



Rise of the Federation: Uncertain Logic (Star Trek: Enterprise)

By Christopher L. Bennett

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An original novel continuing the saga of the TV series *Star Trek: Enterprise*—featuring Captain Jonathan Archer and the crew of the *Enterprise*!

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Meanwhile, when a long-forgotten technological threat re-emerges beyond the Federation's borders, Captain Malcolm Reed of the *U.S.S. Pioneer* attempts to track down its origins with help from his old friend "Trip" Tucker. But they discover that other civilizations are eager to exploit this dangerous power for their own benefit, even if the Federation must pay the price!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Christopher L. Bennett has written such critically acclaimed *Star Trek* novels as *Ex Machina*, *The Buried Age*, the *Titan* novels *Orion's Hounds* and *Over a Torrent Sea*, two *Department of Temporal Investigations* novels, and several *Enterprise* novels, as well as shorter works. Beyond *Star Trek*, he has penned the novels *X-Men: Watchers on the Walls* and *Spider-Man: Drowned in Thunder*. His original work includes *Only Superhuman*, as well as several novelettes in *Analog* and other science fiction magazines. For more information, visit: home.fuse.net/ChristopherLBennett and ChristopherLBennett.wordpress.com.

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Rise of the Federation: Uncertain Logic

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February 23, 2165

U.S.S. Pioneer NCC-63

“JUST LOOK AT THOSE STARS.”

Lieutenant Commander Travis Mayweather sighed in satisfaction at the sheer unfamiliarity of the star patterns outside the viewports of Pioneer's mess hall. “Uncharted territory,” he went on. “It's been a while.”

“Well, of course it's been charted,” said Doctor Therese Liao from her seat across the circular table. “I mean, we can see it all from Federation space. We have telescopes. It's not like there are any horizons to sail over out here.”

Mayweather threw the diminutive, middle-aged chief medical officer a sour look. “You know what I mean. We may know the lay of the land, but we don't know who lives out here. We haven't mapped the planets and systems in detail. And that's not even counting what we might find in the dark spaces between the stars,” he went on in more dramatic tones, shifting into storytelling mode. “Rogue planets, derelict ships, subspace anomalies, you name it. Why, once on *Enterprise*, we were intercepted by this huge ship that swallowed us whole like a manta ray devouring its prey. Its crew turned out to be—”

“Non-corporeal ‘wisps’ who wanted to snatch your bodies. You told me that one before,” Liao interposed.

He heard the disbelief in the older woman's tone. “This wasn't one of my ghost stories, Therese. It's in the logs!”

“I'll believe that when you explain to me what creatures without bodies needed a starship for.”

“They couldn't live in space.”

“Then how did they operate the thing?”

“I never got around to asking, okay? The point is,” he went on with a chuckle, “we’re finally out where we belong. No more experimental upgrades, no more diplomatic missions to known worlds, no more follow-ups of old pre-war surveys. Just this.”

He spread his arms to take in the vista beyond the port. This sector of the galaxy had been inaccessible to humans and their neighbors in the past, blocked by Romulan patrol fleets and Vertian experimental raids in the intervening space. But now the Romulans were confined behind the Neutral Zone and the Vertians had agreed to cease experimentation on sapient beings, enabling safe passage to the territories beyond. The members of the expansive Rigelian trading community were already clamoring to seek out commercial opportunities in the new reaches, and since Rigel was now a brand spanking new member of the United Federation of Planets, it was up to Starfleet to serve as their vanguard. Thus, Admiral Archer had assigned Pioneer to live up to its name. “Going where no man has gone before,” Mayweather finished.

Liao gave him a sidelong look. “Cochrane stole that line from Davida Rossi, you know.” She furrowed her brows. “Or was it D. F. Black? A Boomer, anyway.”

“Rossi and Black were the generation before the Boomers,” he reminded her.

“But they made us possible.”

“So did Cochrane.”

“Until he sold out the ECS and shared his Warp Five plans with UESPA instead.”

Mayweather smirked, knowing Liao wouldn’t be in Starfleet if she sincerely clung to the old rivalry between the “Space Boomers,” the generations of humans born and raised on Earth Cargo Services freighters, and the government-run United Earth Space Probe Agency—a rivalry that had only intensified when UESPA founded its Starfleet arm and brought stronger regulation to the spaces the Boomers had grown used to traversing freely. But these days, now that the spread of Warp 5 and Warp 7 engines was rapidly rendering the Boomers’ slow-paced lifestyle obsolete, more and more freighter natives were following Mayweather into Starfleet, Liao among them. Sometimes Mayweather lamented the end of that era, but he wouldn’t miss the insularity of thought that had often come with it.

“It used to be us, you know,” she went on. “We were the ones who pushed out the frontiers, made the first contacts.”

“We’re still here, Therese. And not just you and me.”

“But we’re sharing it with rock jockeys,” she said, using an old-fashioned Boomer term for planet-dwellers. “Earthers and Centaurians, even aliens now. It’s not the same.”

“It doesn’t matter who makes the discoveries,” he said, “as long as they get made.”

She threw him a sidelong look. “That attitude is why you aren’t sitting in a captain’s chair yet.”

Before he could formulate a response, the intercom sounded. “Bridge to Commander Mayweather,” came Captain Reed’s crisp, English-accented voice.

The first officer excused himself to Liao and made his way to the panel by the door, pressing the intercom

button. “Mayweather here.”

“I want you on the bridge at once, Travis,” Malcolm Reed ordered. “We’ve detected an object nearby with a disturbingly familiar sensor signature.”

“Familiar how, sir?”

“I’d rather not say until we’re sure. But if it’s what I suspect . . . well, you’d better just get up here.”

* * *

The first glimpse of the gray-hued space station on the bridge viewscreen had been enough to confirm Malcolm Reed’s suspicions about its sensor signature. Its cylindrical spacedocks made of expandable latticework, like metallic versions of Chinese finger puzzles, were a dead giveaway. It was a sight he’d hoped never to see again, but had long expected that he might.

“Oh, hell,” breathed Travis Mayweather as soon as he emerged from the bridge turbolift. Reed could see the same instant recognition in the eyes of his handsome, dark-featured first officer—along with a touch of dread. “I hoped we’d seen the last of these things.”

Reed studied him. “So you agree it’s the same technology as the automated repair station we encountered aboard Enterprise?”

“Believe me, I’m not about to forget that station,” Mayweather replied. Reed nodded grimly. The station Pioneer now approached was larger than the one they remembered, with a more substantial, multilevel central body connecting to two stacked docking lattices on either side instead of one; but there was no mistaking the shared design lineage, not only of the docks but of the core module at the station’s heart, a sphere bisected at its equator by a seven-sided polygonal slab. Worse, one lattice was slightly distended to accommodate a ship of an unfamiliar, spindle-shaped design. Someone was docked there.

At the science station, Lieutenant Reynaldo Sangupta looked back and forth between his superior officers with curiosity on his youthful, bronze-skinned face. “Is there something the rest of us should know, sirs?”

“It was about a year into Enterprise’s mission,” Mayweather told him. “We’d just had our first encounter with the Romulans and taken heavy damage in a cloaked minefield. We were deep in unknown space, stuck at low warp and years away from a friendly port, but a passing Tellarite freighter gave us coordinates for an automated repair station.”

“Hold on, Travis,” Reed cautioned. “Right now I think it’s more urgent to tell our story to whoever’s aboard that ship.”

“Good point,” the first officer replied. “Grev, hail the alien ship.”

“Aye, sir,” affirmed the chubby-faced Tellarite at the communications station.

“Translation might be tricky,” Sangupta advised. “That ship has—wow—a hydrogen-fluorine atmosphere at a temperature of minus twenty Celsius. That’s a kind of life we’ve never encountered before, so who knows how their brains process language?”

“He’s right,” Grev said. “I’m getting a reply, but the translator’s struggling with it. It may take a few minutes for our computer and their computer to hash out a translation model together.”

“That makes sense,” Mayweather said while Grev did what he could to assist the computer. “When we first encountered the repair station, it had . . . I think it was a helium atmosphere inside, much colder than this one. But once it scanned us, it quickly adapted to Earth-like conditions.” He frowned. “All the better to bait the trap.”

At the tactical station, Lieutenant Valeria Williams looked up. “Trap, sir?” asked the auburn-haired armory officer, instantly alert.

“Captain,” Grev interposed, “I think we have a working translation now. I can give you the alien captain.”

Reed nodded and rose to greet his counterpart. “Onscreen.”

The face that appeared before him was a narrow, red-hued ovoid dominated by large, faceted eyes. A small, beakish mouth was situated midway between them, and thin breathing vents fluttered softly on either side of a slender neck. The shoulders and upper portions of four long, narrow arms were visible, two in front and two behind. “Greetings extended,” the captain said in a piping voice. “Know me as Rethne and my vessel as Velelev.”

“Our greetings as well, Captain Rethne. I’m Captain Malcolm Reed of the U.S.S. Pioneer, representing the United Federation of Planets.”

The alien tilted its head. “Unity of planets. Is this a nation’s name or simply an expression of kinship?”

Reed thought it over for a moment. “It’s the first—but we like to think it conveys the second as well.”

“Cleverly answered! We are pleasantly met. Though from our scans, it seems your atmosphere would not suit the conditions in the trading post.”

“Trading post?” The captain frowned. “So it’s not just a repair station?”

“Ah, I perceive that you have met the Ware before.”

“The Ware?”

“Automated facilities such as this,” Rethne clarified. “My people, the Menaik, have only mastered the warping of space less than my lifetime ago, but we have encountered several such stations, and met others who tell us of more. It is they who name them Ware.”

Reed and Mayweather exchanged a look. “They told you about these stations—but not about the danger?” the captain asked.

Captain Rethne leaned forward. “Danger? The Ware stations are eminently useful! Repairs, supplies, services, a haven for weary travelers, all these things they provide.”

“But at a steep price,” Mayweather put in.

The Menaik turned to face him. “Greetings extended. You also speak for Pioneer?”

“This is my first officer, Commander Travis Mayweather,” Reed explained.

“Thank you, Captain. Yes, Commander, the Ware stations drive hard bargains for their services, but they are more than worth the price.”

“The price is a lot higher than you think,” Mayweather said with feeling, stepping closer to the screen. “Tell me: Have you lost any members of your crew at one of these stations?”

Rethne’s head lowered. “On this visit, we have not. But six weeks ago, on our last visit here, a passenger went where she should not have been. Ground-dwellers do not understand the hazards of space, and sometimes make fatal errors. Still, the fault is mine for not tending my charge more carefully.”

Mayweather spoke urgently. “Captain . . . that passenger is probably still alive, and still on the station.”

Rethne shot upright, all four arms extended in shock. “How can this be? Her body has already been returned to TeMenaik and consecrated to the Core of Creation.”

“I’m sorry to tell you this, Captain, but that wasn’t her body.”

“You know that the Ware stations can create perfect replicas of any organic or inorganic matter, correct?” Reed put in.

“This is so. It is what makes them so enormously useful.”

Mayweather resumed the narrative at Reed’s nod. “Over a dozen years ago, Captain Reed and I served on a ship called Enterprise. We came across one of these stations when we needed repairs. While we were there . . . I was abducted. I was beamed aboard the station and replaced by an exact replica of my own body—exact, but dead. At first, my crewmates thought I’d been killed by an energy discharge during the repairs. But our ship’s doctor had recently inoculated me with a kind of microbe that should’ve thrived on that kind of energy, except that all the microbes he found in the duplicate body were dead. He realized the station’s replicating mechanism had created an exact double to make my crew think I was dead.”

“Why would it do this?”

Reed picked up the tale. “We found that out when we broke into the station’s control center to rescue Travis.” He hesitated. “Captain . . . we found him, along with a number of other captives, hooked in to the central data core. The station was tapping into their brains to augment its memory and processing power. One or two had been there for months, others for a few years, some even longer.”

“And the longer they’d been there,” Mayweather added, “the more brain damage they’d sustained. Eventually they just . . . burned out. So every so often, the station must’ve preyed on another crew, taken one of their personnel—and made it look like an accident, complete with a body, so they’d have no idea what had happened. But I’m living proof of what these stations are really doing.” He visibly suppressed a shudder. “I don’t remember any of it firsthand. It kept me sedated the whole time. But I saw my . . . my ‘corpse’ after they rescued me. I know what would’ve happened to me if it hadn’t been for a really attentive doctor. And I still have nightmares about it.”

Rethne was stunned. “Why? Why would the Ware extend such benevolence and then do such a thing to innocent people?”

Innocent indeed, Reed thought. He saw in Rethne the same naïve optimism he had seen in Jonathan Archer in those glory days of pure exploration before the Xindi had attacked Earth and changed things forever. It saddened him to be the one giving Rethne her rude awakening. But better she find out this way than through more violent means. “The benevolence is the lure,” Reed told her. “The stations need a steady supply of brains, so they make themselves inviting.”

“But if they only use the added computing power to create the things that draw us to them . . . then where is the purpose in it?”

“We don’t know what drives the people that created these things,” Mayweather told Rethne. “But what we do know is that your passenger is probably on that station right now. And if she was taken as recently as you say, it’s probably not too late to save her.”

Reed could tell that Mayweather was already identifying with this alien stranger, based on nothing beyond their common victimization. Still, Reed wasn’t about to begrudge him that sympathy. “Captain, we’d be happy to assist in a rescue operation. We’ve faced one of these stations before and beaten it.”

“My ship is merely a commerce vessel,” Rethne said. “None of us are fighters. If there is any chance of retrieving my lost charge, then I will gratefully pay a high price for her return.”

“We ask no payment, Captain Rethne. We’re explorers, new to this part of space. If we can start our relationship with the Menaik people by earning their friendship, that will be payment enough.”

“Your generosity is humbling, Captain Reed. Please . . . do what you can for her.”

“I will, Captain Rethne. We’ll contact you when we’re ready to go in. Pioneer out.”

When the screen image reverted to the shot of the station, Mayweather turned to his captain and smiled. “You’re getting pretty good at this diplomatic stuff, sir,” he said.

“That’s as may be,” Reed replied with a faint smile. “But this situation calls for falling back on my old skill set, don’t you think?”

Mayweather nodded grimly. “Absolutely. Let’s save whoever we can, then blow that damn thing out of the sky.”

Ware trading post

Valeria Williams had long been impressed by Captain Reed’s skill for advance planning. Pioneer’s armory officer was more the improvisational type herself, preferring to keep her plans loose and adapt to circumstances as her gut led her. But under Reed, she’d learned that anticipating problems and developing advance contingency plans could make things much easier for a security team in the field—or at least provide a solid foundation on which to build her improvisations. She knew her captain prided himself on the time, thought, and hard work he poured into readying himself and his crew for whatever they might face on the frontier.

But Reed's level of preparation for liberating captives from a Ware automated station exceeded his normal standards by a considerable margin. Apparently he'd been calculating strategies on and off for a dozen years since Enterprise's encounter with the repair station, always expecting that there would be others. "After all," he had explained back on Pioneer during the briefing, "that station was designed to adapt to a wide range of environments. It had to be the work of a widely traveled interstellar civilization."

Indeed, the captain had revealed that during the Earth-Romulan War, two other Starfleet vessels had reported encounters with stations believed to be of the same origin, both in Romulan-controlled territory. Captain Shosetsu of Yorktown, remembering Enterprise's encounter, had refused to permit his damaged task force to dock at one such station for repairs, instead ordering its total destruction to ensure the enemy could not use it. The contingencies of war had required him to forgo any attempt to rescue its captives. Later in the war, the Eberswalde, one of the old Ganges-class ships, had detected wreckage consistent with another automated station on long-range sensors, showing Romulan weapon signatures. It suggested that Shosetsu's fears were unfounded, though Williams wondered how the Romulans had caught on to the stations' predatory nature. Perhaps the number of fatal "accidents" had simply provoked their inherent paranoia.

But forewarned was forearmed, so Reed had his crew briefed and ready to act within a couple of hours following contact with Velelev. The first step, once Captain Rethne had retrieved her crew and undocked, was to bring Pioneer in on a docking trajectory and hail the trading post. As Reed predicted, the station subjected Pioneer to a thorough, penetrating scan and began to reconfigure itself, adjusting one of its spacedocks to fit Pioneer's half-saucer hull and nacelle fins while replacing the cryogenic hydrogen-fluorine mix inside with an Earth-like atmosphere and temperature. The station transmitted no greeting, but the welcome was clear enough.

Yet Pioneer did not accept the invitation. The plan was to strike hard and fast, assuming the station would be at its most vulnerable during this all-too-brief period of transition. The ship veered off and opened fire with photonic torpedoes, targeting the narrow gangways that connected the docks to the main module. The original station had attacked Enterprise using the same robotic arms and cutting beams it had used to repair the vessel earlier, so now Reed sought to neutralize those defenses by severing the docks completely.

At the same time, Williams and her tactical team dropped from Pioneer's launch bay in a shuttlepod, following a trajectory toward the central core, letting the station's own bulk shield the pod from the shrapnel and radiation of the torpedo hits. Ensign Karthikeyan flipped the pod over, extending its dorsal docking collar—a specialized unit developed late in the Romulan War, though never successfully deployed against a Romulan ship—to seal against the upper hull of the slab surrounding the central sphere, whereupon it detonated shaped charges to breach the station's hull. Once the seal was confirmed secure, Williams led her team—oxygen-masked against any atmospheric tricks the station might deploy—into the docking collar. Karthikeyan had already turned off the gravity inside the pod, so that they didn't have to contend with a 180-degree flip.

Once Williams passed through the jagged hole, the station's gravity caught her and she dropped to the deck, rolling to come up on her feet. Clifton Detzel came close on her heels, the crewman moving as swiftly as always despite his burly frame. Sleek, ebony-dark Ensign Katrina Ndiaye followed, rolling to her feet with a dancer's grace and reaching up to aid second-class crewman Julia Guzman in her descent. Finally, Crewman Ediz Kemal lowered his lanky but solid frame to the deck.

The team held their particle rifles at the ready as they moved forward—Williams in the lead, Detzel and Ndiaye flanking the field medic Guzman, and Kemal guarding the rear—but so far the only response the station made to their forced entry was an automated announcement: "Any damage to these facilities will be

charged to your vessel. Any damage to these facilities . . .”

Williams flipped open her communicator. “Williams to Pioneer. Entry successful. No resistance so far.”

“Acknowledged,” Reed replied. “Transporter interference field engaged.”

“Understood. We are proceeding.” Transporter use for live subjects had been restricted to emergencies since the discovery of the cumulative genetic and cellular damage they caused. But Captain Reed had found a novel interpretation of “emergency use”: Pioneer’s transporter was blanketing the station with a high-gain, unfocused scanning beam in the hopes that it would interfere with the station’s own internal transporters and prevent it from beaming intruders away. In Enterprise’s original encounter, the repair station had only beamed intruders back aboard the ship itself; but Ware programming might respond to a more aggressive intrusion by beaming the interlopers into space, or worse. Reed wasn’t willing to risk that—though it was actually Williams and her team, she reflected, who were gambling on the effectiveness of the transporter interference.

Yet the team made its way through the station’s clean white corridors unmolested, save by the polite hectoring of the Ware computer’s mellifluous voice. Their path, based on Captain Rethne’s information about the trading post’s layout, took them through a sterile, white chamber adorned with circular metal tables and low-backed chairs—a place Williams never would have pegged as a recreation area if not for prior testimonials. Apparently the white circular platforms in the tables were matter replication units able to create any nonliving item on request. “Anyone want to order a quick snack?” Detzel joked as they made their way to the far door.

A chiming sound from one of the replication units heralded the materialization of a dome-shaped metal object—which fired an intense energy beam at Detzel and turned him into a glowing cloud of plasma. The heat and concussion of his sudden vaporization knocked the whole team back, and that was the least of its impact upon them.

But grief would have to wait. Williams channeled her fury into action, leaping forward just in time to dodge a second beam. With no cover beyond the flimsy tables and chairs, she turned her particle rifle onto the beam generator and blasted it mercilessly. But a second dome was already materializing on another table. Clearly the transporter interference didn’t prevent the replication units from working. Were they on a different frequency, or was it because they operated over such short range? Well, that was for Rey Sangupta to sort out later. Her job was to shoot the things.

She made it to the far door, but it would not open, and the dome’s emitter was swinging to bear on her. She stood boldly before the doors and leapt aside just as the emitter fired. By the time Ndiaye and Kemal’s cover fire blasted the second dome, the door had been mostly vaporized, and Williams ducked through. She and Kemal covered the room from their respective entrances while Ndiaye escorted Guzman through, her own rifle blasting at the tables. In time, every table had been reduced to a smoking pile of scrap, and Kemal was able to make it through unscathed.

Well, physically unscathed. “Damn it!” he cursed, followed by “Siktir!” and a few other Turkish words the translator discreetly left alone. He and Detzel had been an item for a while and had remained close friends afterward. “What are these damned things? Why do they do this to people?”

“Focus, Crewman!” Williams barked. “We secure the hostage, then we blow this goddamned station out of space.”

It was what Kemal needed to hear. Setting his jaw, he gave Williams a nod. The remaining team members moved forward with renewed focus and vigilance.

Soon they reached the corridor adjacent to the data core at the heart of the central sphere. According to Reed, the walls to the restricted core could be blown out by a simple phase pistol blast, so particle rifles should make short work of them—and did. Williams led the team through the breach, rifle raised against any possible threat. But as with Reed’s Enterprise experience, the only response they met was another repeating announcement: “Inursion detected in primary data core. Vacate this section or your vessel will be compromised.”

Which vessel? Williams wondered. Pioneer was clear of the station and there were no more robotic arms to attack the shuttle. It seemed an empty threat.

The station’s public areas presented a façade of meticulously clean sophistication, but the data core looked cruder by centuries, dark and dingy with antiquated pipes along the walls. But Williams could spare little attention for the technology, as her eye was drawn inexorably to the bodies. Nearly two dozen aliens, most but not all humanoid, lay motionless on several tiers of slabs suspended from a framework of dull golden metal. Their heads and feet, where present, hung out beyond the slabs so that they almost seemed to be floating, adding to the macabre nature of the scene. Metallic devices with red and green status lights were attached to their heads—interfacing their brains with the data core, according to the Enterprise crew’s analysis—and tangles of intravenous tubing connected their limbs to the life-support machinery in the surrounding walls as well as to the central processor, a slender, black-framed column rising to the ceiling and radiating white light from within. By itself, the column would have seemed harmless, if vaguely ominous, like an antiquated device for electrocuting insects. But those tubes linking it to the surrounding bodies gave it a vampiric quality, filling Williams with revulsion.

Julia Guzman moved efficiently through the chamber, ignoring the Ware voice’s repetitive warnings as she scanned the bodies. “They’re all in varying states of neurological deterioration. Most of them are all but dead, sustained only by these tubes and neurostimulators.”

“Why leave them in place, then?” Ndiaye asked with an angry grimace. “Why not at least let them rest in peace?”

“This machine doesn’t care about any of that,” Williams said. “It’s just using them as external drives.”

“I know. But why wait so long to . . . to swap them out for new ones?”

“Leave the whys to Rey and the captain. Julia, where’s the Menaik captive? And is there anyone else intact enough to be recoverable?”

“Over here,” Guzman said to the former question. The Menaik wasn’t hard to spot; due to her fluorine-based biochemistry, she was contained in a translucent polymer sac of some sort. According to Guzman’s scanner, it was inflated with a Menaik-suitable atmosphere and kept chilled to minus twelve Celsius, warm for a Menaik but survivable.

“Can you detach this sac from the rest of the equipment without letting the fluorine out?” If the flourine reacted with the moisture in the air, the resultant corrosive gas would be dangerous despite their breathing masks.

“I think so, but it’ll take a minute.”

“Fast as you can, Julia,” she ordered. “We seem secure for now, but let’s take no chances.” Williams quashed the fantasy that arose in her mind: The nearly dead bodies rising from their slabs to attack the team, grisly marionettes animated by commands sent through the interface devices. She reminded herself that most of these victims’ muscles and nervous systems were too atrophied to let them move at all, even if the Ware core did have some means of controlling them. I’ll never forgive Rey for making me watch those zombie movies.

“Lieutenant,” Kemal called. He indicated another captive across from the Menaik, a diminutive biped with vaguely canine features framed by long purple fur. “This one’s reading a fair amount of brain damage and muscle atrophy, but he might be able to recover.”

Kemal had some field-medical training of his own, so he should know what he was talking about. Still, this species was totally unfamiliar. “Are you sure?” Williams asked him. “We have no idea—”

“We have to take the chance, sir. So all this means something.”

All this—Detzel. Williams nodded. “Do it.”

They found no other aliens that showed any signs of higher consciousness remaining. Reed had expected no less, which was why he hadn’t sent a larger team. Still, two lives hardly seemed enough to be worth Clifton Detzel’s sacrifice.

Williams chastised herself for the thought. Even a single life was invaluable. That was why losing Detzel hurt so much.

Soon, Kemal had freed the canid alien and slung it over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry. Guzman completed liberating the Menaik’s support sac moments later, and she and Ndiaye hefted it between them. “No telling how long this will hold,” the medic said.

“Come on.” The lieutenant led her team through the breached bulkhead into the corridor. Once out, she registered that the PA announcement had changed:

“Theft of primary data core components is not permitted. Return the components or your life support will be compromised. Theft of primary data core components is not permitted. . . .”

Val opened her communicator. “Williams to Shuttlepod One. Extraction under way. Stand by to detach the moment we’re aboard.”

“Bit of a problem, Lieutenant,” Karthikeyan replied. “I’m reading a plasma current building in a conduit next to our breach point. It could blow any minute.”

“Understood. Move, team! Double time!”

Once the team was clear, Williams enacted the next step in Reed’s careful plan: She took aim at the central column and blew it apart. Her throat tightened at the knowledge that her action would end the lives of the remaining captives inside. It was a hard step to take, even knowing they were effectively dead already. But it might just save the team’s lives, if it cut the station off from the brains that boosted its processing power.

But the announcement continued unabated. “Return the components or your life support will be compromised. Theft of primary data core components . . .” Val cursed. Either the computer had backups, or whatever process had been initiated was running on automatic. Even lobotomized, the station could still kill them.

Once they passed the shattered recreation area, that threat became real. The lights grew blindingly bright, and searingly hot gases began pouring into the corridor. The team still had their oxygen masks on, but the heat burned Williams’s exposed skin and her ears popped painfully from the rapid pressure increase. “Carbon dioxide,” Kemal called. “Traces of sulfur dioxide! Pressure at three atmospheres and rising fast, temperature too! This place’ll be Venusian in minutes!”

“You’re kidding!” Guzman called. “Don’t tell me there are aliens who can live in Venusian conditions!”

“We can’t,” Williams barked. “So cut the chatter and move!”

Soon they reached the extraction point, but lifting the rescued aliens and themselves into the pod one by one was excruciatingly slow going, even with Karthikeyan keeping both lock hatches open (and increasing the shuttlepod’s internal pressure to keep the lethal gases out). And according to Karthikeyan, the plasma conduit was getting more unstable by the second. This would be so much easier if we could use transporters, Williams lamented privately. She would gladly take the chance of being beamed, but it would take too long to reconfigure Pioneer’s transporter back from interference mode.

The moment the team was back aboard and the inner hatch was closed, Williams ordered, “Jettison the collar and go, go!” Karthikeyan responded with lightning speed, but he hadn’t gotten the pod more than thirty meters from the station before the conduit blew. Superhot plasma and shrapnel smashed against the polarized hull plating, knocking the pod into a tumble. The spin pushed Williams against the floor even though the internal gravity was still off, and the hull creaked ominously.

But moments later the pod recovered, its hull and all its occupants still intact, and the ensign accelerated clear of the station. Williams moved to the starboard seat behind him and opened a channel. “Williams to Pioneer. We’re clear with the Menaik captive and one other . . . but we lost Detzel. Sir, we’d all really appreciate if you’d blow that piece of junk into atoms now.”

After a respectful silence, Reed’s voice returned tightly. “Acknowledged, Val. There’s nothing I’d like better.”

“Target lock holding,” came the voice of Crewman Yuan, manning the bridge tactical station in Williams’s absence.

“Then fire at will, Sandra. Let’s end this scourge.”

It brought Valeria Williams great satisfaction to watch through the shuttlepod’s side port as Pioneer’s torpedoes and phase cannon beams tore into the damaged Ware station and blasted it apart until nothing was left but vapor and scrap.

But it was an empty satisfaction, for one of her people was still dead.

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