

STAR TREK

BANSHEE SQUADRON

THE FIRES OF CREATION



RICHARD ADALBERT MERK

Deadly Race

West receives a mysterious message from a long-lost friend that launches him on a wild chase across the Serenity system in search of an ancient artifact of immense power. Joined by Max Vasser of Starfleet's Banshee Squadron, the duo races barely one step ahead of nefarious factions bent on galactic domination who would do anything to wield the Fires of Creation!

Star Trek: Banshee Squadron

The Fires of Creation

Richard A. Merk



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Prologue

Old Acquaintances Forgot

Location: Lake Town, Planet Serenity

If you are not too long, I will wait for you all my life.

Oscar Wilde

West closed the door behind him and flopped facedown on the bed. Outside, the rain continued to pour just as it had for the past week, making a clattering racket on the motel's uninsulated roof. West's mind was a blank, all conscious thought obliterated by the all-encompassing fatigue in his bones. A month of hauling yorna berries between Serenity and Oo-oo-ah had left him drained and feeling old.

He listened to the rain on the roof. It would probably be quieter in his cabin aboard the *Rocinanté*, but after a month of being cooped up in that small space he had to get out,

even if it was just to this sleazy motel for a night. After a few minutes he drifted off to sleep...

...And awoke to the insistent bleating of the communication terminal on the nightstand. He felt like he had just dozed off a few seconds ago, but the sunlight lancing through the cracks in the lopsided window shade told him it was already tomorrow.

West groaned and rolled over. He'd lain where he'd collapsed all night without moving, still fully dressed, boots and all. He was glad he'd at least had the presence of mind last night to bring along a change of clothes. He pulled off his boots in preparation for taking a nice long shower and glanced over at the nightstand.

A small red light on the bottom of the communication terminal indicated he had a message waiting.

West tossed aside his boot and reached over to push the blinking button. The antique machine whirred to life. There was no video image on the screen or even a voice recording, but with a clatter of motors and gears, the terminal disgorged a sheet of paper into his waiting hand.

An email? What kind of dinosaur uses email anymore? he wondered. He could think of a few.

As West read the contents of the curt missive, his eyes grew wide in surprise, but that quickly gave way to other emotions. His forehead creased in puzzlement and concern. *After so many years, why is he contacting me now?* he wondered.

He folded the message printout and stuffed it in his shirt pocket. After diving back into his boots and grabbing his belongings, he headed out the door, wrinkled clothes and shower forgotten, displaced by more important concerns,

like why a man he hadn't seen in over twenty years suddenly felt it necessary to send him this strange message.

Chapter 1

Grave Matters

I know that I am only going to a graveyard, but it's a most precious graveyard.

*Fëdor Mikhailovich Dostoevski,
The Brothers Karamazov*

"What do you mean, 'no such person'?" demanded West.

"Like I said, buddy," said the disinterested clerk behind the service counter at the Lake Town Public Records Office. "There is no such person listed anywhere in the entire Federation database, living or dead. How many more times I gotta tell you? You sure you got the name and ID right?"

"Of course I'm sure," grumbled West impatiently. "You sure you typed it in your computer right?"

The clerk glared at West with undisguised resentment and called "Next!" at the long line behind West.

Knowing a rude dismissal when he was slapped in the face with one, West turned away from the counter with a mumbled "Thanks for nothing, kid," and headed for the door.

Once outside, he leaned against the building in the shade of the awning that stretched across the front. The only sign of activity out in the blistering noonday sun was a lonely dust devil swirling an erratic zigzag down the center of the street. Only the hardest or most masochistic souls were out and about at this time of day.

West unfolded the scrap of paper he still carried in his shirt pocket. There could be no mistake. The message, while cryptic and mysterious, was properly formatted with the cipher from the old days. It really was from whom it claimed to be. He refolded the paper and stuck it back in his pocket.

He considered the possibility that the official records had been deliberately wiped. He knew his own records had been doctored many times over, but they hadn't been completely erased as seemed to be the case here. He was pretty sure strolling into the local Starfleet Intelligence branch office and asking about it wouldn't yield particularly positive results either. He was at a loss as to where to search next. Maybe it was time to call in some old favors.

An old man with gray hair and scraggly beard was standing at the far end of the porch and caught West's eye. He was stooped from a lifetime of hard work, and the shabby clothes on his back suggested he'd seen better times. The eyes, when they swept across West, still held a

bright sparkle though, despite the hardships they'd seen. When the man noticed West looking in his direction, he turned his eyes away. He changed his mind almost immediately though, and approached West with a shuffling gait. West waited patiently, curious to see what the oldster was going to do.

"I heard you talking to the clerk inside," said the old man without preamble. "I might know a thing or two about the man you're looking for—" he opened his mouth in a sly, gap-toothed grimace, and added, "—for a price."

=^=

West threaded his way through the drought-yellowed, overgrown weeds and scrubby chaparral towards a lone, ancient oak in the near distance. The bare limbs reached into the darkening sky, starkly silhouetted against the setting orange sun behind them. The air was chilly, forcing an involuntary shiver from West, but he had left his leather jacket behind in Lake Town with the old man, along with a few slips of latinum.

If the old man was telling the truth, he would find his missing friend here in the Cairn Hills, though West was at a loss to explain what his friend would be doing in the open wilderness so far from town.

As West proceeded, the darkening landscape grudgingly relinquished a few more details. He could see stone slabs, crosses, Bajoran orbs, and other religious symbols from across the galaxy sticking out of the earth at irregular

intervals. The oak tree was the center point of an old cemetery. Most of the grave markers were skewed one way or the other, and most were weathered with age and neglect.

West stopped just inside the broken gate that hung from the mostly-disintegrated fence that used to guard this forsaken place. He was perplexed now more than ever. Starting with the nearest grave, he began scanning the names on the headstones, looking for one particular name.

As he rounded the thick trunk of the old oak, he suddenly realized there was someone else standing in this lonely field — a woman, by the curvaceous shape of the silhouette. She was facing the other direction, staring down at a particular grave marker, and either hadn't heard him approach or was choosing to ignore him. He stopped behind the woman, loath to disturb her, but she spared him the necessity when she finally turned her head to acknowledge his presence.

Both West's and the woman's eyes widened in surprise, instant recognition flashing between them like a 1.21 gigawatt jolt.

Before he could even formulate a greeting, a clenched fist came flying out of nowhere and connected with devastating effect on West's jaw. He staggered back, his vision exploding into a thousand shards of light, and tripped over an exposed root. He landed on his butt in a little cloud of dust. The woman loomed over him threateningly with both hands on her hips, and glowered down at him.

"That's for almost getting us killed the last time we met, West!" she spat.

West rubbed his aching chin and looked up into the woman's murderous glare. A few pieces of the puzzle suddenly clicked into place. The woman's last name was Vasser — the same last name as his missing friend, the one he'd come all the way out here to find. With sudden understanding, West turned his eyes toward the gravestone, which was now at eye level with him, but he already knew what name he'd find etched there. 'Claude Vasser'. His friend. He turned back to the woman.

"Hello, Max. Funny... As I recall, the last time we met I saved all your lovely butts from a world of trouble," he said as genially as he could manage.

"Sure, after *you* got us into it!" retorted Max. "What the hell are you doing here, anyway?"

"I've come looking for your father. I didn't expect to find you here extending the fist of welcome." That last was said with a very carefully measured dose of sarcasm. He didn't want to do anything to antagonize the woman. He stood up and fastidiously patted the dust from his pants.

West had first run into Max Vasser and her wing commander, Lee Carter, months ago. The two women, members of Starfleet's Banshee starfighter squadron, had been on a mission to thwart the evil criminal Vincent Kelly and his Jelly Brain masters, and West had helped out a little. He'd gotten along great with the Banshees, especially Lee Carter, but for some reason Max had taken an instant dislike to him, though he couldn't imagine why. Women usually found him irresistible.

"If you're here to see my father, you're a little late, West," said Max testily. "My father's been dead for twenty years."

"I got a subspace message from him yesterday."

"That's impossible," spat Max.

West reached into his shirt pocket and withdrew the scrap of paper that held Claude Vasser's enigmatic message and waved it in front of Max.

She snatched it from his hand and read the brief contents out loud: "Press your luck with the angels. C.V." She thrust it back at him and said, "What kind of idiotic nonsense is this? This can't possibly be from my father."

West shrugged. "I have no idea what it means, but I do know it's from your father. What I don't understand is how someone whom you say has been dead for twenty years can send me a subspace email."

Max shook her head. Her eyes caught the last dying rays of the setting sun and flashed like two miniature supernovae. "I have no idea what you're talking about, West. This is obviously another one of your crazy schemes just like the last time we met. That time you almost got Commander Carter killed with your idiotic plans, but I'm not falling for it, whatever you're up to. And just how the hell do you know my father anyway?" she demanded.

"We were partners," replied West. "We worked for Starfleet Intelligence. We were good friends, but we had a... falling out, I guess you could say. That was twenty years ago. We lost touch and I never knew what became of Claude," he said looking at the gravestone.

"What are you talking about?" retorted Max, her voice thick with ridicule. "My father worked three-hundred-sixty days out of the year on a tramp freighter hauling quintotriticale. I hardly ever saw him, just a lousy recorded message on my birthdays, and then he was killed by Son'a

renegades when I was nineteen years old. I never got to know him, and now he's gone, so don't give me any talk about Starfleet Intel and secret missions."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't know the truth," mused West. "But either someone sent me this message to lure me here, or else your father is really still alive and is asking for help."



"In that case, I'm coming along, if only to prove you wrong. And when I *do* wind up proving you wrong, I'm gonna pound your head in for slandering my father, so don't even think about trying to stop me."

West broke into a lopsided smirk. "I wouldn't dream of it, sweetheart."

"And don't try any funny stuff, either," warned Max. West affected a wounded look. "This is strictly a business relationship."

"You got it, babe."

"And the next time you call me 'babe' or 'sweetheart', you're losing some teeth."

West wasn't listening anymore. Claude Vasser's grave marker had reclaimed his attention. He bent down for a closer inspection. Above the etched name was a pair of winged angels. They were carrying a stone tablet between them, and on the stone tablet was carved a single symbol — the Greek letter omega.

West's breathing quickened. Could Claude have found it after all, after they'd parted ways? Had he taken it to the grave with him? Or was this all an elaborate ruse?

"What are you looking at?" demanded Max.

"What does this symbol mean to you?" asked West pointing to the Greek letter.

"Omega," replied Max. "It was the name of the freighter he worked on, the *Omega Orionis*."

"Omega Orionis," repeated West thoughtfully. There was no such freighter, of course, since Claude never actually worked on a freighter. That was just the cover story perpetrated by Claude for his young daughter's sake. So was the name another clue? West had his suspicions. He had a sudden thought. *Press your luck with the angels*. He applied his thumb to the little carved tablet between the angels and shoved, and to his mild surprise the stone gave way. He was instantly rewarded with the sound of stone grating on stone from around the backside of the headstone. Both he and Max looked, and saw that a rectangular section had pushed out about an inch above the surface in which it was embedded. Max wrapped her fingers around the protrusion and yanked.

She held the rectangular stone in her hands, astonishment plain in her eyes, astonishment that something in which West was involved was actually more than just a figment of his demented imagination.

"May I?" asked West, holding out his hand.

Max handed him the stone and looked on with growing curiosity (despite herself) as he turned it over and around inspecting the different sides, but her confidence disintegrated when he held it up to his ear and shook it like a kid trying to figure out what was inside his birthday present.

"What the hell are you doing?" she said in disgust.

"It's hollow. There's something inside," replied West. He bent down and placed the stone on the ground. A quick scrounge yielded a fist-sized rock, which he picked up. Then, before Max could protest, he brought the rock down on the stone rectangle with shattering force. The brick cracked, and a jet-black *something* peeked through the wreckage from the hollow inside.

Both Max and West reached for the little rubble pile. West's hand came away with another small slip of paper only because Max had snagged the black object first. The thing was colored a black so inky black that it seemed to actually suck in all the light from the air around it. It didn't seem to be so much a solid rectangular box as much as a box-shaped *absence*. But as Max and West looked on, they could begin to see shapes forming inside the black void that was the box's surface. They swam around just on the edges of perception so that they couldn't really be sure they actually saw them, but then a few solidified.



Max gasped. "I recognize those symbols!" she exclaimed breathlessly. I saw them on the planet on the other side of the Black Gate. It's the writing of the Ancients!"

West's eyes widened in amazement. *Claude did it! He actually found it!* he marveled silently. He opened his mouth to speak, but froze when he saw Max suddenly go stiff, like a she-wolf sensing predators nearby.

In a lightening-quick burst of motion, Max grabbed West by the lapels, and, ignoring his surprised cry of outrage, heaved him bodily over the top of Claude Vasser's grave marker and slammed him into the ground before diving on top of him herself. West felt a violent *whump* in the pit of his gut as an explosive shockwave slammed into him. A thunderous *boom* pounded his ears and a spray of gravelly shrapnel stung his face. The blast tumbled Max off his back. He scrambled to his feet, forgetting for the moment the indignity of being planted face-first in the dirt

by a woman, and peered over the top of Claude's marker. A smoking crater three feet across marked the spot where he had been standing only moments before.

"How did you know?" he demanded of the woman crouching by his side.

Max flashed a quick look around the side of her father's tombstone, trying to spot their attackers. She felt at her waist for her accustomed sidearm but her hand came up empty. "Damn!" she grouched. "Didn't think I'd need my phaser here." She spared West a quick moment of her attention. "I'm an esper. Who the hell is shooting at you?"

"Me?!? What makes you think they're shooting at me?" exclaimed West indignantly.

"Because you're you," was Max's snide rejoinder.

West decided not to argue the point, though he strongly suspected the Ancients' black box was the reason for the sudden hostilities, and not his own, unique charms.

A bright lavender energy beam streaked out of the darkness and struck the ground near the first crater, blowing another hole in the landscape and showering West and Max in more dirt.

West had had enough; it was time for a strategic retreat. He searched the ground for another rock and found one. He counted to two, then lobbed it high overhead in the opposite direction from where he had parked the *Rocinanté*.

The rock landed with a racket of snapping branches in the middle of a thicket of brambles, and a second later the sound of running boots reached his ears. He grabbed Max roughly by the arm, made extra sure she still clutched the black box in her hand, and hauled her ungently to her feet

after him. "Come on!" he urged, and ran off through the graveyard towards his ship.

It didn't take their unknown attackers long to discover West's trickery, and before the pair had even gotten to the old graveyard gate the lavender energy beams were blowing more holes in the scenery all around them. The night's darkness was torn apart with staccato flashes of hellish light.

West and Max had just enough light to see the graveyard fence, which they leapt like a pair of Olympic sprinters. Far ahead, the shadowy bulk of the Rocinanté still seemed a lightyear away.

As she ran, Max dodged and weaved through the energy bolts with uncanny precision thanks to her esper ability, and West did his best to follow her lead — he knew enough not to look a prescient horse in the mouth — but his foot caught on a tough bramble and he went sprawling flat on his stomach.

"West!" shouted Max. Braving the zipping energy blasts, she dashed back and hauled the wheezing man to his feet. A well-aimed shot streaked out of the shadows behind them and grazed West's left arm. He cried out in agony as the merest touch of the beam fried clothes and flesh alike, fusing them together in a horrifying mess. "West!" cried Max again. "Are you all right?"

"Still alive," West managed to grate out between clenched teeth. He pushed back the red haze of pain and let the woman yank him to his feet by his good arm and forced his feet to follow her. Behind them, he could hear gruff voices calling to each other. The owners of those voices were still hidden in deep shadow amongst the tombstones,

but he recognized their accents all too plainly. The knowledge lent impetus to his flight.

West detached himself from Max's grasp and fumbled at his belt for his communicator. His thumb automatically found the emergency switch.

To his relief, he could hear the whirr of servo-motors ahead from where he knew the *Rocinanté* lay waiting. A few seconds later, a racket like the sound of ten-thousand golf balls hitting a tin roof slammed into his ears and the air was suddenly full of hot lead and glowing tracers from his ship's autocannon turrets. The ground ten yards behind West and Max exploded upward in a solid wall of dirt as it was churned by the torrential anti-personnel fire. Angry cries of outrage erupted as their pursuers were stymied by West's defenses.

The last few yards to the *Rocinanté* were the longest of West's life, but with Max's help he staggered up the boarding ramp in his ship's underside. He slapped the 'close' switch on the wall beside the entrance and collapsed on the cargo hold floor.

"Rocinanté! Lift off! Full thrust!" he shouted.

Something somewhere beeped compliance, and the rumble of engines suddenly echoed through the empty hold. West felt the deck lift under him. Beside him, still on her feet, Max grabbed hold of a support beam. She looked at West questioningly. *Shouldn't you be at the controls?* was the unspoken question written on her face.

West groaned and got up. He waved off Max's help and passed through the sliding hatch out of the cargo hold into the forward part of the ship, carefully favoring his injured arm. At the end of a short, angled corridor, they came to the

cockpit. He dropped heavily into the pilot seat and Max took the copilot position to his right. Outside the front windows, the sky was rapidly darkening and the stars becoming sharper as the *Rocinanté* climbed away from Serenity.

Multicolored patterns of light played across West's face as he studied the sensor readouts, and after a minute he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

"No sign of pursuit — for now," he breathed.

Chapter 2

Sad Stories of the Death of Kings

*Let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings:
How some have been deposed, some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,
Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed;
All murdered: for within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court.*

William Shakespeare, King Richard the Second

"Ow! Watch it, will you?!?"

"Stop being such a big baby, West," grumbled Max, but her voice lacked its usual bite. In fact, West wondered if he

hadn't detected an actual hint of compassion buried beneath the prickly crust.

Outside the *Rocinanté's* cockpit windows, the stars shone peacefully, and in the far distance, the outlying streamers of the Briar Patch could just be discerned. Whoever had been chasing them down on Serenity had been left behind when they'd taken off, and so far there was no sign of pursuit here in orbit. Neither West nor Max thought that would last very long.

Inside, West had his shirt off and was squirming in the pilot seat of the *Rocinanté* facing the rear of the cockpit where Max Vasser stood leaning over him, cleaning his wounds. The explosions in the old graveyard had cut his face and forearms in a dozen places where the flying stone chips had struck, and the disruptor beam that had grazed his arm had left a long streak of ruined and charred flesh along his left upper arm.

Lying on the copilot seat was the strange black box, apparently built by the Ancients and forgotten for the moment, which the pair had recovered from Claude Vasser's grave.

"It's a good thing you've got this old surplus Starfleet medical equipment," Max was saying. She applied an anabolic protoplaser to West's disruptor burn and watched the charred skin melt away, then swept a dermal regenerator over the area.

As she worked, she couldn't help but notice the signs of old scars all over West's upper body. His back was a roadmap of faint, white, crisscrossing furrows and ridges. She wondered what this man had been through in his life to have earned him so much punishment and physical abuse.

A small, round tattoo on the small of his back caught her eye. It looked like a spiral bisected by several straight lines, but from the angle he was sitting she couldn't make out any details.

After she was done with the arm wound, she turned her attention to the cuts on his face. "Hold still so I can clean these out, unless you enjoy infections."

"Ow!"

"Oh shut up. Why don't you think of something else to take your mind off it." She leaned over him and resumed her ministrations.

West tried diverting his thoughts towards other subjects – the latest Major League Springball scores from Bajor – but suddenly and unexpectedly found himself with a new dilemma. As Max leaned over him, her long chestnut hair fell around his face. Her scent filled his nostrils and he became intoxicated by her nearness. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the sensation.

He slipped his hand around her and planted it on her firm behind, then gave it a little squeeze.

The blinding slap that resounded through the cockpit was like a thunderclap, and the atomic red heat from the glowing handprint on West's face could have lit a small village for a week.

"I see you're feeling your old self again, West," growled Max. She'd taken a step backwards, though in the small cockpit she couldn't go far, but the glare in her eyes was more than enough to dissuade West from attempting any sort of suave follow-up. "I think for *your* sake it might be a real good idea to take me back down to Serenity so I can

pick up my shuttle. It's still sitting out in the Cairn Hills where I abandoned it to come with you," she said.



West rubbed his smarting cheek and couldn't quite suppress a rueful grin. It had been worth it. Out loud though, he said, "That's probably a real bad idea. Those goons who were shooting at us—"

"At *you*," corrected Max.

"—probably blew the hell out of your shuttle," continued West ignoring Max's interruption. "And even if they didn't, I'm sure they're just waiting for you to return and pick it up. You wouldn't stand a chance."

"I can take care of myself, West," snapped Max testily. "I don't need advice from a scruffy, two-bit smuggler."

West's face darkened at Max's slanderous abuse but he kept his temper. She didn't know all the facts after all. "Not even your esper skills can save you from a dozen carefully

concealed snipers with disruptor rifles, because that's the *minimum* you'd run into if you went back now."

"Yeah, about that..." said Max suspiciously. "You obviously know a lot more than you've told me. Just who were those guys back at the graveyard? What do they have to do with my father?"

West sighed. He stood and picked up his shirt and began putting it back on. "You won't like the truth," he said in a low voice without meeting Max's gaze.

"Tell me anyway." Max's tone left no room for compromise. She folded her arms stubbornly across her chest and waited impatiently as West went through the motions of buttoning up his shirt.

When he finally finished straightening his attire, he said, "I didn't actually see them in the dark, but I recognized their accents as they shouted to one another. They were Orions."

"Orions?!? Orion is on the other side of the galaxy! What are Orions doing here on this nowhere backwater planet? And that still doesn't explain how my father's involved."

West waved his hands to stop Max's torrential objections. "Those weren't just any Orions. You've just been informally introduced to the Orion Syndicate."

"Well that's just great," snapped Max. "As if we need another group of petty thugs in this sector. The Son'a, the Mullurans, the Breen, the Nausicaans weren't enough; now we can add Orion pirates to the list!"

"This is going to take forever if you keep interrupting me," snipped West.

Max looked like she was going to continue her tirade, but thought better of it and shut her mouth. She'd save the rest for later.

West bent down and picked up the Ancient device from the copilot's seat and held it between himself and Max, turning it slowly. The faintly luminous lettering on its side shimmered in and out of view, always seeming to be hovering just on the edge of perception.

"Do you have any idea what this is? What it represents?" he asked.

Max shrugged. "Beyond the fact that it has Ancient script on it? No, and I don't really care."

West shook his head in disapproval of Max's attitude. "It's the power of the universe. Power beyond the dreams of gods. The Ancients understood. Six billion years ago, they knew the answers. The secrets of existence are locked away in this box – the very Fires of Creation!" His voice had risen in pitch and fervor throughout and he cast a long covetous gaze at the thing in his hand. "I've spent my life looking for this," he continued softly, almost to himself. He caressed the inky black slab with his eyes as he continued to turn it around and around in his hand. "It cost me a lot... It cost your father more."

Max frowned. She wasn't sure if she liked what she saw in West's eyes or heard in his voice. A change had come over the man since he'd picked up the black box – a darkness, as if the shadowy aura of the object was infusing itself into his soul. A sudden chill ran its icy fingers up her spine. "What are you talking about, West?" she demanded, but her voice came out a lot thinner than she intended.

West turned his stare from the Ancients' device to the woman in front of him. "I was in Starfleet Intel in those days. Me and—" West stole a glance at Max's uneasy expression and chose his next words carefully. "—my 'partner' were assigned to a top secret project to search for and recover technology left over from antiquarian super-races. We managed to bring back a few Preserver artifacts, even a Slaver stasis box, but this..." he hefted the box in his hand. "This was the Holy Grail. We'd heard rumors about devices like this for years but none of them ever panned out.

"Then one day we were approached by a representative of a certain covert organization. They called themselves 'Section 31'."

"Never heard of them."

"Of course not," replied West. A weariness crept into his voice as he recounted his experiences with the nefarious group. "They're a shadow organization. Not even the uppermost levels of Starfleet brass know about them. They operate far above the law, answer to no one, taking it upon themselves to safeguard the Federation by any means necessary, and if that means breaking the rules, well... the end justifies the means in their book." He looked at the Ancient device in his hand as if seeing it for the first time, and this time Max saw loathing in his eyes. The sinister aura in his eyes had gone. West tossed the thing back onto the copilot's seat.

"Anyway, the recruiter had a mission for us. We weren't given the details at the time, but it involved recovering some sort of artifact. We'd get the details when we joined their little club."

"What did you do?" asked Max. She'd forgotten her earlier skepticism and had become entranced by West's tale. "You didn't join them, did you?" For reasons she didn't want to admit to herself, she didn't want to think that West would ever willingly go along with an organization like the one he had described. It went against everything that the Federation stood for.

West thought about the question. "I can't say I wasn't tempted," he finally admitted. "To have Starfleet's resources at my disposal with none of those pesky restrictions Starfleet imposes – like the Prime Directive... But in the end – no, I walked away. My uh... 'partner' chose otherwise. We had a terrible argument and it ended our friendship. I never saw him again."

West lapsed into silence and Max stared with knit brow at the floor. After a while, she broke the silence in an uncharacteristically quiet voice. "My father didn't work on a freighter, did he?" She sounded resigned to believe anything West's claimed at this point.

"No," said West. "He was my partner. He went to work for Section 31 looking for this Ancient artifact." He pointed at the black box lying so innocently on the chair.

"I see... And the Orions? How do they fit into all this?"

"Section 31 weren't the only ones hot on the trail of this device. The Orion Syndicate had gotten wind of it through their intelligence network. Whoever got the prize first would wield the most powerful energy source in the Galaxy."

"And my father found it," said Max. "Twenty years ago..."

"So it would seem," replied West. "And it also seems the Syndicate never stopped looking for it. What I don't understand is why he chose to keep it and hide it. Why didn't he turn it over to Section 31?"

Max let out a gigantic breath, then brought up both hands to rub at her eyes. "I hate huge info-dumps," she said. "So much still doesn't make sense. I'm so tired... I need some shuteye – some time to sort all this out."

"Take the bunk in my cabin," offered West. "I've got a hammock back in the hold."

At the mention of going to bed on board the *Rocinanté*, Max's expression turned suspicious again. West saw it and headed off her objections with a quick reassurance. "The door's got a lock, and besides, I'm a gentleman."

Max looked into his eyes and saw only genuine sincerity there. She nodded agreement and stepped through the cockpit hatch back into the short, angled corridor leading aft to the hold and the ship's single, small cabin, leaving West alone in the cockpit with the Ancient's black box.

Chapter 3

Double-Cross

We have to distrust each other. It is our only defense against betrayal.

Tennessee Williams

Max Vasser lay on the narrow bunk in West's cabin aboard the *Rocinanté* unable to fall asleep. She had to bend her knees because her feet hit the bulkhead at the lower end of the bed and she kept bumping her head on the bulkhead at the upper end. *Even Defiant class ships have bigger berths than this! No wonder West offered it to me, the jerk.*

But it wasn't the physical discomfort that was robbing her of rest. The events of the last few hours whirled around her brain in a maddening frenzy, and try as she might, she

just couldn't accept some of the things that West had told her about her father.

The man she had never known.

No, it was even worse than that. Even the few things she thought she *had* known about him were lies.

Her father hadn't been a crewman on an old grain freighter – he'd been a spy! And if what West had said was true, he had worked for a secret shadow group known as Section 31, the embodiment of everything that Starfleet was not. It was a major sore issue with her. She had fought in three wars – the Dominion War and the First and Second Mulluran Wars – to uphold the ideals of the Federation, to ensure its continued prosperity for following generations, only to discover that an organization so reprehensible operated with impunity within the very government she had sworn to uphold. And her father was a part of it.

No. West had to be wrong.

Max tossed in the cramped bunk. She turned onto her side and buried half her face in the pillow. There was nothing to look at in the tiny cabin, just a small desk and chair along the opposite wall beside a basic replicator alcove. No window, not even any pictures. Nothing to distract her from her tormented feelings. Nothing to give her any clue as to what kind of man West was. Could he be believed? Could she trust him?

Her thoughts turned to the strange black box found inside Claude Vasser's grave marker, the one Section 31 had wanted, the one the Orion Syndicate was still after. In all the excitement, she hadn't even asked West what it was. It didn't really matter to her. It could hold the meaning of life, the universe, and everything for all she cared. All that

mattered was that her father had found it twenty years ago and then he'd been killed because of it.

Or was he?

She suddenly realized she had no proof one way or the other. She had not been present at the burial twenty years ago. She didn't know anyone who had. She'd never thought about it before, but in light of recent developments she suddenly found it very strange that her father had died and was buried without any known witnesses. Not even her mother had been there. Her father's death had been so unexpected that there simply hadn't been time to fly all his relatives 5000 lightyears from Earth.

Was that all a carefully constructed cover?

She had to know. Before she went any farther with West, she had to find out the truth with her own eyes.

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Max tried to be as quiet as she could, but her high boot heels clanged off the metal deck plates of the *Rocinanté*. She stepped through the hatch into the ship's wide, empty cargo hold. On the far side were three more hatches, evenly spaced along the rear wall. She knew the smaller center one led to the bathroom, and West's raucous snoring could be heard reverberating from the large door on the left. It was door number three that was her goal, however.

The hatch creaked open on poorly-lubricated bearings and the light inside flicked on revealing a broad cargo

transporter. Max walked over to the wall controls and began inputting coordinates.

She had rummaged through West's cabin and failed to come up with any weapon, but she did find an old model black-and-chrome tricorder in one of the desk drawers, and now wore it slung over her right shoulder. It would be good enough for what she needed it to do.

She pressed the activation key and jumped up onto the transporter pad. The unit powered up, filling the small room and indeed the entire ship with its characteristic harmonics. The noise was sure to wake West, but by then it would be too late. The tingling of the matter stream took over her senses and the transporter room of the *Rocinanté* faded from view...

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...to be replaced a few seconds later by chill grayness. It was the early hours of pre-dawn in the Cairn Hills. Max had chosen a spot about a mile from the old graveyard on the other side of a line of low grass-covered hills in hopes that her arrival would go unnoticed by anyone still lurking here in wait.

Her breath steamed in front of her face and she suddenly wished she'd remembered to bring a jacket. The standard Starfleet uniform she was wearing wasn't made of quantum fibers like her Banshee Squadron flightsuit with its automatic thermal properties, and the night out here on the prairie was cold.

Putting her discomfort aside, Max headed off in a northwesterly direction. She estimated it would take her about twenty minutes of cautious progress to get to the outskirts of the graveyard where her father was supposedly buried.

=^=

West's eyes snapped open and he was instantly wide awake. It was an ability he had learned many years ago while in the service of Starfleet Intel and it had saved his skin on a number of occasions. Of course, there were the times it hadn't saved him and he had the scars to show for those lapses.

He heard the distinctive hum of the *Rocinanté's* cargo transporter. He swung out of his hammock and dashed from the small compartment where he'd strung it, across the main cargo hold to the transporter chamber just in time to see the last fading sparkles disappear.

"Dammit," he muttered. "Why can't things ever be easy with you, Max?"

He headed for the *Rocinanté's* control room at a trot.

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Max was crouched low behind a clump of dried chaparral surveying the area around the graveyard. It was

difficult to see anything definite in the dim pre-dawn. In the medium distance she could make out the uneven shape of the shuttlecraft she had used to get here yesterday, and just as West had predicted, someone had 'blown the hell out of it.' A thin column of smoke still issued from its broken shell, ascending straight up in the still morning air.

Max's scowl grew darker. She already had a reputation for getting her starfighter blown up on every mission. Those two pinheads Jo and Alex razed her constantly about it. The joke would surely be expanded now to include civilian craft as well.

The sun was still below the horizon but the sky had lightened to a pale silver in joyous expectation of the coming day. The landscape was painted in a monochrome grayscale palette. Aside from the blown up shuttle, Max could see nothing untoward.

She wished Sam Beckett were here. Her teammate's cybernetic eyes would come in real handy right about now. She considered for a few seconds using the tricorder slung at her side to scan for lifeforms, but if anyone was lurking out in the shadows between the old tombstones and weeds they'd detect her scanning beams. On the other hand, if someone had the ability to detect her scanning beams, they also had the ability to detect *her* hiding in the bushes. She decided not to risk it just yet, and instead crept out from behind her cover, keeping a sharp eye out and trusting in her esper ability to keep her safe.

The grounds of the old cemetery were gained through a broken section of fencing. There was her father's alleged grave, beneath the large oak tree, not more than ten yards ahead. Still no one challenged her right to be here. If the

Orion Syndicate's alleged snipers were out there, they were either waiting for a better shot or else they were asleep.

Then she was crouching at her father's grave. It was surrounded by small craters from the last firefight and the upright headstone was tilted and cracked from all the explosions. Max cursed silently and vowed to deliver a little R&R to whoever was responsible.

Rage and Retribution.

But right now she had something more urgent on her mind. She unslung the old tricorder and popped the lid. The device commenced a high-pitched warbling, but when she tuned it to detect biological matter and aimed it at the burial plot it flashed a red light in her face, emitted a negative squawk, and went silent.

It took a few moments for the meaning to sink in.

Her father's grave was empty.

Max didn't quite know what to think or feel. She had spent the last twenty years believing her father was dead, and this new truth was just too incredible. But as she crouched there in the field in the gray morning light, a fierce determination grew in her heart. She would get to the bottom of this mystery. She would find out why her father had faked his own death – why he had let her believe all these years he was dead and buried – why he had left her and her mother alone so long ago. Because despite the fact that she had hardly ever seen him while growing up, Max loved her father fiercely and had always looked up to him. Her feelings for him demanded answers.

And she knew just who to ask first. West. She'd let her fist do the talking.

She'd have to find the man again first, however – she'd left him three hundred miles above her in orbit and had no way of getting back. Now that she thought about it, she had no way of getting *anywhere*. The nearest settlement was Lake Town, a hundred miles to the northwest.

"Well ain't I the genius," she muttered in abject self-ridicule. "I beam myself down with no way of getting back." She stood and dusted off the seat of her pants and wondered what she was going to do. "Well, I suppose someone's going to come looking for my rented shuttle eventually." Max suddenly noticed that she'd been speaking out loud. "Somebody better show up soon before I start talking to myself."

Just then, as if in answer to her wish, she heard a rustling of the bushes off to her left. She quickly turned her head to see what it was, thoughts of West's Orion snipers foremost in her mind. The low morning sun was at her back and shining on the shrubbery and old tombstones in front of her. Something shiny caught the light and reflected it back into her eyes at the same instant a warning tingled at the back of her thoughts.

Max instinctively dove for the ground a split second before a sizzling energy beam sliced through the air she had just vacated. Suddenly the air was full of crisscrossing weapons fire and the unforgettable sound of disruptors set on 'kill'.

She cursed under her breath and crawled on her belly through the dirt back towards Claude Vasser's headstone. It wasn't much cover, but it was better than the dried up weed she was hiding behind at the moment. A second later,

however, the tombstone ceased to be cover of any kind as it was blown to smithereens by a direct hit.

Max thought frantically. How was she going to get out of this one? She had no weapon, just the old tricorder she'd stolen from West. Was this old, forgotten graveyard about to become the permanent resting place of yet another Vasser?

A near miss blew a hole in the ground six feet from her face, showering her with clumps of dirt and broken masonry, and she covered her head with her arms.

An unpleasant alternative occurred to her – one she'd never considered before in all her life. She could surrender. The question was, did the Orion Syndicate want her alive? Or would they just shoot her in cold blood? "I've got nothing to lose," she muttered and prepared to stand.

Just then, a new sound reached her ears and she froze – the distinctive sizzle of Federation-issue phasers. *She was saved!*

Above her she could see the bright orange beams streaking back towards where the Orion Syndicate had been lying in wait, and she heard gruff, human voices shouting orders to cease and disarm. On the other side, she heard cries of panic as the Orions realized they were under attack.

Max jumped to her feet to offer the Starfleet forces a hand in rounding up the remaining Orions, but the sight that awaited her took her completely by surprise and left her horrified, confused and utterly speechless.

The cemetery grounds were littered with pale green-skinned Orions, fallen where they'd been shot. Stepping between the bodies and pools of dark green blood were a dozen men clad not in the expected familiar Starfleet

colors, but in all-black uniforms of some kind that Max had never seen before. They were prodding the lifeless bodies with their boots, methodically making sure everyone was dead.

At the sound of booted feet approaching from behind her, Max spun around. Her eyes smoldered with indignation at the unjustifiable slaughter that had just been committed, but her expression quickly turned to that of alarm when she saw the black-clad figure before her raise his phaser rifle and point it at her chest.



The shock and betrayal she felt barely had time to register on her face before the trigger was squeezed and the bright orange phaser beam struck her in the heart. Searing pain unlike anything she'd ever felt before blinded her with a red sheet of agony. At the same time, she thought she felt the tingle of a transporter beam. Conscious thought only

lasted another second, however, before everything went dark.

Chapter 4

The Fires of Creation

*And God said, Let there be light, and there was light.
Genesis 1:3*

Max Vasser opened her eyes and looked around, then decided she wasn't in the afterlife. She was in West's cabin aboard the *Rocinanté* lying on the tiny, cramped bunk. She grunted in annoyance. *I've cheated death yet again*, she thought morosely. *This time it was West's fault.*

Then events from down on the planet came flooding back into her conscious thoughts. She looked down with dread at her chest and saw a black scorch mark right over her heart where the phaser had struck. She didn't have time to puzzle over it, however, because at that moment the door

slid open and the agent of her continued existence sauntered in looking much too pleased with himself.

"Oh for God's sake, West," grumbled Max, displeasure drawing her face into a deep frown. She sat up in the bunk. "Is that a tribble in your pocket or are you just glad to see me?"

Cocking an eyebrow, West reached into his pocket. Max was about to threaten his life if he tried anything repulsive, but instead he withdrew a small, tan, furry object and held it out on his open palm.

"Actually, it *was* a tribble in my pocket," he said. "Max, meet Gromit. Gromit, meet Max."

The tribble in West's hand chirped amiably and skwunched up and down a few times.

West stuck Gromit on the wall and turned back to Max. She saw concern in his eyes. "How are you feeling?" he asked. "I wasn't sure if I'd snagged you in time."

"Fine," replied Max a little more gruffly than she intended. West's attention was making her uncomfortable. "What the hell happened?"

"You ignored my advice, that's what," snapped West, surprising both Max and himself with his passion. He visibly calmed himself and a second later was once again the carefree scoundrel Max knew. He began again. "You ran into a welcoming committee. Lucky for me I tracked you and had time to swoop in and beam you out of there before something bad happened."

"It almost did," said Max softly, thoughtfully fingering the burned circle on her uniform front. "The beam must have passed through me just as I was dematerializing. I only caught the very fringes of the disruption effect." She

looked at West. "Who were those guys? They had Starfleet-issue phasers."

West's expression darkened. "Section 31," he replied. "Actually, the *Rocinanté's* been dodging their starship for the last twelve hours; they've got a cloaked Defiant class in the system. I only lost them a few minutes ago."

Max's eyes grew wide. "Twelve hours?!? I've been out twelve hours?!?" She tried to stand but wound up stumbling forward on unsteady legs right into West's strong arms.

"Whoa, easy there, sweetheart. You're still recovering from a phaser hit," said West.

Max's cheeks were suddenly aflame. She tried to convince herself that it was merely embarrassment at her physical weakness, but she knew the terrible truth. It was the realization that finding herself in this man's arms provoked such a torrent of unbidden and intense emotions from her. She could feel the heat from his body, knew that his lips were so close to hers... Her predicament was made all the more intolerable by how obviously West was enjoying himself, if the stupid grin on his face was any indication.

She pushed herself away from West with all her remaining strength and stood leaning against the cabin wall, panting, inwardly hating him for his smugness but hating herself more for her pathetic vulnerability.

West let her go. "Relax, sweetheart," he drawled. "Everything's under control."

From his sideways perch up on the cabin wall, Gromit suddenly began a shrill screeching, and a second later, the *Rocinanté's* alert klaxon sounded.

"Rats," muttered West. "Time for romance later, sweetheart. Right now we got trouble. Come on!"

With that, he disappeared back out into the corridor in the direction of the control room. Max reluctantly followed behind.

She found West already seated in the pilot's seat when she entered the cramped cockpit. Outside the front windows all she could see was black — no stars. "Where are we, West?" she asked as she took a seat in the copilot's position.

"At the bottom of a deep fissure on an asteroid somewhere in the main belt. There's kelbanite veins all throughout the rock, so I figured we'd be safe from prying sensor beams until we figure out what we're going to do."

"What was the red alert for?"

West craned his neck and looked up out the big front windows although there was nothing to see but the rock walls of their hole. "The Section 31 ship just decloaked nearby. They're keeping station about a hundred-thousand kilometers from here. They can't find us directly, and they can't just start blasting all the asteroids around here or else the legitimate Starfleet will come investigating, and they'll never recover the Ancient artifact we have, so they're just going to wait us out. They decloaked just to let us know there's no escape."

"Now that you mention it, what the hell *is* that thing we found in my father's grave? Why is everyone so hell-bent on getting their hands on some old 6-billion-year-old box?" said Max. "Neither the Orion Syndicate or this 'Section 31' of yours seem the types to be interested in something strictly for archaeological reasons."

"They're not," confirmed West. He reached into his jacket and withdrew the jet-black, oblong object and set it upright on the control console in front of him. "It's what's inside the casing that they're after. The alien machinery and the thing at the heart of the it."

"And that is?"

"Like I told you before — power."

"What *kind* of power, specifically?" prodded Max, no longer satisfied with West's conveniently vague explanations.

"Absolute power," said West. "The power of the universe. Power to do anything you want. Literally." He turned to the woman sitting beside him. "Understand, Max," he said fervently, "this thing is more than six *billion* years old and it's *still running*. This single tiny device has enough stored energy even after all those eons to supply an entire planet with energy for the rest of human history. Can you even imagine that? Can you image what you could do if you learned how it works and how to build more?"

Max couldn't, but she understood about the desperate desire for power in some people and organizations. Anyone who had ships driven by power sources like the one West described would rule the Galaxy. But she still wasn't going to let him get away with not telling her exactly what the device was. "How does it work?" she asked.

"It's... uh... classified," was the unexpected reply.

"Classified?!? By who?"

"By Starfleet at the highest levels," answered West. "Only starship captains and above know about it, and a few of us with Intel backgrounds." He looked sideways at Max and saw that she wasn't going to accept anything except a

straight and complete answer. He sighed and said, "Fine, I'll tell you, but you didn't hear it from me." Max nodded.

"About a hundred years ago, a Federation scientist named Dr. Ketteract discovered a new kind of atomic particle. He called it Omega. Ketteract managed to synthesize one single Omega molecule, but it only lasted a fraction of a second before blowing up his entire research station and destroying subspace for a radius of over five lightyears. Starfleet banned any more research into Omega and suppressed all knowledge of it because of the incredible threat it poses to interstellar travel. They issued a secret general order called the Omega Directive that requires any starship captain to use whatever means necessary to destroy any Omega particles they encountered up to and including violating the Prime Directive. That's how serious they took the threat.

"Archaeologists have uncovered evidence that the Ancients knew all about Omega. They routinely manufactured the molecules and knew how to keep them stable inside these small cases. Their entire civilization was powered by Omega batteries like this one, though until now no one's ever actually found one." He pointed to the device resting so innocently on the control surface before him. "Omega is believed to be the single most powerful substance in the universe, and some cosmologists believe it existed in nature at the moment of the Big Bang."

Max listened with rapt wonderment. That the Ancients could control an embryonic Big Bang inside such a small container was testament to a technology that was truly staggering. At the pause in West's story, she commented, "So it really is the Fires of Creation."

West nodded. "But just because Starfleet banned Omega doesn't mean anything to Section 31. They wanted the power for themselves. For the good of the Federation, of course," he added cynically. "Twenty years ago Claude found one for them."

At the mention of her father's name, Max perked up. "There's no one buried in my father's grave," she said.

"I know," said West. He smiled that rascalion smile of his. "I know where he is. Back when we found the Ancient's Omega battery, this was also in the secret compartment in his headstone." He withdrew a scrap of paper from his shirt pocket and held it up for Max to see.

"Swell. Another mysterious scrap of paper," was the unenthusiastic reply.

"Ah... — not so mysterious," said West, grinning smugly. "Look." He reached across the *Rocinanté's* cockpit and handed the paper to Max.

She snatched it from his hand and glanced at it, but when she saw that it was indeed decipherable, her mood lightened considerably. She actually smiled, and West decided he liked her smile. "This is a spacetime vector," she said with growing excitement.

But as quickly as her smile had come, it was supplanted by an apprehensive frown. "The time index is less than ten hours from now. That doesn't give us a lot of time. Are these space coordinates what I think they are?" she asked West.

"Probably. Why? You got something against 21-dimensional space/time/thought discontinuities?"

"Definitely! The last time I went through the *Black Gate* with Banshee Squadron we got sent to the other side of the

universe, wound up fighting for our lives against creatures from Babylonian mythology, and only made it back because it would have made a terrible ending for the story otherwise. You're telling me that my father is on the other side of the Black Gate?!?"

West chuckled. "Wait — don't get pissed yet — it gets better. Take a look at the entry velocity your father says to use."

Max looked again at the calculations on the scrap of paper still in her hand. West was right. If she was upset at hearing of their ultimate destination it was nothing compared to this. "No. Impossible," she declared flatly. "You can't enter a wormhole at warp speed. Anything above impulse leads to catastrophic warp field imbalance and your ship disappears into an unstable artificial wormhole."

"Yeah, interesting, huh?" replied West with a reckless grin. "Create an unstable artificial wormhole *inside* a wormhole. The ultimate getaway!" Then he grew serious. "Besides," he continued, "it's the only way we're going to find your father."

Max rolled her eyes and sighed. "Fine. You're right. Let's get going."

Chapter 5

Resurrection

Every parting gives a foretaste of death, every reunion a hint of the resurrection.

Arthur Schopenhauer, German philosopher

Max Vasser felt the *ka-thunk* through the soles of her boots as the small probe shot out of the *Rocinanté's* dorsal tube.

"You sure this is going to work?" she asked dubiously. Fooling a Defiant class starship with such a simple trick seemed to her improbable at best.

"No problem," was West's confident guarantee. "I've used this a bunch of times. Sort of like tapping someone on the shoulder and then running the other way. Never fails."

"I won't even ask why you would regularly need to use tactics like this," said Max.

West studiously ignored her comment. "Besides, the decoy's holo-generator and fake warp signature only have to fool their sensors long enough for us to get off this asteroid and back into space. Speaking of which..."

West watched the sensor readouts on the console before him. "The decoy probe just went to warp... They've seen what they think is the *Rocinanté* zooming away from here... And there they go, the fox after the hound."

Instantly, he was a blur of action and efficiency that Max would never have suspected lay underneath the careless, undisciplined exterior. Within seconds, the subsonic thrum of the *Rocinanté's* engines was vibrating the deck underneath her feet, and moments later, her seat pushed up against her bottom as the ship quickly lifted from the asteroid and accelerated away.

"Setting course for the *Black Gate* — ETA, one hour twelve minutes."

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Max sat in the dim cockpit alone with her thoughts. West had gone aft some time before muttering something about the inertial ball bearings not sounding right, or something like that. It was still ten minutes before they arrived at their destination, the coordinates left behind twenty years ago by her father.

Her father. The man she barely knew. She felt nervous anticipation building inside her. How would she react if she actually found him now after so many years of thinking he was dead? She had a thousand questions for him. Why had he left her mother and herself? Why had he faked his death? Why hide inside a wormhole? And what did all this have to do with Omega and the Ancients?

Why, after twenty years, did he send a secret message to West and not her?

That, more than anything else, wounded her, thought she would never let West see her hurt and disappointment.

Did her father not trust her? Or was there a far worse explanation? Did he simply not have any feelings for his daughter?

No. Unthinkable. There had to be a reasonable explanation for every one of her father's actions no matter how cold and callous they seemed right now.

Max shook her head to dislodge the strangling tendrils of pessimism just in time to see West stroll back into the cockpit with Gromit riding on his shoulder like some bizarre pirate-and-parrot combo. West sat in the pilot seat and placed the tribble on the ledge beneath the forward window.

"Three minutes to the Black Gate," he said after a quick check of the *Rocinanté's* position. "Last chance to change your mind, sweetheart."

"I told you to stop calling me that," grumbled Max, though it was clear she was distracted by other concerns. Her eyes were glued to the view out the front viewports, searching for the first glimpse of the mysterious, artificial wormhole aperture that had been dubbed the 'Black Gate'

for obvious chromatic reasons. Then there it was — a faint warping effect of the background stars as though they were reflected off a giant funhouse mirror, a faint darkening of the already black sky, but all of it enshrouded by a faint glowing vortex of Hawking radiation making the gate not *entirely* black.

West took her non-answer as permission to continue. "Okay, we're going in at warp 5."

Max knew they had to enter the wormhole at warp speed, but still looked at him as though he were insane and told him so.

West grinned and shrugged. "That's why you're crazy about me. Admit it."

Max snorted. "Dream on."

West's reply was a broadening of the infuriating grin, but there was no time for anything else. The Black Gate loomed before them, reaching out its gossamer tendrils of force to embrace the onrushing *Rocinanté*. Max clenched her eyes shut and tensed herself. She remembered all too well the disorientation, icy chill, and pain she felt during her last trip through the Gate — a very different experience from the only other stable wormhole ever discovered, the Bajoran Wormhole, which was reportedly a very placid and calming affair. Of course, since they were barreling in at warp speed, it didn't matter since she didn't expect to survive more than another few seconds.

And then they were in! And they were still alive!

But there were none of the unpleasant effects Max remembered from last time. She opened her eyes to an awe-inspiring vision of complete astonishment and wonder outside the front window. Their little ship was surrounded

by and zooming down a twisting tube of folded spacetime the boundaries of which were clearly delineated by a brilliant green gridwork of force lines. Beyond the lines of force, the normal lights of the universe could still be faintly glimpsed, though they looked distorted and tiny, like they were being seen from a tremendous distance and through a fisheye lens. The whole thing was something she would have expected to see in a computer-enhanced diagram of the inside of a wormhole, but she was seeing it with her own two naked eyes. It defied explanation.



At her left, West was splitting his attention between staring at the bizarre vista outside and the sensor readout on the console before him. He frowned and pounded the control top with his fist, that being his preferred method of adjusting something that was malfunctioning, but the strange readings persisted.

"What is it?" asked Max.

"It's the underside of the universe, sweetheart," replied West looking up at the curved walls of the wormhole above them. "The gridlines are the actual fabric of the spacetime continuum we live in — the Vacuum itself, and if these readings are right—" he pounded the recalcitrant readout again "—then the gaps between lines are exactly one Planck-length apart."

"What? That would make us—"

"—About the size of a quark nugget," finished West.

Max was thinking furiously. "When we entered the wormhole at warp speed, we must have punctured the wall. You can't traverse a space fold while in subspace. Our warp field actually poked a hole in the quantum foam and now we're flying through some sort of temporary universe bubble — a quantum-level extrusion out the side of the Black Gate. Our normal metric is unbelievably expanded in here—"

"—Or we're unbelievably tiny," interjected West.

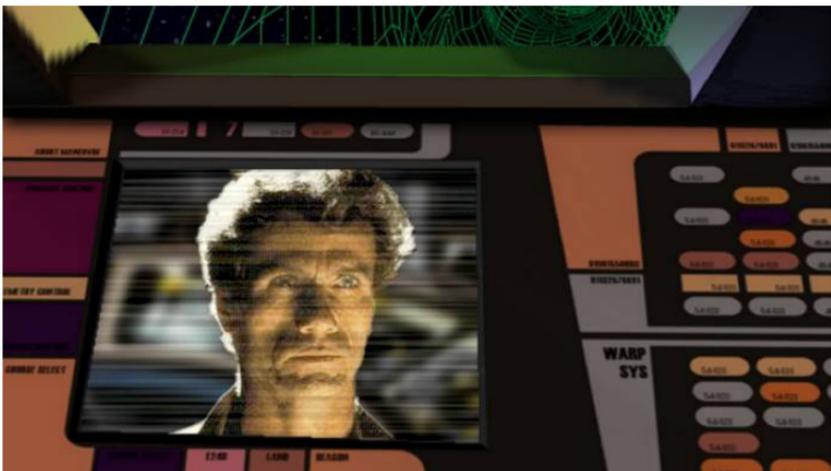
"Yeah, s'what I always suspected about you," said Max after making sure he saw her cast a quick glance at his pants. The corners of her lips turned imperceptibly upwards at West's ill-suppressed indignation. She continued her theorizing. "So right now the only thing protecting us from the environment outside and keeping us from disappearing in a puff of ghost particles is our own warp bubble."

West thought about Max's words. "Makes sense to m—"

Just then, the proximity alarm sounded. West checked the readout, then peered out the front window. "There's a ship approaching from three-hundred-thousand miles deeper inside the wormhole. Raven class, just like the one Claude flew."

He tuned the comm system to a general hailing frequency. The communications viewscreen on the front console crackled to life. At first it was filled with random static, interference from the quantum turbulences outside, but the image wavered and coalesced into a recognizable human face. West's eyes went wide, and at his side, Max let out a shocked gasp.

"Daddy!" she whispered.



The grim-visaged man stared out through the communication screen at West ignoring Max completely. At first there was no friendliness in his eyes, only suspicion and unspoken threats, but then his jaw unclenched into a tight smile in recognition of his former partner.

"Hello, West. You're looking careworn these days."

"Hi, Claude. You sure led us a merry chase," replied West in a neutral tone of voice. It seemed to him that there was something not right about Claude Vasser's face, or this

entire situation, but West couldn't put his finger on whatever it was.

"Yes, well, couldn't make it easy on Section 31, could I? Plus, the Orion Syndicate was sniffing around too. I assume you got my message."

"Yeah, I got it," said West.

"Did you find— *it*?"

"Yeah, we found it," said West. He held up the precious black box that contained the Omega power source in one hand for Claude to see.

At the word 'we', Claude seemed to notice for the first time the woman sitting by West's side. "Who've you got with you?" he asked, his former suspicion making a quick reappearance in his eyes.

Max had sat in silent torment all through West and her father's little reunion, but now she could contain herself no longer. "Daddy, it's me! It's Maxine!"

Claude's suspicious frown intensified. He regarded the unfamiliar woman for a few long seconds, then turned back to his old partner. "What are you trying to pull here, West? I know I was never the best father, but you think I wouldn't recognize my own daughter?"

"Apparently not," shot back West.

"Dad, don't you recognize me?" cried Max. Her tough shell was rapidly cracking and crumbling to dust under the assault of her father's perceived cold and heartless indifference.

But the image of Claude Vasser remained stolidly unaffected by the hurt in Max's brimming eyes. "Young lady, I don't know who you are or what your stake in this is,

but my daughter is sixteen years old back on Mars, a thousand lightyears from here."

Max and West looked at each other in confusion.

"That was twenty *years* ago, daddy!" exclaimed Max. She was about to go on, but West placed a hand on her shoulder.

He suddenly realized what it was that had been bothering him about Claude Vasser's appearance — the man didn't look a day older than he did the last time West had seen him, twenty years ago. "Claude," he ventured cautiously, "do you know what year it is?"

"What?"

"Just humor me and answer the question."

Through a skeptical scowl Claude said, "Twenty-three-*three*. October twentieth to be exact."

"Well, it *is* October..." began West, but Max interrupted him.

"Dad, it's twenty-three-*eighty*-three! I went to Starfleet Academy like I always told you I would, and I graduated a long time ago. I'm an officer now." She could tell the man on the viewscreen wasn't buying her story. "Your wife is Claudia Farmer. You had one child, me. We lived in Martian Colony 3 until I was eight, then we moved to Chryse. You said the schools were better there. I—"

"All that is in the public records, young lady," said her father stubbornly.

Max wiped away a single stray tear that had somehow managed to sneak through her emotional shield, furious at herself for showing even this tiny weakness and forcibly pulling herself back together. She had to convince her father of the truth. She gathered her strength and tried

again. "When we moved to Chryse, the other kids in school would pick on me — the new kid. I would come home in the afternoons with bruises and black eyes because I'd gotten into yet another fight. Mother would comfort me, but scold me for letting the bullies win again. She would tell me to be strong, to make my father proud. Be strong and the bullies will leave me alone. Never show them any weakness, never cry, never show any soft emotions, be tough, show them what Vassers are made of. It was the best advice Mother could think of to give her young daughter, because she knew that child would have to grow up without hardly ever seeing her father and would have to learn to take care of herself.

"So I did. I learned to be the toughest kid in school. Soon it was the kids that picked on me who were the ones going home after school with the bruises and black eyes. My father would have been so proud of me I thought. He was never home though, always away on another long cargo run. That was okay though because he was being strong, working hard to provide for Mother and me. I always looked up to him as my role model, the man who by his absence made me what I am today.

"And then he died and was buried on some Godforsaken planet out on the edge of explored space before we could even attend the funeral. Or so I thought. Now I find out my father is still alive, that he deliberately deceived me, and that he doesn't even recognize me anymore!"

During her impassioned plea, Max had undergone a startling transformation from the overwhelmed, frightened little girl longing for her father's love into an angry young woman demanding justifications for the wrongs of the past.

The silence in the *Rocinanté's* cockpit was thunderous. West sat motionless on his seat, darting nervous glances between the image of Claude on the comm screen and his strong-willed daughter sitting in the chair beside his. Even Gromit had stopped kvetching.

On the viewscreen, Claude Vasser squinted at the woman who had just berated him. There was something of the tone he recognized, the defiant clench of her jaw. The same he had seen on his daughter during those very few occasions his work had permitted him to return home. "Maxine? Is that really you?" he said warily. "How can that be? You're grown up."

"Yes, it's me, dad." A tremulous smile found its way onto Max's face. "It's... It's good to see you again."

"It's good to see you too," said Claude, breaking in to a warm smile of his own, "though I'm beginning to suspect it's been a little longer for you than it has for me. In which case we have a lot of catching up to do... and I have some explaining to do," he added almost apologetically after a moment's more thought.

"The twisted metric of this quantum wormhole must be affecting time as well as space," said West. "I wonder how much time has passed by outside while we've been in here. Will we get out to find everyone's aged *another* twenty years?"

The image of Claude Vasser wrinkled his brows in thought. "I knew there was some time slippage, but I had no idea it was this much." He turned his face towards Max. "I'm so sorry, Maxine. I never meant to be gone for so long — I just wanted a place to hide for a little while until Section 31 gave up the search. That's why I faked my

death. But I was going to come back to Mars and get you and your mother as soon as the coast was clear."

"Working for Section 31 wasn't all it was cracked up to be, eh?" said West somewhat snidely.

Claude smiled ruefully. "At first it was the best thing that had ever happened to me. I had unlimited resources at my disposal. I actually felt sorry for you for not having joined." He chuckled at the memory. "But after I discovered the Ancients' power device, I also found out that Section 31 was building a fleet of black ships in the Scorpio Sector. They were going to reverse-engineer the Ancient device I had retrieved and use it to power those ships, and then use that fleet to stamp out everyone they saw as a threat to the Federation. I realized then that Section 31 was totally evil and that I'd made a terrible mistake. I also knew I couldn't let them get their hands on the device so I came up with a plan to 'disappear'."

Max searched her memories. "The Scorpio Sector was destroyed by subspace weapons fifteen years ago. The whole place is a radiation-filled deathtrap. It's off limits."

On the comm screen, Claude Vasser nodded his head knowingly. "Section 31 covering their tracks. After I 'died' and they lost their chance to acquire the Ancient device, they destroyed the whole operation so no one would ever find out about it."

West picked up the story now. "So you faked your death, hid the Omega battery in plain sight where no one would suspect it to be, found a place for yourself to hide where no one would ever think of looking, and sent me that cryptic subspace email to retrieve it for you and bring it here."

"I was very careful. Plenty of witnesses saw my ship get blown up. Planted DNA evidence proved beyond doubt that it was my burned body in the wreckage. There was absolutely no reason for anyone to suspect that I wasn't really dead, so no one ever checked my empty grave. The only thing I didn't count on was the message taking twenty years to climb out of this damn wormhole," added Claude.

"But why, dad?" asked Max. "Why bring Omega here?"

Her father raised a surprised eyebrow. "Why, to destroy it, of course!" he said as if that fact should have been evident. "At first I thought it would be enough to hide it and hide myself for a while, but I've thought about it and realized that won't be enough. It needs to be destroyed. It's the only way to keep it from falling into Section 31's hands."

"Or the Orion Syndicate," added Max.

Claude waved a hand in dismissal. "They're nothing. Section 31 is the real threat. They tell themselves that everything they do is for the good of the Federation. I'm sure they justified their black fleet in the name of protecting the Federation and everything it stands for, but their very existence is an affront to the ideals of the Federation, of peace, honesty, integrity. If they get their hands on that device, they'll become an unstoppable juggernaut and the Federation as we know it will cease to exist."

Claude was cut off by a brilliant explosion of light outside, and the *Rocinanté's* deck heaved underneath West and Max as the shockwave hit. They managed to hold onto their seats, but Gromit went flying across the room and smacked into the back wall like a wet beanbag. He came to a rest in the corner, squeaking weakly.

West grabbed the controls and sent the *Rocinanté* on a wild series of evasive gyrations, though the twisting walls of their little Planck-scale wormhole made maneuvering difficult. Max meanwhile had switched to a rear view on one of the control console's viewscreens. There, outlined against the writhing green gridlines of vacuum energy was the unmistakable outline of a Defiant class starship.

"Section 31!" she hissed. "Looks like we didn't outsmart them after all."

Chapter 6

The Needs of the Many

He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.

William Faulkner

Speech upon receiving the Nobel Prize

The predatory outlines of a Defiant class starship loomed on the small viewscreen on the *Rocinanté's* control console. "Section 31!" hissed Max Vasser. "Looks like we didn't outsmart them after all. They're coming up fast from dead astern."

Another energy bolt blossomed in the rear viewscreen. "Hang on!" shouted Max.

West yanked the controls hard over causing the *Rocinanté* to swerve crazily. Behind the two pilot seats, Gromit rolled from the left wall of the cockpit to the right side. Outside, the phaser blasts from the pursuing ship passed to starboard, but just barely. "Here's where things get interesting," muttered West.

"What's happening?" yelled the image of Claude Vasser on the *Rocinanté's* little comm screen. His face showed worry and concern for his daughter and his old partner West.

"We're under attack by a Section 31 ship, dad!" yelled Max. She had to shout to be heard over the constant battle noises — the creaks and groans of stressed metals, the clamorous thrumming of shockwaves slamming against the hull outside, the frightened squealing of West's tribble. "They had twenty years to figure out your grave on *Serenity* was empty. They must have been monitoring it just on the off chance that someone would eventually show up who knew something about the Omega device, and they've been on our tail ever since."

Claude could be seen manipulating controls out of the viewscreen's field of view. After a few moments, he looked up at West and said, "I'm heading in your direction. Hold them off until I get there."

"Easy for you to say," replied West, but he barely spared the older man on the monitor a glance so occupied was he with keeping the *Rocinanté* from being hit by phaser fire from the warship behind them.

"Why don't you fire the rear weapons, West?" shouted Max. Another near hit rattled the cockpit forcing her to

hang onto the console before her. In the back, Gromit rolled from the right side of the cockpit to the left.

"Rear weapons?" barked West between grated teeth. He laughed humorlessly. "Sweetheart, this ain't a shiny Starfleet ship, it's a beat-up old cargo hauler. We've barely got any *front* weapons!"

Max thought furiously. There must be *something* they could do to fight back. Some way to strike back at the Section 31 ship — some way to slow them down just a little. "What about those little decoy drones?" she asked suddenly.

"What about them?" asked West.

"We could lob a couple behind us and overload their warp drives. Two miniature antimatter reactors exploding in your face ought to do a *little* damage!"

West's face lightened. "Great idea! Glad I thought of it. Here— you fly, I'll lob." He punched a contact and the flight controls disappeared from the console before him and reappeared on Max's side.

"Wha—? I don't know how to fly this bucket!" exclaimed Max.

But West was already out of his chair and heading aft. Over his shoulder he called, "Piece o' cake for an ace starfighter pilot like you," and then he was out the hatch.

Max cursed under her breath and placed her hands on the steering controls. After a few false starts that made the poor *Rocinanté* rock and scream in protest and made Gromit roll back across to the other side of the cockpit, she got the hang of it, and the ride got smoother. She marveled at the responsiveness and power of this 'beat-up old cargo hauler', as West called it. There was clearly a lot more to it

than met the eye. Now if only she could keep away from those phaser blasts.



A particularly close blast splashed across the *Rocinanté's* shields and almost knocked Max from her seat. "Hurry up, West!" she shouted down the corridor behind the cockpit.

West's voice returned through the intercom. "I'm set. Fire both tubes!"

Max's palm slapped the decoy firing control and she felt the *ka-thunk ka-thunk* of the small booby-trapped probes being ejected from the dorsal tubes. West burst back into the cockpit and fell into his seat and quickly focused the rear-view monitor on the two torpedo-shaped objects.

At the last moment, the Section 31 ship noticed the tiny obstacles in its way and tried to swerve aside, but it was too late. The probes' miniature warp cores overloaded and caught the vessel between two searing explosions of warp

plasma and gamma rays. For a few seconds, the blinding light washed out everything else, neither ship nor the green force lines of the quantum wormhole could be seen, and West and Max dared to hope that they had succeeded in destroying their enemy, but then the stubby prow of the Defiant class emerged from the fireball followed by the rest of the ship and they knew they were still in big trouble.

"Damn!" shouted West. "Is there no stopping these guys?"

To punctuate West's statement and demonstrate just how futile their attempt had been, a barrage of phaser fire spattered over the *Rocinanté's* shields. They flared bright green and sputtered fitfully as they tried to absorb the onslaught, but in the end the attack was too much. In a last angry flash, the shields collapsed, letting the last few phaser shots through to the hull.

West and Max somehow managed to retain their seat through the violent shaking, but a wide assortment of new bruises would tomorrow attest to the fact that they were banged against console edges and arm rests repeatedly. Circuits overloaded and relays fused, filling the cockpit with showers of sparks making them duck their heads, and acrid smoke constricted their throats and stung their eyes before the automatic filtration system could compensate. The lights flickered and shorted out, plunging them into darkness until the dim red emergency lights came on long moments later.

"Remind me to upgrade the shield generators after we get out of this mess," muttered West after he had recovered from the shock of that last hit.

"If we get out," was Max's grim muttered reply.

The comm screen on the control console flickered to life again. West expected it to be the captain of the Section 31 ship calling to demand their immediate surrender, but was surprised to see the craggy face of Claude Vasser again. In all the excitement, he had almost forgotten about the other man.

"Here's the plan," said the older Vasser without preamble. "You may or may not have noticed that the Ancient's Omega device doesn't appear on our primitive sensor scans. If it did, the Section 31 ship would already have beamed it away. You send me its coordinates so I can beam it over to my ship. I lead Section 31 away while you two make your escape. Got it?"

"No we don't 'got it!'" yelled Max. "They'll come after you!"

"That's the idea, Maxine. Section 31 doesn't give a damn about you two. All they want is Omega and to get revenge on me for defecting and ruining their plans."

"But you'll be killed!" pleaded Max. "There must be another way! You have to come with us, dad!"

At her side, West said in a calm voice, "He's right, sweetheart. It's the only way. Any other option and we *all* get killed." He started punching controls on his board. To the comm screen, he said, "I'm sending you the coordinates for the device, Claude."

"No! I won't let you do this! How can be so cold? He was your partner for God's sake!" Max grappled with West's arm to keep him from finishing transmitting the data to her father. "I didn't find my father alive after twenty years just so he can throw his life away!"

A terrible explosion from somewhere on the aft section of the *Rocinanté* jerked the deck out from under Max's feet and she staggered to her knees. West used the opportunity to stab in the final number sequence and hit the 'transmit' key. Half a second later, the Ancients' Omega device was enveloped in a cascade of transporter sparkles and faded from view.

The viewscreen image of Claude Vasser smiled sadly at his daughter. "Don't worry about me, Maxine. Listen to West; he understands. Your old man still has a few tricks left up his sleeve. You haven't seen the last of me." He paused and regarded his anguished daughter with clear affection. "You've grown up into a fine woman, Maxine. I'm proud of you. Tell your mother I love her... and... I love you too." He touched an off-camera control and the comm screen went dark.

West banked the *Rocinanté* in a tight loop that tossed Max back into her copilot seat and made Gromit roll and thump against the opposite wall again. Outside, the Section 31 ship whooshed past the small evading cargo runner and headed straight for Claude Vasser's ship just as he predicted.

"We can't just leave him," said Max to West in a last desperate attempt to change his mind. In her heart she knew what they were doing was the only reasonable course of action — even jettisoning Omega out into space and making a run for it wouldn't have worked; Section 31 wouldn't be satisfied until they had both the Omega device *and* exacted their revenge on her father — but she still found it impossible to accept her father's sacrifice.

West looked up from his controls at Max's distraught face. He felt a sudden pang of empathy for her. She tried to act so brash and uncompromising all the time, but he could see the carefully concealed vulnerability behind her mask.

"Trust your father, Max," he said emphatically. "If he says you haven't seen the last of him you can bet your life on it."

"That I could do," muttered Max disconsolately as she turned back to face forward. "But we're betting *his* life here, and that's a game I don't like."

But there was nothing she could do. Under West's guidance, the *Rocinanté* fled back the way it came while the black Section 31 ship dove deeper into the quantum realm in pursuit of Omega and her father. She couldn't imagine any other outcome than the death of her father — after all, what could a Raven class do against a souped-up Defiant class? She hoped and offered a silent prayer to the Great Bird that her father did indeed have one helluvan ace up his sleeve.

At her side, despite his optimistic words, West was thinking along the same dismal lines.

Their thoughts were interrupted by a tremendous flash of light. The whole inside of the quantum extrusion was suddenly filled with white brilliance too intense for their eyes to tolerate, and then the whole cockpit was turned upside down and rolled over and over again in a never-ending cartwheel. Walls, ceiling and floor became a blur, indistinguishable from each other in the frenetic gyration, and West, Max, and Gromit were brutally thrown around the small room in tangles of arms, legs, and fur. From somewhere in the midst of the maelstrom, Max thought she

heard West shout something about an Omega explosion, but she was too busy trying to keep from getting her brains smashed in to pay attention.

Outside, the Planck-length forcelines delineating the quantum vacuum units fluctuated wildly, shrinking and inflating repeatedly almost too quickly for the eye to follow as the energy from the destabilized Omega molecule poured into the constricted continuum, flooding it with the very fires of creation.

The forcelines squeezed together, then puckered as though the fabric of spacetime was folding up and turning itself inside out, then vanished from the universe. One tiny spaceship was expelled from the pocket of quantum foam back into normal Euclidean space at that exact instant. It tumbled slowly end over end in lazy, zero-gee somersault, its running lights extinguished, its engines cold, its windows dark. Only the emergency beacon in the nose possessed life, flashing its simple message with metronomic regularity.

Several hours later, the Search & Rescue vessel which had been dispatched from Serenity pulled alongside, attached a tractor beam, and towed the derelict craft back to safe harbor.

Epilogue

Reflections

*Even the death of friends will inspire us as much as their lives...
Their memories will be encrusted over with sublime and pleasing
thoughts, as monuments of other men are overgrown with moss;
for our friends have no place in the graveyard.*

Henry David Thoreau

One month later...

Max Vasser stood inside the softly lit viewing gallery of the orbital supply depot staring out the large transparent aluminum window into space. Below, the peaceful planet Serenity lifted its curved limb into view, and above, the stars shone brightly except where partially obscured behind

the numinous veil of the Briar Patch Nebula. But she barely noticed the view, just as she barely noticed anymore the dull ache of her bandaged, mending ribs.

Her thoughts were elsewhere and elsewhen. The calendar said it was one month since she had found her father alive, though she had only lived three days of that month in subjective time. The quantum fluctuations of the pocket universe in which she and West had found themselves had robbed her of the rest, just as it had robbed her father of twenty years of his time. It had been one month since she had found her father, one month since Section 31 had come after them, one month since her father had sacrificed his life to save hers and West's by detonating the Omega power source. One month since the pocket universe had vomited them out.

One month since her worldview had been turned upside-down.

She had always believed in the Federation, in what it stood for, had always believed in its basic goodness and lofty ideals. But the shocking discovery of the organization known as Section 31 called all that into question. Its very existence was an affront to everything she had believed the Federation had meant to her. True, Section 31 was a clandestine group that operated far above the ordinary governmental levels, but she found it impossible to believe that an organization that had such a fundamental influence on the very course of human history could go completely unnoticed. It was inconceivable that truly no one on the Federation Council or the Starfleet Admiralty was aware of its existence, and by being aware, giving tacit support to its unholy activities by their very silence.

That was not the Federation for which she had fought for so many years through so many wars. How could she continue to give it her support?

She gazed out at the countless sharp points of light in the black sky and brooded.

"He's not really gone," said a familiar voice from behind her, "as long as we remember."

She saw West's reflection in the glass standing behind her own. He in turn was watching her through her reflection in the window.



"Who are you, West?" she said quietly, moodily, without turning to face him. "I mean really. And don't tell me you're just some smalltime nobody cargo runner. I want to know who you really are."

West shrugged noncommittally and advanced a step towards the window. He addressed her reflection in the cold glass. "I am what you see," he said in an equally

hushed voice, though a small smile had crept onto his face. Neither of them wanted to shatter the almost churchlike aura of the quiet gallery. "I try to make a living in a crazy, mixed up universe. Now and then I apply the bootprint of justice to the buttocks of evil. I try to make a difference."

"How, West?" asked Max. "How do you do it? How can you look at the universe in that ridiculous, optimistic way you have after all the death and injustice you must have seen? How can one man—"

"—or woman," interjected West pointedly.

"—make a difference?" finished Max.

To West it was clear that Max was desperately searching for some fundamental truth that eluded her, some justification for the decisions she had made throughout her life. He knew he couldn't give her that, but he thought a moment, then replied with the best advice he knew.

"The universe is a vast place, full of wondrous marvels waiting to be discovered, and nightmares ready to devour your soul. We are so tiny in comparison... The only thing we truly have any control over is whether we are a force for good... or for evil."

At that, Max turned around and looked into West's eyes, trying to discern whether she saw good or evil there, and for the first time in three days or a month, she smiled.

"I think my dad would be proud of me," she declared.

"I know he would," replied West, his smile growing wider.

Max turned back to the window. "What do you think happened to him?"

West shrugged again. He came forward and stopped by Max's side and placed his hands on the railing in front of

the window and joined her in staring out at the stars. "When Claude broke the containment on Omega, he ripped that little quantum pocket wide open. Heck, you know how quantum foam is — *anything* could have happened. Literally. Personally, I think he started a brand new Big Bang, and that little pocket wormhole we were in budded off our universe to start a brand new one."

Max smiled at the thought. "That would make him 'God' there, wouldn't it?" she chuckled softly.

"Yeah, I suppose," replied West, amused by the notion of his old partner ascending to such a lofty office.

For a while, West and Max just stood side by side looking out into the galaxy, each engrossed in his and her own thoughts. Finally, Max took a deep breath. West could tell she had come to a major decision of some kind, but kept quiet, knowing she'd tell him at her own pace.

"West, I've been thinking..." began Max. She was unusually hesitant.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah..." Again the hesitation, but her next words came blurting out, as if she was afraid that if she didn't say them quickly she would lose her nerve. "I'm coming with you," she said. "That is... if you'll have me." She looked expectantly into West's eyes. His next words would determine the course of the rest of her life.

West raised a surprised eyebrow, but his smile didn't diminish. He decided to test her resolve. "Gee, I dunno," he began. "You know I've only got the one cabin aboard the *Rocinanté*..."

Max smiled a supremely confident smile and took a step towards him. At the sight of her expression, West actually

took a half-step backwards, but she grabbed him by the shoulders and planted a long, firm kiss on his lips.

When she released him, there was no doubt about the future left in his mind.

"Evil, prepare for butt-kicking!" he cried.

