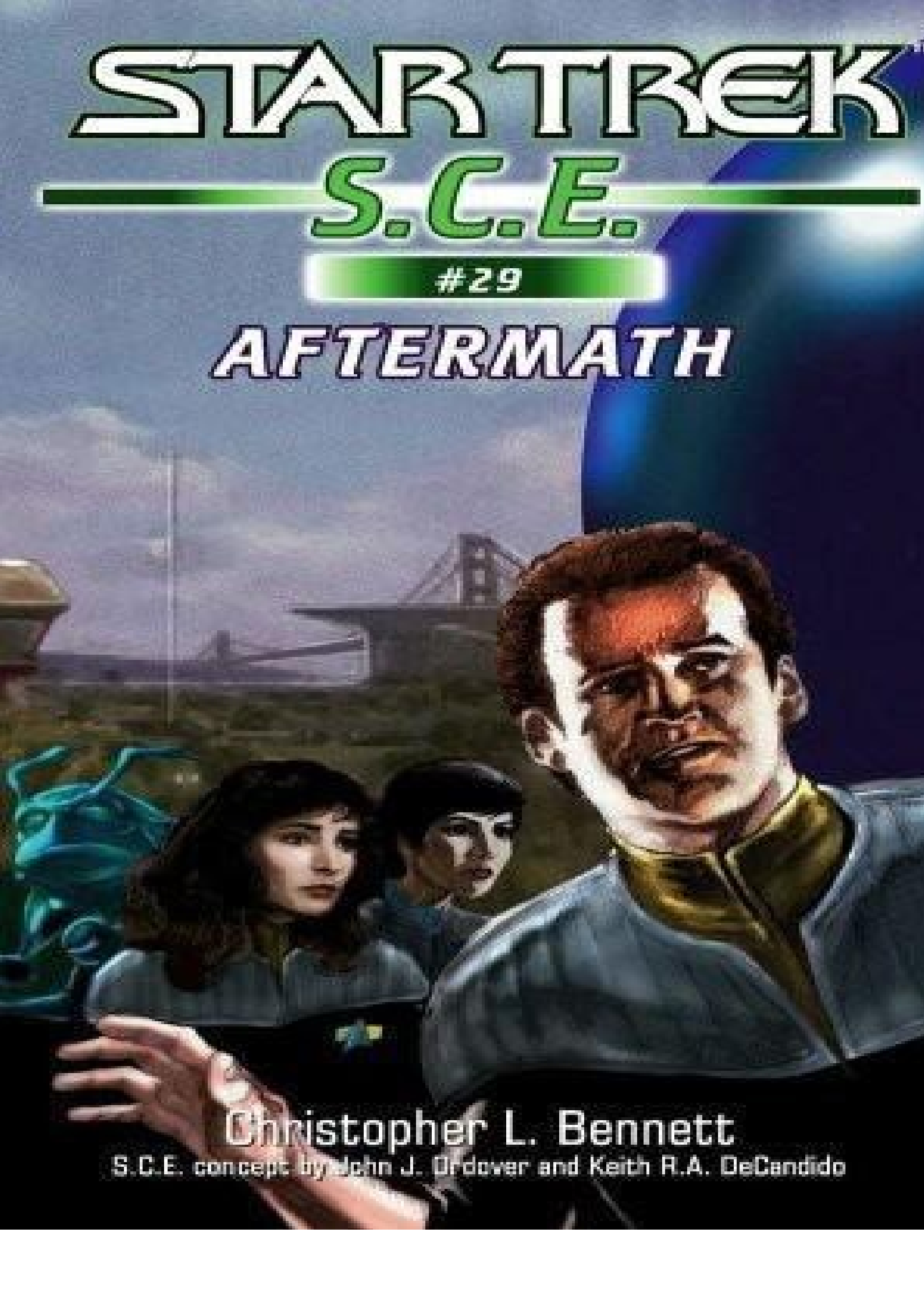


STAR TREK

S.C.E.

#29

AFTERMATH



Christopher L. Bennett

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AFTERMATH

Christopher L. Bennett




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New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore

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An *Original* Publication of POCKET BOOKS

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ISBN: 0-7434-7058-3

First Pocket Books Ebooks Edition June 2003

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Chapter

“Danged Breen,” Katie Huang complained. “They put a hole in my city.”

Sanek, her new assistant, looked up at her as they worked their way down the slope, his bright orange hard hat clashing with his sallow skin. “The Breen put a great many holes in San Francisco. However, most of those holes have been filled.”

“Yeah,” Katie acceded grudgingly—or not so grudgingly, she decided as she caught a glimpse of the Golden Gate Bridge, now restored and reopened to traffic. She remembered how it had looked a year ago, after the Breen attack on Starfleet Headquarters—the north tower crumpled, the span missing a huge chunk in the middle. It was a miracle the bridge hadn’t collapsed. Some had wanted to leave it as a monument, but it was too valuable a thoroughfare, and too important a symbol of the City by the Bay, not to be restored to its former glory. As proud as Katie was of her fellow civilian builders and maintenance workers, she gave a silent thanks to the Starfleet Corps of Engineers, Earth Division for their tireless efforts on the city’s behalf.

“But that’s just it,” she went on. “All this time, and there’s still this great big ugly scar in the middle of my town.”

“That is more the fault of the geology than the Breen.”

“They had sensors. They must’ve known about the underground caverns.” The Breen had been indiscriminate in their attack, hitting parts of the city far removed from the military targets and costing many innocent lives. They’d even attacked the Starfleet Museum Center, destabilizing the ground beneath it and opening a sinkhole into which most of the complex had collapsed. The losses to art, culture, and science were incalculable, and Katie felt them keenly; but the massive blemish on the landscape had become her personal symbol for all of it, something that affected her on a visceral level. What had made it worse was that the continued instabilities had hampered efforts to clear and restore the site, so it still remained, even though the rest of San Francisco was as good as new.

“Still,” Sanek said, “the ground is now stabilized and most of the wreckage has been cleared away. The new museum can be built soon. Perhaps the construction of a war memorial will be approved. I understand you humans are fond of such emotional representations.”

Katie smiled at her new friend’s very Vulcan sentiment. “Nothing wrong with a good emotional representation, Sanek. You should try it sometime.”

He raised an eyebrow. “That would be illogical, as you well know.”

Katie laughed and said, “I know, but you can’t blame a human for trying. I’m sure lots of humans think Vulcans would be better off if they let their hair down a bit.”

“Just as many Vulcans think humans would be better off if they, to maintain the metaphor, kept their hair tied up.”

That prompted another laugh. “Probably, yeah. But that’s what keeps the galaxy interesting.” The ~~reached the bottom of the sinkhole and activated their sensor units. Not as versatile as Starfleet tricorders, they were still good enough to scan for remaining instabilities, gas pockets, salvageable artifacts from the museum...or organic remains. Even now, a few victims were still unaccounted for.~~

Sanek focused intently on his scanner, barely paying attention to his footing, and Katie smirked. “Don’t trip over any android heads.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“These tunnels are where they found Data’s head a few years back.”

“Assuming you are referring to Lieutenant Commander Data of the Starship *Enterprise*, I was under the impression that his head has remained attached to his person.”

“This was his head from the past. He went back in time, it got knocked off, gathered dust here for five hundred years, and got put back on.” She frowned. “So his head’s twenty times older than the rest of him. I wonder what that does to the warranty.”

“According to the records, that was a ‘prank’ on the part of some cadets from Starfleet Academy—another of your emotional representations.”

Katie grinned. “That’s the official story. Of course, time-travel evidence gets classified. Too dangerous, you know. Imagine the havoc someone could cause if they knew how to go back and mess around with the past.” She noticed something on her scanner. “Hey, I’ve got some kind of...reading. It’s coming and going...but yeah, it’s there.”

“What manner of reading?”

“I think it’s some kind of subspace static,” she frowned. “Under those rocks.”

“Down here?”

“Hell, maybe it’s some old communicator from the museum with a bit of power left. Better check it out, though—might be a priceless antique.” Again, she smirked, showing what she thought of the odds. “Help me here.” Together they moved the rubble out of the way, exposing the item.

It was a small spherical object, about the size of a golf ball, covered in dust. “It is not registering on my scanner,” Sanek said. “Perhaps a Starfleet-issue tricorder would do better.”

“No, we don’t need to call in the troops every time a problem comes up.” She reached toward it.

“I would not advise touching it. We have no way of knowing its function.”

“Whatever its function *was*, if anything, it’s been blasted by the Breen’s energy dampers, dumped through a sinkhole, and buried under rubble for a year. It probably doesn’t do much of anything anymore. Hey, look, it’s even got a crack in it. Was that there a moment ago?” She reached a finger forward to indicate the hairline fissure. Her fingernail barely brushed it.

She never heard the blast that followed—though it rocked the whole city.

* * *

It's too quiet, thought David Gold.

He was walking to the bridge with Sonya Gomez, the same morning ritual he and his first officer had enacted every day until the *da Vinci* had been crippled in the incident at Galvan VI. This was the first morning back since then, and they'd resumed the ritual automatically, a natural beginning to the day when the repaired starship would launch herself out of dry dock once more. Around them the rebuilt corridors sparkled in mint condition; in the background the restored engines thrummed in perfect tune, supplying electroplasma for perfectly calibrated systems. *Shipshape and Bristol fashion*, Gold thought, remembering the phrase his old friend Jean-Luc liked to use in his antiquarian moments.

But it was too quiet. There was none of the pleasant bustle that had formerly filled the ship's compact corridors—whether that of engineers pursuing their projects, constantly making adjustments to push the systems just a bit more beyond dry dock specs, or that of crewmates and friends exchanging banter and giving friendly greetings as their commanding officers walked by. All the people they passed were subdued—the old crew members (agonizingly few) still recovering from the tragedy, the new ones still adjusting to unfamiliar surroundings. It would take time for them to grow comfortable with each other, to mesh into a unit that Gold hoped could work as smoothly as the old crew—though not in quite the same way, to be sure. The *da Vinci* would never be truly the same again.

Gold wondered if his morning walk with Gomez would ever be the same again either. In the past, it had been an opportunity for small talk, for exchanging shipboard gossip and chatting about family and news and trivia, having more to do with friendship than duty. To Gold, it helped to compensate for being so far from his own family.

In fact, he hadn't been sure that she was going to show up for the walk at all. Among the many fatalities had been Kieran Duffy, the ship's second officer and Gomez's lover. It had seemed from the outside like a simple shipboard romance—until Duffy had popped the question out of the blue. Gold couldn't blame Gomez for being too *farblonzhet* to give him an answer. But then Duffy had sacrificed himself to save the ship, never knowing what her answer would've been. By her own admission, Gomez herself didn't know, either. One more loss to add to the list—the loss of closure. But for the time, Gomez had blamed Gold for Duffy's death, and, though they had settled that, at least, and regained a semblance of their former friendship, Gold knew that Duffy's death would always be a barrier between them.

Gold knew she'd worked through the worst of her grief, and was ready to resume her duties. But there was no telling how long it would be before she could take joy in them again. Which was a shame. She was generally a serious sort, a hardened pro, tough on herself, prone to worry; but underneath it all was a girlish innocence and playfulness, which manifested itself in a radiant smile that filled Gold with fatherly warmth. He missed that smile.

And it was still too quiet.

Naturally, just as he thought that, a jolt went through the ship, knocking him briefly off balance. As he and Gomez ran to the bridge, the captain reflected that he had some choice words for God about H

sense of timing.

The bridge was bustling with activity as the crew worked to analyze the disturbance. Yet even here it seemed too quiet, without David McAllan to announce “Captain on the bridge” as he always had. That shtick had annoyed Gold at first, but over time he’d grown accustomed to it, and now he’d give anything to hear it again. Better that than the memory of McAllan sacrificing himself, shoving Gold out from under a falling ceiling support—of the look on the young man’s face in that last moment, meeting his captain’s eyes imploringly, seeking assurance that he’d done all right. Until that moment Gold had never realized the deep respect and devotion that had underlain young David’s—his *namesake’s*—insistence on announcing his captain’s arrival.

Anthony Shabalala, McAllan’s replacement at tactical, looked for a moment like he wanted to announce Gold, but couldn’t bring himself to. They weren’t his words to say.

So Gold announced himself. “What’s all the tumult about?”

Lieutenant Commander Mor glasch Tev, the *da Vinci’s* new second officer, rose efficiently from the center seat and faced his captain. The stocky Tellarite barely came up to Gomez’s height, but carried himself high and proudly. His monk’s fringe of dark hair and the gray-frosted beard that framed his porcine features were groomed to machine tolerances. “Subspace shockwave, sir,” Tev reported in a curt but surprisingly mellow baritone. “No damage reported, but I’m having Chief Engineer Conlon recalibrate the warp coils.” Although no engineer himself, Gold knew well enough that the wave moving through subspace instead of normal space, wouldn’t have affected the *da Vinci* at all if the warp coils hadn’t resonated with it and transmitted the shock to the ship. Any resultant misalignment would be minuscule, but if there was one thing Gold had already learned about Tev, it was that he was a perfectionist.

“Subspace shock?” Gomez asked with an air of dread. “Did a ship blow up?”

“The wave metric is wrong,” Tev told her. “No engine signature, no magneton pulse.” Efficient, to have evaluated and responded to the situation so quickly. “It reminds me of a warp-field collapse upon collision with a massive body, though.”

The most massive body in the immediate area was the one where most of Gold’s family, and a fair percentage of his species, lived. “Where did the shockwave come from?”

Tev’s reply was prompt, but muted. “San Francisco, sir.”

Gold stared for a second, then turned to Shabalala. “Get me Starfleet Command.”

* * *

The city looked like a bomb had hit it.

Smoke and dust hung in the air, obscuring the sun. Buildings around the blast site stood empty, some burning, some teetering on the brink of collapse. Emergency crews, including S.C.E. units, worked with grim, determined efficiency.

It could’ve been far, far worse, thought Montgomery Scott as he surveyed the scene. The sinkhole region had still been largely unpopulated. And transporter grids, both civilian and Starfleet, had been

able to lock onto buried survivors and beam them promptly to hospitals across the western seaboard. But dozens of people—cleanup crews, surveyors, geo-engineers, and gawkers—were still unaccounted for. More than a few had been S.C.E. personnel. Scotty knew from experience—too much of it—that the number would likely fall as more information was gathered; but however low it went, it would still be far too many.

Perhaps the worst damage was to the spirit of the San Franciscans. Their postwar sense of security and comfort had been shattered in an instant. Thousands stood outside the force-field cordons, gazing on in fear or bewilderment or anger, while children cried and asked their parents why this was happening again, or whether another war had begun. Nobody had any answers for them. Scotty hoped to change that, with the help of his S.C.E. crews.

So far the one clear thing was that it hadn't been a bomb. Instead, in the middle of a new crater blown in the side of the sinkhole, there was...a *thing*. A stout domed structure eight stories tall, in fluid contours declaring an unearthly origin. The blast damage had been done by its impromptu arrival, rather than by any explosive reaction.

An image came to Scotty's mind—the distress signal from Intar months ago, showing the devastation wrought when the Omearan Starsearcher *Friend* had crashed into their capital city. The Intarians had been lucky, he'd reflected at the time, that the ship had been traveling relatively slowly. If a vessel that massive had hit at full impulse, a quarter lightspeed, it would've been a dinosaur-killer of a blast. That was why almost every spacefaring world—including Intar now, belatedly—had a damned good planetary defense grid. The Breen fleet that had attacked Starfleet HQ had sacrificed half its ships just to break through Earth's defense grid, even with the advantage of their energy dissipators.

“And that's what doesn't make sense!” Scotty insisted to the two men who walked through the disaster zone alongside him: Starfleet Admiral William Ross, the decorated Dominion War commander, and Cemal Iskander, the civilian Director of Earth Security. “My crews rebuilt the defense grid stronger and better than ever, upgraded with the finest sensors and countermeasures ever devised. No cloak ever made could slip by it. A Denebian dust mite could not get through, not without setting off every alarm from here to Neptune's nether regions. I'd stake my life on it!”

“I don't doubt you, Scotty,” Iskander said. Indeed, the distinguished Turk had worked closely with Scotty in rebuilding the grid, and had proven a good sort to trade tall tales with, even if his faith kept him from enjoying a good bottle. “But then, how did it get here? Could it have stayed in warp until the actual moment of impact?”

“That would've set off the alarms even sooner.”

“Could it have been *beamed* in somehow?” Ross asked.

Scotty shook his head. “A confinement beam strong enough to shove that much solid earth aside that forcefully? That'd be a devil of a weapon in itself—why bother beamin' anything in with it?”

Iskander frowned. “Maybe as a warning—psychological warfare. Maybe this enemy wants to terrorize rather than simply destroy us—to cow us into accepting conquest, like the Dominion.” He peered at the structure, though, as if expecting it to erupt at any moment. “But just dropping that

our laps as a statement isn't enough. The other shoe could fall any moment. That's why you've got to attack it now, Bill."

"And we know this is even a weapon, how?" came a familiar, gruff voice. Scotty brightened to see David Gold and his team approaching.

Iskander was taken aback. "Look around you, Captain...."

"Gold. David Gold. *Shalom*."

They shook hands. "*Merhaba*. As I said, look around. Our city is ablaze again. Does that look like a peaceful gesture to you?"

"In fact, it looks a little like the Starsearcher crash on Intar. That turned out to be an accident."

Right, Scotty remembered, it had been the *da Vinci* that he'd assigned to that mission.

"And how do you 'accidentally' slip through the most secure defense grid ever built, bypassing every sensor mechanism?"

"I don't know, but my crew here is the most likely group to find out."

Iskander looked impatient. "Scotty, all respect to your people, but shouldn't they be working with the other S.C.E. teams on cleanup and ground stability? Even if we do risk the cautious approach," and his expression showed what he thought of that, "we have specialists who are better qualified to tell you about that thing."

"I can tell you one thing right now," said P8 Blue, startling Iskander, who'd overlooked her since she was down in crawl mode taking some low-angle seismic readings. The Nasat rose to full height to continue her report. "That object wasn't designed to arrive the way it did."

"We don't even know how it did arrive."

"We don't need to, not for this. The structure's not as badly damaged as the buildings around it, obviously, but it shows clear signs of stress. There are cracked support members inside, fatigue in several shell layers, and it's visibly crumpled at ground level." Scotty peered closely at its curves, but he couldn't tell what was crumpled and what was intentional. But he wasn't a structural specialist like P8 Blue. "The only reason it hasn't suffered worse is that it seems to be designed for a higher gravity than this, using dense materials such as cortenium."

"Then there's the inside," said Tev, holding up a tricorder with a cross-section display. "Clearly designed for habitation, but not for ferrying troops. The compartment size, corridor layout—they'd be too spread out, take too long to get to battle stations or exits. And there's nothing that looks like a weapon."

Good man, Scotty thought. Tev wasn't a tactical specialist like Fabian Stevens, but he was nearly as much a "Renaissance man" as Spock himself had been. Scotty had hand-picked him for this assignment, knowing only the best could hope to make up for Duffy's loss.

Stevens, however, looked a little annoyed, as though Tev had stolen his lines. “And the very fact that we can scan inside,” he added, “means there isn’t any substantial shielding.”

“Obviously,” said Tev dismissively. “More importantly, it suggests the structure wasn’t designed for combat.”

Stevens glared. “I was getting to that.”

“What about life signs, though?” Iskander asked. “We can’t get a clear read. They might be shielding the occupants.”

“Or they could all have been killed on impact, and we’re just reading residual heat and organic residue,” Stevens replied.

“Besides,” chimed in Carol Abramowitz, the team’s cultural specialist, “if this structure were intended as a warning in itself, I doubt it would look so...placid and soft. Most species would symbolize aggression with sharper, more angular designs. And if something within it, rather than the structure itself, is the message, then it probably would’ve emerged by now.”

Scotty beamed. “Cemal, there are no better specialists around for this sort of thing than this bunch before you. Explorin’ dangerous alien whatsies, findin’ out if they’re safe and makin’ ’em safe if they’re not—that’s what S.C.E. teams like theirs are all about. And there’s no team I’d rather have here than this one. The best thing about this whole mess is that these lads and lassies are here to straighten it up. So let them do their job,” he said, addressing Admiral Ross as well now. “Send them in.”

“This was the team that brought back the old *Defiant* and averted a war with the Tholians,” Ross told Iskander. “I have every confidence in them.”

The director was hesitant. “We still don’t know what dangers there might be in there. Surely this is a job for Starfleet Security.”

“You rang?” Domenica Corsi strode forward, seemingly towering over Iskander, though they were comparable in height. She made her case just standing there. The security team behind her, and the sizable phaser rifles they all carried, didn’t hurt either.

Iskander sighed. “Very well. I concur. But may Allah protect you all.”

Chapter

The comm screen in the O'Brien household had been tuned to the newsfeeds ever since the disaster struck. But Keiko had grown tired of the images and taken Molly into her room to brush her hair. The nine-year-old had protested that she was old enough to do it herself, but Keiko felt a strong need to be with her children right now, to take care of them, to keep them close and at least *feel* like she was protecting them.

Besides, she knew what was coming. What Miles was about to do. And she didn't want to be in the room when he made the call, didn't want him to see her reaction.

Of course he came into Molly's room soon thereafter. The child fearlessly asked the question Keiko couldn't. "Are you gonna go help with the accident, Daddy?"

"That's right, dear. I just made the arrangements with Scotty's office, and they've given me a new assignment."

"What about teaching your class?"

Miles shrugged. "The accident's kind of put things on hold today, honey. The Academy's not holding classes, so people can watch, and be together, and help if they can." He smirked. "Look at this way—we both get the day off from school."

Molly pouted. "I *like* school. We're learning about subspace and warp engines, so I can be an engineer like my daddy!"

Miles wasn't falling for it. "And you like taking classes with that cute boy Masoud, don't you?" Molly blushed. "Well, maybe Mommy could invite a few of your classmates over for a little home schooling today, how about it, honey?"

"Um...sure! That sounds fine!" Inwardly she winced. Why was she so bad at trying to sound sincere?

Of course Miles caught it instantly, peering at his wife in puzzlement. "Molly, why don't you go call your friends now?" He didn't have to ask the girl twice—she was out the door before he finished. "Keiko? What's wrong?"

She rose and turned away. "Oh, nothing's wrong. I'm just concerned about the... 'accident.' The attack. Whatever. I'm sure everybody is."

He put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Well, there's no real sign that it's an attack. The thing hasn't made any hostile moves—there aren't even any clear life signs from it. Anyway, Scotty's put Sonya Gomez's team on it, and I'm sure they'll clear it up in no time. I'm more concerned about the mess it's made of the city. There's damage all the way from Presidio Boulevard to the Marina. We may have to demolish some of the buildings that just got finished a few months ago, and there'll have

to be a whole new geological survey, no telling what new instabilities the blast has caused, and—”

“Miles...”

“What?”

She quashed what she'd been about to say, and put on a calm face as she turned to him. “I'm sure you could do more good if you went ahead and started doing it, instead of standing here telling me about it. So why don't you just go ahead?”

He started to nod, but then sensed something from her and frowned. Trust him to be most sensitive to her feelings when she didn't want him to be. “That's not what you were going to say, is it?”

“It's all right, Miles—”

“No, it isn't.” There was no anger in his voice, just pure openness and caring, which made it worse. “Honey, you know you can tell me anything.” He tried so hard, Keiko thought, to keep things running smoothly, to avoid the kind of tensions they'd had in the past. The problem was, his efforts were undermining her efforts to do the same thing.

“It's nothing,” she insisted. “It's silly and selfish and I don't want to bother you with it.”

“Hey.” He put his hands on her shoulders. “Nothing you think or feel is silly to me. Whatever it is you can tell me. It's when we don't talk that things build up and cause problems.” He gave her that adorable rakish grin. “Come on—if it's that silly just tell me and we'll have a good laugh.”

He didn't seem to notice he was contradicting himself. It was the thought that counted, she supposed. Anyway, it was clear he wasn't going to drop this. She sighed. “I really didn't want to do this again.”

“Do what?”

“Complain. I was always complaining back on DS9. You were doing an incredibly hard job in incredibly chaotic conditions and instead of being supportive I just kept whining about how unhappy I was.”

“I never felt that,” Miles said emphatically. “You had every right to be happy, to fill your own needs.”

“But that meant going away from you, going off to Bajor. We spent so much time apart.”

“It wasn't your fault. It was the place, that's all.”

“That's just it! I was hoping that, once we came back to Earth, we could finally live a nice, quiet life together, concentrate on being close again.”

“I want the same thing!” he assured her. “That's why I took the teaching job—so I'd have time for my family.”

“And I do appreciate the intent, really.”

“The *intent*?” he frowned.

“It’s just that...no sooner did we get to San Francisco than you were off joining the repair crew rebuilding the city. Or volunteering your time to help rebuild the defense grid.”

Miles’s gentle, understanding mood seemed to be fading, just as she’d feared. “Those were important jobs. They had to be done.”

“Of course they did, but they weren’t your responsibility anymore. Nobody ordered or even asked you to do these things. You promised we’d have a nice quiet life from now on, but you don’t seem that interested in living one.”

“I’m not doing these things for fun,” he countered, his voice rising. “They *needed* every extra hand they could get.”

“And I understand that, I do! But then there was the chaos from the gateways, and then the earthquake, and now this. Miles, every time there’s a problem to fix, you go off and fix it, even though it isn’t your responsibility. And I feel like I’m not seeing any more of you than I did back in the Bajoran system!”

“What are you saying? That I care more about my work than our marriage?”

“No, no, I’m not saying that.”

“Everything I do out there, Keiko—every bit of it—is to keep you, Molly, and Yoshi safe. I can’t do that by staying at home! This is what I have to contribute.”

Now her voice was hardening despite herself. “I could understand that back on DS9. You were the chief of operations; you had an understaffed department in a remote outpost. But this is *Earth*, Miles. This is the capital of the Federation, the heart of Starfleet. There is more ability and brilliance concentrated here than anywhere else in the quadrant. You don’t have to do it all yourself.”

“So what do you want me to do?” he demanded. “Call up Starfleet and tell them I changed my mind? Back out of my commitment, my duty?”

“No. No, you’ve already made the arrangements; you have to go.”

“Then why’d you dump this on me now?”

She gaped. “Because you *asked* me to! I didn’t want to burden you with it. I *told* you you didn’t want to hear it.”

“Damn right I didn’t! Too late now, though, isn’t it?”

“Look, just—just go. They need you.”

“That’s right. They do.” An awkward silence. “Good luck with Molly and the kids,” he said curtly.

and left.

Keiko winced and rested her forehead against the wall. “I *really* didn’t want to do that anymore.”

* * *

Sonya Gomez stared up at the alien structure with no idea what to do next.

Was there any more they could learn from outside? She couldn’t think of a way. But did they dare attempt entry? Was it worth the risk? True, there wasn’t any sign of hostile intent—not recognizable, so, anyway—but who knew how they might react if they felt they were being invaded? If there was anyone there at all. And how could they know for sure unless they went in? But shouldn’t they run every possible scan from outside to judge if it was safe?

She was thinking in circles, she realized. But her thoughts just seemed sluggish today, her creativity offline. *I’ve heard of writer’s block—am I having engineer’s block?*

Kieran would’ve had an idea. Kieran would’ve found some wisecrack to break the tension, make the problem seem smaller than it is and give us the confidence to face it. Kieran—

Kieran is gone. Stop it.

As if to drive the point home, Duffy’s replacement—no, Commander Tev, she corrected herself realizing she had to accept him on his own terms—approached her. “Commander, I recommend we proceed inside. There’s nothing more to be gained by waiting.”

She felt a twinge of resentment—who was this newcomer to tell her how to run an operation?—which fizzled in the face of her awareness that she wasn’t doing so well on her own right now. And then the rather striking face of Corsi, a friend and proven veteran, who said, “I concur. If they don’t want to come out and play, I say we start knocking.”

“I’ve confirmed there’s no match in the cultural databanks,” Abramowitz added. “If there’s more to learn about these people, we need to go to the source.”

“True—Abramowitz and Faulwell should be on the team,” Tev recommended.

“Sure, makes sense.” Sonya nodded absently.

“One catch, though.” That was Vance Hawkins, Corsi’s deputy chief. “The readings show synthetic gravity field over three times Earth normal in there. We’ll hardly be able to move.”

“Speak for yourself,” Pattie chimed in (with actual chimes, no less, or at least that was how the Nasat’s voice sounded).

“Ahh, I think I may have a solution for that wee problem,” came Scotty’s unmistakable brogue. “With some help from a laddie I think some’a you know. Obie?”

“Commander Gomez!” came yet another brogue, one Sonya knew. She turned, and was startled to behold a familiar face over Scotty’s shoulder—a broad, rough, comfortably lived-in face, like an old teddy bear with its fur worn off from frequent attention.

“Chief O’Brien!” she exclaimed, her mood actually brightening a bit.

Stevens laughed. “Or should we call you ‘Professor’ now?”

“Fabian!” exclaimed Miles Edward O’Brien, heartily returning his handshake. “It’s Old Home Week.”

“Been too long, Chief,” Stevens said, apparently forgetting his own question. “But that just means you’ve finally got some stories I haven’t already heard a dozen times.”

“Ahh, my life is boring now. *Good* and boring,” he corrected quickly. “A cushy teaching gig, plenty of time for the wife and kids, no Jem’Hadar shooting at me...”

“You must be hating every moment of it.”

“No!” O’Brien insisted firmly, even though Stevens had been joking. “I’ve never been happier. Though, well, I’ll admit it’s nice to get back in the saddle for a bit, work alongside the old gang. Just for a bit, though.” He sobered. “I just wish Duffy could be here too. I’m so sorry, Commander,” he told Sonya.

“That’s all right,” she demurred, really not wanting to face it again. “So what are you doing here?”

“Well, there’s a little project I’ve been working on lately—really some of my students came up with it, but I’ve been helping out. It’s a sort of antigravity suit, designed to allow mobility in high-g environments. The prototypes are a bit bulky, I’m afraid, but they should let us move freely in there.”

“‘Us’?” asked Stevens. “Are you joining the team?”

“With the commander’s permission, of course. But you’ll need me in there if the suits need adjusting or something.”

“You mean like if they break down, as prototypes have a way of doing?” Corsi asked, skeptical of the always of engineers and their experiments.

O’Brien seemed a bit intimidated by his first good look at the statuesque blonde, but then most people were. He recovered quickly, though. “Not on my watch, Commander.”

“We’re glad to have you, Chief,” Sonya told him. Except why did it have to be O’Brien? Looking at him just reminded her of her days back on the *Enterprise*, when she and Kieran had first dated. But she kept that to herself. It wasn’t his fault. It was just so frustrating—she’d committed to moving on with her life, but the universe kept throwing her reminders of what she’d lost.

Tev stepped forward. “Commander, will you be leading the team, or shall I?”

“If you don’t mind, Commander,” Scotty interposed, “I’d like to borrow Mr. Tev here. Stevens told me some of us should stay out here and do some brainstorming, try to figure out how this bloody bauble did what it did. I have a few thoughts, but I’d like some strong theoretical minds to help me out—tactical minds, too, in case Cemal’s right and this is some kind of attack.”

Gomez nodded. "All right, that sounds fine."

"One more question, Commander," said Tev.

"Yes?"

He faced her squarely. "I was told I would be the *second* officer on this crew. Following your leadership. But you have yet to offer any. Will I have to carry that load for you? Not that I'm not capable, of course. I just need to know what's required of me."

"Hey!" Stevens cried. The whole team bristled, but he was the one who strode forward to confront the Tellarite. "You have no right to talk to her that way. She's just lost someone very special to her. Special to all of us."

"Then if she's not ready to resume her duties, she should still be on leave."

"You are so out of line!"

"I?" Tev replied in cool disbelief. "Which of us has the officer's pins, *Specialist*?"

"Fabe—it's okay." Actually it wasn't; Sonya was angry inside. In place of Kieran, who would've supported her and cheered her up and made it all better, they'd stuck her with this smug, coldhearted...But no, that was unfair to Tev. She couldn't let herself resent him just because he wasn't Duffy. She had to give him every chance. "Mr. Tev is expressing a valid concern. Giving me something to think about. A little bluntness is a good way to do that. I'd prefer you to do it in private in the future, Tev, but I appreciate your input." She smiled politely, extending a hand.

Tev glared at it as though she were making a rude gesture with it. "With your leave, Commander," he said stiffly, "we all have work to do."

She controlled her reaction tightly. "Dismissed," she said through clenched teeth. *Damn—why do these keep getting harder?*

* * *

Corsi squirmed within her antigrav suit, tugging at the collar. "Sorry if it's a bit snug, Commander," O'Brien said.

"It's not that," she replied. "Do we really need these cowls? They restrict head movement. Not good if something's sneaking up behind us."

"Well, without it your head would be three times heavier than normal. How easy would that be to move?"

"Point taken," Corsi said, and concentrated on tucking a loose strand of dirty-blond hair under the cowl. She checked over the rest of her security team—Vance Hawkins, Rennan Konya, and Elle Krotine—to make sure they were properly suited.

Noticing her gaze upon him, Hawkins approached. "You sure you want us both to go in? Chief and deputy chief? I mean, shouldn't one of us stay behind in case...you know, if something should happen?"

in there....”

Ahh. Like most of the crew, Hawkins was still dealing with the losses they’d suffered. It had been particularly hard on security; only three of them, including Corsi and Hawkins, had come out alive. And Corsi doubted Hawkins’s survivor’s guilt was in any way helped by the irony that, after having been the *da Vinci*’s resident punching bag on mission after mission, he’d come away from Galvan V without a scratch.

“Listen, Hawkins,” she said firmly. “Just because we had a disaster last time out doesn’t make any more or less likely to happen this time. There’s no reason to change the way we do things. We’re security—we’re always prepared for the worst, right?”

“Yes, sir,” he replied, subdued.

“Besides—based on our track record, disasters only happen when *I’m* not there to stop them.” Corsi had been in a coma during the worst of it, taken down by an alien light show that didn’t even give her anything to shoot or kick at. Rationally, there was no cause to think she could’ve prevented things if she’d been conscious; but she just knew deep down that somehow she could’ve. *Right—like on Hawkins is dealing with survivor’s guilt.* “So I’m sure as hell not gonna sit out here twiddling my thumbs.”

“Me neither.”

“Issue settled, then.”

“Okay.” They exchanged a look of mutual approval and support. Then Hawkins sidled closer and whispered, “One other thing, though.”

“What?”

“It’s about Konya. I mean, he’s a nice guy and all, but...a Betazoid in security?”

Corsi smirked. “Hawkins, he *is* a Betazoid,” she said in a normal tone. “Why whisper? He already knows what you think.” Hawkins blushed, throwing a sheepish look at Konya, who waved back insouciantly. “All I can tell you is, he came through training with impressive marks, and recommendations from instructors I know and trust.”

“Which doesn’t necessarily mean anything out in the field.”

“No. But we have to find out what he’s made of sometime, so why not now?”

Hawkins granted her point, then awkwardly wandered over to Rennan Konya, whose large dark eyes met his expectantly. “Look...”

“It’s all right,” said Konya. “It’s a perfectly understandable concern. Betazoids aren’t known for our combat skills. I know I have to prove myself; I don’t take it personally. Oh, and as for the other thing, don’t worry—I can only read your surface thoughts. I’m not the most powerful telepath on Betazed.”

“Then how did you know I was worried about that?”

“Because everyone is.”

“Oh.”

Corsi wondered if that made Hawkins more or less embarrassed.

“So,” her deputy chief asked, “does that mean you don’t feel people’s pain? Is that why you can be in security?”

“Oh, I feel it, all right. My cognitive reading’s average, but my empathy’s just fine.”

“Then how do you do your job?”

Konya looked at him contemplatively. “Why should causing pain and injury be necessary to preserve security?” he asked as though positing a topic for philosophical debate.

“Well...of course there’s more to security than fighting. Crowd control, paramedic stuff, investigation—I bet you’d be great at interrogation, catching liars and such.”

The lanky Betazoid shrugged. “I do okay.”

“But if someone’s coming at you and wants you dead, you have to fight back.”

“Fight, yes. But inflict pain?” Konya shifted easily into a loose fighting stance. “Come on—attack me,” he said, his tone as amiable and serene as ever.

Hawkins hesitated, so Corsi gave him a prompt. “Go on, Hawkins—I’d like to see for myself.”

“Okay.” Hawkins shrugged. “But you asked for it.”

He didn’t lunge blindly—Corsi had trained him too well. He read Konya’s stance—some kind of judo variant, it seemed to Corsi, designed to turn his own attack against him with a minimum effort. Sensible enough, given their difference in build, but Hawkins knew how to adjust to such tactics. *If the new guy wants to prove himself, Corsi thought, Hawkins will make him earn it.*

Moments later, he was on the ground, with Konya extending a hand to help him up. He took the hand, rose, then tried another throw.

And found himself facedown this time, his cheek a little scraped. “Ow,” Konya said in sympathy. “Sorry, didn’t see that pebble. Better than broken ribs, though, huh?”

This time Hawkins didn’t try anything when he accepted Konya’s hand up. “How?”

“Proprioception,” Konya smiled. “The body’s sense of its own position and movement. I’ve trained myself to tune into it, into the motor cortex rather than the cerebral cortex. I can feel the way your body moves as clearly as you can. I know your every move as soon as you start to make it, so I can evade it. I can sense your weak points, your most exposed moments. So I don’t need to force my way through your resistance—I can find the attack that neutralizes you most effectively with the least damage.”

“Neat trick,” Corsi said icily. “But what if you’re twenty meters away, a Nausicaan’s about to disembowel your chief, and the only weapon you have is an antique plasma rifle that kills slow and burns like hell?”

Konya’s calm wavered for the first time, the possibility clearly disturbing him. But he faced her squarely. “I’m committed to my duty, Commander, whatever the psychic cost to myself. But isn’t there a good security procedure about averting such situations before they arise?”

“A nice idea in principle, but reality isn’t so tidy.”

“But if we’re too quick to assume violence is necessary, will we try hard enough to find alternatives?”

Corsi loomed over him. “You want to avert violence, then you watch that lip, mister.”

“Children!” The sharp bark came from Tev, who stood there with arms crossed, looking down his substantial snout at them even though they were all taller than he was. “If you’re done playing, it’s time to go.”

Corsi had her expression composed by the time she turned to face the Tellarite second officer, but Konya’s eyes widened at what she was thinking.

Chapter

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