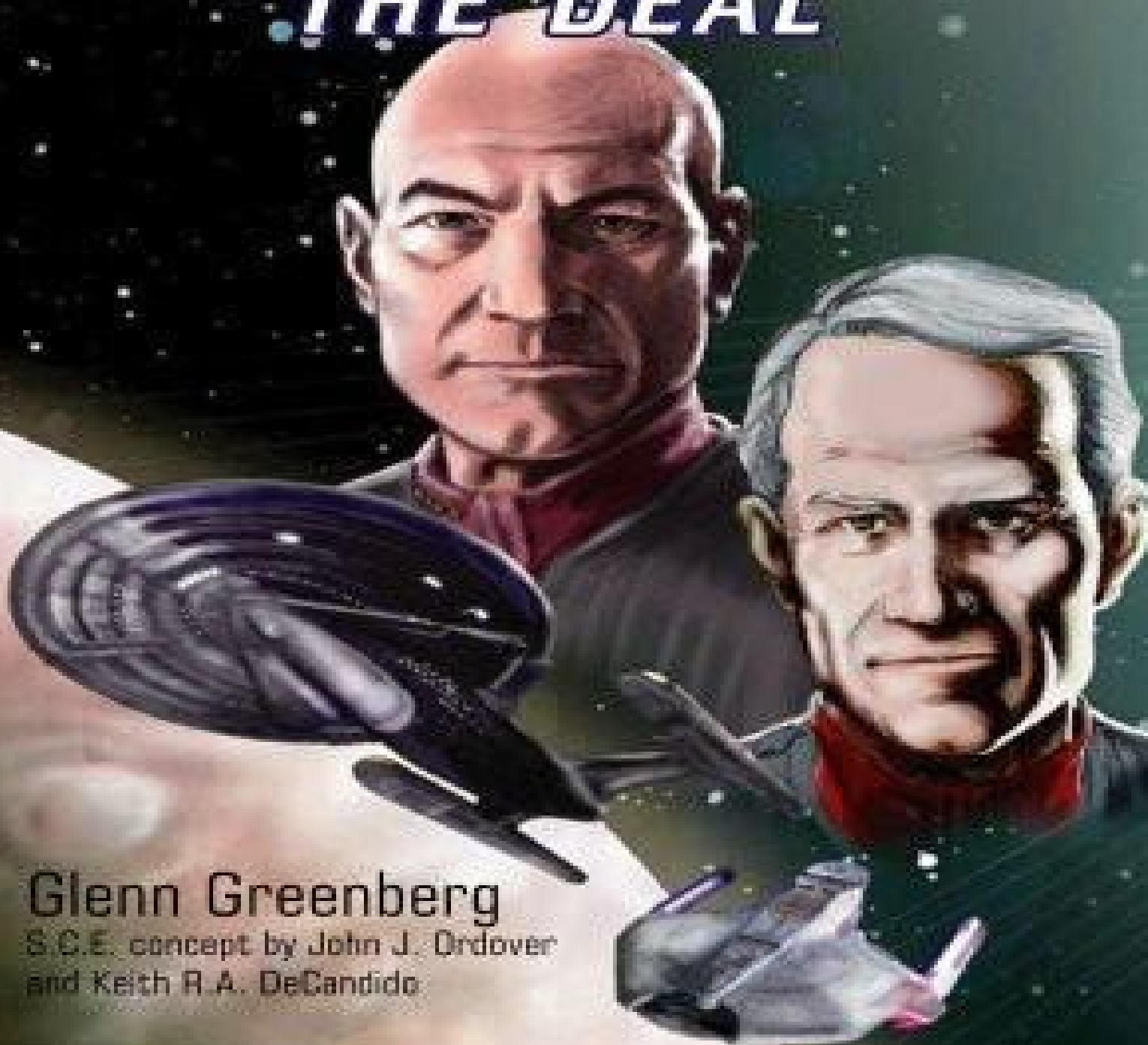


STAR TREK

S.C.E.

#45

THE ART OF THE DEAL



Glenn Greenberg

S.C.E. concept by John J. Ordover
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Chapter

1

U.S.S. *da Vinci*, Captain's Log, Stardate 54153.6:

The da Vinci has been assigned to the planet Vemlar in the Norvel system, where the Federation has entered into a partnership with business tycoon Rod Portlyn to transform the planet from a farm world into a major industrial complex, scientific research and development center. This partnership is expected to benefit both sides greatly. Portlyn will gain access to technology and resources normally beyond his reach, and the Federation will share exclusive proprietary information and all scientific breakthroughs and inventions developed on Vemlar by some of the most brilliant minds in the galaxy. The role of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers is to assist in the construction of the new key facilities on Vemlar. I expect this to be a reasonably easy mission.

* * *

Captain David Gold finished recording his log entry into the ship's library computer. Alone in his quarters, he leaned back in the chair situated at his work desk and sighed deeply. His ship and crew were now coming out of a relatively slow period, in between assignments. Of late, during these slow periods, Gold tended to look back on his long career and the choices he'd made.

Like any ambitious being, Gold was prone to wondering from time to time if he'd done as much as he could to go as far as he could in his career. Commanding the relatively small *Saber-class da Vinci* with its crew of forty, was satisfying, to be sure, and he never felt any regrets. But of late, during his periods of downtime, Gold found himself reflecting on how things might have been different for him if he had been more ambitious, if he had tried harder, pushed harder.

If he were in command of a larger, more powerful ship, maybe a *Sovereign-class* vessel like Jean-Luc Picard's *Enterprise*, perhaps he would not have had to endure the tragic loss of half his crew, which occurred during the *da Vinci's* fateful mission at Galvan VI. Perhaps he would not have lost his hand, now replaced by a realistic but nonetheless artificial appendage.

Gold knew that even a ship like the *Enterprise* was not invulnerable. Hell, Picard was now on his *second* ship of that name, the previous one having crash-landed on Veridian III a while back. But that knowledge did little to change how Gold was feeling.

Exactly five months had passed since Galvan VI, and this anniversary served to remind the captain that while he had since come to terms with what had happened and was moving on, it would never be far from his thoughts. Losing people like Kieran Duffy and David McAllan and Stephen Drew and...

Enough, Gold finally told himself, shaking his head as if to wipe the slate clean in his mind. But he knew he would never completely be able to stop looking back and wondering about all the "what ifs."

Looking at the chronometer on his desk, he realized he was about to get a reprieve from his downtime. He was due in the transporter room, to beam down to Vemlar with his senior officers for a meeting that would officially get this project started. That was good; keeping busy would help him get his mind off the question that crept in and would not go away: *Is this really how things were supposed to be?*

* * *

Gold strode into the main transporter room to find the rest of his away team already there: Commander Sonya Gomez, first officer and head of the S.C.E. team; Dr. Elizabeth Lense, the ship's chief medical officer; Lieutenant Commander Domenica Corsi, the ship's security chief; Soloman, the Bynar computer specialist; and Fabian Stevens, tactical specialist and one of the most reliable and trusted engineers on board.

“So, what have you heard about this Rod Portlyn fellow we’re meeting with?” Lense asked him as he came up beside the group.

“Not much more than what’s in the official records,” Gold replied. “Self-styled, independent entrepreneur and real estate mogul, friends in pretty high places. That includes Starfleet Command, by the way. He’s known for buying up the majority of the real estate on various worlds, so that he essentially ends up owning the planets and adding them to his ever-growing business empire.”

“Which the Federation is now getting involved in,” Corsi chimed in with a tone that could only be interpreted as skeptical. Apparently, the blond security chief was not in complete support of this new business arrangement.

“I guess he made us an offer we couldn’t refuse,” Stevens said with a grin. Turning serious, he added, “On paper, it seems like a good situation for us. Who knows what kind of great stuff they’ll come up with here once this place is up and running? And the Federation will own a piece of all of it.”

Gomez said matter-of-factly, “It also brings the Federation into an area of space we’ve never really gone to before.”

Soloman, apparently in agreement with Stevens, then spoke up. “It is not as if the Federation has never before involved itself in civilian projects. The late twenty-third-century Genesis Project was partially funded by the Federation, and even involved the participation of that era’s Starfleet Corps of Engineers.”

Corsi responded, “It’s not exactly the same situation. The Genesis scientists were Federation citizens. Portlyn is a nonaligned, independent tycoon who mostly operates outside of Federation space—like this solar system, for example. He’s been pretty much a law unto himself, not having to answer to anyone—”

Gold finally cut off the conversation with a wave of his hand. “What say we stop talking *about* this man and start talking *to* him? We’re due at his headquarters right about now.”

The group fell silent and followed Gold up to the transporter platform, where they took their places on the pads.

Gold nodded to the transporter chief, Laura Poynter. “Energize.”

Poynter activated the console, and seconds later, Gold felt a brief, familiar wave of dizziness. He knew that he and the rest of the away team had just been transformed into shimmering columns of energy. But from his point of view, the transporter chamber faded away, to be replaced by a huge indoor reception area on the surface of the planet Vemlar.

The away team materialized on the ground floor of a sprawling, partially completed, five-story building complex. This was to be Rod Portlyn’s headquarters on Vemlar, and as such, it was the first structure on which work had begun. Construction workers—a hardy-looking bunch of men and women—were scattered all around the chamber, engaged in heavy lifting, laser-drilling, and energy-sawing. Some were taking coffee breaks. All were dressed in dark blue uniforms bearing the Portlyn name in large, stylized letters emblazoned on the backs. Before long, the S.C.E. would be working with the

people.

Suddenly, a thin, tall, young human man with flat dark hair, dressed in an expensive-looking business suit, approached the *da Vinci* team.

“Captain Gold?” the young man inquired. When Gold nodded, the young man continued, “I’m Wellim Belvis, Mr. Portlyn’s assistant. He asked me to escort you to his office.”

“After you, Mr. Belvis,” Gold replied with a smile.

Belvis guided the away team to the building’s sole working turbolift, which he noted was reserved exclusively for transport to and from Portlyn’s office suite. The lift deposited them on the top floor, which looked almost totally completed. The floors were newly carpeted—that distinctive “new carpet smell” was the first thing that Gold noticed when the elevator doors slid open. The suite’s waiting area was furnished with several new, comfortable-looking chairs and a matching sofa. At the far end of the room was a plain-looking metallic desk occupied by a pretty young Andorian whom Gold assumed was Rod Portlyn’s secretary. She was unpacking some of her belongings and getting her cluttered desk into some semblance of order, but she paused long enough to smile at the new visitors. Behind her were two tall, massive doors, which presumably opened into Portlyn’s private office.

“Mr. Portlyn is wrapping up another meeting,” Belvis said. “He’ll be with you shortly.”

Gold and his team headed over to the sofa and chairs to sit as they waited. But the two massive doors suddenly opened, and a beautiful, regal-looking, older human woman walked out, heading directly for the elevator. She carried a briefcase and wore a somewhat conservative red dress that began at her neck and ended at her ankles, although her shoulders were exposed. Her hair, jet-black with streaks of silver, was long and lustrous, but pinned up in a manner befitting a serious businesslike atmosphere. Gold initially gave her no more than a passing glance, until something clicked inside his head and, almost involuntarily, he blurted out, “Patrice? Patrice Bennett?”

The woman turned abruptly, searched out the source of the voice that called out to her, and settled on Gold. She narrowed her eyes, scrutinized the captain’s face, locked on to his eyes, until she finally displayed a look of recognition, then surprise. This was followed by a smile that could melt the heart of a Vulcan.

“David,” she said in a voice that was both soft and captivating. She walked over to Gold and met him in a fond embrace that he happily returned.

She smells exactly the same, Gold thought as he felt the decades falling away.

After a long moment, they broke from their embrace and looked each other over.

“You look wonderful,” Gold told her. “Just as I remember.” And it was true, she was exactly as he remembered her, despite wrinkles and silver hairs that weren’t there when he last saw her. How else could he have recognized her so quickly, after all this time?

“You don’t look so bad yourself, old-timer,” she responded wryly. “The white hair makes you look very distinguished. And still in Starfleet, I see. What are you now, the commanding admiral of

something?”

Gold was grateful for the fact that she apparently hadn't been following his career. That meant there wouldn't be any questions about things like Galvan VI, or his hand, or anything else he was trying not to dwell upon.

“No, just a humble starship captain,” he told her with a grin. “Here on business, a special project with Rod Portlyn.”

She chuckled. “Oh, you've got business with ol' Roddy too, huh? That's why I'm here, as you've probably guessed. I needed to go over some details of a new venture of his I'm investing in—a planetwide resort on Rando III, something he says will rival Wrigley's Pleasure Planet and even Risk. I didn't know he'd gone into business with the Federation. He sure does get around, doesn't he?”

“I guess so,” Gold replied. “But the same can be said about you. You've come a long way since the old days.” He couldn't help but smirk at that phrase.

Turning to his crew, he said, “This is Patrice Bennett, one of the sharpest, shrewdest, most successful business leaders in the Alpha Quadrant.”

“Flatterer,” Patrice laughed.

“She's an...old friend. Patrice, these are some of the senior members of my crew.” He introduced each of them.

“A pleasure to meet all of you,” Patrice said. She then turned her attention back to Gold. “I wish I could stay longer and talk, David, but I have to get back to Tau Ophiucus—that's where I'm headquartered these days. Pending business meetings, contracts to read, inventory shipment arrivals to oversee—”

“In other words, the usual,” Gold said with a chuckle.

“Precisely,” she replied, laughing. “Oh, David, it's so good to see you.” She hugged him again.

“You too,” he told her softly, then gently kissed her cheek.

Patrice Bennett then walked toward the elevator again, but turned one last time and said to Gold, “Don't be a stranger!”

Gold nodded. “I'll get in touch with you as soon as I can. We should catch up with each other and reminisce about old times.”

With a final wave, Patrice entered the elevator and was gone.

Gold was disappointed that she had to leave so soon—seeing Patrice again gave him a nice, warm feeling inside, took him to another time and place, and he could not help but smile.

The smile was still lingering on his face when he turned back to his crew, all of whom had expectant looks on their faces. But if what they were expecting was a more complete explanation

his connection to Patrice Bennett, they were going to be disappointed.

“Always nice to bump into old friends, isn’t it?” was all Gold would say as he sat down.

“Especially if you don’t owe them any money,” Dr. Lense responded dryly.

After a few moments, Belvis reappeared to tell Gold and his crew that Rod Portlyn was ready to meet with them.

* * *

Portlyn’s office was enormous, at least twice as large as the bridge of the *da Vinci*. The window extended from ceiling to floor and provided a breathtaking view of the terrain of Vemlar and the tall, majestic Kirtko Mountains in the distance. The chairs and couches were of the highest quality, even better than what was in the waiting area outside. The office was decorated with exotic paintings and sculptures from different worlds, including Earth, Betazed, Delta IV, and Argelius II.

Portlyn came out from behind his massive desk to meet his guests. The tycoon was humanoid, albeit with pale green skin and scarlet-colored eyes. He was balding on top of his head, and his slight potbelly betrayed the fact that he could do with some more frequent physical exercise. But he was impeccably dressed, in a dark brown suit made of the finest silk from Rigel IV. And he was smoking a long, thick Yridian cigar.

Gold introduced his team to Portlyn, who happily shook their hands. The captain explained each of their roles in the project: Commander Gomez would oversee the entire operation on the S.C.E. side of things, as the senior officer in charge; Dr. Lense would consult on the construction of the medical facilities; Corsi would do the same with the security systems; Soloman would lead a team in setting up all of the computer systems; and Stevens would help to finalize and install the emergency and damage control functions of all key facilities. Other members of the S.C.E. would beam down the next day to work under these section leaders and take part in the actual building of the various structures, including the main power plant, the central transportation center, and the laboratory complex.

Portlyn seemed pleased with everything and everyone. He sat back down behind his desk, in a beautiful, centuries-old antique made of rich, burgundy-colored Arcturian wood. Atop the desk sat the tycoon’s state-of-the-art personal computer system, which had yet to be set up. Puffing on his cigar, he waxed enthusiastic about his joint venture with the United Federation of Planets.

“I’ve sought this partnership for a long time. I’m looking forward to making it a success for me and for the Federation. I plan for Vemlar to be the capital of my business empire, and I couldn’t be happier that the Starfleet Corps of Engineers is involved in getting things rolling. I’ve long had an admiration for Starfleet and its technical wizards.”

Seated in the chair closest to Portlyn’s desk, Gold leaned back into the profoundly comfortable cushion behind him. “So, Mr. Portlyn, have you ever done such extensive rebuilding of worlds before?”

Portlyn’s face broke into a wide grin, and there was a twinkle in his eye. “I’m glad you asked that question, Captain. But instead of just answering, how about I *show* you? Allow me to give you and your team a tour of my properties in this system. Once you see what I’ve accomplished, I think you’ll

agree that all will benefit from my purchase of Vemlar.”

Gold was intrigued, and he saw from the looks on his away team’s faces that they shared his curiosity.

“We’ll take you up on your offer, Mr. Portlyn. Shall we beam up to the *da Vinci*?”

Portlyn waved him off with a chuckle. “No need, Captain. I’ll bring all of you aboard my yacht. Let’s do it in *style*. A nice little cruise around the Norvel system. Once we’re done, I think you’ll see why this region of space has been nicknamed ‘The Corporate Corridor.’”

Domenica Corsi had to admit it: she was impressed. Aboard Portlyn's streamlined, luxurious space yacht, Corsi and the rest of the *da Vinci* away team were treated to a guided tour of the Norvel system and the various properties owned and operated by Portlyn, hosted by the tycoon himself.

As the yacht made its way to the core of the system, the *da Vinci* crew members were shown several planetoids that, under Portlyn's guidance, were transformed from moderately developed, underdeveloped, or totally undeveloped worlds into fully operational chemical plants, computer manufacturing factories, dilithium cracking stations, and uridium processing centers. They also saw asteroids that had become mining colonies and reliable sources of various desirable minerals and metals. One of the system's larger planets, Creccus, housed Portlyn's shipbuilding facilities. Another planet, called Jemada, served as the location for a continent-size shopping mall and a family-oriented amusement park.

Seeing what Portlyn had accomplished, Corsi could not help but think of her father and his beloved freighter business on Fahleena III. She reflected on how hard he had to work even now to keep it a success, how tiny and fragile it seemed next to Portlyn's thriving empire.

Finally, the yacht turned and began making its way back to Vemlar and the *da Vinci*. The conversation turned to the S.C.E.'s role in the construction project, which would begin in earnest the next day. Gomez, Lense, Corsi, and the other team leaders would beam down first thing in the morning with their various subordinates. The *da Vinci* would remain in orbit around Vemlar until the project was completed.

Corsi noted that Captain Gold and Portlyn had established a friendly rapport in the short time they were together. It made sense—both men were in important positions of power and authority, with many people working under them who depended on their leadership abilities. And Captain Gold obviously felt comfortable among people of Portlyn's social status, given his past involvement with that woman, Patrice Bennett. Corsi briefly wondered about the exact nature of that involvement before getting her thoughts back on track and deciding that the captain's rapport with Portlyn would certainly make the project run more smoothly. Corsi stood nearby as the captain and the tycoon, each holding a glass of Saurian brandy, engaged in conversation as they looked out at the stars through one of the yacht's large windows.

"This won't be the most glamorous or exciting assignment for you, will it, Captain?" Portlyn asked good-naturedly.

"They can't all be life-and-death missions to save the universe," Gold replied with a grin. "Besides, our voyages are usually more about investigation and problem solving anyway. But we're proud of the part we play in the grand scheme of things."

"As well you should be, Captain. I was quite happy when Admiral Adair made sure you were assigned to this project. Ian and I go way back, as you may know, and I must admit to having pulled a few strings or two to get the best engineering crew in Starfleet out here."

Pays to have friends in high places, Corsi thought. She heard the captain reply simply, “We appreciate your confidence in us.”

The conversation turned to the subject of the yacht they were aboard. Gold mentioned that he admired the vessel, and Portlyn replied by telling Gold how much he paid for it, and for the five other yachts he owned.

Corsi, remaining a silent bystander and following the conversation between the two men, noticed that Portlyn had a tendency to attach a price tag to nearly everything he talked about. She found this somewhat off-putting. Corsi doubted she would ever be completely comfortable around someone like Portlyn, who had no qualms whatsoever about showing off his vast wealth, power, and influence to anyone and everyone. His aggressive capitalism and naked materialism reminded her too much of the Ferengi, and that put a bad taste in her mouth. But Corsi accepted this as her own shortcoming—certainly wasn't Portlyn's problem. She knew she'd just have to accept that Portlyn was someone who seemed to subscribe to an old saying she'd heard over the years: “If you've got it, flaunt it.”

* * *

By the time Portlyn's yacht returned to Vemlar, it was already local nighttime. Corsi was relieved that the tour was finally over. Portlyn had proved to be a gracious host, but she was anxious to get back to the *da Vinci*, devote some time to preparing for the next day's activities, and get a good night's sleep.

She knew that not all of her crewmates felt as she did. Her close friend and occasional lover, Fabian Stevens (one of these days, they'd figure out exactly what they were to each other), thoroughly enjoyed himself and was disappointed that his time aboard the luxury craft had come to an end.

“And I thought the *Nagus* was a beaut,” he'd said to Corsi, referring to the luxury ship recently purchased by *da Vinci* conn officer Songmin Wong. “But the impulse engines on this baby are state-of-the-art, they're not even available to the general public yet! And the leather on the seats—it's from Sarpeidon! You know how rare Sarpeidon leather is? Their sun went nova a hundred years ago!”

Corsi, not wishing to trample on his enthusiasm, simply smiled and nodded as Stevens went on and on. About the gracefulness of the vessel's overall design, the quality of the warp core, and even the wood that the bar in the main lounge was made of. She just hoped his eagerness to point out every edge that Portlyn's ship had over Wong's would give out before her patience did.

Standing together in the yacht's main lounge, Gold and his team wished Portlyn a good night as they were caught up in the *da Vinci*'s transporter beams and brought back to the starship.

“Quite an operation Mr. Portlyn has out here,” Gold commented as he stepped down from the transporter platform.

“‘The Corporate Corridor’ is a very appropriate nickname,” Gomez said.

The group exited the transporter room and walked down the corridor together toward the nearest turbolift.

“Portlyn's quite a character,” Lense said with an amused tone in her voice. “Very...larger than life.”

Gold nodded and replied, “He would have fit in very well on Earth a few hundred years ago, when

‘Big Business’ dominated and wealthy tycoons were the major driving forces around the world.”

Corsi privately wondered if those old-time tycoons were as enamored of their own wealth and material possessions as Portlyn was of his.

“I was most intrigued by the methods by which his computers are manufactured, and how the standard systems are set up,” Soloman commented, obviously enthused about his upcoming responsibilities on Vemlar. “It will be an engaging exercise, getting our systems to fully integrate with his.”

They arrived at the turbolift and stepped through the open doors. As the doors closed and the lift began moving, Corsi turned to Gold and asked him point-blank, “So, what’s the story between you and Patrice Bennett?”

If Gold was at all surprised or uncomfortable by being put on the spot, he didn’t show it. No doubt he was used to the security chief’s forthrightness by now, and maybe even expected the question to come up eventually.

He folded his arms across his chest and said, “Okay, we dated, as you probably surmised. It was a long time ago. We were kids, really. I was in my early days at Starfleet Academy; she was attending Stamford University. It was...very nice.” A gentle smile appeared on his face.

The smile seemed to turn wistful as he continued. “But we drifted apart. Patrice found that she had a real head for business and finance, and that took up most of her time. And I eventually came to realize that I needed to be with someone a bit more...*spiritual*.”

“So you married a rabbi,” Lense said.

Gold shrugged his shoulders and chuckled. “Hey, if you’re going to aim, aim high.”

With that, the doors to the lift opened and Gold stepped out. “My stop—and just in time. Good night, all. Get some rest, tomorrow’s going to be a busy day.”

The doors closed and the lift started moving again. The remaining occupants rode in silence. Gomez, Lense, Stevens, and Soloman cast long glances over at Corsi.

“What are you all gawking at?” the security chief finally blurted out. “You all wanted to know just as much as I did.”

After a brief moment, they shrugged their shoulders, smiled sheepishly, and nodded their heads in agreement.

From what Corsi could tell, things were going well on the S.C.E.'s first day as part of the Vemlar development team. As security chief, it was her responsibility to know the whereabouts and activities of everyone from the ship who was down on the planet, on top of her own responsibilities to the project.

She knew that first thing that morning, the S.C.E.'s structural engineering specialist, the eight-limbed Nasat named P8 Blue (informally known as "Pattie"), had a meeting with Portlyn's design and construction team. They were discussing ways in which the building being constructed to house the main power generator could be extra-reinforced, in the unlikely event of a major systems overload.

Elsewhere, *da Vinci* cultural specialist Carol Abramowitz met with the leading citizens of the native Vemlarite population to determine what cultural barriers, if any, needed to be addressed to ensure that cooperation and harmony among all parties were maintained. Although Vemlar was being transformed from a farm world into something entirely different, its native inhabitants were still an important part of the planet and its future. The Vemlarites were all farmers who sold their land to Rod Portlyn and were now employed by the tycoon in various capacities, particularly as construction crews, food service workers, and sanitation teams.

The fact that everything seemed to be going smoothly was satisfying to Corsi, even if she wasn't overly enthusiastic about the mission itself.

Corsi didn't know exactly why she had such a prejudice against Portlyn. Clearly he had worked hard for his success, and she respected him for that. He possessed a great deal of personal charm, even if she found him to be insufferably materialistic. But there was something about him and his empire that made her uncomfortable. Perhaps it was the fact that this tycoon, who had always operated outside the Federation and made a point of the fact that he owed allegiance to no one but himself, wielded such power and influence and had connections to certain higher-ups at Starfleet and within the Federation government. Striking a deal with the Federation allowed Portlyn, in Corsi's view, to use that power and influence to suit his own needs and involve Starfleet personnel—specifically the crew of the *da Vinci*—while he was at it.

But Corsi was nothing if not a consummate professional, and she would not let her feelings get in the way of the job.

At lunchtime, she caught up with Gomez, Abramowitz, Soloman, and P8 Blue, who were sitting at a table at a makeshift outdoor cafeteria near the site of the main headquarters. Blue, of course, was seated in a special chair designed for her insectoid body structure.

Corsi caught the tail end of Blue's status report as she plopped down on the bench next to Soloman.

"Mr. Portlyn's engineers seemed receptive to my suggestions," the Nasat was saying. "Best of all, they told me that my ideas could easily be incorporated into the plans, even though construction on the building began today. They assured me it was not too late."

“Excellent,” Gomez responded. “Thank you very much, Pattie.”

Blue bowed her head humbly.

Gomez then turned her attention to Soloman. “So how goes getting this place online?”

“It is going quite well,” the Bynar answered brightly. “We had to start with Mr. Portlyn’s personal system.”

“Yes, he gets first dibs on *everything* around here, doesn’t he?” Gomez interjected with a mischievous smirk.

“Rank has its privileges,” Corsi replied as she unwrapped a baked Altairian dogfish sandwich and opened the lid of a cup containing iced coffee, which she’d brought down from the ship.

“Most of the morning was dedicated to Mr. Portlyn’s system,” Soloman continued, unfazed by the interruption. “Mr. Portlyn’s computer connects to the main network, but it also has a separate exclusive system, strictly for his use, and he wanted access to that as soon as possible. It took some time to get it running, but now that we have, he seems very pleased. We are now working on setting up the main network.”

Gomez nodded. “How long do you think that’ll take?”

“The initial stages should be done by the end of the day. The most crucial parts of the network should be accessible, at least in a limited capacity, at that point. Tomorrow, we will begin working on all the other computers and getting them to interface with our software.”

“That’s great! Good work,” Gomez told him enthusiastically. He gave her an appreciative nod.

Corsi saw that they were being joined by a new arrival: a middle-aged, male Vemlarite, with the pale orange skin and small, round, pitch-black eyes of that species. He was dressed in dark blue construction coveralls. Abramowitz introduced him as Delfo, one of the Vemlarites’ leading citizens. He sat down at the table, pulled a meat-filled sandwich out of a tan-colored paper sack, and ate with them.

“So what made you all decide to sell your land to Portlyn?” Corsi asked Delfo after several minutes of casual conversation. She was genuinely curious about how the tycoon managed to convince the Vemlarites to sell out to him. She then chuckled. “What did he do, hold your families prisoner till you signed the real estate over to him?”

She thought Delfo would understand that she was only kidding around, but his face remained impassive.

“You might want to be more careful what you say about Rod Portlyn around here, ma’am,” he told her, looking around at the various Vemlarites and Portlyn employees passing by. “He’s got a lot of admirers here, including me, and comments like that could be mis-interpreted.”

Corsi wasn’t sure what to say. She certainly did not share Delfo’s high regard for Portlyn, but she immediately regretted offending the Vemlarite. She hoped Delfo was not so offended that whatever

cultural bridges Abramowitz established had not just been irreparably burned.

“I’m sorry,” Corsi told him. “I was just trying to make a joke.”

Abramowitz then stepped in, trying to smooth things over with a smile that Corsi recognized desperately upbeat. “Sometimes we humans forget that not every species in the galaxy shares our peculiar sense of humor.”

Delfo shook his head. “No harm done. Just a little friendly advice. To answer your question about why we sold our farms—we didn’t have much of a choice. Not long ago, the soil on Vemlar became infertile, totally incapable of growing any more of our crops. All of a sudden, the land was just barren. You have to understand—our farms had been our lives, and our livelihoods, for...well, I don’t know how many generations. And now they were useless. After that, we just started sinking into poverty. We became desperate.”

Delfo paused for a moment, and though his face remained expressionless, Corsi could tell that he was silently reliving that dark period. Finally, he continued.

“Luckily, Mr. Portlyn came along with a very generous offer to each and every one of us, to buy our land. And he offered to keep us all on, give us jobs helping him build this place up. And once that was done, he’s promised us steady work helping him to keep things running day to day. It was the best solution we could get, and he made it possible.” Delfo then looked Corsi squarely in the eyes and told her, “Rod Portlyn’s a hero and a savior in my book, and most other folks here feel the same way.” He then went back to his sandwich and ate in silence.

Corsi was left with much to think about. Her skepticism about Portlyn remained—she’d learned long ago to always trust her first impressions about people and situations. But clearly there was another side to the tycoon. He personally saved the inhabitants of Vemlar and provided them with a future. In that sense, he was exactly the kind of person with whom the Federation should be doing business. Having come to that realization, Corsi felt a bit more enthusiastic about the Vemlar project and her role in it.

* * *

As night fell on Vemlar, Sonya Gomez and some other members of the S.C.E.—including Steven Soloman, Abramowitz, and Blue—chose to remain on the planet overnight. For Gomez, it was out of desire to feel more connected to Vemlar and the construction project, and to get used to the environment, since she was going to be spending a lot of time there for an extended period.

In the aftermath of Galvan VI, Gomez was grateful for assignments like this and the responsibilities that came with them. She’d found that keeping as busy as possible was instrumental in getting her to move past the tragedy and the loss of Kieran Duffy, who gave his life to save the *da Vinci* on that fateful mission...and who had asked Gomez to marry him shortly before. Having a goal, focusing on it, working toward achieving it, helped to ease the pain and get her moving forward with her life.

Guest quarters had not yet been set up, so Gomez and her companions had to camp out in Federation-issue tents and sleeping bags. They didn’t mind—they thought it could be a lot of fun “roughing it,” and even had marshmallows beamed down from the *da Vinci* for toasting later in the evening. But Gomez quickly discovered that not everyone shared that enthusiasm—starting with the

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay tonight, Domenica?” Gomez asked as she stood outside of her tent with Fabian Stevens and watched Corsi gather up her gear and prepare to beam back to the *da Vinci*.

“I have some paperwork to catch up on, reports to fill out...” Corsi replied. That sounded like a lame excuse to Gomez. It was more likely that the notoriously no-nonsense Corsi just didn’t feel comfortable socializing with her crewmates in such a fashion.

“C’mon, Dom, it’ll be fun,” Stevens chimed in cheerfully. “There’ll probably be a singalong and everything.”

Corsi grimaced. “Was that supposed to be an enticement?”

Suddenly, they were joined by Dr. Lense, who was carrying her own gear and looking eager to get back to the ship.

“Not you too, Elizabeth?” Gomez asked with disappointment.

“No offense, but given the choice, I’ll pick the relative comfort of my bunk over a sleeping bag any day. Besides, I spent enough time ‘roughing it’ during those weeks I was on that Shmoam-ag ship.”

“But, Doc, you haven’t lived until you’ve heard my rendition of ‘Moonlight Bay,’” said Stevens.

“Guess I’ll have to stay among the nonliving, but thanks,” Lense replied wryly.

Corsi tapped her combadge. “Corsi to *da Vinci*, two to beam up.” A moment later, she and Lense were gone.

“Their loss, right, Commander?” Stevens asked with a lopsided grin. “I’m going to go set up my tent. See you at the campfire!”

* * *

As it got later into the night, with the campfire dying down and everyone’s voices hoarse from all the songs they sang together, the Starfleet engineers finally went to sleep. Gomez had fallen into such a deep slumber that she barely heard the beep of her combadge well past local midnight. But once registered in her mind that the device was summoning her, she suddenly bolted up in her sleeping bag wide awake, and reached over to tap it.

“Gomez here,” she said, her voice dry and rough.

“Gomez, it’s Captain Gold. Sorry to wake you.” His voice sounded serious.

“No problem, sir. What’s going on?”

“We picked up distress calls from two of Portlyn’s other properties in this system—a planetoid named Kalibiss and an asteroid called P-12. It seems that maintenance workers at both locations discovered activated time bombs.”

“When are they set to go off?” Gomez asked, surprised by this news.

“We’re not sure. The maintenance workers saw the bombs and fled to safety before contacting Portlyn. I spoke to him and offered our assistance, which he’s accepted.”

Makes sense, Gomez thought. If there are time bombs needing to be deactivated, why turn down help from a ship carrying some of Starfleet’s best engineers?

“What do you need from me, sir? Should I beam back up?”

“No—I’m not sure how long we’ll be gone, and you’re needed on Vemlar to keep the project moving along. That’s why we’re here in the first place. But I’m going to need Stevens, Soloman, and Blue back aboard. The da Vinci is heading to Kalibiss and since we can’t be in two places at once, a second team will travel by shuttlecraft to P-12. Hopefully we can stop both of these things in time. I’ll be in touch when there’s something to report.”

“Take whoever you need. And good luck, Captain.”

“I hope we won’t need luck, but I’ll take it. Gold out.”

Gomez sat in silence in her tent for half an hour before concluding there was no way she was getting back to sleep. She had too much on her mind. The *da Vinci* had already left orbit and was well under way by now. Who would plant time bombs? Why? Would the S.C.E. be able to stop them from detonating? Would her crewmates be all right? Her tent began to feel very small and cramped. It was still several hours before sunrise, but she decided to go for a short walk and get some air. Maybe that would help clear her head.

Gomez wandered aimlessly until she walked up a hill and found herself overlooking the construction site for the main laboratory complex. This would be the center of everything on Vemlar, the point around which everything else revolved, once Portlyn’s operations were up and running. The lab would, for all intents and purposes, be the “heart” of Portlyn’s Vemlar. Gomez remembered what Stevens had said earlier, about all the amazing things that could potentially be created at this place in the future. She silently acknowledged that this facility could one day be one of the most important places in the galaxy.

She walked down the hill to get a closer look at the building. Maybe she would see areas in which she could make suggestions for revisions and improvements once work resumed later in the morning.

As she approached the building, she tried to keep her mind off the *da Vinci*’s dangerous mission and to stay focused on her own responsibilities. She did not expect the blinding flash of light that burst forth suddenly from the site. Or the searing heat. Or the deafening, thunderous boom.

Then everything went black.

Chapter

4

Captain's Log, Stardate 54154.9:

The da Vinci has arrived at Kalibiss, the location of Rod Portlyn's warp engine manufacturing company. Lieutenant Commander Corsi, P8 Blue, and Soloman have beamed down to the operations center to examine and hopefully deactivate the bomb. I have been informed by the crew of the shuttlecraft Kwolek that they have arrived at asteroid P-12, which houses Portlyn's robotics factory. Lieutenant Commander Tev, Fabian Stevens, and Deputy Security Chief Vance Hawkins are on site and conducting their own investigation.

* * *

Captain Gold, seated in the captain's chair on the bridge of the *da Vinci*, did not have long to wait before he heard back from the away team on Kalibiss. Corsi contacted him seven minutes after beaming down .

"It looks like the bomb is set to explode in two hours, twenty-three minutes, sir," she reported. *"It seems we had plenty of time to get here."*

"Fortunately." Gold then thought for a moment. "Almost two and a half hours from now...that would be the middle of the night here. Who would be in the building at that time?"

"No one, sir."

"So no one would be hurt or killed when the bomb detonated," he pondered aloud.

"Thoughtful terrorists—go figure."

"Corsi, how was the bomb discovered in the first place?"

"A maintenance worker was cleaning the ground floor of the operations center for the evening. He heard a loud beeping that lasted about ten seconds. He was able to follow the beeping to its source—that was the bomb, planted inside a supply closet."

"So the bomb might never have been discovered if not for the noise. Any idea what the beeping was about?"

"So far, Soloman and Pattie don't believe it served any particular purpose. They think it might have been a minor design flaw in the bomb."

"A flaw that's certainly seemed to work in our favor. Are we going to be able to defuse this thing?"

Gold was answered by the voice of Soloman. *"We are already finishing up, Captain. Pattie is just about to disconnect the final wire from the explosives."*

Gold's curiosity grew. "What kind of bomb are we dealing with here? Could it take out the whole site?"

Now P8 Blue herself answered, though her voice sounded muffled. She was apparently working on the bomb as she talked. *"It's a fairly simple device, sir, although it seems well made, and I estimate it would cause a fair amount of damage if allowed to detonate."*

“Okay. Just be careful, all of you. And good work.”

The conversation was interrupted by a transmission from Tev on asteroid P-12. Gold anxiously opened the channel to hear the report from the *da Vinci*'s Tellarite second officer and S.C.E. second in-command.

“It turns out there was no need for urgency, Captain,” Tev told him. *“The bomb is not set to detonate for another seven hours.”*

A theory immediately popped into Gold's head. “At which point it would be the middle of the night cycle on the asteroid, and no one would be in the factory?”

“Quite correct, sir. But most unusual was how the bomb was discovered. You see—”

“Loud beeping?” Gold interrupted, his theory catching fire.

Tev hesitated before answering. *“Affirmative, Captain,”* he said in a bemused voice. *“As for the bomb itself, it is—”*

“A simple design and fairly easy to deactivate.”

“Sir, would you like to give the report to us ?” Tev was clearly frustrated and confused .

Gold chuckled. “Sorry, Tev. Needless to say, what-you're telling me is not coming as a shock. Okay, you and Stevens finish deactivating the bomb. We'll set up a rendezvous point to retrieve you.

“Aye, sir. We will contact you again once the bomb is neutralized. Tev out.”

Gold's mind was racing. Obviously the two incidents were linked. But what was all this about? What was behind it? Why these targets?

Before he could ponder these questions any further, the *da Vinci* received an emergency transmission, this time from Vemlar. It was Carol Abramowitz. Her image popped up on the main viewscreen, and Gold was struck by how shaken she looked. Her dark hair was a mess and her cheeks and uniform were covered with dust, dirt, and...was that blood?

“Captain, we were attacked.” Abramowitz's voice revealed her dismay, yet somehow remained controlled. *“The main lab construction site was bombed! It's completely demolished. Sir, Commander Gomez was in the vicinity when it happened.”*

“Dear God,” Gold muttered. Sonya Gomez just recently had a near-death experience, on the planet Teneb, and Gold's first thought was that this time, her luck had run out. Maintaining his composure, he asked, “Is she all right? Is she...?”

“Minor burns, slight concussion, some cuts and bruises. Luckily, she was far enough away that it wasn't more serious. She's resting right now, but she needs proper medical attention—I've just about used up my knowledge of first aid. The local Vemlarite physician is on his way to take over and get her to his hospital.”

Gold was well aware that any Vemlarite hospital was downright primitive by Federation standards. “We’re on our way,” he assured Abramowitz. “Lense will take over as soon as we get there. Was anyone else hurt?”

“None of us or Portlyn’s people, sir. No one else was at the site at the time of the explosion. But Portlyn’s security force chased down a suspect trying to leave the planet shortly afterward. Shots were exchanged, and the suspect’s craft was hit and crash-landed.”

“What kind of shape is this suspect in?”

Abramowitz frowned. “He sustained serious burns and extensive injuries, sir. He’s being taken to the hospital too, of course...but I’m not sure he’ll survive.”

“Lense will be the judge of that,” Gold told her sharply. It then dawned upon him that this explosion on Vemlar happened in the middle of the night.

“Abramowitz, this bomb wasn’t discovered ahead of time? There wasn’t any kind of loud beeping from it that could have led to its discovery?”

“Not as far as I know, sir. If there was any loud beeping, I think it would have been heard by someone. The lab site was one of the busiest areas today until work ended for the night.”

Gold nodded gravely. “Where’s Mr. Portlyn right now?”

“At the construction site, assessing the damages. He’s extremely agitated, sir.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Gold then turned in his chair to Lieutenant Anthony Shabalala, stationed at the tactical console.

“Shabalala, contact the away team on Kalibiss. Tell them we need them back aboard. The second they’re done with that bomb, I want them beamed up.”

“Aye, sir,” Shabalala replied. He began to send the call signal, but the captain was not finished.

“Then, contact our team at P-12. Tell them that when they’re done there, they should head back to Vemlar on their own aboard the *Kwolek*.” Time was of the essence, and a rendezvous with the shuttlecraft would only slow the *da Vinci* down.

Gold then turned in his chair again, this time to address his conn officer. “Wong, plot a course for Vemlar. Full impulse power, as soon as we’re under way.” At that speed, they would be back at Vemlar in less than an hour.

“Course already plotted, Captain,” Wong replied.

Gold smiled inwardly—he liked when his people showed that kind of initiative.

“Captain,” Shabalala called from tactical. “The away team has just beamed aboard.”

“Go, Wong,” Gold told the conn officer. He then turned his attention back to the main viewscreen.

where Abramowitz's face remained.

“Abramowitz, we'll be back as soon as possible. *da Vinci* out.”

Gold felt the ship smoothly accelerate as it left Kalibiss behind. The situation had become very clear to him: the *da Vinci* had been lured away from Vemlar. The bombs on Kalibiss and P-12 were *intended* to be discovered, so that the *da Vinci*, the only Federation vessel in the region, would rush to deactivate them and therefore not be able to interfere when the *true* target was hit.

So much for the reasonably easy mission.

* * *

“He'll probably live, but he may end up wishing otherwise,” said Dr. Lense, delivering to Captain Gold her report on the condition of the suspected terrorist. They stood side by side in the *da Vinci*'s sickbay, looking down at her patient, who was lying unconscious on a diagnostic bed within a sterile field. His burned and broken body was covered with a clear healing gel and wrapped in loose bandages.

Lense looked exhausted. Six hours of nonstop emergency surgery and two and a half hours of intense post-op examination and research will do that to the hardest of doctors, even one who was aided by her Emergency Medical Hologram.

“Third-degree burns over eighty percent of his body,” she continued. “There are more bones broken than not. His vocal cords are destroyed—he'll never speak again.”

“Damn,” Gold muttered. “He's our only link to the terrorists responsible for those time bombs and the explosion on Vemlar.”

“Assuming he *is* a link,” Lense noted pointedly. “We don't know that for sure. Innocent before, proven guilty and all.”

Gold nodded. “Is there any way we can determine his identity?”

Lense frowned and shook her head. “Not at present. His fingerprints are completely burned away. And so far, there are no DNA matches. Right now, I can't even be sure what species he belongs to. His blood type doesn't match anything in our database.”

Gold let out a disappointed sigh. “All right, tell me about this chip you found.”

Lense lifted up a small pair of tweezers that held a tiny metal square, no larger than a centimeter, between its prongs.

“This was inside him, at the base of his skull. I'm not sure if it's a computer chip, a transmitter, a receiver, a medical device, or a joy buzzer. Which is why I asked Soloman to join us. I figured with his ability to interface with computers, he could determine—”

Suddenly, the doors to sickbay opened and the Bynar entered, looking very curious about why the doctor had summoned him.

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