

STAR TREK® CORPS OF ENGINEERS



THE LIGHT

Jeff D. Jacques

Star Trek™: Corps of Engineers

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STAR TREK™

CORPS OF ENGINEERS

The Light


Jeff D. Jacques

Based upon *Star Trek*™
and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*™
Created by Gene Roddenberry
and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*™
Created by Rick Berman & Michael Piller



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ISBN: 1-4165-4566-2

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Chapter

1

As Sonya Gomez lay in bed and stared at the remarkably dull ceiling, she wondered, not for the first time, whether anyone would notice if she snuck into an airlock and shot herself into the void of space. Being the middle of shipboard night, she could probably do it. Alarms would go off once she did the deed, of course, and her gamma-shift crewmates would act quickly to beam her back once they realized someone was floating about in the frigid vacuum. Within ten seconds, she'd be beamed directly to sickbay, where valiant attempts would be made to revive her. They would, sadly, fail. At least, they would in this particular scenario of morbid speculation.

Gomez sighed morosely and closed her eyes, giving her head a chiding shake in the process. *Not that would be taking the easy way out.* But how the hell was she going to face Fabian in the morning after what had happened? Or Corsi? Or herself in the damn mirror? What had she been *thinking*?

It had started out easily enough—which should have been her first indication that disaster would rear its head before long. As head of the *da Vinci's* S.C.E. team, she was no stranger to missions that appeared fairly simple at the outset, but proved to be—often at the most inopportune time—to be anything but. But this hadn't been a mission. It had been a simple visit with a good friend.

Simple.

* * *

"Commander," Fabian Stevens said when the door to the cabin he shared with Bart Faulwell swished open. If the expression on the tactical specialist's face was any indication, Gomez must have looked as bad as she felt: glassy eyes, tear-streaked face, rat's-nest hair—in a word, pathetic. "Are you all right?"

"I'm a wreck, Fabian," Gomez said, in case it wasn't immediately apparent by her appearance. As an officer in a leadership position, it wasn't an easy admission for her to make, but if she was here to bare her soul to Stevens, then she might as well start right away. "Do you have a few minutes?"

"Of course. C'mon in," he said and stepped aside. "Can I get you something? Some tea, Earl Grey, hot, perhaps?" he asked with a grin. But Gomez wasn't in the mood for levity, and once the realization hit Fabian, his expression faltered.

"No, thank you. Wait," she amended immediately with a shake of her head. "Yes, I do. Some tea would be nice."

Stevens gave her a bemused look. “You’re sure now? I don’t want to force anything on you...” Gomez flashed him the *I’m-not-in-the-mood* expression she often inflicted upon Tev. “Right. Tea is.” He grinned and went to the replicator. “Have a seat, Commander.”

“We’re off duty, Fabian,” Gomez told him. “Right now, I’m just Sonya.”

“Okay.” The replicator hummed softly, and Stevens reached in for the tea.

Gomez glanced around the room as she moved toward the small centralized couch. “Bart’s not here?” she asked, though clearly Fabian’s roomie wasn’t.

“No, he’s out wandering the ship,” Stevens said as he moved to join her. Bart Faulwell, the ship’s linguist and cryptography specialist, didn’t maintain normal sleeping hours, so while most people assigned to alpha shift were snuggled in their beds, awaiting the dawn of the next day, Bart could be found doing some research, or studying a mission-specific alien language, or nursing a French roast coffee while he wrote a new letter to his other half, Anthony Mark—though he hadn’t been doing much of the latter lately. “He only left about fifteen minutes ago, so I don’t expect him back anytime soon.”

Stevens handed her the cup of tea, and Gomez accepted it with thanks as he sat next to her. The scent of bergamot tickled her nose as she brought the cup to her lips and blew on the steaming liquid. But rather than take a sip, she set it down on the low table in front of her. All the while, she felt Stevens’s eyes watching her closely.

“No offense, Sonya, but you really do look like a wreck,” he said. “Did something happen? You seemed okay earlier.”

“I’ve been keeping it contained,” Gomez said. She moved her legs up and sat cross-legged on the couch, leaning back against the ample cushion. *And it’s tearing me apart.*

“Ah, the old Vulcan trick,” Stevens said with a nod, always ready to keep things light, even when it wasn’t called for. “Not always a wise tactic if your ears aren’t pointed.” When Gomez allowed the joke to pass over her head, Stevens turned serious again. He placed a hand on one of her jutting knees and gave it a gentle squeeze. “C’mon, Sonya, what’s going on?”

Sonya sighed and already felt her eyes growing moist. “It’s...It’s Kieran.”

Stevens’s eyebrows lifted upon hearing the name of his deceased best friend. “What does Duff have to do with this?” Kieran Duffy, Stevens’s best friend on the *da Vinci* and Gomez’s lover and might-have-been husband, had perished along with half the crew during the ill-fated Galvan VI mission ten months ago.

“Everything,” Gomez said, then shook her head. No, that wasn’t entirely true. *What am I doing blaming the dead guy for my problems? I thought I was past this.* “I don’t know, I...everything and nothing.”

Stevens frowned again and gave his hairline a quick scratch. “Uh, Sonya, that...you’re not real

making any sense.”

“I know!” Gomez blurted, splayed fingers quivering at the side of her head in frustration. “And that’s part of the problem, isn’t it? I barely understand what I’m thinking myself.” She took a breath then let it out slowly. *Okay, here it comes.* “Do you remember Captain Omthon?”

Stevens nodded. “The green guy, sure. Cappy, wasn’t it?”

“Pappy,” Gomez corrected. “And his name is Wayne, if you want to be specific.” She’d only thought of Wayne occasionally since their failed rendezvous at Recreational Station Hidalgo, and while his absence had been disappointing, her stay there hadn’t been completely uneventful. This was due in large part to a couple of distractions, namely the dashing Tobias Shelt, who had rescued her from having to spend her vacation alone, and the little fact that a simulacrum of herself had taken Hidalgo hostage.

“Okay,” Stevens said. “Wayne. You two have been trying to get together for a while, right?”

“*Trying*, being the key word. First it was the Strata spinning ship that kept us from meeting up with Galor IV, then he had to cancel our shore leave together at Hidalgo. It’s like Fate is doing its damndest best to keep us apart. And I *do* want to get together with him, Fabian, like you wouldn’t believe.” Not that spending time with Tobias had been a drag, but it had made her long for Wayne even more. Gomez paused to wipe a tear that had spilled down her cheek. And why the hell hadn’t she called him in the six months since then to set something else up? Was she afraid of being turned down, or something getting in the way again? “I think I’m overdue for some getting together, if you know what I mean. I *know* I am. It’s time. He likes me, and I *really* like him. What could be more perfect? He stirs in me a hunger I haven’t felt in a long time—*too* long a time—and it’s not just because his skin is the color of pistachio ice cream.”

Stevens shifted in his seat, as though a bit uncomfortable listening to her womanly wants and desires, but Gomez didn’t care about that right now. She was venting, she was on a roll, and he was damn well going to listen.

“Uh, so what’s the problem?” Stevens asked.

“Kieran!” Gomez let out a growl of exasperation and resisted the urge to wrap her fingers around Stevens’s throat to give him a friendly strangle. “God, haven’t you been listening?”

And then Stevens laughed—he actually had the nerve to *laugh*! At her misery! Had she made a mistake coming here, to unleash her frustrations on a man who saw a joke in every situation?

“Sonya, Sonya, I’m sorry. Here, c’mere.” Grinning, he threw an arm around her shoulder and pulled her close before she had a chance to bluster away. His nearness comforted her, and she allowed herself to melt into his friendly embrace. “I didn’t mean to laugh. I know this is difficult for you. And although I haven’t had much use for my little-known degree in Intergalactic Psychology, I’m going to offer up my own diagnosis.”

Gomez sniffled. “You have a diagnosis for me?”

“Absolutely,” Stevens said. “I won’t even charge you.” *See, a joke.* Gomez smiled again and waited. When he spoke again, his voice was soft, soothing. “Look, we all reacted to Duff’s death differently. Me, I’d be in the mess hall, and I’d expect him to stroll in at any moment and sit across from me with a quinine water. But I’ve gotten past it. I’ve accepted that he’s gone. With you, though, it’s different. Duff was your man, Sonya. You two were going to get married and live happily ever after. And then he was gone before you could do anything about it. Of course it’s going to take a little longer for you to adjust than the rest of us. You just have to give it time. Don’t rush it. When you’re ready, it’ll happen.”

“But that’s just it, Fabian...I *am* ready. I *want* to move on,” Gomez said, and then all at once her emotional barrier dropped like an open floodgate, and words tumbled out of her as her body shuddered with sobs. “As much as I loved Kieran, as much...as much as I wish he was here with me now, I need to move on with my life. It’s not as if I’m waiting for him to miraculously appear out of the ether so we can resume our relationship—that’s ridiculous. But there’s a perfect man out there who...who wants to be with me, who wants to be my friend—and something’s keeping us apart. I don’t know if it’s me, or just coincidence, or...oh, Fabian, I just don’t want to be alone anymore.”

And then she broke down entirely, giving herself a good cry, something she hadn’t known was waiting to get out until it was there, spilling unceremoniously onto Stevens’s shirt. He whispered words of comfort in her ear as he stroked her dark curls. As her sobs subsided, she tilted her head upward and saw Stevens looking at her, a smile of compassion and understanding on his face. He had always been a friend she could count on in a time of need, and he was proving it a hundredfold right now.

So, naturally, that was the moment she chose to kiss him.

It didn’t last long, no more than three seconds, she guessed, but it seemed as though their lips were locked for nothing short of a decade or so. Stevens didn’t return the kiss at all, bless him, and with good reason. He was in a relationship with the ship’s security chief, Domenica Corsi, and as they both knew—as *everyone* knew—she knew three hundred ways to kill a person, and that was before she even picked up a phaser. If Corsi found out about this, innocent though it was, Stevens’s continued existence—not to mention her own—might soon become far more complicated.

Stevens let out a startled yelp, and a look of terror crossed his face as he scrambled out of reach, crawling backward over the rear of the couch, as though Gomez had just revealed she had the Tarellian plague. “Sonya!” he croaked. “What—what was that?”

Gomez, equally mortified, managed to utter a startled gasp, as she clutched her forehead in shock. She felt the blood drain from her face so quickly she half expected to see it pooling at her feet.

“Oh, God,” she said, backing away from the couch. She almost tripped over the table and staggered about in a daze. An overwhelming feeling of uncertainty claimed her, and for a moment Gomez felt as though she were lost in an alien landscape with no idea how she’d gotten there. Fortunately, the disorientation didn’t last long, and when she recovered her senses, such as they were, her eyes found Stevens still half-crouched behind the sofa as though worried she might come at him again. “I...” she managed, but no more words were forthcoming. What could she say? *Sorry about that, buddy? Oops?*

With little else she could possibly do to salvage the situation, Gomez turned on her heel and ran the

hell out of there as fast as she could.

Almost five hours later, she was no closer to getting any sleep, nor had she come up with a viable solution that would allow her to shrug the incident off. No, this one was going to linger, in a bad way. If she was going to deal with it in a mature professional manner, she was going to need some sleep. Was that so much to ask?

“Gold to Gomez.”

Maybe she *had* fallen asleep, after all, and the captain’s summons just now was a part of this whole twisted nightmare. That would be ideal.

No such luck. She sighed and leveled her gaze at the ceiling. “Gomez here.”

“I apologize for waking you, Gomez—” I wish, she thought with a roll of her eyes. “—but Starfleet has just given us a priority mission that needs our immediate attention. Have your team assembled for observation in twenty minutes.”

“Acknowledged, sir,” Gomez said, then sat up as her professional mode kicked into gear. The priority mission had her curious. What was so urgent that it couldn’t have waited another three hours?

She rolled out of bed and headed to the sonic shower.

Chapter

Gomez didn't exactly take her time getting to the meeting Gold had called, but neither did she make any effort to move any faster than her regular stride. It wasn't a race, after all, and she would get there eventually.

As she rode the turbolift to the bridge, Gomez wondered if she'd blown things out of proportion with what had happened with Stevens. Was she overreacting? It had been an innocent mistake that had bloomed in the heat of an emotional moment between two close friends. Surely things like that happened all the time. In fact, if she were to tell Corsi about it in the mess hall a day or two from now they'd probably both get a rousing chuckle out of it.

Like hell.

The lift came to a halt, and Gomez stepped out onto the bridge. Gamma shift was still on duty, and she nodded at Winn Mara at tactical on her way to the observation lounge. As the door parted, she saw that everyone was already assembled around the long conference table, minus the captain, their quiet chatter drifting out as they met her gaze. *It's like they all know*, she thought, even though she knew that wasn't the case. Based on Stevens's reaction last night, the last thing he'd want to do is blab about it. She glanced quickly at Stevens, and he flashed an awkward smile before finding something of interest on the bare table before him.

Great. We're off to a wonderful start. "Good morning, everyone," she said. Maybe if she dove into business, it would allow her to shove the events of last night aside. "I'm sorry for having to wake you up ahead of schedule, but the captain felt it couldn't wait."

"Do you have any idea what this is about, Commander?" Corsi asked, turning her blond head in the first officer's direction.

Gomez held the security chief's level gaze for a moment. *She doesn't know anything. She doesn't know anything.* "Only that Starfleet has ordered us on a priority mission. Beyond that, we'll have to wait for an explanation from the captain."

As if on cue, the door hissed open again, and David Gold entered the room. Gomez took in the expression on Gold's face and knew something was wrong. Well, not *wrong*, necessarily, but it was clear something had put him on edge, and she suspected the mission details he'd received from Starfleet were the source of that discomfort.

But as a member of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers, Gomez knew, as did Gold, that they were often given assignments that weren't ideal. Some of them, such as her experiences on Sarindar, Teneb, and Vemlar had provided some personal close calls she could have done without. And the Galvan V incident...well, the point was that from one extreme to another, despite the odds, the ship and crew had always come through, working together to come out more or less intact.

Gold paused behind his chair at the head of the table and took them all in with a glance. He inhaled deeply, then let it out as he finally sat down. Gomez couldn't remember him being so hesitant about discussing a mission and thought he was being a little over-dramatic. *How bad can it be?*

"All right, there's no use in my stalling any longer," Gold said, speaking more to himself, it seemed, than to those gathered before him. "We've been ordered to investigate a faint Borg power signature that was picked up on a remote planet deep in this sector two days ago by a Bosh freighter."

Borg? Okay, that is bad. Like the crack of a whip, Gold's mention of the Borg snapped everyone in the room to attention, and a flurry of worried and uncertain looks passed from face to face around the table. Gomez herself was unable to suppress an involuntary shudder. Eleven years ago, she'd been aboard the *Enterprise-D* when they were forced into Starfleet's first meeting with the cybernetic species. The meddlesome being Q had flung the ship some seven thousand light years to System J-2 in order to illustrate his point that humanity wasn't ready for what awaited them out in the galaxy. It was an encounter that had claimed the lives of eighteen crewmembers, and one which Gomez had not forgotten. The experience had frightened her enough that, even today, any mention of the Borg gave her pause.

"So, naturally," said Stevens, "they advised Starfleet." His voice was light, but Gomez detected a note of cynicism there as well.

Gold acknowledged with a soft grunt. "When it comes to the Borg, Starfleet has become the go-to guys for beating them back. God knows few others have had success at it."

"That may be so, sir," Gomez said, "but *we're* not equipped to go hunting down the Borg. The *Vinci* isn't exactly armed to the teeth."

"I'm well aware of that, Gomez," Gold said, "but we won't be going into battle. The signal is coming from a cube, but it appears to have crashed on the planet's surface a long time ago."

"How long?" asked Corsi.

"At least two decades before Wolf 359, based on the information Scotty passed along to me," Gold said, referring to their Starfleet liaison, the legendary engineer Montgomery Scott.

Gomez shook her head. A Borg cube in Federation space twenty years before they were first seen here? It didn't make any sense. How could it not have been detected by long range observatories or nearby starships? And why, after all this time, hadn't the Borg returned to retrieve the vessel or any drones that might have survived?

"An advanced team from the *Hood* has been onsite since day one and has deemed it safe," Gold

continued, then glanced at Gomez. “It’s the power signature inside the cube that you and your team need to contend with. The output is negligible enough that it doesn’t reach far beyond the planet, but Starfleet doesn’t want to take any chances. They want the power shut down.”

Aside from the Borg factor, this all seemed fairly routine to Gomez. The specifications of Borg cubes could be easily accessed by any starship in the service, so she still wasn’t clear why the S.C.E. was being sent. She voiced this concern to Gold, adding, “The *Hood* is already onsite. Wouldn’t it be simpler for them to send a team in to turn the thing off?”

“Under normal circumstances, yes,” Gold said, “but there’s another element to this, and Scott wants Starfleet’s best engineers to look into it.” He paused to make sure he had everyone’s attention. “There’s apparently an odd energy distribution pattern that indicates the power is no longer being directed throughout the ship, but rather below the surface.”

“That is peculiar,” said P8 Blue from her specially-designed seat at the opposite end of the table. The Nasat’s comment was accompanied by a tinkling sound that indicated the insectoid engineer’s growing interest. “This would also explain why the cube appears dormant despite the minimal active power flow.”

“I concur,” said computer specialist Soloman, the lone Bynar on the ship.

Gomez had to admit, her own curiosity was piqued. Although she still believed this was a task that the *Hood*’s engineering team could readily deal with, part of Gomez was glad that her team would be the one to investigate the mystery, despite the fact it was centered around a Borg cube.

“If, for whatever reason, you’re unable to shut the power down, our orders are to clear the site and destroy the cube,” Gold said. “Any questions?”

Sitting opposite Gomez, Mor glasch Tev, the *da Vinci*’s Tellarite second officer, cleared his throat roughly and raised a stubby index finger. “Perhaps I’m missing something here, Captain, but why are we complicating matters by looking into this power distribution anomaly? We’re talking about a Borg cube. Why not just destroy the thing and be done with it?”

“Because we’re the S.C.E., Tev,” said Gold. “It’s our job to investigate engineering anomalies. And as I’ve already mentioned, the cube shows no signs of any danger. I can appreciate your reticence where the Borg are concerned; I’m sure we can all relate in one way or another. But I assure you, we wouldn’t be going anywhere near that ship if I didn’t think it was safe.”

“Very well, sir,” Tev said, “although I still have my reservations.”

“So noted,” Gold said, then glanced at the rest of them. “Any other questions?”

When no one else spoke up, Gomez said, “All clear, sir.”

“Excellent.” Gold rose from his chair and fixed his eye on Gomez. “We’ll reach the planet in just over four hours, so you have until then to review the data and prepare a mission plan.”

Gomez stood as well and bobbed her head. “Aye, sir.”

“Dismissed.”

Soloman almost sent Dantas Falcão sprawling to the deck as he sprang out of the turbolift the moment the doors parted. The attractive human female, the *da Vinci*'s medical technician, avoided the collision by twisting out of the way at the last second, completing a graceful three-hundred-and-sixty-degree pirouette before falling softly against the bulkhead. The impromptu display was one of the most impressive evasive maneuvers the diminutive Bynar had ever seen.

Unfortunately, he was late for the meeting Commander Gomez had called in the mess hall to discuss their upcoming Borg mission, and there was no time to compliment Falcão on her impressive feat of acrobatic legerdemain. He'd been in sickbay when the team was summoned, and Dr. Lense hadn't seen the need to interrupt his annual physical.

“I'm sure they can do without you for a little while,” the increasingly pregnant Lense had said as she passed her tricorder near his thoracic region. Soloman had reluctantly agreed, though it pained him that he was going to be late.

Once Lense was through with him, however, he'd darted out of there as fast as his legs would take him, making his way through the ship as though his very life was at stake.

“I'm so sorry!” he called over his shoulder at Falcão.

Falcão smiled and gave him a wave. “No harm done.”

Soloman smiled back, then picked up his pace again. In moments he passed through the mess hall doors and saw his associates sitting around a table in the far corner. In addition to Gomez, present at the table were Fabian Stevens, Tev, P8 Blue, and Lieutenant Commander Corsi, who would be heading up the security detail for the inevitable away mission. Notably absent were Bart Faulwell and Carol Abramowitz, though based on the mission parameters Captain Gold had outlined, there did not seem to be any need for a linguist or a cultural specialist on the mission. Soloman hadn't expected the group to wait for him, but he was still a little disappointed to see them already immersed in discussion. He hoped he hadn't missed anything significant.

“Ah, there he is,” Gomez said as he approached. She gestured to the empty chair next to Fabian Stevens, and he quickly took his seat.

“I apologize for being late.”

“That's all right,” Gomez said, “we were just discussing what our tasks should be for the upcoming mission.” Soloman listened as she quickly outlined what had been determined in his absence. Stevens and Pattie would be responsible for accessing the power core and finding a way to shut it down, while he and Tev would research any pertinent data the away team would need once they reached the Borg cube's power core.

Soloman's heart fell at the implication. “I won't be joining you on the away team?”

“I'm afraid not, Soloman,” Gomez said. “We need to limit the team to as few as necessary, plus we'll be taking some security personnel as well. At the moment, you'll be the most use to us here.”

pulling up data that will help us in the cube.”

Soloman nodded. He understood that the specialized skills of the S.C.E. team members were not always needed for every mission, nor was it necessary for certain individuals to beam down to the mission site in order to be of the most use. Still, he always felt a small pang of disappointment when he was left behind. He enjoyed visiting new worlds and seeing what kind of technology was used by alien cultures, and he doubted he would have many other opportunities to examine Borg technology firsthand. But depending on how the mission went, there could be an opportunity for him yet.

“I understand,” he said, then glanced at Tev. “I am sure with Commander Tev’s assistance, we will make an effective team.”

“I look forward to working with you, Specialist,” Tev said.

Soloman nodded in response. Six months ago, the Tellarite would have made a comment that would have been at once aggrandizing to himself and belittling to Soloman, but repeated rebukes from Gomez and Gomez—as well, according to rumor, as some enforced sensitivity training in the hololab—had served to soften Tev’s bluster a bit. Slowly but surely, he was actually becoming a team player.

“Well,” Stevens said, rubbing his hands together, “who’s up for some pre-mission beverages? We’ve got a few hours to kick back until we drop in on the *Hood*.”

“Are you buying?” P8 Blue asked.

Stevens grinned. “Of course.”

Tev emitted a soft snort. “Despite the fact that there’s no monetary value assigned to replicator food and drink, I accept your offer.”

“Will wonders never cease,” Stevens said.

“Considering you’ve just ‘bought’ us all drinks, my guess would be no,” Tev said, and this garnered a chuckle or two from the Tellarite’s crewmates.

“I think I’ll pass,” Gomez said and stood up. “I’ve got some things to do to prepare for the mission.”

“Are you sure, Commander?” Stevens asked.

Gomez looked at Stevens for a long moment as she considered the question—longer than seemed necessary, Soloman thought. It was as though they were communicating telepathically, but Soloman knew neither of the humans had that particular skill. He glanced at the others to see if they had similar thoughts, but no one appeared to notice anything was wrong—not even Commander Corsi, who was watching their silent exchange with a level expression.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Gomez said at last. “Thanks anyway.” She turned and left the room without another word. It seemed odd that she wouldn’t join them for a drink, but Soloman supposed that as the head of their team she did have other preparations to make before they arrived at the mission site.

“What was that all about?” Corsi asked, her eyes shifting to Stevens.

“I dunno,” Stevens replied, then shrugged as he turned back to the table. “I guess she wasn’t thirsty. I’ll be right back with those drinks.”

As Stevens left the table, Soloman noticed that Corsi’s gaze did not waver from the retreating tactical specialist. This wasn’t surprising, considering the pair were engaged in a relationship. Soloman supposed, as the human expression went, she just couldn’t keep her eyes off of him. After a few moments, Corsi shrugged off her distraction and turned back to the group.

“What do you have to do to get some real service in this place?” she asked casually.

“Get up and get your drink yourself,” Tev suggested. Not surprisingly, Corsi fixed the Tellarite with a scowl that was surprisingly more sedate than those she usually reserved for him.

“That really is the only option,” Pattie said. “Unless you want to apply for a waitressing job.”

Corsi puckered her lips a bit as though she were contemplating whether or not to react in the manner her instincts probably wanted her to. Finally she just said, “No thanks. I’ll just stick with Stevens for the time being.”

“Suit yourself,” Pattie said with a cheery tinkle. “But we could really use a waitress in here.”

Stevens returned and set a platter of small glasses filled with a reddish liquid on the center of the table. “Don’t worry, it’s nothing lethal. Just a little something I concocted.”

“In that case, perhaps we should be wary of its toxicity,” Tev said with a snort. This prompted a few chuckles from around the table, including Stevens himself.

“Funny,” Stevens said. “Okay, glasses up.” Mirroring his crewmates, Soloman raised his glass in the customary toasting fashion. “To success on the upcoming mission. May we get through it without being assimilated.”

“Hear hear,” Corsi said and drained her glass in one gulp.

“Success,” Soloman said in tune with the others.

“*Qapla’.*”

Everyone turned upon hearing the Klingon word, and Soloman was pleased to see Bart Faulwell approaching the table.

“Is this a private party or can anyone join in?” the linguist asked.

Stevens grinned as he sat down. “Well, it *is* an exclusive gathering...but we’ll make an exception for you, Bart.”

“You’re too kind,” Faulwell said as he slipped into the seat Commander Gomez had vacated.

Soloman smiled. It was times like these—before a mission even started—that he was glad to be part of the S.C.E. team on the *da Vinci*. The camaraderie they shared always made completing the tasks much easier than they had any right to be, and he had a feeling this upcoming Borg-related mission would need all the smoothness it could get.

Chapter

With the prospect of exploring a Borg cube on her day's agenda, Domenica Corsi had wanted to take a full complement of security personnel with her to the surface of the planet, armed to the teeth with phaser rifles and no-nonsense attitudes. The idea wasn't at all out of line as far as she was concerned. Venturing inside one of the vessels wasn't exactly a run-of-the-mill experience, particularly considering the unease and fear that was associated with the race of cybernetic bad guys. It was better to be safe than assimilated, after all, and despite all assurances that the site was safe and secure, Corsi preferred to determine that on her own terms. Besides, those cubes were huge, and there was no telling where a stray drone or two might be lurking in wait.

In the end, however, Gomez granted her a team of two plus herself, citing again that the mission didn't warrant so much security because there weren't any living Borg on the cube to worry about. Corsi argued that it was better to have half a dozen armed guards when only three were needed than to only have three and discover that you needed more. It seemed logical to her, but Gomez felt that one security person per engineer was sufficient. Corsi didn't like it, but she'd have to live with the fact that she, her deputy security chief Vance Hawkins, and Tomozuka Kim would be the extent of the away team's protection.

As the security team materialized on the surface of the planet with Gomez, Stevens, and Blue, Corsi didn't really expect an army of Borg to be waiting with open arms. But the sight of the massive cube ship's remains was enough to give her a sense of foreboding and mild anxiety. It was partially embedded in the turf near the edge of a wooded area and towered over them like a forgotten sentinel.

"Well, well, well, it's about time."

The loud voice managed to pull Corsi's attention from the cube to a male Starfleet lieutenant who approached her and the others with a smirk on his slightly stubbled face. Three officers milling about a makeshift camp behind him made no move to follow, but they did look up with interest and appeared relieved that Corsi and the others had arrived. As the lieutenant drew near, Corsi could almost see the word "obnoxious" emblazoned on his forehead in bright red lettering.

"I wasn't aware that our arrival was so eagerly anticipated," Gomez said with a smile as she moved past Corsi to greet the man. "I'm Commander Gomez from the *da Vinci*. This is Lieutenant Commander Corsi, Chief Hawkins, and Crewpersons Stevens, Kim, and Blue," Gomez said, indicating each of them with a nod.

“Lieutenant Gibson, from the *Hood*,” the officer said by way of introduction, then glanced down at Pattie. ~~“A Nasat. It’s a pleasure. I’ve never met a member of your species before.”~~

“I hope your first time was a memorable one,” Pattie said with a tinkle of amusement.

“Believe me, after six hours stewing next to this thing,” Gibson said with a gesture at the cube “you’ve definitely made my day.” He turned and gestured to the trio behind him. “That’s Ensign Jones, Ensign Abrams, and Chief Featherstone.”

At the mention of the latter name, Stevens perked up. “No way,” he said. His eyes lit up, and he didn’t hold back a grin as he walked past Corsi like she wasn’t even there, moving swiftly toward the other crewmembers from the *Hood*. “Heart-of-Stone, is that really you?”

Featherstone, an attractive woman with fair skin and long hair the color of wet rust, looked up at Stevens as he approached and broke into a grin herself. “I’ll be damned. Fabian Stevens, long time no see.”

Corsi felt her jaw tighten as Stevens and Featherstone gave each other a quick friendly embrace before proceeding to babble like two long-lost friends.

“It appears they know each other,” Gomez observed dryly.

“Yes, it does.” The twinge of annoyance in her own voice surprised Corsi, particularly since she knew there was nothing to be annoyed about. They were just two acquaintances, seeing each other after what had apparently been several years. And even if something more had gone on between them, so what? It obviously wasn’t an issue now. But Gomez must have seen something in her expression because she fixed Corsi with an odd look.

“What?”

“You okay?” Gomez asked.

“Of course,” said Corsi as she met her look. “I just don’t work well with jealousy.”

“I’m shocked,” Gomez said with a smile that didn’t seem entirely there. In fact, her whole expression seemed somewhat clouded to Corsi.

“Don’t worry, Commander,” said Corsi. “I’m not going to march over there and slit her throat.”

Gomez nodded vaguely. “I’d appreciate that.”

“So would I,” Lieutenant Gibson said with a grin. “We kind of like her on the *Hood*. Umm, Commander Gomez, I take it you’re here to relieve us of Borg babysitting duty?” he asked as though trying to steer the conversation back to more pressing matters.

“That’s right,” Gomez said, turning back. “Anything to report?”

“Not a thing,” he said, turning toward the cube. The wrecked vessel cast a dark shadow across the hillside to the north. “Except for the the faint power signature, the thing is as dead as a grave.”

“What about the interior?” Gomez asked. “Anything we need to know before we go in?”

Gibson shook his head. “We’ve completed routine scans every few hours since we arrived yesterday, and we haven’t detected any lifesigns.”

Corsi had only been half-listening to Gibson’s voice as he and Gomez spoke, but this last remark was enough to pull her attention away from Stevens and the redhead. “You haven’t gone inside yourself?”

Gibson turned and fixed her with a look. “Those weren’t our orders, Commander. We were told to secure the site and determine that it was safe. That’s what we did.”

“And how can you determine that with one hundred percent accuracy if you don’t even go inside to visually inspect the interior?” Corsi asked.

Gibson pulled the tricorder from the holder on his hip and waggled it in his hand. “We find that these are very helpful for that sort of work. If they don’t beep a certain way, then there’s nobody inside.”

“Watch your tone, Lieutenant,” Gomez said crisply.

Gibson started at the rebuke and looked down at his boots. He shook his head, then regarded Gomez and Corsi again. “I’m sorry. I guess this place has put me a little on edge. It’s not exactly the cheeriest place I’ve ever been, and between you and me, it’s creepy as hell.”

“I hear you, Lieutenant,” Gomez said as she glanced at the silver-gray monstrosity.

Corsi followed her gaze, her annoyance abating. She certainly couldn’t blame him for being a little nervy. She was feeling the same thing, and she’d only been here five minutes.

“Trust me, Commander, our scans were thorough,” Gibson said. “If there were any Borg in there they would have come out by now. Besides, the place has been dead for years. I’m surprised the thing has power at all.”

“So are we,” Gomez said. “And that’s why we’re here.”

Gibson nodded. “Well, good luck with that.” With a nod at them both, he turned and walked back toward his crewmates. “Wrap up your reunion, Chief. We’re outta here.”

Stevens waved good-bye to Featherstone, then Gibson called for a beam-out. A moment later, the foursome from the *Hood* disappeared in a wash of twinkling silver-blue light.

Corsi started toward Stevens, trying to keep calm and trying not to be the *kasnik* Gold had called her in jest once. “Friend of yours, Fabe?”

“Yeah, I met her when she was temporarily posted to Deep Space 9 for a few weeks,” Stevens said.

Corsi could almost see the little daggers shooting out of her eyes. “A few weeks, huh?”

Stevens nodded. “Yeah, she made quite the impression. On Captain Sisko, I mean. And Chirpa and O’Brien. In a completely professional, engineering capacity, of course.” He paused a moment, no doubt noticing that she was disemboweling him with her eyes. “Wait, you’re...Dom, you’re not—”

“No.”

And that was the end of that.

* * *

Gomez tipped her head back and looked way up along the side of the cube that faced them, a balm breeze blowing through her wavy black hair. It was odd to see a symbol of so much fear and destruction in such a dormant unkempt state. It looked for all the world like an abandoned building that had been lost to the elements and the surrounding flora, not a ship belonging to one of the most feared species the galaxy had ever known.

Though scans confirmed the vessel was indeed one of the infamous cube vessels, much of its external cube-like shape was actually no longer in evidence, having been pulverized during the crash. The fact that it had remained in this condition for so long was also another indication the ship was no longer active; if it had been, it would have repaired itself long before now.

Where the cube brushed up against the edge of the forest, thick vines wound their way up along the vessel’s superstructure, snaking in and around the eroded latticework. On the side facing the trees, Sonya saw a tree branch jutting out of the vessel, but she couldn’t tell if the source of the branch was outside or actually growing within. A crisp chirping sound drew her attention, and she turned to see a blue bird flying out of the upper reaches of the cube near the top. With all the nooks and crannies present in the structural design of these ships, she imagined the cube was a haven for a variety of creatures.

“Doesn’t look like anyone’s home,” Stevens said, his eyes tracking the chirping bird as it disappeared into the forest. “No Borg, anyway.”

“All the same, let’s do a scan,” Gomez said from the rise where she stood. “We can’t be too careful, right?” Since they’d arrived on the surface, she’d found it pretty easy to keep her mind on the mission rather than the issue between herself and Stevens, though she had to admit that Corsi’s remark about her delicate relationship with jealousy had given her pause. Shaking the thought aside, Sonya glanced at Pattie and nodded at the apparent Klingon dagger strapped to the Nasat’s torso. “Are you going to use that thing, or is it just for show?”

Pattie’s laughter sounded like delicate wind chimes in a soft breeze. The impressive-looking knife was actually a unique scanning device designed to her specifications and inspired by a similar device owned by the Klingon engineer Kairn, whom they’d all met on a joint mission eight months back. While Kairn’s Master’s dagger had really been a measuring tool, Pattie had modified her design to include more conventional scans. Gomez knew the Nasat was lucky to still have it at all after almost losing it when she crashlanded on Zhatyra II. Maybe she was feeling a little protective of it.

But Pattie drew the knife and held it vertically toward the cube, blade pointing upward. After a moment, she brought it down to eye level and examined the results that glowed blue along the flat side of the blade facing her. “Results are negative for lifesigns, Commander,” she said.

Good, now let's keep it that way. Gomez marched down the slope to join her crewmates, "Okay, let's look for an opening we can use to get inside."

"I wouldn't think the Borg would have any use for doors," Hawkins said as he moved off along the edge of the cube, his phaser rifle held lightly in his hands. "They pretty much beam everywhere they go."

"A valid point, Vance," Pattie said, still wielding her dagger. "However, there would have to be some manner of hatches available for their sphere vessels to enter and exit."

"I don't think we need anything quite that big, Pattie," Gomez said with a smile. Those round hatches were probably big enough for a *Galaxy*-class starship to fly through with ease.

"Anything that big would be partially buried anyway," Corsi noted, then pounded the ship with the side of a closed fist. "Why don't we just blast a hole in the hull and walk through it?"

Stevens chuckled. "Leave it to you to come up with that idea."

Corsi turned, her brows knitted into a frown. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, come on, Dom," Stevens said, grinning. "You know you like to shoot stuff."

Gomez paused and called after Hawkins, who was several meters ahead of them. "You see any openings up there, Chief?"

Hawkins looked back and shook his bald head. "No, not really."

"What does that mean?" Gomez asked.

"Well, I did see a few openings, but unless we're squirrels, they won't be much use to us."

Gomez smiled. Between the two of them, Stevens and Hawkins could probably make a moderately amusing comedy duo if their careers in Starfleet ever went down the drain.

"Funny," Corsi said, though she was in full sarcasm mode.

"Aw, come on, Boss," Hawkins said, his grin matching Stevens's a short time ago. "Say it like you mean it."

Corsi just grunted.

"Okay, Domenica, I guess you get to blow a hole in the thing," Gomez said, then waved a hand at the side of the ship. "Pick a spot and fire away."

Corsi adjusted the setting on her rifle as she moved back a few steps, then aimed at the side of the ship. "Fire in the hole," she said as phased energy spewed forth from her weapon and struck the side of the cube. At the point of impact, the metallic surface of the ship glowed yellow, then red, then disappeared altogether as the hull was vaporized. She maintained the burst for ten seconds, then ceased fire. A small niche had been created, but they weren't inside the ship yet.

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