Dr. Lense has activated me only to assist with her lab work, and only when her scheduled sleep cycles coincide with those of Medical Technician Copper and Nurse Wetzels.”

Gold nodded, very pleased with the report. “Thank you, Emmett.”

Emmett smiled back. “You’re welcome, sir. Is there anything else I can do for you today?”

“No, thank you, Emmett. We’ll let you know if we need you.”

Emmett nodded, then blurred and dissolved with a barely audible hum of photonic generators shifting into standby mode.

Gold looked at Lense, who couldn’t conceal her expression of self-satisfaction. Normally, her cockiness would have irked him, but considering the turnaround she’d made, he couldn’t hold it against her. “Well, Doctor. Sounds to me like you’ve earned a bowl of my wife’s matzoh-ball soup. Or, at least, a fairly good replicated facsimile of it. Join me for lunch?”

“It would be my pleasure, sir.” Lense rose from her desk and fell into step next to Gold. They reached the door, then halted as the comm chirped. The voice that followed was that of Lieutenant David McAllan, the ship’s spit-and-polish tactical officer. “*Bridge to Captain Gold.*”

“Gold here.”

“*Captain, we’re picking up an emergency signal from a Starfleet vessel, with a message on an encrypted channel.*”

Gold frowned. “Put it through to my ready room. I’ll be there in a moment. Gold out.” He looked at Lense, and sighed heavily. “I’m afraid I’ll have to give you a rain check on that free lunch, Doctor.”

Lense shrugged. “That’s okay, sir. I’ve always known there’s no such thing.”

Commander Sonya Gomez, first officer of the *da Vinci* and leader of the ship's S.C.E. contingent, monitored her team's progress as she stood and sipped her Earl Grey tea at the center console on the lower level of the operations center aboard Whiteflower Station. The spacious, two-level, state-of-the-art command area of the traveling mining platform was large enough to accommodate up to thirty people during normal operations. Right now, however, its only occupants were Gomez and Lieutenant Commander Kieran Duffy, her second-in-command on the S.C.E. team.

Duffy was at the rear of the upper level, half-inside an open bulkhead, his beeping and chirping tricorder in one hand and a sonic screwdriver in the other. The tall, blond engineer was searching methodically, but with expiring patience, for a fault in the command center's wiring that the diagnostic program was unable to track down, for reasons that were equally elusive. Gomez caught the sound of muffled swearing from behind the bulkhead, but couldn't make out the words.

She heard an echoing, metallic banging that she surmised was Duffy's sonic screwdriver being pounded like a hammer against a duranium bulkhead. "Everything all right?" she said teasingly, amused at Duffy's mounting frustration over what initially seemed to be a simple problem.

"Fine," Duffy said, clearly irritated. "Never better."

"You should take a break."

Duffy sighed heavily. He turned off his tricorder, put it back into a holster on his belt, and pulled himself free of the bulkhead. He looked around the nearly finished operations center. Two of the three large monitors that dominated the front wall showed the *da Vinci*'s two new "Work Bugs"—large three-seat versions of Starfleet's one-person work pods, designed for heavy-duty industrial operations.

P8 Blue was piloting Work Bug One like a natural. Fabian Stevens was piloting Work Bug Two, but with far less finesse. Blue had spent the past five weeks showing Stevens the ropes, teaching him the finer points of the crafts' controls. Together with two assistant engineers in each pod, Blue and Stevens were making excellent progress securing the station's pristine white exterior hull plates.

For the past five weeks the *da Vinci* had been in orbit around Tenber VII, a strikingly beautiful ringed gas giant planet. Gomez and her team had been assigned to construct a mobile mining platform and refinery that would roam the planet's rings, seeking out such precious ores as dilithium and ultritium, which a Starfleet advance scout had detected here in abundance a few months ago.

The S.C.E. team had been busy since they arrived, most of them volunteering for double shifts on the mining station and refinery, which they soon nicknamed "Whiteflower" because of its gleaming ivory-hued duranium hull plating and five, teardrop-shaped sections that extended outward at regular intervals from the equator of its hemispherical, central engineering hub. Not long afterward, the name became official, much to the crew's collective amusement.

Duffy sleeved the sweat from his forehead as he walked to the replicator. He rubbed the back of his aching neck as he ordered. "Computer: quinine water with a twist of lime."

"That item is not currently listed in the replicator databank," the computer said.

Duffy stared at the replicator with a glare of equal parts anger and disgust. He closed his eyes and drooped his head in defeat. “~~You’ve got to be kidding me.~~” He stood, arms akimbo, anticipating the computer’s inevitable, overly literal reply. It didn’t come. He opened his eyes, then turned and looked down at Gomez.

“How do you like that, Sonnie? Doesn’t it usually make some kind of Vulcanesque remark when we say things like that?”

“I had Soloman reprogram it to ignore rhetorical questions.” She reached under her console and picked up a thermos. “I figure I just saved you about an hour per month that you’d have wasted on pointless arguments with the mess hall replicator.” She pushed her dark, wavy hair out of her eyes, waved the thermos, and flashed him a come-hither smile. “Care to guess what this is?”

“You know me so well,” he said. He grinned and jogged to the short stairway that connected the two levels of the operations center. He hopped up to a sitting position on the rail and slid down it to the lower level, landing on his feet with casual athleticism in front of the petite brunette. She handed him the smooth, metallic, curve-topped thermos. He removed the cap and gulped down two mouthfuls of quinine water, then gasped contentedly. “That hit the spot.”

He’s like a boy sometimes, she thought as she sipped her Earl Grey and studied him out of the corner of her eye, watching the bobbing of his Adam’s apple as he downed another swig of quinine water. They had been attracted to each other almost immediately when they had met aboard the *Enterprise* over a decade ago, and had dated briefly, but it ended amicably when she transferred to the *Oberth*. Then, after nearly eight years apart, they found themselves together again aboard the *da Vinci*.

But the situation had changed: she was now his boss, and that had made their renewed romance more than a little awkward. She constantly had to remind herself that reigniting their affair had been her idea, part of the “live life while you can” philosophy she had embraced after her brush with death on Sarindar. She thought she could live in the moment, the way he did, but lately she was becoming less certain. *I love him, and I know he loves me...but he’s always leaping from one adventure to another. He never thinks about the future.*

“Sonnie,” he said, suddenly unable to look her in the eye, “I’ve been thinking.”

Oh, no.

“About tonight—”

“You mean dinner with Fabe and Domenica?”

“Yeah.” He self-consciously combed his fingers through his short hair. “I was wondering, I mean—”

“Tell me you’re not canceling.”

He inhaled through clenched teeth. “Not exactly. I was thinking we might...reschedule?” She tilted her head to one side and glared reproachfully at him.

“Kieran, you were the one who said we should have dinner with them, that you wanted to ‘bury the

hatchet' with Corsi. You even had real Betazed oysters and Risan white wine brought in on the last supply ship."

"I know, it's just...well, I wanted tonight—"

"What is it about her that makes you act like this?"

"What're you—"

"Do you hate her *that* much?"

"I don't hate her, Sonnie, I—"

"Then what is it? Why do you get weird every time her name comes up? What, are you two having an affair or something?"

Duffy's face was flushed red and his voice pitched upward. "Damn it, Sonnie, this has nothing to do with her."

"Then what's it about?" She looked at him, trying to read through his eyes what was going on in that mysterious mind of his. His jaw was moving, but no sound was coming from his mouth. She had seen him go through this kind of struggle only once before, when he had asked her out on their first date aboard the *Enterprise*. He took a deep breath—

Their combadges both chirped. "*Gold to all personnel.*" Gomez noted that Gold's voice was unusually grim and terse. "*We have new orders. Secure the Whiteflower station and report back to the command. Vinci immediately. S.C.E. staff, assemble in the observation lounge on the double. Gold out.*"

Gomez looked at Duffy, who clearly had detected the same bad omens in Gold's message that she had. She tried to lighten the moment. "You were saying...?"

He frowned. "I guess it'll have to wait." He turned away from her and climbed back up the stairs toward the operations center's only working turbolift. She hesitated, then followed him up the stairs and into the turbolift.

"Level six, transporter room," he said as the turbolift doors slid shut with a pneumatic swish.

"Kieran, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said in a clipped, neutral tone that she knew meant something serious was on his mind. "Never better."

Chapter

3

Domenica Corsi, the chief of security aboard the *da Vinci*, hurried down the corridor toward the briefing room, fumbling to get her hair tied back into its customary, tighter-than-regulation bun. She had switched from alpha shift to gamma shift four weeks ago and had finally become accustomed to her new sleep schedule. Gold's urgent summons had just roused her from a particularly pleasant dreamscape, her first in a long while.

She blinked her eyes hard to dispel the fuzzy border around the edges of her vision, finishing securing her blond hair into place, and stepped inside the observation lounge.

The room was unusually quiet. Captain Gold was already there, standing behind his regular seat, his expression somber as he stared at the reflective black surface of the table. Lense, Faulwell, and Abramowitz had taken their seats and were conspicuously not speaking.

Corsi moved to her own seat as Soloman, the ship's Bynar computer specialist, entered behind her, followed moments later by engineers Fabian Stevens and P8 Blue, a Nasat whose compact, insectoid form Corsi sometimes envied for its resilience. P8, whom most of the ship's complement called "Pattie," settled into a seat specially designed for her multilimbed physiology, located at the far end of the table from the captain.

Last to enter the briefing room were Duffy and Gomez. Duffy looked scuffed, while Gomez was the very picture of composure. Corsi sensed an unusual level of tension between the two, but under the circumstances, it was difficult to know how to read their moods. Gold looked up at Gomez as she moved to her chair, immediately to his right. His speech was curt and direct.

"Commander, are all *da Vinci* personnel accounted for?"

"Yessir," Gomez said quickly, a bit surprised by Gold's sudden formality. If he noticed, he gave no sign of it that Corsi could see.

"Gold to bridge."

"Go ahead, sir," McAllan said over the comm.

"Set course for the Galvan system, maximum warp. Engage when ready."

"Aye, sir."

Gold leaned forward slowly, as if he were resisting a terrible weight pressing down upon him, and rested his palms flat on the tabletop. The throbbing hum of the small ship's warp engines kicked in

distant, deep and familiar.

“About an hour ago, we received an automated distress call from the starship *Orion*,” Gold said. “She ejected her log buoy after suffering a massive onboard failure while navigating in the atmosphere of a gas giant. The data from the buoy’s flight recorder is not good.” Corsi watched Gold’s hands close slowly into fists as his jaw clenched. “We have reason to believe the *Orion* went down with all hands, including seventy-one S.C.E. personnel.”

“Oh, God,” Gomez said, a look of dread draining the color from her face. She composed herself and looked quickly back up at Gold. “The *Orion* was Lian T’su’s ship, sir. I—” A look passed quickly between her and Duffy. “She was a friend.”

Gold nodded compassionately at Gomez, then looked back at the rest of the group. “There’s more of course. What you’re about to hear is classified.”

Corsi started. If classified information was being bandied about, she wondered whether or not no-coms should be present. Eyes-only information usually wasn’t for the eyes of enlisted personnel like Stevens, Faulwell, Soloman, Blue, and Abramowitz. But she trusted that the captain knew what he was doing.

“We’ve been informed by Starfleet Command that when the *Orion* went down, her S.C.E. team was testing a new, prototype stellar-ignition warhead, code-named Wildfire.”

Gold turned toward the monitor behind him and activated it. It displayed a detailed schematic of a torpedo-shaped device and a seemingly endless scroll of technical data running up the screen along one side. “It’s protomatter-fueled, and capable of initiating stellar-core fusion. Its stated purpose is to aid in terraforming by turning gas giants—such as Galvan VI—into small dwarf stars to provide external energy sources for remote planets.”

Corsi considered the device’s other potential uses. Every scenario she could think of gave her a sick feeling in her stomach. She had to ask.

“What if this device were deployed into an existing star?”

Gold fixed her with a stern look. “It would depend on the mass of the target,” he said. “Small stars would supernova within a matter of minutes. Midsized ones might take up to an hour to explode. An extremely large star could possibly be turned into a supermassive black hole that would begin swallowing neighboring systems.” Gold scanned the faces of his staff; the dismayed glances that were crisscrossing the table confirmed they all grasped the scope of the crisis. “So, as I’m sure you already understand, Starfleet is particularly anxious for us to recover the device.”

“Sir,” Duffy said, straining to keep his tone of voice diplomatic. “What about the *Orion*?”

Gold cleared his throat—more, Corsi suspected, out of diplomacy than out of genuine need. “She went down in neutral territory, which means salvage rights go to whoever reaches her first. Starfleet has made our chief priority the safe recovery of the device—with the salvage of the ship and the rescue of her crew, if possible, a close second.”

Corsi nodded, envisioning numerous potential complications. “Sir, we should also be prepared for the possibility that the *Orion* was the victim of a hostile action,” she said. “And even if it wasn’t, its distress signal might have attracted unwanted attention.”

“I already have McAllan working on tactical options, coordinate with him,” Gold said. “We’ll reach Galvan VI in about nine hours, and we’ll be going into the atmosphere as soon as possible after that. Faulwell, Abramowitz: work with McAllan and Corsi—give them any insight you can into the forces we might run into out here. Gomez, you and your team have nine hours to work out a plan for recovering the device.” He glanced at Duffy. “And hopefully, the *Orion*.”

Gold didn’t look Lense in the eye as he spoke to her. “Doctor, I don’t expect there to be survivors aboard the *Orion*, but prepare sickbay, just in case.”

“We’ll be ready, sir.”

“That’s it, then. Reconvene here at 2100 hours. Dismissed.”

Corsi lagged behind as the rest of the group filed out. She understood now why Gold had included the entire S.C.E. team in the briefing despite the high security—in this instance, they did need to know if they were going to do their jobs right.

Duffy, Corsi noted, walked quickly out of the lounge, Gomez half a step behind him, with no eye contact passing between them. *He’s pretending not to be hiding something*, Corsi deduced, *and she’s pretending not to be bothered by it. Wonder what’s going on there?* Before she could think of possible explanations, she realized Fabian Stevens was standing just behind her right shoulder.

“I guess this means no oysters tonight,” he said.

Corsi sighed. “Guess so.”

She still didn’t know what to make of her budding friendship with Stevens, whom she had begun calling “Fabe” whenever they were alone together—a situation that had become more frequent during their extended assignment in the Tenber system. It had been several months since their spontaneous synthale-fueled one-night stand. She’d asked him to keep the matter to himself and not expect anything to come of it. To her surprise, he had done exactly as she asked.

At first she had been grateful for his discretion, but as time passed she found herself inventing reasons to be near him on away missions and planning her schedule so she’d be in the mess hall when he was. There had even been a few more occasions when they’d been alone together.

When she accepted Gomez’s invitation to join her, Duffy, and Fabe for dinner tonight aboard Whiteflower Station, she had stood in front of the mirror in the quarters she shared with Dr. Lense and asked her reflection, “What are you doing?” As she and Stevens exited the briefing room in pensive silence, she still had absolutely no idea.

Chapter

4

Gomez blinked, not sure she had heard P8 correctly. She considered the possibility that being sequestered in the science lab for over four hours, weighing their options, had caused her to begin having auditory hallucinations. “Towing cables?”

P8 responded to Gomez’s dismissive question by switching the image on the science lab’s main viewer to a computer simulation of the atmosphere of Galvan VI. Blue streams represented fast-moving currents of frigid, supercompressed gas that plunged in vortices from the upper, cold regions of the atmosphere toward the planet’s superheated core. Reddish patterns indicated upwells of superheated, lower-density gas and fluid. Green and yellow patterns marked areas of intense electromagnetic disturbance.

“The icospectrogram we received from Starfleet only goes down to around ten thousand kilometers,” P8 said. “That’s less than half the distance to the *Orion*, and the severity of ionospheric disturbances at that depth will disrupt our shields, phasers, transporters, and tractor beams. Assuming the *Orion* is incapacitated, a series of five-centimeter duranium towing cables is our best hope for pulling it out.”

Gomez tapped her finger on the side of her half-full mug of Earl Grey tea, which had long since changed from steaming hot to room temperature. She shook her head. “I don’t know, Pattie. It just seems so...low-tech.”

“Sometimes the best solution is the simplest one,” Stevens chimed in. “We have about two hours before we make orbit. We could replicate the cables with time to spare if we start now.”

Gomez looked at the other specialists gathered in the lab. Ensign Nancy Conlon, a petite brunette human, and Lieutenant Ina Mar, the ship’s athletic, red-haired Bajoran senior ops officer, stood next to one another. Both women nodded slowly as they considered P8’s proposal. Gomez glanced at Duffy. He was nodding, as well. “I think she’s right,” Duffy said. “We don’t have time to recalibrate the tractor beams. Crazy as it sounds, this is the way to go.”

“With our shields offline, we’ll have to reroute all shield generator output to the structural integrity field,” Stevens added. “Otherwise, the pressure in the lower atmosphere will squash us like a bug.” A split second later he winced and turned toward P8. “No offense.”

“Just wait till I find a good analogy for a bag of meat,” the Nasat said.

“All right,” Gomez said, cutting them off. “Fabian, start replicating the cables to P8’s specs. Pattie, go over the schematics for the *Orion* and plan where you want to anchor the tow lines. You and Fabian will handle the hookup with the new Work Bugs.”

“Oh yippee,” Stevens said glumly, which prompted a tinkly laugh-equivalent from P8.

Gomez turned to Duffy. “Kieran, you’ll try to restore auxiliary power—maybe we can fly *Orion* on instead of towing her. I’ll search for survivors while Corsi retrieves the Wildfire device and Soloma recovers the logs. Nancy, since we can’t transport to the *Orion*, I’ll need you to whip up some null field generators to help us pilot the Work Bugs in that atmosphere. Mar, you’re in charge of rerouting *da Vinci*’s shield generators to the SIF.”

Gomez noted with satisfaction that even once she stopped talking, she still held everyone’s full attention. “Everyone clear?” She was met by a chorus of acknowledgments. “All right, let’s get to work. Dismissed.”

As the group broke up and moved toward the door, Gomez reached out and gently took hold of Duffy’s sleeve. He stopped and waited until the others had left. Stevens was the last person out, and he tossed a sympathetic glance Duffy’s way as the door shut with a soft, hydraulic hiss.

“What’s going on?” Duffy said with a nonchalant half-grin.

Gomez normally found Duffy’s ability to smile his way out of a tense situation charming. Now suddenly, she found it maddening. “I was going to ask you the same thing. You were about to tell me something when we were back on Whiteflower. What was it?”

Duffy wasn’t smiling anymore. “Now probably isn’t the time, Sonnie.” Gomez felt acid churning in her stomach. Something was wrong, and he was stalling.

“Kieran, I can tell something’s on your mind.” She moved close to him, reached up and softly pressed her right palm against his cheek. She was always amazed at how warm his skin was. “You know you can talk to me. What do you want to tell me?”

He reached up and took her hand in his, and slowly lowered it away from his face. Gomez steeled herself for the breakup speech she could see coming from light-years away.

With his free hand he reached inside his uniform jacket and, still holding her hand, knelt in front of her. Gomez watched numbly as his hand emerged from his jacket, an exquisitely crafted gold band set with a diamond, held firmly between his thumb and forefinger. He handed it to her as he looked up at her. With great effort, she looked away from the diamond ring in her hand and back at him.

“Sonya, I love you,” he said in the most sincere tone of voice she had ever heard him use. “I want to share the rest of our lives together. And before you start lecturing me about Starfleet and duty, I want you to know I’ll resign if I have to, because I’ll pick you over Starfleet any day. So, to make a short question long, I’m asking for the honor and privilege of being your husband. Sonnie...will you marry me?”

For several long seconds, Gomez was convinced her heart had stopped beating. She forced herself to breathe, but despite her best efforts she couldn’t think of a single word to say to Duffy, who was now looking very self-conscious and awkward down on one knee. Five seconds of silence stretched into ten, at which point Duffy stood up, his hopeful expression melting into one of desperation.

“Sonnie, please say something.”

Gomez closed her eyes and pressed her free hand to her forehead to stave off the fever she could feel forming.

“Sonnie?”

Gomez felt the strength in her legs ebbing. She sat down next to the center worktable and let out a heavy sigh. *We're on our way to recover a device of unspeakable destructive potential from the wreck of a ship on which one of my first friends at the Academy just died. Under the circumstances, probably could've handled being dumped. But this—*

She opened her eyes as she heard the *swish* of the lab door opening. Duffy was halfway out the door before she called out to him. “Kieran!” He kept going without looking back, and the door slid shut behind him.

Gomez stared at the closed door, then looked back at the sparkling diamond and noted its latinum setting. The fact that the stone was set in latinum meant the ring couldn't have been replicated. *It must have cost Kieran a fortune, she thought. He must be the sweetest man I've ever known... So why don't I know what my answer is?*

As she tucked the ring into her inside jacket pocket and made a mental note to return it to Duffy later, a fresh wave of acid provoked muted growls from her stomach.

Chapter

5

McAllan stood up from the center seat on the bridge as Gold stepped out of the turbolift. “Captain of the bridge!” he said as he moved to his post at tactical.

Gold nodded politely to McAllan and strode to his chair. He had resisted McAllan’s insistence on formality and protocol when the young lieutenant first came aboard a few years ago. After McAllan’s first year on the bridge, Gold had learned not to mind it so much. Lately, he’d grown accustomed to it and had started letting McAllan take the conn from time to time.

“Report,” Gold said as he sat down.

“We’re in standard orbit over Galvan VI, sir,” McAllan said. “Ensign Conlon has finished prepping the Work Bugs for deployment into the atmosphere. The away team is standing by.”

“Good,” Gold said. “Ina, do we have a lock on the *Orion*?”

“Affirmative,” she said. “Active tachyon scans show her circling the planet’s equatorial region at a depth of approximately twenty-nine thousand kilometers. She appears to be derelict, sir, being pulled in by a descending current.”

“What’s the weather like down there?”

“Atmospheric pressure is over forty-two thousand bars, temperature is approximately eleven hundred degrees Celsius,” Ina said. “Velocity of atmospheric currents varies from four thousand to seven thousand KPH. And it looks like *Orion*’s heading for some choppy weather—she’ll hit a region of severe thermal upswells in less than two hours. After that, her path intersects a vortex that’ll pull her down into a layer of liquid-metal hydrogen.”

Gold turned his chair to face McAllan, who was studying a readout at his station. “Any sign of company?” Gold said.

“No, sir,” McAllan said. “Long-range scans are clear, and we haven’t picked up any ships in orbit or in the atmosphere.”

“Faulwell, any signal traffic I should know about?”

“None,” Faulwell said from the communications station, where he’d been since they warped into the system. “We thought the Gorn might send a patrol to investigate the *Orion*’s mayday, but they don’t seem to have detected it—or us.”

“Let’s keep it that way, if we can.” Gold studied the deceptively placid-looking, bluish gray sphere

of Galvan VI on the main viewer. “Wong? Think you can handle that?”

Songmin Wong, the *da Vinci*’s boyish-looking helm officer, turned and looked back at Gold. “No problem, sir. It’s well within our operating parameters.”

“It was within the *Orion*’s parameters,” Gold noted grimly. “Plot an intercept course for the *Orion* at best possible speed.”

“Aye, sir.”

Gold took a slow, deep breath as he watched the shape of the gas giant grow larger on the main viewer and finally fill it completely. The planet’s subtle striations of color grew more distinct as the *da Vinci* plunged headlong toward the upper atmosphere. Then the viewer crackled with static and the ship lurched violently as it penetrated the upper cloud layer and began its descent into the semifluid darkness.

“Time to intercept?”

“Twenty-one minutes, sir,” Wong said.

“Gold to Gomez. Prepare to deploy your away team.”

“Aye, sir,” Gomez replied over the comm. Gold detected the rising howl of swift, powerful atmospheric currents buffeting his ship—and he felt his fingers tighten reflexively on the arms of his chair.

* * *

The *da Vinci* shuttle bay buzzed with activity as Conlon and four other engineers scrambled to make final tweaks to the null-field generators they’d just installed on the two yellow Work Bugs. The industrial-grade work vehicles were bulkier, more durable, and more powerful than the average Starfleet-issue Work Bees, but they were slower and would need all the protection possible.

Gomez tried to ignore the muffled shrieks of high-velocity wind that were audible even through the *da Vinci*’s hull. She focused instead on checking the seals and readouts on Corsi’s environment suit. Several meters away, Stevens and Duffy were completing their own suit checks, and behind them Soloman and P8 took turns verifying each other’s specially made environmental gear. Soloman’s was fitted for his short, slender body and larger-proportioned head. P8’s suit permitted full mobility with all of her eight limbs, and she could retract its arms if she needed to assume her curled-in, defensive posture.

Gomez slapped her thickly gloved hand on Corsi’s shoulder. “You’re good to go,” she said. “Everybody ready?”

Stevens gave Gomez a thumbs-up signal, and P8 and Soloman nodded. “All right,” Gomez said. “Corsi, you’re with me and Pattie. Kieran, Soloman, you’ll be flying with Fabian. Let’s go.” The two trios split up and clambered awkwardly into the Work Bugs.

Inside Bug One, P8 settled comfortably behind the controls, her small size compensating for the

added bulk of the pressure suit. She began powering up the Work Bug as Gomez sealed the hatch. Normally, the vehicles could seat three comfortably, but in full environment suits it was a tight fit, a situation that for Gomez only exacerbated the feeling of confinement she felt whenever she put on the clumsy gear. She settled into the vehicle's rear seat as Stevens's voice came over the comm. "Be Two is all set, Commander."

"Acknowledged," Gomez said. "Gomez to bridge. We're ready to launch, Captain." A powerful tremor shook the *da Vinci* and rattled both Work Bugs as a resounding boom of thunder echoed through the ship.

"Stand by," Gold said. "Three minutes to intercept."

Gomez felt the first bead of sweat trickle down her spine. *Three minutes*, she told herself. *Three minutes sitting still in this suit, while the ship flies straight into a navigational nightmare that I'm about to face in this souped-up cargo pod.* The claps of thunder and violent shaking became more intense and frequent. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and began counting backward from one hundred eighty.

* * *

It took every shred of willpower Duffy possessed to sit still. He almost wished he were piloting Be Two instead of Stevens, but his friend was the one who had spent the past month learning to fly the heavy-duty utility craft.

Despite the acoustic insulation of his environment suit and the Work Bug itself, Duffy could hear the unmistakable groaning of stressed metal as the *da Vinci's* hull protested its descent into the crushing depths of the gas giant's atmosphere.

"Would you listen to *that*, Fabe? Sounds like we're really putting *da Vinci* through her paces."

"Tell me about it," Stevens said. "I haven't heard anything like this since Captain Sisko took the *Defiant* into a gas giant to save a Karemman ship from the Jem'Hadar."

"Please," Soloman said, "not that story again."

"He's right, Fabe, it's the only one you ever tell."

"This from the man who never seems to tire of the Tellarite story," Stevens said. "Fine, I'll change the subject. Did you ask her?"

"Ask who what?" Soloman said, confused.

"He was talking to me," Duffy said. "And yes, I did."

"And?"

"And nothing. She didn't say a damn thing."

"Pardon me," Soloman said. "Who and what are we talking about?"

“No one,” Duffy said.

“It’s nothing,” Stevens said.

“You asked a question about nothing to an entity that does not exist and are surprised to have received no answer,” Soloman said, shaking his head in dismay. “And humans wonder why they have trouble communicating with one another.”

Duffy stared in mute amusement at Soloman, wondering when the Bynar had found time to master the fine art of sarcasm.

* * *

The image on the *da Vinci* main viewer was little more than static punctuated at random intervals by flashes of lightning that whited-out the screen and revealed swirling eddies of various liquefied gases raging past the ship at thousands of kilometers per hour. A computer-generated grid of longitudinal and latitudinal markings was superimposed over the image, along with a reference point indicating the position of the *Orion*. That reference point was just above the artificial horizon line and quickly drawing near.

Ina checked her console. “Sixty seconds to intercept.”

A powerful impact knocked Gold forward, halfway out of his seat, and pinned Wong and Ina to the consoles. As Gold pulled himself back into the center seat, he noticed, out of the corner of his eye, McAllan scrambling back to his feet, trying to look like he’d never lost his balance. “Report,” Gold said.

“Thermal upswell, sir,” Ina said. “Small, but enough to overload our inertial dampers.”

“A lot of these we should expect?” Gold said.

“Impossible to predict, sir,” Ina said. “Convective columns have been drifting, disappearing, and reappearing in a chaotic manner. But the *Orion* will be drifting into a region of intense convection columns within ninety-six minutes.”

“Let’s get this over with, then,” Gold said. “Wong, take us to within two kilometers of the *Orion*, then use thrusters to maintain minimum safe distance. The tide down here is fast and rough, so you need to leave room to compensate.”

“Aye, sir,” Wong said. Gold watched the young ensign confidently guide the ship through the maelstrom, seemingly oblivious to the ominous roar of the atmosphere that they’d been unable to mask with acoustic dampening frequencies, despite numerous attempts.

The *Orion* appeared on the *da Vinci* main viewer, hazy behind a bluish silver veil of swirling gases. The sight of it reminded Gold of a story he used to read to his son, Daniel, when he was a boy—*The Flying Dutchman*, a tale about a cursed sailing vessel. Looking now at the lifeless husk of the *Orion* on the viewer, Gold couldn’t help but recall the image of the battered, sea-torn *Flying Dutchman* emerging from a wall of fog.

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