

The service lift opened and admitted Antonia onto the bridge. She paused briefly to glance at the forward screen. The Forge seemed to be suspended in a bubble of ink. The outlying star field was a mere bluish fog against the far horizon, obscured in parts by clouds of dark cosmic dust and a sprinkling of superbright stars. The sight was eerily beautiful, defying the description of empty space this area was known for. She barely had a moment's peace to appreciate it.

"Captain!" Commander Sondheim called, turning abruptly with her hand pressed to her ear squib. "I have just picked up a high res squirt headed outbound toward the center of the Trench!"

Gray turned in his chair. Antonia could see the tension tightening the muscles of his face and hear it in his voice. "What? Where is it coming from? Who is sending it?" he demanded.

"Sir, I am unable to lock it down," she replied as she worked her station frantically.

Antonia slid into her station chair and tied in her monitor to the communications array. The transmission was elusive, ghostly, almost impossible to track. "Sir, that signal did not originate from any known station aboard ship," she announced a moment later.

"Then where did it come from?" Gray demanded.

She cross-checked and verified her conclusion. "It must have been sent from a highly sophisticated portable terminal. I am attempting to identify and triangulate its location now, sir." She called up a graphic display of the ship's hardwire configuration and inserted a frequency tracer into the diagram. But it failed to lock onto anything. "I am sorry, captain," Antonia said a moment later. "It is gone."

"He's baaaack," Kovacic murmured softly, his eyes mocking her.

Gray was in no mood for giving up the chase. "Keep trying, Lieutenant," he said. "Don't let him get away."

She threw the professor a brief murderous glance and returned to her monitor. She worked for five silent minutes, but the console's response was sluggish at best. She could feel Kovacic's eyes watching her back and endured his silent amusement. Finally she said, "Doctor, instead of utilizing your refined sense of humor to antagonize me, why don't you concentrate on helping?"

He uncrossed his arms and replied, "I thought you'd never ask, Lieutenant. Shall we dance?"

She allowed a grim smile to light her face and nodded.

Together the two officers worked in tandem, cross linking with the communications system and searching out the electronic trail of their unknown enemy, while Sondheim continued to monitor all incoming and outgoing traffic for signs of unauthorized activity. They worked silently and as fast as they could, for time was of the essence and there was no telling when the next attack would occur.

Suddenly, Sondheim had a blip. "Incoming!" she yelled.

Antonia had the message intercepted and rerouted to her board when Kovacic's station erupted in a shower of sparks and arcing electricity, throwing the scientist out of his chair and onto the deck plate. He yelped and then curled up into a ball as smoke rose from his clothing.

"Oh my God," Gray breathed, starting from his chair. He glanced at Antonia for the answer.

She was astonished as well. This attack had come out of nowhere, and had crossed the line from mischief into terrorism. "I do not know what happened, sir," she replied. "Feedback from the operating system, perhaps, overloaded by the power of the incoming transmission. I was not in that part of the control software to see what he was doing."

Delia abandoned her station along with two of the junior technicians. She sat cradling Kovacic's head in her arms with tears in her eyes. The professor was still alive and breathing, though just barely. His left arm was black with burn marks, and his teeth were clenched while his hands were trembling with the pain. He appeared to waver in and out of consciousness.

"Take him to sick bay," Gray told the technicians. Then he turned to Delia and said, "get to your post, mister, and report on that incoming transmission. I want to know what's going on and I want to know now!"

Delia's face blanched at his command. "But, sir..."

"No time for tears, commander," he told her, his face stern and cold. Antonia watched the two of them, sensing the tension and anxiety welling up between them. Sondheim and Gray were having a war of wills, and he was winning.

"Yes, sir," Delia said finally. She climbed to her feet, reseated herself and worked with her board in tense silence while the others watched her quietly. Then she said, "I am unable to identify this particular code, captain. It does not match any known Federation or Naradan code in our linguistics banks."

Antonia glanced at the extract displayed on her screen and recognized the pattern almost immediately. "It's an Arkellian code, Captain," she said.

All eyes shifted to her. Antonia ignored the heightened suspicion in them.

"Arkellian," he echoed her, his eyebrows drawing down.

"Yes, sir. It is an old spacer's code left over from the Border conflict. The Arkellians employed it to smuggle illegal weaponry back and forth over the border into Naradan space in order to fool both sides. The code signal itself could be modified into a weapon, given the right frequency and amplitude, of course."

The captain was about ask something else when the engineer's voice cut through and filled the bridge. "Engineering to Main Bridge."

Gray went back to his chair and nodded to Sondheim, who opened an intraship channel. "Yes, Tomo? Go ahead."

"Captain, we've had an accident in the mainframe control room. We had three technicians injured and an electrical fire. We won't have full computer support and control for two or three days at least."

"What happened?" Gray asked.

"It was a short in the auxiliary control system that did it. We can't switch over to emergency backup systems without risking a partial loss of several critical systems, including our navigation and defense grids."

"What about life support and basic maintenance?"

"We could lose those too if we're not careful."

Gray ran a hand through his hair, a nervous, helpless gesture. "Well, do the best you can, Commander," he replied. "I'll expect a complete report as soon as you have time."

"Will do, Captain. Out."

The silence that followed was almost deafening. Finally, Gray blew out his breath. "Well. Here we are. A two billion credit dreadnought, crippled and wounded without a single shot fired."

Antonia vowed to catch the enemy agent herself and flay him alive.