

CHAPTER 1

Earth Year 2328

Location: Moon orbiting Delavi III

Mission Elapsed Time: 1 hour, 14 minutes, 38 seconds

Lieutenant David Gold saw the shadow moving in the corner of his left eye an instant before he felt the heat of disruptor energy flash past his face.

"Back!"

He yelled the warning as the harsh yellow bolt tore into the carved stone wall to his right. Chips of warm sharp rock pelted him, peppering his uniform and stinging his exposed skin as he ducked back around the bend in the tunnel.

Weighty footfalls echoed in the narrow passageway, coming closer with each passing heartbeat. Gold swung his phaser rifle up to meet the new threat, but was not fast enough as he caught sight of a figure with stark white hair moving to his left. Ensign Rha-Teramaet stepped around the corner of the tunnel, the muzzle of his weapon leading the way as the Efrosian pressed the firing stud. Bright orange energy lanced from the phaser rifle followed immediately by a grunt of pain as Teramaet found his target, and Gold then heard the sound of something heavy crashing to the ground.

"Are you all right?" asked Lieutenant Commander Dilat th'Sena, the Andorian security officer and leader of Gold's away team. She spoke as she walked backward, covering their rear as the trio continued to advance deeper into the underground passages.

Gold nodded. "I'm fine, Commander," was all he could say before new disruptor fire echoed in the corridor and he saw Teramaet backpedaling and firing his weapon again to cover his retreat. The harsh yellow hues of two disruptor bolts chewed into the wall as the Efrosian scrambled for cover. Dropping to one knee, Gold pivoted until he was leaning into the narrow passageway, aiming his phaser rifle ahead of him.

All but cloaked in shadow, the corridor was illuminated only by a series of emitters strung haphazardly along the tunnel's low ceiling and connected by optical cabling. It almost was enough to conceal the Cardassian hugging the near wall, his dark armor helping him to blend in with the black rock in the dimly lit corridor. Gold caught the light reflecting off the soldier's oily skin and adjusted his aim before pressing the rifle's firing stud. The weapon's beam was like a flare igniting in the tunnel, highlighting the Cardassian as the phaser strike caught him high in the chest. The sentry was thrown backward, bouncing off the rock wall before collapsing in a disjointed heap to the dusty floor.

"Nice shooting, Lieutenant." Teramaet rose from his place of concealment with his own weapon aimed ahead of him as he stepped back into the corridor.

"You too," Gold replied, using the muzzle of his phaser rifle to indicate the first Cardassian. Near the fallen sentry's right hand was the disruptor pistol that appeared to be his only weapon, which Teramaet scooped up and deposited in the satchel he wore slung over his left shoulder. He repeated the action with the other stunned soldier.

Looking both behind and ahead of them at the otherwise empty passageway, th'Sena frowned.

"Resistance is lighter here than I expected. I would think that they would redeploy their remaining forces to keep us from getting this far."

It was an assessment with which Gold could not take issue. The Cardassians occupying this isolated outpost that had been discovered inside Federation territory- situated beneath the surface of a barren moon that was the only natural satellite of the uninhabited planet listed in Federation stellar cartography databases as Delavi III- had certainly known of the U.S.S. Gettysburg's arrival in the system. It had been an unfortunate reality that could not be helped, at least according to the briefing Gold and the rest of the assault group had been given by the Gettysburg's captain, Mark Jameson. Based on reports provided by Starfleet Intelligence, the outpost was being used as a covert surveillance platform, monitoring the movements of ships belonging to the Federation and her allies, with an emphasis on the patrol patterns of Starfleet vessels.

It was a disconcerting if not unsurprising revelation, given recent strained relations between the Federation and the Cardassian Union. In the years that had passed since first contact, the militaristic

empire had displayed a fierce desire to expand its borders. Freely planting its flag on sovereign worlds and laying claim to those planets' natural resources- regardless of the presence of an indigenous population- Cardassians seemed as antagonistic as did the Klingons. Add to that a cunning nature that seemed to befit a Romulan, and the Cardassians possessed the makings of a formidable opponent, one that would be making the lives of those serving in the Federation Diplomatic Corps miserable for some time to come.

Not that the tricky political situation between the two governments mattered to Gold right now. The only concern at the moment was carrying out the assignment given to him and the rest of the assault group: Capture the outpost, take all personnel into custody for transfer to a Starfleet Intelligence detainment center, and secure any information contained in on-site computer banks or files. The action was sure to ignite a firestorm of controversy between the two governments, but Gold figured the Cardassians would face a challenge when explaining their presence in Federation space.

With stealth unavailable as an option, Jameson had instead chosen tenacity and boldness of action, maneuvering the starship into standard orbit around the moon less than a minute after dropping out of warp, and all while activating communications countermeasures to ensure the Cardassians could not call for help. Captain Jameson had next dispatched a fifty-member assault group to secure the outpost, which, according to Starfleet Intelligence briefings, possessed a complement of twenty-two.

Using sensors in an attempt to pinpoint the Cardassians' individual locations within the underground complex, it was quickly discovered that the moon's mineral composition was compromising the scan's quality- no doubt a facet the Cardassians had welcomed when constructing the outpost in the first place. With no choice but to adapt to the situation as necessary, the raiding party was quickly divided into smaller teams by the Gettysburg's Vulcan first officer, Commander T'Vel, who coordinated the new deployment from a hasty command post established in one of the outpost's captured landing bays. That was when the operation kicked into high gear, with Gettysburg personnel maneuvering deeper into the subterranean complex and moving with calculated haste sufficient to capture nearly half of the outpost's crew while suffering no casualties.

It was tracking down the remaining Cardassians that now was proving difficult, a challenge made even more daunting by the news from Captain Jameson that he was taking the Gettysburg out of the system in an attempt to conceal its presence from possible Cardassian ship traffic. Consequently, the assault group was on its own until the starship returned, which, according to Jameson, would not be for nearly six more hours.

So until then, Gold mused, we've got the place to ourselves.

Reaching into a pocket of his dark maroon field operations jacket, he retrieved his tricorder and activated it. On the device's miniaturized display he saw a technical schematic of the outpost as updated by Gettysburg sensors. "Scans are still imprecise," he said after a moment, "but the command center should be at the end of this corridor, seventy meters beyond the next bend."

Nodding at the report, th'Sena said, "Guess we should see if that thing is right." With that, the Andorian stepped in front of Gold and TeraMaet, taking point as the trio made their way down the passageway.

"I'll cover the rear," Gold said.

* * *

Earth Year 2377

Location: U.S.S. da Vinci

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

Unsure of what she had just heard, Lieutenant Sarjenka frowned as she looked at her new commanding officer, David Gold. Seated behind his desk in the captain's ready room of the U.S.S. da Vinci, he seemed distracted, his eyes fixed on an indistinct point somewhere in front of him as he stroked his chin with the fingers of his right hand. It was a continuance of the behavior he had displayed since her arrival, though Sarjenka noted that the captain's mood appeared to have darkened in only the few minutes that had elapsed since her entering the room. Her own question had gone unheard, and she was opening her mouth to say something else when Gold suddenly looked up, blinking several times before turning to regard her.

"I'm sorry, Doctor," he said, swiveling his chair until he faced her and placing his elbows atop his desk. "My mind wandered there for a minute." For the first time since boarding the ship at Starbase 347, Sarjenka noted that the captain appeared much older than she recalled- even as recently as her graduation from the Starfleet Medical Academy. There were new lines around his eyes and mouth, and the creases along his forehead seemed more pronounced. His hair, gray and thinning, seemed to have lightened further around his temples and above his eyes. He looked tired, or sad, or perhaps both. As she watched, the captain's demeanor shifted before her eyes, his momentary preoccupation being forced aside to make room for the temperate yet resolute commander she had always known him to be. He smiled, but it was an expression that to Sarjenka lacked his usual warmth.

"This is supposed to be my official welcome aboard to you," he said. "Did you enjoy your leave? I trust your parents are well?"

Sarjenka nodded. "It was good to see them again, sir. They send their regards." The visit to her home on Drema IV had come after her graduation, her first such opportunity to make the trip from Earth. During her leave, she had told anyone who would listen about her time at the Academy and her pending first assignment as a physician and a Starfleet officer: Assistant to Dr. Elizabeth Lense, the chief medical officer of the U.S.S. da Vinci.

"You've been aboard for, what, a day or so now?" Gold asked. He was making what Sarjenka could discern was an effort to remain cordial, but she could still tell that he was grappling with whatever seemed to trouble him. "You've inspected the sickbay?"

"I think the facilities are exceptional, sir," Sarjenka said. "I understand they were upgraded last year after the incident at Galvan VI." No sooner did the words leave her mouth than she realized what she had said. There was nothing to be done about that now, however, as she saw recognition cloud the captain's eyes. It was fleeting, but still unmistakable.

"I know they're not as spacious as what you'll find on other ships," he said, his voice quiet now, "but it serves us well enough. Most of the time, anyway." He paused as he said that, dropping his gaze to look at his left hand, which Sarjenka knew was a biosynthetic prosthesis. It had been engineered as a replacement for the hand he had lost during the incident at Galvan VI, a mission that also had exacted massive damage on the da Vinci itself and taken the lives of nearly half of the ship's crew.

Sarjenka wondered how much of the pain inflicted during that tragedy- both physical and psychological- might still be harbored by Gold and the other crew members who had survived the fateful mission. Would that explain the captain's mood? Instinct told her that was not the case. Gold had greeted her at Starbase 347, to which she had traveled from Drema IV in order to rendezvous with the da Vinci, and he had been warm and engaging from the moment they met in the station officers' club. Whatever had caused the emotional shift he was now experiencing, it had occurred after their initial meeting and the ship's departure from the starbase.

The captain said nothing for another moment, during which the only sound Sarjenka could hear was the low mild thrum of the da Vinci's warp engines. She resisted the urge to fix her gaze on the small viewing port behind Gold, through which she saw stars stretching past in brilliant hues of red and blue as the ship pushed through subspace.

Instead, she studied Gold's face and noted that he again looked to be falling into deep thought.

Straightening her posture in her chair, she cleared her throat. "I've only had a single brief meeting with Dr. Lense. She doesn't seem at all happy that I've been assigned to assist her." The observation was a massive understatement, but during her years spent among representatives from other species, Sarjenka had learned to temper her tendency toward speaking in a straightforward manner. In particular, humans had an inordinate number of traditions and rules for etiquette- as many written as not- that served to govern their social interactions. It had taken her a long time to grasp the essence of those mores, but in the end she felt her efforts had greatly assisted her in her dealings with other species.

Gold sighed, dropping his hand back to the desk as he once more looked to her. "Getting to know Lense can be a daunting prospect, I'll grant you that, but she's a top notch CMO. You've got yourself a good teacher."

While she knew the comment was meant to sound encouraging, Sarjenka could not help giving voice to

her own concerns on the matter. "I've only spoken to her for a few minutes, but I get the distinct impression that she's not agreeable to taking on the role of teacher." Indeed, Dr. Lense had expressed her utmost displeasure at any perceived need for an assistant, asserting that her pregnancy- currently in an advanced state as measured by humans and their typical gestation cycle- had not dulled her ability to carry out her responsibilities. Despite her blunt remarks, which at least could be appreciated for the honest manner in which they were delivered, the physician had gone so far as to assure Sarjenka that it was not a personal animosity held toward her.

"Every Starfleet officer is a teacher as well as a student," Gold countered, his tone slightly harsher now.

"Lense will just have to learn to appreciate having you around, but you'll have to earn her respect as you settle in. If you can't manage that, we can always have your original orders to Drema Station reinstated." Sarjenka bristled at the mention of the Starfleet deep space facility located within her home planet's solar system, constructed there soon after the Federation's designation of Drema IV as a protectorate. It also was the site of her requested first assignment following her graduation from Starfleet Academy, and which would have enabled her to use her newfound medical knowledge to benefit her people. Despite her original intentions, Sarjenka had been unable to refuse the offer to join the da Vinci's crew and serve under the man who had done so much on her behalf by recommending her for Starfleet Academy and acting as a mentor throughout her tenure as a student at that august institution.

Now, however, Sarjenka felt a momentary jab of anger that Gold might now be suggesting she was not up to the assignment he had offered her. Was the captain simply offering a stark appraisal of her competence, or was he instead attempting to inspire her to rise to the challenge he had set forth?

"I have every intention of carrying out this assignment to the best of my ability, Captain," she said, raising her chin in what she hoped was a look of self-confidence.

For the first time since her arrival in the ready room, Gold's features seemed to soften, and he nodded as he offered what she decided was the first genuine smile of the meeting. "I'm sorry, Sarjenka. I've every confidence that you'll do exactly that." Taking a deep breath, he released it as an audible sigh, and again she saw that the captain's thoughts were elsewhere, and focusing on something he obviously found unpleasant. His frown deepened into a scowl at the sound of the ship's intercom whistle echoing within the confines of the room, and Sarjenka heard a grunt of disapproval at the interruption as he tapped his combadge.

"Gold here," he said, biting off each word. "What is it?"

"Gomez, Captain," replied the voice of Commander Sonya Gomez, the da Vinci's executive officer and leader of the ship's detachment of technicians and specialists from the Starfleet Corps of Engineers. "I apologize for the interruption, sir, but we've received new orders from Starfleet Command."

Muttering something under his breath that Sarjenka could not hear, Gold shook his head as he rose from his seat. "On my way." He glanced to her as he moved toward the door. "Looks like we're done here, Doctor."

Surprised by the abrupt dismissal, Sarjenka nodded in acknowledgment, even though Gold could no longer see her as he moved toward the door. Rising to her feet, she followed him as the door slid aside, allowing him to exit his ready room and step onto the da Vinci's main bridge.

"Report," she heard him snap as he stepped down into the bridge's command well and moved toward his chair, from which Commander Gomez was rising. Sarjenka remained on the upper deck, near the entrance to the ready room, observing the exchange between Gold and his second-in-command.

Offering the captain the padd she held in her right hand, Gomez replied, "We've been ordered to the Betrisius Major system, sir. It's home to a planet that has petitioned for Federation membership."

Reaching up to push a length of her dark hair from her eyes, she sighed, which to Sarjenka sounded like one of resignation. "It seems our diplomatic envoys have run into some trouble there, and they've requested Starfleet assistance, and we're- "

"The only ship that's available," Gold said, finishing the sentence. "Has a familiar ring, doesn't it?"

Eschewing the command chair that Gomez had vacated for him, he instead dropped his gaze to the padd, glowering at the inanimate object as he scanned whatever information was displayed upon its screen. "I see the diplomats are as generous as ever with the details as to exactly why they want us there, not that

it's important for us to be informed or prepared or anything like that." When he shook his head, Sarjenka saw the expression of disgust that darkened the captain's features. "It never ceases to amaze me how much a politician can talk, and yet rarely if ever say anything useful."

Gomez frowned, her eyes conveying concern as she regarded her captain. "Sir," she said as she leaned closer, her voice low but still audible to Sarjenka, "is something wrong? Is there anything I can do?"

If he recognized his first officer's attempt to remain discreet, Gold appeared uninterested in such overtures. "You can mind your duties, Gomez," he replied, his tone and volume clear indications that any topics not pertaining to the da Vinci's new mission were not welcome. "Tell Abramowitz that I want a briefing from her about this system and its people by 1900 hours. If there is an emergency, it'd be nice if Corsi and her people had a heads-up, as well."

He was in full command mode now, with the rest of the bridge crew turning to the tasks he dispensed and assisting him to develop a plan even before the details of the new assignment were made clear. Carol Abramowitz, the ship's cultural specialist, surely would be able to provide an in-depth background briefing on the Betrisius Major system. With his order to ensure that the da Vinci's chief of security, Lieutenant Commander Domenica Corsi, also be informed of the situation, it was obvious that the captain- with little helpful information on which to base his preparations- was anticipating trouble.

Would such predictions prove warranted? As she contemplated the answer to that question, Sarjenka realized that for the first time in her brief Starfleet career, this was not a test or a training simulation. The events taking place around her, as well as those which soon would unfold when the da Vinci arrived at its destination, were very real indeed.

An interesting first day, I think.

CHAPTER 2

As she materialized within the confines of the already-fading transporter beam and became aware of her surroundings- an outdoor promenade illuminated by the light of a midday sun- Sarjenka remained still, savoring the moment as long as possible without being noticed.

With a cool breeze beginning to filter through her shoulder-length reddish-gold hair, she raised her face toward the sun and felt her cheeks warm up. She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath, noting the somewhat spicy tinge to the air. It possessed a moist allure that was altogether different from Drema IV, and definitely refreshing when compared to the artificially recycled atmosphere aboard the da Vinci.

Smiling, Sarjenka forgave herself for the bit of added romanticism to the moment, but she felt she was owed it. After all, Betrisius III was only the fourth planet she had visited in her life.

A hand came to rest on her shoulder. Opening her eyes, Sarjenka turned to see Carol Abramowitz, one of the growing number of her new crewmates with whom she was becoming more familiar. Her closely cropped dark hair offered a stark frame for her alabaster skin. Her soft brown eyes and thin smile created an appearance Sarjenka found friendly, even comforting.

"We're heading out, Sarjenka," Abramowitz said, and Sarjenka noticed the other members of the da Vinci away team already walking along the paved promenade that traced a wandering path through what resembled a modern business district.

"Thank you, Dr. Abram- I mean, Carol," Sarjenka said, offering a sheepish smile as she remembered Abramowitz's desire to be on a first-name basis. She lagged behind to walk with the cultural specialist as the rest of the away team- the small Bynar computer specialist named Soloman, accompanied by deputy security chief Vance Hawkins and a pair of security personnel whose names she could not recall offhand- moved off at a brisker pace.

Following the path, Sarjenka quickly found herself inundated by her surroundings. All around her, steady streams of information and what appeared to be product advertisements vied for the attention of passersby from stories-high viewscreens mounted to the exteriors of several of the taller structures.

Ground vehicles traversed the streets while pedestrians crossed to and from various buildings and shops along the promenade. A number of citizens- known in this region as "Lisqual"- were dressed in drab utilitarian coverall garments, custodians tending to construction or repair work or even performing more mundane tasks such as picking up trash or cleaning windows.

As for the Lisqual themselves, Sarjenka was struck by their similarity to members of the Orion species

with which she was familiar. Still, the green hue of their skin was more muted than that of the infamous species known primarily for their slave-trading practices, and the Lisqual also featured elongated jaws as well as an additional pair of nostrils on their slender noses. Much like the Bajorans, a ridged row of cartilage extended from the bridge of the nose, moving up the center of the face and forehead and disappearing beneath the hairline.

They passed a small forested park that featured an inviting blanket of lush green grass, and Sarjenka smiled at the scenes of children running and playing as their caretakers watched over them. For the children, all was as it should be, with nary a concern in the world. For a brief moment, Sarjenka envied them their innocence and wondered what her childhood might have been like had she been so fortunate. Looking away from the park, she noted that many of the locals seemed to take little or no notice of the strangers in their midst. There were a few nods of recognition and some finger-pointing in their direction, but for the most part the people seemed almost blase about the presence of the Starfleet officers. Of course, Sarjenka knew that the Federation had been in open contact with this world for more than a standard year. The Lisqual and the other societies of this planet had received ample opportunity to become accustomed to the notion of extraterrestrials. Indeed, judging from everything she had seen up to this point, this place was the very picture of what almost certainly passed for normal everyday life on this world.

If that's the case, she wondered, then what's the emergency? Why are we here?

"Your first away mission, right?" Abramowitz asked after they had been walking for a few minutes.

Sarjenka nodded. "Yes. I have to admit to being more than a little excited. I still don't understand why the captain chose me to be part of the away team, rather than Dr. Lense. Surely, he doesn't believe her incapable of carrying out her duties due to her pregnancy."

"Hardly," Abramowitz replied. "Given that the Lisqual are petitioning for Federation membership, Captain Gold thought it would be a good idea to exhibit a nice racial and cultural cross-section of the da Vinci crew. You're the first Dreman in Starfleet, so that makes you special." Smiling, she added, "Don't let it go to your head, though."

"I won't," Sarjenka said, only then realizing that Abramowitz was teasing her. "Were you nervous on your first away mission, Carol?"

"Absolutely," replied the cultural specialist. "I remember it like it was yesterday. I've been in Starfleet for twelve years now, but the da Vinci was my first shipboard assignment. We'd been ordered to Ligon II to repair an orbital control station. Working with the Ligonians proved...well, challenging is a polite word for it. Their codes of conduct among each other are well-defined to say the least, and they're not very keen on entertaining strangers. I was the one who got to smooth things over whenever anyone's feathers got ruffled. Ask Pattie to do her impression of the Ligonian communications chief sometime. It still cracks me up."

"How'd Captain Gold react to all this?" Sarjenka asked.

Abramowitz shrugged. "No differently than usual, I suppose. He didn't lead the team, Commander Salek did- he was the first officer before Commander Gomez. The captain doesn't usually lead away teams, honestly- I was surprised he came down for this one. Anyhow, Ligon may have been a wild time for me, but for everyone else it was fairly routine."

Though she pondered what the other woman might consider "routine" for David Gold, Sarjenka refrained from asking her to elaborate. While she possessed a connection with Gold that gave her a broader perspective of the man's charm and warmth, it did not follow that everyone had shared such opportunities to know him that way- particularly subordinate members of his crew.

As they continued their sojourn along the promenade, Sarjenka noticed that they were approaching a nondescript building, its most prominent feature being a wide solid case of stone steps. A small group of people were descending those steps, and as she and Abramowitz drew closer, Sarjenka saw Captain Gold standing with Commander Sonya Gomez as well as the ship's security chief, Domenica Corsi, and a trio of Lisqual. One of the natives, a female, was dressed in a set of earth-toned, loose-fitting robes, while her two companions each wore uniforms, complete with emblems and other accoutrements that suggested to Sarjenka that they were members of the local law enforcement or military entity.

She noted as she and the rest of the away team drew closer that Captain Gold's expression was that of someone not in a mood to be kept waiting.

Uh oh.

"Glad you could join us, people," he said in a taut voice as Sarjenka and the rest of the away team drew closer. To her, it was obvious that he was still dealing with whatever had been troubling him during their private meeting. Despite his efforts to compartmentalize such concerns in favor of concentrating on the current mission, some of that agitation was still visible. Sarjenka noted the passing look of confusion and even mild disapproval on the face of Commander Gomez, but the da Vinci first officer quickly covered up the lapse.

Gesturing toward the Lisqual female, Gold said, "This is Dr. Luluma. She's a physician attached to several committees overseeing the regional penal and reformation system." As he introduced her and Abramowitz to the doctor, Sarjenka followed the cultural specialist's lead and mimicked her actions as she offered what she gathered was a typical Lisqual greeting: crossing her arms at the wrists and hugging them to her chest while offering a slight bow.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Doctor," Sarjenka said when Luluma's gaze moved to her.

Returning the gesture of greeting, Luluma replied, "The pleasure is mine." The universal translator in Sarjenka's combadge made the Lisqual woman's words sound clipped and formal.

"You and Dr. Luluma will probably be working together," Gold said, "along with Dr. Lense, of course. There've been some new details brought to light about the situation here that weren't included in the pre-mission briefing, and frankly, we're exposing ourselves to some risk." Nodding toward Commander Corsi and her contingent of security personnel, he added, "I'm ordering additional security personnel, and they'll be meeting up with us shortly. While we're down here, no one travels alone, and we're maintaining yellow-alert protocols. Am I clear?" He looked directly at Sarjenka, a bit of concern showing through his crisp words.

"Very clear, sir," Sarjenka said, hoping to offer him some assurance in response to what she saw in his eyes. The look on his face was reminiscent of a similar expression she had seen on her father Eliatriel's face numerous times. Seeing it on Gold now served to calm some of her building anxiety.

After a moment, Gold said, "We've got a lot to do in a short time, so we're splitting up. Abramowitz and Sarjenka, Dr. Luluma will brief you on the situation while you accompany her to the central medical facility. Gomez here has already heard the highlights." As he said that, Sarjenka noted the first officer's expression. She too appeared troubled, but also was endeavoring to keep her features schooled. What might be bothering her?

"Soloman," Gold continued, "you're with me. I want your assessment of the technical side of things." To Corsi, he said, "Corsi, you're my shadow. Deploy your people between our two groups."

"Aye, sir," the security chief replied, offering a curt nod that seemed even more formal thanks to her lean angular features and the way her dark blond hair was pulled back into a tight functional bun at the back of her head. Turning to her security detail, she said, "Banks, Hawkins, you're with Commander Gomez. Konya, you come with me." Hawkins exchanged smiles with Abramowitz at that and Sarjenka understood the shared looks, given that the pair were in a romantic relationship.

"Not to worry, ladies," said the chief petty officer, his voice more than a bit boastful. "I'll keep you safe." He was offering an embellished bow when Banks stepped up behind him and slapped him across the back of his head.

"We're on the clock, Chief," she said.

Rubbing his bald crown, Hawkins grinned. "I probably deserved that."

"Yes, you did," Abramowitz countered, with Sarjenka giggling in spite of herself.

With Hawkins and Banks falling in behind them and maintaining a discreet distance in order to better scan their surroundings and the Lisqual pedestrians they passed, the group began walking down the busy thoroughfare. The two uniformed officers that had been standing with Luluma took up point positions, leading the way and leaving the doctor to walk alongside Sarjenka and Abramowitz.

"Forgive me, Doctor," Sarjenka said after a moment, unable to temper her curiosity. "Captain Gold said you worked for the penal and reformation system. What does that mean? Do you provide medical

treatment for prisoners?"

Bowing her head, Luluma replied, "After a fashion. My work involves reforming those who have committed crimes against our society. Once you have had an opportunity to understand the reformation processes we employ, you will better be able to assist us."

"You said it involves behavioral modification," Gomez said. For the second time, Sarjenka noted uncertainty and perhaps even disapproval in the commander's expression.

Luluma nodded. "For generations, my people were plagued by crime. Our prisons were filled to overflowing, and our society was in danger of collapsing in on itself. However, we finally developed a means to not only eliminate the need for the incarceration of criminals, but also to rehabilitate them- including our most violent offenders- and lead them back to being contributors to our civilization rather than simply plundering it."

"Behavioral modification," Abramowitz said, repeating Gomez's earlier comment. "What exactly do you do?"

As though steeling herself to deliver unpleasant news, the Lisqual physician replied, "We utilize what we call a neural mediator, a small device that is surgically implanted into each prisoner following their criminal conviction and sentencing as prescribed by our laws. At that point, we no longer refer to them as criminals, but instead as 'reformants.' For the duration of their sentence, each reformant receives a steady broadcast of instructions and information via our worldwide computer network to their individual mediator implant, which is designed to stimulate the emotional and cognitive areas of the brain and induce chemical reactions that foster rehabilitative behavior. It takes time, but eventually the new thought processes take hold without need for the mediator, and the approach is long proven to all but eliminate recidivism."

"The process must be fairly complex," Gomez said, "for you to be able to so control your crimin...I mean, reformants...without the need for prisons. You're basically saying that you alter their personalities so that they'll do what you want them to do." Sarjenka noted the hint of accusation in the commander's voice, and felt uneasy as she regarded the new expression of uncertainty on Luluma's face.

"Sonya," Abramowitz said, her tone low and cautioning.

Frowning, Luluma said, "I understand your apprehension, Commander. The mediator does give us a high degree of control over a reformant's mind. In fact, similar devices are also used by our military as a means of facilitating training as well as the forwarding of orders and related information. Imagine an army that can be organized and maneuvered via computer control so that they are always where they need to be with respect to a battle plan, able to engage the enemy in the correct numbers and at the precise time and location for maximum effect."

"I can imagine it quite easily," Gomez said. "We've faced an enemy that uses similar technology and tactics. Forgive me, Doctor, but to me it sounds as though you're robbing these people of their free will." Bristling at the commander's overt condemnation, Luluma said, "We are talking about people who have committed crimes, everything from minor offenses to the most heinous of acts- murder, rape, child abuse. By definition, they are incapable of functioning within an orderly society. This program offers them a chance to regain their place among our people and has been successful for generations."

"You said you've eliminated the need for incarceration," Abramowitz said, her brow furrowed. "What happens to them once these...mediators are implanted and operating?" Sarjenka wondered if the cultural specialist was struggling to maintain the strict objectivity her duties required of her.

Luluma drew a deep breath before replying, "While they are in the custody of the penal system, reformants perform all manner of services and tasks designed to benefit all of our people: construction, utility administration, waste management. These and other labors that are unglamorous and yet still very much required in order to keep a society functioning. They do this for the duration of their sentence, after which they are returned to their former status as private citizens. The mediators remain in place, of course, as a means of further dissuading a return to former unacceptable behavior."

Despite her apprehension- and risking what she thought might be a backlash from Commander Gomez-Sarjenka said, "The Federation has made similar attempts at criminal rehabilitation." She recalled from her studies at Starfleet Academy several instances of research and testing of procedures designed to alter

the behavior of violent criminals or those suffering from any number of psychological disorders. Experiments conducted on Federation penal colonies such as Tantalus V, Elba II, and even the New Zealand settlement on Earth stood out in her recollection. "However, I must admit that none of those occurrences matched the...extent to which you've progressed."

"You disapprove," Luluma said.

Shaking her head, Sarjenka replied, "I didn't say that." Even as she spoke the words, however, her eyes were drawn to the Lisqual moving around and past their group. Across the promenade, she saw a man emptying refuse from a collection container. Was he working honestly- or as a conscript to the government? She caught sight of two delivery workers and then a female conducting maintenance on some form of utility junction. Passing by her side along the walkway was a courier.

Were any of these people of their own mind, or were they simply programmed drones? The very notion of imposing such unnatural restrictions on free will across a segment of the populace- even if it happened to be the least desirable segment- ran counter to everything she believed as a healer.

"Your silence speaks volumes, young woman," Luluma said after a moment before looking away. When she returned her attention to the Starfleet officers, there was a new conviction in her eyes. "Please know that my role in this process is as a physician. I and other doctors like me oversee the implantation procedures, and I do so because I truly care for the life and safety of each reformant. If you can refrain from judging my people in undue haste, you can help me care for them as they deserve."

"What sort of help are you looking for?" Gomez asked. Though Sarjenka was certain the commander still harbored misgivings, she apparently had set them aside for the time being.

When the doctor answered this time, her words were laced with fatigue and perhaps even a hint of resignation. "The reformants are being turned against us."

CHAPTER 3

Earth Year 2328

Location: Moon orbiting Delavi III

Mission Elapsed Time: 1 hour, 26 minutes, 11 seconds

Lieutenant Gold pressed himself against the rough uneven surface of the tunnel's rock wall, aiming his phaser rifle ahead of him as he peered down the passageway. The shadows cloaking the corridor less than thirty meters from where he stood were not moving, not this time, anyway. If Gold had learned anything in the ten minutes or so that had passed since Lieutenant Commander th'Sena's decision to press on toward the outpost's alleged command center, it was that the shadows could not be trusted.

"This should be it," said Lieutenant Augustus Bradford from where he stood to Gold's left, leaning against the tunnel wall on the opposite side of the large pair of rather thick and heavy metal doors set into the rock. Bradford and his team- Lieutenant Mairin ni Bhroanin and a female Bolian ensign named Jolev- had fallen in with th'Sena's team in one of the many corridor junctions that connected the outpost's network of underground passages. Cradling his phaser rifle in the crook of his right arm so that the muzzle was aimed toward the door, Bradford eyed Gold with one of his typical mischievous grins. "You want to knock, or should I?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Lieutenant," th'Sena said. "Given how things have gone so far, I'm not betting on the rest of this being easy."

While the Andorian was all business even during the best of times, Gold was sensing that the stress of the outpost infiltration was beginning to wear on her. They had encountered two more Cardassians as they proceeded deeper into the complex, and Gold had listened over his communicator at reports as other elements of the assault team also engaged new targets. The problem was that the number of soldiers discovered so far had surpassed the total as indicated by Starfleet Intelligence, and there were still some areas of the outpost left to secure. Several of the teams also had reported encountering scattering fields- electronic countermeasures designed to confound the efforts of scanners and sensors, which of course only served to further complicate the situation.

"Anything inside?" Bradford asked, looking over to where Ensign Rha-Teramaet stood to Gold's right, the muzzle of his phaser rifle pointed downward as the Efrosian consulted the tricorder he carried in his left hand. Though Gold and Bradford were friends dating back to their days at Starfleet Academy, and

both had befriended ni Bhroanin upon their mutual assignment to the Gettysburg, Gold knew Jolev only in passing as a member of the ship's security contingent. It was because of his long association with the other man that Gold could recognize when Bradford was getting restless.

Teramaet shook his head. "Nothing registers beyond the door. There must be a scattering field in place here, too. For all I can tell, there's nothing but solid rock behind that door." Teramaet shook his head as he continued to study the unhelpful scan readings, having muted the tricorder's audible emissions in the fading hope that it might aid to preserve the team's stealth.

Not that it mattered, as it seemed every Cardassian on this barren moon knew exactly where they were. The darkness at the far end of the passageway was shattered by the flare of a disruptor weapon, and Gold flinched at the sound of the blast as the energy bolt slammed into the rock wall above him. Ducking in what was a futile attempt to seek cover, he felt something hot slice into his left arm. Grunting in pain, he dropped to one knee and lost the grip on his phaser rifle as he clamped his right hand over his now pain-racked left bicep. White heat overloaded his vision for several seconds, but all around him the clamor of phasers being brought to bear on the new threat echoed in the narrow corridor, along with several more disruptor bursts. He ignored the firefight erupting all around him, his vision already starting to clear, even as he felt blood seeping between his fingers.

"David!" Bradford shouted over the reports of phaser fire, and Gold saw his still-indistinct figure turning from where he knelt near the wall and shuffling toward him. "Are you all right?"

"Piece of rock," Gold hissed through gritted teeth, barely audible over the last report of phaser fire. "Cut me right open."

As quickly as it had begun, the skirmish was over, near silence once again returning to engulf the corridor. After sending Jolev and Teramaet to investigate the source of the enemy fire, th'Sena looked to Bradford. "How is he?" the commander asked, moving closer and kneeling next to Gold.

Reaching for the medical kit at the small of his back, Bradford shook his head. "Doesn't look too bad. I can stop the bleeding and apply a dermal patch, which should be enough until we get back to the Gettysburg." Patting Gold on the shoulder, "If you're going to get injured, try to make it more interesting, or at least more serious. That way, you've got an excuse for them to send you home to that fancy house of yours."

Despite the dull throbbing pain in his arm, Gold managed a small smile. He and his wife, Rachel, had a small house in New York on Earth, though Gold himself hadn't had much time to enjoy it. For a brief moment, he wondered what manner of interior decorating madness Rachel had unleashed in his absence. Gold heard footsteps coming up the passageway and looked up to see Teramaet and Jolev returning to the group. "Three Cardassians, sir," Teramaet said, reporting to th'Sena. "At least, that's who we found lying stunned up the corridor. Forgive me, Commander, but I seemed to have lost count as to how many that makes."

"Damn sight more than twenty-two," Bradford said, not looking up as he pulled items from his medical kit.

Moving to a sitting position so that he rested his back against the wall as Bradford treated his wound, Gold shook his head and considered the status of the mission. "I don't suppose we can get a refund for this trip?"

* * *

Earth Year 2377

Location: Betrisius III

"Captain? Captain Gold?"

"What?" David Gold snapped, irritated as he was startled from his reverie. Of course, he was less annoyed with Soloman's efforts to gain his attention than he was at his own behavior, angry with himself at his inability to keep his mind focused on the present rather than the past. Seeing the confused expression on the small lilac-skinned Bynar's face was enough to tell him that he had- once again- entangled an innocent bystander in his latest bout of brooding.

Get back to work, he scolded himself.

"I'm sorry, Soloman," he said, turning from the window through which he had been studying the expanse

of Gisela, the capital city of this, the most densely populated province on this continent of Betrisius III. Crossing to where the diminutive engineer had set up a temporary work space, Gold was struck once again by the blandness of the room's interior. Located within a building chartered to the provincial government, to the captain it seemed as though the small unimpressive chamber was doing its part to foster the apparent universal constant that public-sector office space should aspire to nothing more than boredom and lifelessness.

"Have you found something?" he asked as he moved to stand alongside Soloman, who seemed to already have shrugged off Gold's brief outburst.

Seated at a spare utilitarian desk, atop which he had placed the portable computer workstation he had requested from the da Vinci, the Bynar nodded as he replied, "I believe so, sir. I've successfully interfaced with the global computer network, and I'm presently scanning all current and recently archived communications and transactions."

"That was fast," the captain observed.

"I owe much to the assistance of Minister Qrana," Soloman said, offering a respectful nod to the tall lean Lisqual male standing to his right.

Looking to Gold, the minister bowed his head. "It was no effort, Captain. Your engineer performed the most complicated tasks." The captain noted- not for the first time- that when filtered through his combadge's universal translator, the Lisqual's voice was rendered in a measured manner that to the captain's ear sounded much like Soloman himself.

It had not taken long for Gold to decide that Qrana, an assistant to the provincial governor and a member of the Ministry of Reformation which oversaw the corrections and rehabilitation departments within the regional government's penal system, was not the most assuming of hosts. Greeting Gold during his first visit to the planet's surface, the minister had served as his liaison- and self-appointed shadow- since then. His personality had alternated at irregular intervals between flat and brusque, which of course rubbed in just the right way against the captain's already foul mood.

"Where are we, Soloman?" Gold asked, turning his attention back to the matter at hand.

His long thin fingers moving across the workstation's interface pad, the Bynar engineer replied, "I'm detecting an unexplained level of communications activity across a number of the global network's transfer hubs and ancillary connection nodes, for which there appear to be no authorization certifications or logs. For each legitimate operation being executed, there are dozens of additional command protocols embedded within the transfer packets."

Blinking at the avalanche of technical jargon, Gold said, "Can you please translate that to captain-speak?" Soloman actually smiled at that. "It appears that someone was using the global network to access the subsystems that oversee communications with the reformant community."

"Captain," Qrana said, "we have known about this for some time. We believe that this is behind the protests I described to you earlier. What we have been unable to do up to this point is locate the source of the activity."

Gold nodded, recalling what the minister had told him about the recent series of disruptions caused by hundreds of reformants. At the midpoint of each day for the past eight days, hundreds of the monitored criminals had halted whatever they were doing and marched in unison to various public areas throughout the city. They impeded traffic, delayed the delivery of all manner of services, and essentially made nuisances of themselves. The actions were always peaceful, and ended at a precise interval that measured out to approximately sixty-eight standard minutes.

Indicating his workstation, Soloman said, "That's understandable, sir. The responsible party is utilizing a complex arrangement of encryption algorithms as well as data fragmentation and scattering subroutines. There's also a process in operation that's able to redirect these broadcasts to random transfer hubs throughout the network, while also supplying a varying number of requests to the system that appear to have no useful purpose whatsoever. It's a most effective means of camouflaging their communications." Stepping forward, Qrana regarded the stream of information scrolling across the computer screen, his dark eyes wide and with what to Gold appeared to be a new flush to his sea-green complexion. "My understanding is that you possess technology that can aid in tracking these signals to their source."

"In time, Minister," Soloman replied. "Such a trace still requires us to have a basic understanding of the protocols currently in play, which I admit at this time is proving most challenging."

Gold frowned. "If I understood you before, you're saying they're putting out diversionary communications?"

"In a manner of speaking, sir," Soloman said, his fingers rapidly moving across the smooth surface of the workstation's interface. "They add clutter and confusion to an already dense collection of continuous transactions and broadcasts, but in time I should be able to filter through some of it and isolate an example of one covert data stream."

He fell silent, and Gold watched the Bynar's eyes flit in staccato movements as he assessed streams of data advancing at rapid clips across the computer screen. So far as the captain was concerned, the information appeared as little more than incomprehensible flashes of streaking light.

"What is he doing?" Qrana asked.

Gold nodded toward the workstation. "Interfacing directly with your network. He comes from a world where the people are literally integrated with their own planetary computer system. As a consequence, they're able to access and correlate information at speeds comparable to the computers themselves." It was a skill and talent that the captain had come to rely on from the young Bynar, who had remained with the da Vinci even after the tragic death of his life partner more than a year earlier.

"Captain," Soloman said after a moment, his eyes opening wide, "I believe I've found something of importance." The data on the computer screen stopped scrolling, then shifted to an image of a cloaked figure, couched in shadow and standing before a featureless wall.

"I come to you again as Jannim," the figure said in a voice which to Gold's ears sounded as though it was being subjected to some sort of artificial filtering. "As our leaders petition for membership in the United Federation of Planets, the time nears also for us to right a profane injustice against a large yet silent segment of our society. I speak, of course, about the so-called reformants."

Folding his arms across his chest, Gold frowned. "Well, there's an interesting development." As he spoke the words, he noted Qrana's reaction to the transmission. Instead of the shock he only partly expected to see, the captain instead observed what he took as the minister's embarrassment at watching the message.

"Jannim," Qrana said, shaking his head.

"Our noble-minded attempts to bring an end to crime and to transform idle imprisonment into worthy public service must be recognized as a failure," the cloaked figure said. "We must also confront the truth that this is an engineered failure brought about by the greed of the privileged and power of the abusive at the expense of the helpless. Someone must be the voice for those who have been rendered silent. Jannim will provide that voice."

Gold leaned closer until he was all but peering over Soloman's shoulder. "What the hell is this?" he asked.

"This is part of what you've been trying to trace?"

"Yes, Captain," the Bynar replied. "It is one of several prerecorded messages encoded into the data stream, and it currently is being directed to broadcast facilities in major population centers across this continent. From what I'm able to ascertain, it's one component of a coordinated transmission, working in tandem with a flurry of new directive protocols currently being submitted through the global network."

Turning to regard Qrana, Gold saw growing nervousness in the Lisqual's eyes. "Minister, who is this person?"

"A public nuisance, Captain," Qrana replied, his brow furrowing. "A would-be demagogue who threatens us with alarming regularity. We do not respond to his threats and posturing."

Instinct told Gold things were not that simple. "But you're more than willing to invite us into responding for you. According to your briefing, these reformant protests were a form of coordinated civil uprising, someone seeking a redress of grievances." Pointing to the now-stilled image of the figure on the computer screen, he said, "What's this Jannim person talking about?"

"It is a complicated situation, Captain," Qrana replied, "and there is much you still do not understand."

"Then perhaps you'd better start explaining it to me," the captain snapped. It was becoming obvious to him that the minister and his peers had kept critical information about aspects of their society not only from him, but also the diplomatic teams that had come here to address the Lisqual's petition for

Federation membership. Further, that deceit had been compounded by their asking for assistance under apparently false pretenses.

And now my people are stuck in the middle of it. Wonderful.

"Reformants serve as a vital component to our society, Captain," Qrana said, and Gold heard the first sign of indignation in the minister's voice, though the actual words seemed to possess a rehearsed quality.

"Some of them have skills and perform tasks that cannot be easily replaced."

He's said that enough times, Gold thought, he actually believes it. "Regardless of whether they actually might want to be replaced," Gold said aloud. Before Qrana could muster a reply, he was interrupted by Solomon turning from his workstation.

"Captain," the Bynar said, "I've isolated a new series of commands being ushered through the network. It's a real-time broadcast being disseminated nationwide, transmitting on the same range of frequencies used by the ministry to communicate with the reformant community."

"Another protest," Qrana said. "It is the appropriate time of day."

Gold's attention was caught by the sound of the door opening at the far end of the room. It swung open to admit Corsi and Konya, who entered the office at a run.

"Captain," the security chief said, "reformants are gathering in the streets outside. It looks like a mob."

Looking to Qrana, she asked, "Minister, I thought you said these protests were peaceful?"

Nodding, the Lisqual replied, "That is correct. None of the reformants so much as speaks a word, and only a few isolated incidents of violence have been observed."

"I think that might be changing," Corsi countered. "Some of them are talking, and a lot of them seem rather...irritated."

Moving toward the window so he could observe the scene for himself, Gold said, "Corsi, notify your people to step up their alert level. No weapons, though, except as a last resort. And I want a status report from Gomez."

Even as he issued the orders, the captain felt the first twinge of anxiety gripping his gut. Something big was happening; he could feel it.

CHAPTER 4

To Sarjenka, the promenade that was Gisela's main business and retail district had already seemed lively even before the crowds of Lisqual had started to swell with the onset of midday. Still, as she stood with the rest of the away team and Dr. Luluma amid the bustling activity that was continuing to increase, the young Dreman doctor could see that something was wrong.

"Another protest," Luluma said, pointing toward the entrance of the multistory structure that was the city's primary medical facility. Exiting the building were more than two dozen Lisqual, each clad in coverall jumpsuits of varying colors. As if guided by a practiced choreography, the workers moved to stand atop the steps leading from the entrance down to the small courtyard that separated the hospital from the public thoroughfares. Their intention was obvious: They were acting to prevent access to and from the building.

"The captain says it's happening everywhere," Gomez said as she returned to the group, having just completed a conversation with Commander Corsi via her combadge. "Stay close, people. Hawkins, Banks, keep your eyes open." In response to her orders, the security officers and their Lisqual counterparts each took up positions on the points of the compass, forming a circle with Gomez and the rest of the group at its center.

Around them, more workers, all of them wearing similar work clothing, were taking up positions at the entryways to nearly every other building within view. Stepping closer to Gomez, Sarjenka watched as still more Lisqual moved into the street and bordering walkways in numbers sufficient to impede the flow of pedestrian and ground vehicle traffic. She heard warning tones issued from several of the vehicles, along with the sounds of frustrated voices beginning to punctuate the air- though she noticed they were the voices of the inconvenienced rather than the demonstrators.

"This happens every day?" Abramowitz asked from where she stood just behind Gomez.

Luluma nodded. "Yes. According to our security forces, Jannim has found a means of compromising the Reformation Ministry's proprietary data communications network that is most efficient." The doctor had

already explained the series of messages transmitted by the mysterious architect of the daily uprisings, who identified himself as Jannim, the name apparently taken from a figure in Lisqual folklore often referred to as the "Bringer of Light" and a hero of the oppressed. "He issues the appropriate commands to the entire reformant community and directs their actions."

Watching the scene unfold before her, Sarjenka was overwhelmed by the magnitude of what the Lisqual doctor was describing. She had already explained how the protests had started and the compromised nature of the reformants' individual neural mediation implants, but seeing it happen before her eyes was something else entirely. "All of these people are reformants?" she asked. While she had expected the number of reformants to be significant, even in comparison to the rest of the city's population, Sarjenka realized she had been unprepared for the sheer volume of alleged criminals who now moved through society at the direction and discretion of the government. "And this is happening across your entire country at the same time?"

"I am afraid so," Luluma replied. "It is most disquieting to see it, I must admit."

"Most masters tend to get upset when the slaves revolt," Gomez said, with her eyes narrowed and her lips pressed tightly together. It was easy for Sarjenka to see that the commander's tension level was rising with every passing moment.

"Sonya," Abramowitz said, her voice taut with warning.

Gomez glared at her. "If you've got another definition for this situation that I'm missing, feel free to share it with the group."

The Lisqual gathered in the streets and walkways. Standing before the entrances to the various buildings, they were chanting no slogans, nor were they inciting any altercations. Sarjenka noted that they were not even talking amongst themselves. They were doing nothing except standing their ground, staring straight ahead as though oblivious to the disruption they were causing. For a moment, she likened the reformants to what Dreman folktales called joromi, or persons inhabited by spirits from beyond the world of the living and tasked with resolving the unfinished business of the dead. Despite her rational dismissal of such superstition, the notion still was enough to give her a momentary chill.

"They just stand there, doing nothing?" she asked. "Why can't your security forces disburse them?"

Shaking her head, Luluma replied, "If only it were that simple."

"Right," Gomez said. "It's not as though this is their idea, after all."

Studying the sea of blank faces, Sarjenka's eyes searched out answers to the questions now filling her mind. "What's stopping them from becoming violent and hurting each other or anyone else?"

"They are more than capable of defending themselves," Luluma replied. "During the first two uprisings, citizens and members of law enforcement attempted to break up some of the gatherings. The reformants responded with sufficient force and numbers to quell those attempts. We then realized that Jannim was monitoring for such responses, and each time that it happened, he directed groups of reformants to lash out against property as a means of reprisal."

Turning to the Starfleet officers, she added, "Otherwise, they never initiate any violent action, and it is worth noting that at no time has a reformant set out to harm a person. Once that was realized, our security forces were issued strict orders to simply allow the protests to take place, and the populace was likewise advised. For now, Jannim only seems to want our attention, but I fear something terrible may well happen soon."

Worse than they already had been forced to endure? To what end were these people being manipulated? It galled Sarjenka to consider that the reformants- already forced to live as charges of the state for the duration of their criminal sentences and to act only at the behest of their government-appointed masters- were nothing more than pawns, tools to be used and exploited by the radical activist who had adopted the persona of Jannim, storied nemesis of the ruling class and champion of the subjugated.

"It seems so pointless," Abramowitz said after a moment, and Sarjenka agreed with the observation. The reformants remained motionless, staring blankly ahead.

"Until they receive new instructions," Luluma said, "they will carry out the last order they received."

The number of reformants coming to join the gathering in the streets- alone or in groups- was growing,

along with the increase in people who now were being victimized by the protest action. Shouts and the blaring of sirens echoed off the facades of the surrounding buildings, continuing to grow just in the few minutes that had passed since the beginning of the disturbance. That, too, surprised Sarjenka, as she figured the local populace would almost come to expect the now-daily disruption to their routine. The screens of the numerous video monitors arrayed around the promenade all ceased their various broadcasts, each of them shifting to display the same image. A cloaked figure standing in semi-darkness peered from the screen. The reaction in the square was immediate, with almost everyone halting their frustrated pleas toward the reformants to turn and observe the screens. Sarjenka noted, however, that the reformants themselves seemed to take no notice, but instead continued to stand frozen in place. "Jannim, I presume," Gomez said.

As if in response, the figure on the screen said, "I speak now to the representatives of the United Federation of Planets, who grace us with their presence on this day. While you consider our leaders' request to join your interstellar community, I pledge to take on the responsibility for which they are unable or unwilling to carry out: I will reveal the secret shame of our people."

"More dirty little secrets?" Hawkins said from where he stood near Abramowitz. "Why am I not surprised?"

On the screens, Jannim continued, "We can no longer compel those without voice in our society to serve our ends, as though they were nothing more than resources to be used and discarded. Those who have been convicted of crimes and who serve their sentences in good faith must be allowed to resume their former lives, rather than to have their tenures as indentured servants illegally extended merely to serve the whims of the privileged."

Stunned at this revelation, Sarjenka turned to Luluma. "Doctor, is this true?" Though the Lisqual doctor did not reply, her silence was more than sufficient to provide an answer.

"My attempts to gain our leaders' attentions through these passive demonstrations have yielded nothing," Jannim said. "Today, Federation representatives, you will learn just how heinous the manipulation of the reformants has become."

"I don't like the sound of that at all," Banks said, and Sarjenka watched as both she and Hawkins surreptitiously pulled their phasers from the holsters on their hips, though both security guards kept the weapons down, resting against their legs in the hopes of not drawing attention.

Then the screams started.

Cries of surprise and shouts of alarm punctuated the air, and Sarjenka watched as several of the Lisqual turned and began hurrying away from where pockets of reformants still stood. She caught sight of sunlight reflecting off polished metal, only then realizing that several of the reformants had produced weapons from beneath their clothing, the barrels of which were aimed into the air.

"Take cover!" Hawkins shouted an instant before Sarjenka felt his hand clamp onto her arm, and he pulled her toward him. "Move!" She did not resist as the deputy security chief all but plucked her off her feet and carried her toward a nearby ground vehicle, pushing her down behind it. "Stay down," he ordered, already moving to ensure the safety of the rest of the away team.

Remaining where Hawkins had placed her, Sarjenka listened as one of Luluma's security escorts ushered the doctor behind the base of a large statue, while the other produced a communications device and issued a call for additional support. All around them, unarmed Lisqual civilians were fleeing the scene in a rising panic.

"What's the next move, Commander?" Banks asked, looking to Gomez from where she crouched next to Abramowitz, her voice sounding calm and composed despite the current situation.

"I don't think it's being made by us," Gomez replied, pointing across the promenade. Following the gesture, Sarjenka saw a formation of several dozen Lisqual, each wearing what she took to be body armor and carrying large bulky rifles.

Observing the scene, Hawkins shook his head. "There's no way this ends on a high note."

"They're still just standing there," Sarjenka said, nodding toward the nearest group of reformants, which with the exception of those who had drawn weapons had done nothing in response to the arrival of new law enforcement troops.

She heard a click, followed by a voice booming through some form of public address system. "Drop your weapons and kneel on the ground. Comply immediately."

No reaction to the demands was offered by any of the reformants. Not a single one so much as turned to look for whoever had issued the directive. In contrast, the armored troops were fanning out, forming a line that began to march toward the nearest group of reformants. All the while, the commands to disarm were repeated and ignored.

The line of troops reached the first of the reformants, and Sarjenka realized she was holding her breath as one of the security officers stepped up to a seemingly catatonic worker, a female Lisqual, who was holding what looked to be a pistol in her right hand.

"Drop your weapon," the officer ordered.

The woman said nothing, did nothing to indicate she had heard the command, at least, not until the security officer reached out to wrest the pistol from her hand. Only then did she react, lashing out with her free hand to punch the officer in the faceplate of his helmet. The move did no damage, but it was enough to catch him off guard and give her the opportunity to kick him in the stomach and send him falling backward to the ground.

"Here we go," Banks said, her voice low and tense.

Even as other members of the riot control force responded to the attack on their comrade, stepping forward with batons and shields to engage the heretofore peaceful mob, the reformants reacted as though possessed of a single consciousness. Despite their diverse appearances- male or female, young or old, tall or squat, lean or muscular- all of them resisted the attempts to disarm or subdue them with the skill of a well-trained and cohesive unit. They did only that which was necessary, acting defensively and passing up what to Sarjenka seemed to be numerous opportunities to seize the initiative. She watched as- time and again- the reformants resumed their calm stances after fending off their opponents.

Until the first crack of gunfire.

Sarjenka flinched as the report echoed above the din of skirmish. Looking around frantically, she could not see from where it had originated, but within the span of a few heartbeats that no longer mattered, as the shot was quickly followed by several more. New screams resounded throughout the promenade, as many of the troops and reformants alike scattered, and more gunfire issued. This time Sarjenka saw the muzzle flashes as security officers aimed their weapons at the protestors.

"This will be a slaughter," Luluma said from where she crouched near Sarjenka, and the young Dreman heard the anguish in the doctor's voice. As a fellow physician, she shared her Lisqual counterpart's worry over the rapidly deteriorating situation, already beginning to contemplate the number of casualties the next moments would bring.

Adjusting the controls on her phaser, Gomez said, "Let's see if we can end this.phasers on wide-field stun." When Hawkins and Banks both indicated that they were ready, the commander offered a curt nod. "Go!"

All three of them rose from their places of concealment, choosing their targets and aiming their weapons at nearby throngs of security troops and reformants alike. A trio of bright orange energy bursts pierced the air, expanding outward to envelop the nearby combatants. Lisqual on both sides of the chaotic melee started to drop in groups, succumbing to the effects of the phaser fire.

Their hasty tactics were garnering other notice, however.

"Commander!" Sarjenka shouted, pointing in the direction of several reformants who were turning in their direction and raising their weapons. "Look out!"

No sooner did the warning leave her lips than she saw Hawkins lurch to his right, dropping to one knee and reaching up with his left hand to grip his right shoulder. The phaser fell from his other hand, and Sarjenka saw that his features were screwed into an expression of agony. Without thinking, she lunged from behind the vehicle, running in a near crouch toward Hawkins, pulling out her medical tricorder.

"Are you okay?" she asked, ignoring the sounds of phaser and projectile fire going off around her, as both her eyes and the tricorder rapidly assessed the security officer's condition. A ghastly wound marred his shoulder, and she pressed her hand against it, trying her best to ignore the blood already beginning to pulse between her fingers.

"Never fails," Hawkins hissed through gritted teeth. "My streak of bad luck, I mean."

Sarjenka looked up at the sound of Gomez shouting above the din. "Gomez to da Vinci! Eight for emergency beam out, directly to sickbay! Now!"

Time seemed to slow almost to a stop as Sarjenka waited for the initial tingling of a transporter beam to reach out for her. Keeping her hand pressed to Hawkins's shoulder, she was checking her surroundings to ensure the entire away team as well as Luluma and her people were close by when another crack of gunfire echoed nearby.

A shriek of pain punctured the air and Sarjenka watched in horror as blood and skull fragments erupted from Banks's head. She dropped in a limp heap to the pavement just as she was embraced by the sheen of transporter energy.

When a similar beam finally coalesced around Sarjenka, it was in time to muffle her own anguished scream.

CHAPTER 5

Domenica Corsi was in no mood to take prisoners, and it was with a great deal of effort that she was making an exception in this instance.

"You're sure you've tracked to the correct location?" she asked Soloman as she stood behind the Bynar, who occupied a workstation at the rear of the da Vinci's transporter room. It was the fourth or fifth time she had posed the question, having quit bothering to count after the second failed attempt to triangulate on the source of the transmissions being broadcast by the mysterious Jannim.

Turning from the computer interface terminal and its array of three display screens, Soloman nodded. "I believe so, Commander." Pausing, the engineer cast an uncertain glance toward the deck at his feet. "Of course, the readings on which I am focusing are almost identical to those I was tracing during our previous attempts."

Corsi let out an audible sigh. "I'm sorry, Soloman. I know you're doing everything you can." As much as she hated to admit it, she still was upset over what had happened to Hawkins and Banks. While Hawkins's injuries had been relatively straightforward and easily treated by Sarjenka, Banks was a different matter altogether.

A recent addition to the da Vinci's security team- having replaced T'Mandra when the Vulcan woman chose not to reenlist when her term was up- Leslie Banks possessed all the qualities of a superb security officer, including the potential to one day lead a detail of her own. She now lay in sickbay, fighting for her life with the assistance of Dr. Lense and the Emergency Medical Hologram. Though the prognosis was grim, the da Vinci's chief medical officer had spent the past eleven hours doing everything in her power to defy that dire prediction.

Corsi did not blame the reformant wielding the weapon that had injured Banks. She knew now that the individual had almost certainly been acting under instructions fed to him or her via the computer chip implanted into his or her brain. That person had not made the decision to harm Banks, and Corsi wondered if the shooter was aware of what he or she had done, or if they even retained memories of the altercation down on the planet's surface.

No, she decided, the reformants had not caused Banks's critical injuries. The person known as Jannim alone held that responsibility. Therefore, Corsi wanted Jannim, or at least his head. Hence her current and rising level of frustration

Even with the resources at the crew's disposal, finding Jannim was proving to be more difficult than originally anticipated. What had begun as a seemingly straightforward exercise in triangulating to their source the plethora of transmissions disseminated by the troublesome activist, had instead evolved into a protracted and increasingly exasperating game of technological hide-and-seek. As if anticipating that the Ministry of Reformation and indeed the Lisqual central government would enlist the aid of Starfleet to track him down, Jannim had set into motion a complex scheme of misdirection and diversion that had left Soloman baffled at the insurgent's considerable technical skill. The result was that each time the Bynar announced that he had pinpointed what should have been Jannim's exact position, no life signs were detected at that location. All that was found was a suite of hardware designed to receive the activist's transmissions, as well as process and pass them on to a random destination elsewhere in the global

communications network.

He's a sly bastard, Corsi mused. I'll give him that.

"I believe I've deciphered the pattern Jannim is using to scatter his communications," Soloman said after a moment. "It's fragmented and embedded within separate data transmissions. What I didn't notice earlier was that the decryption algorithm is itself the result of two additional and wholly distinct encoding schemes, each containing a host of code stubs and logic loops that do nothing except obfuscate the true purpose of the software Jannim is using to infiltrate the network."

Blinking in confusion, Corsi shook her head. "More of those distractions and countermeasures that you mentioned in your report?"

"Precisely," the Bynar replied. "In this case, the software appears designed to actively engage search protocols and encourage pursuit to what ultimately are revealed to be diversionary destinations within the network that are unrelated to those Jannim is interested in utilizing. However, now that I've determined the nature of these countermeasures, I should be able to bypass those transmissions purposed strictly for misdirection and instead key in on the true source."

Yeah, Corsi thought as she closed her eyes and rubbed the bridge of her nose, listening to the transporter room's omnipresent and yet still-soothing hum, even as she felt the onset of a fresh headache. That explanation was much simpler.

An indicator tone sounded at Soloman's workstation, and the engineer pointed to a new graphic now displayed on the console's leftmost screen. "Sensors are detecting significant power sources as well as a single Lisqual life sign at the targeted location."

"Now you're talking," Corsi said, patting Soloman on his shoulder. "Notify the bridge that we're proceeding with the extraction." Despite her growing level of irritation at the proceedings' slow pace, she had known from the start that- given time- the talented Bynar would eventually succeed in the task given by Captain Gold. Turning from the workstation, she saw Ellec Krotine and Lauoc Soan rise from where they had been sitting on the steps of the transporter platform, drawing their phasers and- out of habit- checking the weapons' power settings.

From behind the curved freestanding console, the transporter chief, Laura Poynter, gave Soloman a nod and said, "Receiving coordinates now."

"Any sign of weapons, Chief?" Corsi asked as she drew her own phaser from its holster on her hip. After Gomez's report about the weapons utilized by the reformants during the riots in the city square, the security chief was taking no chances.

Shaking her head, Poynter replied, "None that I can find."

Corsi nodded in satisfaction. "Good," she said as she stood with Krotine and Lauoc at the foot of the steps to the transporter platform. "Ready?"

"Yes, Commander," Krotine said, her voice containing absolutely none of her normally engaging personality. Banks and Krotine were roommates, and they had become close friends during Banks's three months aboard. The Boslic woman had insisted on being a part of any away team or security detail on hand when Jannim was to be taken into custody.

As for Lauoc, he just nodded. The diminutive Bajoran showed none of Krotine's anger, but there were few on her staff Corsi would more want covering her back.

"Energize," Corsi said. The lights within the transporter alcove flickered as the energy-intensive procedure was put into operation, and seconds later a shower of energy appeared on one of the platform's six pads. Almost immediately, the beam solidified into a humanoid figure, wearing a dark robe with a hood that Corsi instantly recognized from the broadcast transmissions she had been studying for the better part of a day.

Jannim.

"Remain where you are," Corsi ordered, her voice taut and stern as she stepped from behind the transporter console, phaser aimed directly at the Lisqual's head. "Remove your hood."

Hands held out and away from his body, the new arrival did as instructed, reaching up with slow deliberate movements to push the hood back from his head.

Or, rather, her head.

Scowling as she took in her new surroundings, which of course included Krotine and Lauoc leveling their own phasers at her, Jannim said, "I see that the Reformation Ministry has enlisted you to do their bidding." Shaking her head, she released what to Corsi sounded like a sigh of resignation. "A pity that those in power cannot take a fraction of the time and energy they expend on subjugation and duplicity, and instead exert it toward understanding and compassion. If that were the case, you and I might well be embracing one another as friends, rather than posturing as adversaries."

"It doesn't have to be that way," Corsi said, allowing the muzzle of her phaser to drop the slightest bit. "If you have a legitimate grievance, everything will be done to see that you're heard, but you'll never accomplish anything so long as you continue these disruptions you're causing. You've been lucky so far, but eventually more people are going to get hurt, and when that happens, you can forget getting out any message you're trying to send."

Jannim cast a downward glance before returning her gaze to Corsi. "I want you to know that I sincerely regret the injury to your personnel. It was not intentional, and I hold no malice toward you or your Federation, but I am afraid I must disagree with you as to my methods. So long as the government acts against any segment of the society it is charged with protecting and nurturing, citizens must see to it that those who cannot speak are given a voice."

"It's over," Krotine said. "We've got you, and once we send our people down to your site, we'll have no trouble counteracting what you've done to the reformants. Your only chance is to cooperate now and help us get this all sorted out as quickly as possible."

Any reply Jannim might have made was interrupted by the whistle of the ship's intercom system coming to life.

"Bridge to transporter room!" shouted the voice of Commander Gomez. "We're picking up a series of explosions from the location you targeted. Were you able to complete transport?"

Stunned by the report, Corsi's eyes widened as she stared at Jannim, who now was offering a small knowing smile.

"As you can see," the Lisqual woman said, clasping her hands before her, "I have chosen another option."

"What did you do?" Corsi asked, biting down on every word as she stepped forward and raised her phaser to once again aim at the activist.

Shrugging, Jannim replied, "Ensuring my message continues to be heard. I cannot allow you to stop that, not until justice is served, and the people know the full ugly truth supporting the lie they have lived for generations."

"You're just one person," Krotine said. "We'll put a stop to what you're doing; and after that, the authorities down on your planet will deal with you."

Jannim shook her head. "I think not. I have seen how my government treats dissenters and other undesirables, and I have no intention of becoming one of their slaves."

The movement was subtle and yet swift, so fast that Corsi scarcely could believe the Lisqual woman had even moved as she reached with her right hand toward her left wrist, grasping something hidden by the sleeve of her robe.

"Don't move!" Corsi shouted, but it was too late, as an audible click echoed in the transporter room, followed by a lyrical string of electronic tones. Jannim's eyes opened wide with obvious pain, and her body jerked in a series of violent spasms before she collapsed to the transporter pad.

CHAPTER 6

Earth Year 2328

Location: Moon orbiting Delavi III

Mission Elapsed Time: 1 hour, 32 minutes, 58 seconds

His back pressed once more against the unyielding stone wall and feeling his muscles tensing in anticipation, Lieutenant David Gold pulled the stock of his phaser rifle into his shoulder and aimed its muzzle at the large metal doors. Sweat dampened his body beneath his uniform, a consequence of the elevated temperature of the underground passageway, owing to the away team's proximity to the outpost's primary power generation and distribution venues. He winced at the dull stab of pain coursing through his left bicep. Though Gus Bradford had treated his wound, the arm itself was still tender.

"What's the story, Jolev?" Bradford asked from where he stood next to the doors, opposite Gold, watching as the young Bolian ensign knelt before a small oblong keypad that hung suspended by a length of optical cabling and gave her access to the small compartment behind it. She was scanning the niche with her tricorder, her free hand moving in and around the cabling and a bank of what to Gold looked like the Cardassian equivalent of isolinear computer chips.

"According to my tricorder scans," Jolev replied as she continued to work, "the door's controls are not linked to the rest of the outpost's internal security network. It appears that the lock was engaged with a manual override command, most likely from a control pad on the inside."

From Gold's right, th'Sena said, "Which means there is at least one Cardassian still in there."

"Probably more," added ni Bhroanin, and Gold noted how the young officer tightened the grip on her own phaser rifle. The prolonged stress of the operation was now definitely wearing on the young officer. Gold could not blame her, as he was feeling similar strain himself.

Let's just get this over with.

"We need to hurry," said Rha-Teramaet from where he had taken up a protective position farther up the tunnel, near an intersection in the underground passageways. "Sooner or later, any remaining Cardassians will figure out what we're doing, and they will converge here." To Gold it seemed almost like a disembodied voice offering the observation, as darkness all but consumed the Efrosian where he crouched next to the corridor wall. Only his long white hair contrasted with the shadows.

"I think I have it," Jolev said finally. Snapping closed the cover on her tricorder, the ensign returned the device to the satchel slung over her shoulder before returning the keypad to its proper place. "I disengaged the lock in a manner that did not alter any indicators or sensors on the other side. So far as anyone on the inside is concerned, the doors are still secure."

Nodding as she checked the setting on her phaser rifle one last time, th'Sena said, "Even if you are correct, I doubt we have the advantage of surprise any longer."

"I might be able to do something about that, Commander," Bradford said. Reaching into the pocket on his left thigh, the lieutenant produced a small cylindrical object that Gold recognized as a flash grenade. Gold frowned. "How do you know that thing will work?"

Used by security forces when circumstances called for small teams to have access to non-lethal defensive measures, and were outnumbered or holding an inferior tactical advantage, flash grenades emitted a brief yet powerful burst of intense light, capable of disorienting most humanoid species. The duration of the effect depended on the target's individual physiology, of course, and Gold was certain that Starfleet's version had never before been deployed against Cardassians.

Shrugging, Bradford replied, "Only one way to find out, my friend." He smiled as he spoke, holding up the grenade for emphasis before turning to th'Sena. "Whenever you're ready, Commander."

Trying to ignore dryness in his mouth and the feeling that his heart was about to pound its way through his chest, Gold recalled the drills he and other members of the away team had undertaken in preparation for this operation, which had included several variations on room clearing exercises. While he, th'Sena, and Teramaet had scored well during the simulated assaults, the intense training had not succeeded in erasing any anxiety he felt during the actual mission, where the opponents actually were hell-bent on killing him. Nothing like the real thing to get the blood pumping.

"Standard entry on my mark," th'Sena said, her voice low and tense as she tightened the grip on her own weapon and took one last look at the rest of the team, giving them their order of entry. Gold nodded when the commander's gaze fell upon him, hoping to convey a sense of confidence he was not sure he felt at that moment.

Then, finally, it was time to go.

With a nod from th'Sena, Jolev pressed a control on the keypad and the doors began to part. Bradford did not wait, stepping forward and tossing the flash grenade through the space widening between the doors before reaching over Jolev's hand and tapping the keypad again. Gold counted the seconds as the doors closed again, heard the muffled whump as the grenade detonated.

"Go!" th'Sena shouted.

Jolev keyed the door again, and this time it was th'Sena who stepped forward, rushing through the

widening breach with her phaser rifle leading the way. Per the commander's instructions, Gold followed after her, crossing the door's threshold and side-stepping to his right as th'Sena went left. The lingering illumination from the flash grenade still tinged the air of the command center, and in his peripheral vision he saw Teramaet enter the room and follow th'Sena, even as ni Bhroanin echoed Gold's movements. Gold only had heartbeats to gather the layout of the command center. Consoles lined the walls, and there was an open doorway leading to another room, beyond which he was certain he saw at least one shadowy figure. Three Cardassians stood or knelt at workstations, their hands over their eyes as they fought to shrug off the grenade's effects and presenting easy targets for Gold, th'Sena, and Bradford, who each targeted one soldier and fired their weapons.

No sooner did Gold stun his opponent than he detected movement to his right, catching sight of a head ducking behind a freestanding control console. That was all he had time to register before yellow energy flashed across his vision, and a cry of pain echoed in the room. Glancing to his left, he saw th'Sena falling backward, the Andorian dropping her phaser rifle before collapsing to the floor in a disjointed heap. His anxiety level spiking as weapons fire bisected the air of the command center, Gold stooped to one knee and fired in the direction of the Cardassian using the console as cover. He missed, and the soldier dropped back into hiding.

More disruptor energy flared from within the room at the command center's opposite end, and Gold saw Jolev scrambling for cover as Bradford fired in that direction. Maneuvering to his right in search of a better shot, Gold moved until his shoulder pressed against the side of what looked to be an equipment locker. From his new vantage point he almost had an angle on the Cardassian's back, and he raised his phaser rifle to fire.

Then a shadow fell across the weapon's barrel, and Gold had only an instant to register the towering form of the Cardassian lunging around the equipment locker toward him. Light glinted off polished steel, and Gold saw the blade of the jagged-edge knife slicing through the air and coming right at him.

* * *

Earth Year 2377

Location: U.S.S. da Vinci

Gold flinched.

"Captain, are you all right?"

Looking up at the sound of the voice, Gold realized that Corsi was still standing before him, her expression one of worry. He blinked several times to force the intruding memories back to their proper place at the back of his mind.

"I'm fine," he said, knowing even as the words came out that they sounded harsher than he had intended. Irritated with himself for the lapse, he glanced around the transporter room, noting that Sarjenka was still examining the lifeless body of Jannim. The telltale whine of her medical tricorder echoed off the transporter alcove's low ceiling and curved bulkhead. With Lense consumed by her feverish efforts to save the life of the grievously injured Banks, it fell to her new assistant to carry out this morbid yet necessary task.

Stepping closer to the transporter pad and folding his arms across his chest, Gold knew that Corsi was still watching him, and he forced himself to recall the report she had just provided and that he now realized he had only partially heard.

"She killed herself?" he asked.

With her hands clasped behind her back as she offered her report to the captain, Corsi nodded. "Yes, sir. Soloman tells me that she activated a burst data transfer using a personal computer interface she was wearing on her wrist. It triggered what he's calling a failsafe protocol that each implant is fitted with."

"Found it," Sarjenka said, her tricorder emitting an animated series of beeps as if to punctuate her statement. Holding up the device, she added, "What's left of it, anyway. It's at the base of her skull, where you'd expect to find it, but there's not much left, I'm afraid."

Frowning, Gold asked, "A self-destruct?"

"That's what it looks like, sir," the young doctor replied. "I'll have to examine these readings more thoroughly, but it looks as though the implant activated a microburst explosion that severed the brain from

the spinal cord. Death was instantaneous." Listening to the report and observations, Gold shuddered as he envisioned the gruesome, albeit swift, end that had claimed the mysterious Lisqual woman.

From where he stood next to the transporter console, Minister Qrana said, "It was a protocol devised in the event of a catastrophic loss of control over the reformant community, Captain. A signal was to be transmitted to each mediator that would induce an overload and destroy the device." The minister had beamed aboard the da Vinci at Gold's request, invited to see Jannim's body and perhaps make an identification.

Indicating Jannim's body with a nod, Qrana added, "For obvious reasons, it was always a solution we were loath to use, due to the risk of death or irreparable damage to the brain at the very least. Still, there is some good to come out of this. Now that she is dead, the protests will no longer continue, and life can once again return to normal."

"With all due respect, Minister," Corsi said, "I don't think it's going to be that easy. Jannim felt strongly enough about her cause to die for it. I doubt she was willing to just give up because she faced capture."

"What do we know about her?" Gold asked.

Qrana replied, "According to my security minister, her name was Dolanara, a once-respected member of the Reformation Ministry. In fact, she was among the initial group of our people to meet with your representatives when your Federation revealed itself to us."

"Interesting," Corsi said. In response to Gold's inquisitive glance, the security chief added, "That would have placed her in a position to see our technology firsthand, sir, as well as learn about our policies and beliefs. It would give her the chance to learn what she needed to prepare for the uprisings she caused, and even how we might deal with the situation once Betrisian leaders requested our help."

"I do not understand," Qrana said, his brow furrowing in confusion.

Corsi replied, "Based on what Commander Gomez told me, the building Dolanara was using as her home and base of operations for infiltrating the planet's global network was rigged with explosives. Soloman was able to track through the data transfer logs leading up to that event and found a trigger command embedded in one series of transmissions. It was a sort of alarm designed to go off if she was removed from the building against her will. It was tied to her implant, monitoring her location at all times."

Shrugging, she added, "It'd have to be something she overrode when she left the house for normal reasons, but if she was taken without having the time to deactivate it, then...you get what we saw. If anything, our beaming her directly to the da Vinci only accelerated the process."

"It is unfortunate that an individual life was lost," Qrana said after a moment, "but it is important to note that the greater community has been served." He paused, shaking his head. "It is much like the legend from which this radical took her name. In the tales I read as a child, the original Jannim angered the magistrates once too often, compelling them to execute him as an example of how insurrection could not be tolerated and was in fact a danger to the common good."

Not sure if he was ready to buy all of that, Gold instead asked Corsi, "How much damage did she do?" Instead of replying, the security chief turned to Soloman, who had remained at the transporter room's rear computer station for the last half hour, scouring the Betrisian computer network in search of answers to the new questions posed by Jannim's abrupt passing.

"The damage was significant, Captain," the Bynar replied. "All of the computer equipment at her home was destroyed. Further, she initiated a series of protocols that activated new data encoding and scattering schemes, and apparently issued new instructions throughout the reformant community before locking out the communication network that ties into their neural mediators. At present, the reformants are operating under whatever instructions Jannim supplied them. Without her original files to search for a decryption key, we're unable to countermand those orders or issue new directives." Indicating his workstation with one hand, he added, "Determining the full extent of what she put into motion and deciphering enough of it to take the appropriate countermeasures will take time. I've already enlisted the services of Dr. Faulwell to assist in this endeavor."

Gold nodded in approval. Bartholomew Faulwell was perhaps one of Starfleet's most gifted cryptography specialists. If anyone could help Soloman, it was him. Stepping around the transporter console until he stood next to Soloman, the captain said, "You said 'full extent.' Does that mean you've

been able to find anything that might be useful?"

Soloman replied. "Indeed I have, sir. Another prerecorded message has just been transmitted for global broadcast." His hand moving with grace and speed across the workstation's computer interface, the engineer entered a string of commands, in response to which the console's center monitor flickered to life with a new image. It displayed the now-quite-familiar visage of the cloaked and shrouded Dolanara- or Jannim, as the public still knew her.

"My fellow citizens, if you are watching this message, then you can safely assume that I have either been captured or killed by agents of the very government that is sworn to uphold our laws and defend our way of life."

Standing behind Gold, Corsi said, "Gets right to the point, doesn't she?"

"As this is the case, it is time for you to fully understand one of the darkest periods in our history, a stain that has been allowed to fade from memory by those who are most responsible for it being inflicted on our collective conscience. During the bitter conflict that engulfed us and our allies more than a generation ago, we found ourselves in a horrendous war of attrition. Though we possessed a formidable military force, it was decided that large numbers of troops were needed to augment the existing ranks, and a decision was made to conscript thousands of reformants to that end."

"You instituted compulsory military service for your criminal populations?" Corsi asked.

His eyes narrowing in comprehension, Gold nodded. "Of course. You just issued them new instructions through their implants."

"Forced to fight a war in which they had no stake or even understanding," the image of Jannim continued, "reformants were reprogrammed to behave as soldiers. They even were given an incongruous new title: Morhenza, or what our new Federation friends might call 'legionnaires.' Of course, their neural mediators also were helpful in quelling the natural emotional responses to the brutalities of war, to say nothing of quashing any ideas of disobedience, mutiny, and so on. Our leaders will tell you that it was a distasteful decision, but one believed to have facilitated our winning of the war.

"When the conflict ended, those Morhenza who survived were returned to their previous lives. What is not generally known, nor perhaps seen as acceptable, is that for many reformants, that decision meant resuming their sentences of rehabilitation and service to the state. For those unfortunate souls, it was as though no time had passed, even though in many instances individual reformants had participated in war efforts for longer periods than if they simply had remained as wards of the penal system."

"Pause that, Soloman," Gold snapped, his eyes narrowing in barely controlled contempt as he turned to Qrana. "Fine way to treat those who won your war for you."

"Do not be too quick to judge us, Captain," the minister replied, straightening his posture as he reacted to Gold's accusation. "It was a difficult time for us. Rebuilding efforts after the war were considerable and quite time-consuming. Our society needed a return to something resembling normalcy as we struggled to leave the war behind us."

Now glowering at Qrana, Gold said, "Your telling us all of this at the outset might have saved us a host of problems, Minister. By keeping this information from me, you put my people at risk. If you think that doesn't upset me, then you've got a lot to learn about humans in general and me in particular."

Blinking in the face of the rebuke, the Lisqual bowed his head. "It was deemed an internal security matter, Captain. No slight was intended. We...we simply did not realize the extent to which this Jannim was willing to go."

"Leslie Banks will be glad to hear that," Corsi said, making no effort to keep the venom from her voice, but she backed down when Gold shot a warning glare in her direction.

Patting Soloman on the shoulder, the captain asked, "What else is there?"

"This reprehensible action by our leaders caused massive outcry amid the populace," the image of Jannim said, as Soloman restarted the visual playback, "for a time, of course. Protests and riots were incited across our nation, which security forces were tasked with quelling. Many of the people involved in such actions naturally became reformants themselves, and activist groups soon found themselves driven underground, thereafter coming forth only sporadically to lodge infrequent protests and other actions before disappearing in bids to avoid apprehension by the authorities.

"Eventually, and unfortunately, in the eyes of many, the protest movement seemed to fade, perhaps as a consequence of inmates dying off or finally being released from the system to resume their normal lives. But make no mistake: The injustice visited upon the reformant community continues unabated, and in fact has grown even more obscene."

"It gets worse?" Gold heard Sarjenka say, and turned to see that the young doctor, apparently having finished her examination of Jannim's body, was now watching the message with no small amount of interest.

Jannim said, "Sadly, there are many of you watching this broadcast who are fully aware of what I am about to divulge: The sentences of thousands of reformants have been extended- many of them indefinitely- because those members of society who benefit most from the status quo have grown accustomed to an easy division between the privileged and the workers. They believe that there exists a need for what amounts to nothing more than a servant class."

"Well, that was predictable," Gold said, eyeing Qrana as he recalled their earlier conversation.

"Something else you neglected to share, I see."

On the computer display, Jannim continued, "I and a small trusted band of supporters have spent a considerable amount of time and effort in preparation for this day. After learning that our leaders were petitioning to join the United Federation of Planets, after meeting their first group of visitors to our world and gaining insight into the wondrous community they represent and what it might bode for our people, it was obvious what had to be done. We were faced with an unparalleled opportunity to expose this distasteful chapter of our society's past and perhaps affect real lasting change for so many who have been wronged. What you have seen to this point- the uprising, the civil disobedience- is but prologue." With that, the transmission faded, leaving behind a blank screen.

"No," Qrana said, his voice barely a whisper.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Gold asked. "Is there any more to that message?"

Shaking his head, Soloman replied, "No, sir." He pointed to the rightmost of the console's three monitors.

"But I am picking up new data transmissions along with other significant new activity within the network."

Then Gold watched the Bynar flinch as though physically struck.

"What is it?" Sarjenka asked, the alarm clear in her voice. "Soloman, are you all right?"

Hunched over the workstation, the engineer actually grunted in reply, his right hand reaching out as if to clutch between his fingers the streams of data that now were scrolling across the computer screens at a speed that made them all but unintelligible to the naked eye.

"Failsafe protocols," he said. "Hundreds of them. Similar to the one Jannim used to kill herself, but not nearly so devastating, I think." His eyelids fluttered as he accelerated his communion with the data network, drawing and processing data directly. "A protocol has been enacted that has removed the identification and tracking codes on three hundred and forty-nine distinct neural mediators. All records of these codes are also being purged from the system."

"Three hundred and forty-nine?" Corsi repeated. "Not all of them?"

"Of course," Qrana said, and when everyone turned to regard him, the minister cleared his throat. "I suppose we should consider ourselves fortunate. At the conclusion of the war, there were several thousand Morhenza to deal with. The number you cite is approximately the same as the number still living and operating under reformant status since the end of the war."

Turning to Soloman, Gold said, "And you're telling me we can't track those implants?"

"That's correct, sir," the Bynar replied. "Additionally, with the tracking logs purged of all references to these specific codes, there's no easy way to extrapolate probable locations of the affected reformants based on their last known whereabouts."

Frowning, Sarjenka asked, "What does all of that mean?"

Gold released a tired sigh. "There are, essentially, three hundred and forty-nine sleeper agents down there, probably scattered across the planet, all with military training and who the hell knows what kinds of resources at their disposal. If Jannim's message was the truth, it means these Morhenza have been given new mission orders and have basically gone quiet."

"Which means," Corsi added, "that we probably won't know what they're up to until they strike"

somewhere."

"In other words," Gold said as he rubbed his temples in a vain attempt to ward off mounting fatigue, as well as a growing sense that he was sinking deeper into a pond of quicksand, "we probably won't know anything until it's too late."

CHAPTER 7

Genetically predisposed to the arid climate of Drema IV, Sarjenka typically was not prone to perspiration. Still, she had found that when focusing her attention on a task or a problem, particularly when facing a rigid deadline, her increased anxiety would manifest in a fashion that one of her Starfleet Academy classmates rather blithely called a "flop sweat," which never failed to soak through her clothing. She was sweating like that now.

"Any solution to finding and dealing with the reformants will lie as much with the technology as with their biology," Dr. Lense had said upon hearing the latest status reports offered by Soloman in his effort to understand the mysterious Jannim's sophisticated strategy, as well as to locate the renegade Morhenza she had loosed upon targets across Betrisius III. "We should concentrate our investigation on the point where those two things overlap."

That was exactly what Sarjenka had been doing for the past several hours in response to the assignment meted out by Captain Gold: Find a way to communicate with the currently unmanaged reformant community, and to stop the more than three hundred Morhenza now wreaking havoc across the Lisqual nation. Soloman and Bart Faulwell were both engrossed in the first aspect of that joint task, but with Lense and the EMH still working to treat Banks, it fell to the young Dremen doctor to carry out the latter job.

"It is getting worse."

Looking up from the computer workstation, Sarjenka turned to where Dr. Luluma currently sat at another terminal in the da Vinci sickbay's main research lab. "I beg your pardon?"

Luluma pointed to her computer monitor. "Incidents of unrest have increased by fifteen percent since the last report," she said. "Every reformant has abandoned their designated work assignment and is simply standing in the middle of public thorough-fares, as well as blocking entry and exit from government buildings all across the country."

Stepping across the lab until she could see her companion's workstation, Sarjenka said, "Reports of attacks on government targets are increasing, as well." She allowed her eyes to take in the scrolling columns of text comprising the status report. While she was relieved to see that no deaths had been reported, and actual injuries were isolated and few, the truth was that Jannim's final act of insurrection-which appeared geared toward nothing less than full-scale disgrace and deposing of government at all levels across the country- was having a devastating effect.

Coordinated assaults on government facilities and other public property, as well as the resulting damage, were escalating. Fire bombings and other methods of demolition appeared to be the favored tactics, owing to the effectiveness of the Morhenza's military training and their apparent ability to mobilize other members of the reformant community to assist them in carrying out their assaults. Though the da Vinci lacked sufficient personnel to make any sort of meaningful contribution on the ground, Captain Gold and the ship's senior staff were working with planetary leaders to coordinate responses to the unrest, to say nothing of trying to discourage the use of military forces to employ methods of quelling the uprisings in a manner that surely would lead to hundreds if not thousands of needless deaths.

"What amazes me about these Morhenza," Sarjenka said after a moment, "is how well they appear to be carrying out these demanding tasks, despite what would in many cases have to be advanced age." The war that had seen the conscription of thousands of reformants into the Lisqual military had been over for more than a generation. It was a testament to Betrisian physiology that even the few hundred surviving legionnaires continued to operate with such stamina. "Still, without any significant resources, or some means of receiving new instructions as the situation continues to evolve, they won't stand a chance against your military."

"Then we do not have much time," Luluma replied. "My government's leaders will not allow this to continue for much longer, not if the level of violence associated with the disturbances continues to

increase. The risk to the civilian populace is too great. We must find a solution, and soon."

"Agreed," Sarjenka said as she turned her attention to the prone form of the Betrisian male laying atop the examination table at the center of the lab. "The next test is ready. I've recalibrated the signal based on new information supplied by Soloman." After conducting a level-four neurographic scan of the patient's brainwave patterns, the doctor was buoyed by the first round of computer simulation results. Now, it was time to put her and Luluma's latest research findings to the test.

Reaching for the padd resting on the table next to her workstation, Sarjenka keyed a series of commands into the device's control interface. "Activating the link."

On the table, the Betrisian remained motionless, though now his eyes began to move beneath his closed lids, and his chest heaved in response to increased respiration. Turning back to her workstation, Sarjenka entered a new command string, and a fresh collection of test results appeared on the display monitor.

"The implant's reacting to the communication stream," she said after a moment. "It's responding as it normally would when receiving legitimate instructions from the Reformation Ministry computer network."

Tapping further instructions to the padd she still held, she added, "I'm now entering the test protocol."

After a moment, she asked, "Is there any change in patient receptivity?"

"No," Luluma replied, studying the medical tricorder in her left hand.

"Computer, adjust modulation point three two seven percent," Sarjenka said, basing her instructions on the information Soloman had provided about the extremely delicate and precise nature of the communication network linking the reformants' individual neural mediators.

Within seconds of the computer implementing the new instructions, the Betrisian on the examination table began to convulse. Sarjenka flinched at the sound of alarms sounding from the table's adjacent diagnostic monitor just as the man's eyes snapped open, and he released a blood-curdling shout of shock and pain. She all but jumped backward when his teeth clamped down on his tongue before vomiting dark blood that spewed across his chest.

"He's seizing," Luluma said, her voice panicked. "Reduce the level again."

Though Sarjenka issued the proper commands, they did nothing to alleviate the patient's violent spasms. Before she could attempt another modulation of the carrier wave signal being transmitted to the Betrisian's neural implant, the man's body jerked one final time and collapsed in a lifeless heap down upon the examination table. His eyes were open and fixed, staring without seeing up at the lab's ceiling. The diagnostic monitor emitted an unwavering electronic tone that echoed across the lab.

"Another overload," Luluma said, her voice quiet.

Releasing a frustrated sigh, Sarjenka shook her head. "Computer, reset holographic simulation: Sarjenka One." In response to her command, the now-dead Betrisian patient shifted in appearance; his pained twisted features melted into an expression of calm, his sprawled limbs returned to their original positions, and the dark blood stain on his chest disappeared. The diagnostic monitor also reset, now producing a quiet steady beep as it resumed tracking a representation of normal Betrisian vital signs.

"This holographic technology of yours is a gift," Luluma said, nodding in satisfaction. "I may never cease to be amazed by it. To be able to conduct tests without endangering living patients is truly wondrous."

Exhaling a deep breath in growing irritation, Sarjenka said, "It is only wondrous if it helps us find a solution."

She registered movement in the corner of her eye and turned to see Dr. Lense emerging from the sickbay's surgical area. Her stomach bulging beneath her red surgical gown, the doctor looked pale and weary, a consequence of her extended efforts during the past several hours.

"Doctor?" Sarjenka asked. "Are you all right?"

Reaching up to wipe her face, Lense nodded. "I'm fine. I wish I could say the same for Banks."

Sarjenka frowned. "Her condition hasn't improved?"

"It's better than it was before the four hours of artificial brain tissue engrafts and accelerated critical neural pathway formation she underwent," Lense snapped, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "Did you expect she'd be walking out of here today, Lieutenant?"

Disturbed by the evident sarcasm in the doctor's voice and glancing meekly toward Dr. Luluma, Sarjenka noted that Lense had once again addressed her by her Starfleet rank rather than her medical officer's

title- as she had from their first meeting. "No, of course not," she said, shaking her head.

"Of course not," Lense repeated. Sighing in apparent dissatisfaction, she indicated the examination table with a nod of her head. "Have you made any progress?"

"No," Sarjenka replied. "We're still attempting to isolate a means of- "

"All this time you have nothing?" Lense's voice echoed across the lab, its volume high enough that Sarjenka nearly flinched in response to the force behind the question. "Are you my assistant, or not? If you can't- "

A piercing alarm echoed through the doorway leading to the operating room, and the three doctors turned to see Nurse Sandy Wetzel appear in the entrance. "Dr. Lense!" To Sarjenka, what remained unspoken was obvious: It was Banks.

Her face tightening with new resolve that was doing its best to cover the fatigue weighing on her features, Lense glared once more at Sarjenka. "I can't hold your hand now, Lieutenant," she said as she turned and ran toward the door. "Do something."

Watching the doctor vanish into the operating room, Sarjenka felt her mind cloud with the hesitation and self-doubt stirred by Lense's cutting words. It was an effort to rein in her own emotional response to the abrupt verbal reprimand, even though she knew that much of the anger the chief medical officer had displayed was due to fatigue and the stresses of caring for Banks for nearly a full day. That did little to lessen the sting of what Lense had said to her, and in front of Dr. Luluma to boot. Thankfully, the Lisqual physician elected to remain silent, providing Sarjenka with a few moments to regain her composure. She was about to return her attention to her own tasks, when she caught sight of Lense reappearing in the doorway to the surgical theater, followed by Wetzel. Lense cast a weary defeated look in Sarjenka's direction, but offered no words as she instead turned and walked seemingly without purpose toward her office. Waiting until the doctor was gone, Wetzel made her way across the lab.

"We lost Banks," she said, her voice low and soft. "There was too much damage."

Despite the limited amount of time she had spent with Banks, Sarjenka still felt a pang of sadness grip her that was stronger than she might have expected. "Is there anything I can do?"

The blonde nurse shook her head. "No, Doctor, thank you." Indicating the patient recovery area with her thumb, she said, "I'm going to deactivate the EMH and check on Hawkins." Without another word, Wetzel left the lab, leaving Sarjenka once more with Dr. Luluma and their holographic patient.

"Soloman to Dr. Sarjenka," said the voice of the Bynar engineer as filtered through the ship's intercom system.

Sarjenka's eyebrows arched as she realized he was contacting her ahead of his next scheduled update. She felt her pulse quicken in anticipation as she tapped her combadge. Had he found something?

"Sarjenka here."

"Doctor, I've succeeded in gaining entry to the global network and tracking down some of Jannim's final protocols. I've also completed a re-creation of the Reformation Ministry's master database of neural mediator access codes, including those of the Morhenza troops."

Sharing a surprised expression with Luluma, Sarjenka replied, "That's amazing work, Soloman. Are you saying you can pinpoint their location?"

"Yes," the Bynar replied. "Several dozen no longer appear to be active, and a cross-reference shows that a comparable number of Morhenza were killed or wounded during engagements with Betrisian military or law-enforcement entities."

Her brow furrowing in confusion, Sarjenka said, "Wait. Do you mean to say that even those Morhenza who were wounded suffered damage to their implants?"

"In a manner of speaking. According to my scans, wounded Morhenza appeared to suffer in a manner similar to what we observed with Jannim, though in these cases the malfunctions weren't lethal. Instead, their neural mediators seemed to overload, causing their owners to fall into a near coma."

"Oh, my," Luluma said, eyebrows arching as she listened to the report. "That's interesting."

Caught off guard by the comment, Sarjenka turned to regard her companion. "What do you mean by that, Doctor?"

Shaking her head, the Lisqual physician said, "It is just that I am reminded of something from the war, a

problem we encountered with many Morhenza." At Sarjenka's prompting, Luluma continued, "You will recall that I told you about how the reformants were conscripted into the war effort. Essentially, their neural mediators were reprogrammed to operate on the same communications network used by the military to transmit information to the implants our soldiers carried."

"Yes," Sarjenka confirmed, remembering Commander Gomez's reaction and her subtle allusion of Lisqual military forces to the Borg.

Luluma began to pace the perimeter of the research lab, her hands gesturing to emphasize her points.

"The neural mediators used by the military were far more advanced than those employed by the Reformation Ministry. In addition to the training information relayed to the soldiers and instructions they received during combat situations, their mediators also featured a more robust series of behavioral inhibitors that allowed for the suppression of the types of heightened emotions typically encountered on the battlefield. Fear of death, the pain of grotesque wounds, the confusion that would be normal when tactics encounter resistance and have to be modified as the battle evolves, to say nothing of those emotional barriers that might prevent a soldier from performing a duty that runs counter to personal moral codes, all of this was controlled and channeled via the individual soldier's mediator.

"What we discovered- far too late for far too many poor souls- was that the mediators implanted into typical reformants proved incapable of dealing with such prolonged emotional stress. While such reactions were rare in military-issue mediators, the overreliance on the behavioral modification qualities of the reformants' mediators resulted in conscripts being placed in situations for which they lacked the proper emotional preparation."

"Of course," Sarjenka said, nodding in understanding. "Soldiers are trained to survive in battle, to face the prospect of death or injury, and to devalue the lives of their enemy in order to facilitate killing them, rather than hesitating and being killed themselves. The reformants were not."

"Not to the extent of our regular military forces, no," Luluma replied. "We discovered this shortcoming well after the conscription process had begun, and thousands of Morhenza were sent into combat. Hundreds of cases of mediator failure began to emerge. In many of those instances, the resulting neurological damage was massive, even fatal." Casting a glance downward, the doctor shook her head. "Many of us in the Reformation Ministry argued- begged- for the reformants to be fitted with the military-grade mediators. We were told that it would be too time-consuming and expensive, and that it did not matter. Only reformed criminals were being sent into battle, you see."

Disgusted at the notion of the cold heinous treatment by leaders toward those who had been conscripted to defend them, Sarjenka said, "I take it this was something your government was not going to reveal to the Federation?"

Luluma shook her head. "The information was classified."

"Not that it matters now," Sarjenka countered. "The longer the uprisings continue down there, the greater the chance for escalated violence. With that comes the increased likelihood that those surviving Morhenza will fall victim to neural overload. We have to find a way to get control of this situation now." And then, suddenly, the solution coalesced in her imagination.

"I think I have an idea," she said, feeling her heart beginning to race in anticipation. Of course! It's so simple!

Assuming Sarjenka could find a way to make it work, of course.

CHAPTER 8

"Da Vinci," said Gomez as she tapped her combadge. "We're in position. Soloman, are you reading us?"

"Yes, Commander," replied the Bynar, his voice filtering through the communications channel. "We're ready to transmit the signal on your order."

Nodding at the report, Sarjenka turned to once more study her surroundings. The away team had transported down at one end of a normally well-maintained courtyard at the center of the Gisela city core, using the natural foliage for concealment. The small park was littered with all manner of refuse and debris, evidence of the riots that had ensued earlier in the day. Beyond the courtyard's boundaries, reformants stood in the streets and on the walkways, unmoving and apparently oblivious to their environs. Only a few Lisqual civilians were visible, most having returned to their homes or places of employment

rather than risk inciting further violence.

The away team's current vantage point also afforded them an unobstructed view of the target building Sarjenka had chosen for this, the first practical test of the theory she and Dr. Luluma had devised as a means of neutralizing the renegade Morhenza. According to the Lisqual physician, the structure housed the headquarters of the city's municipal law-enforcement agency. From where she sat, looking over the roof's parapet, Sarjenka could see dozens of reformants ringing the perimeter of the building. Two additional insurgents, obviously older and both carrying what she recognized as military grade shoulder-fired projectile weapons, stood near the building's main entrance. According to Soloman, these two were Morhenza, and as things stood now, the scene below her provided the optimum conditions for her test.

"How sure are you that this is going to work?" Gomez asked.

The notion she had devised for combating the Morhenza had seemed straightforward at first. Following the information provided by Dr. Luluma about the inferior nature of the reformants' neural mediators, Sarjenka had hit upon the notion of simulating the effects of prolonged stress and fear that not only had compromised the implants of the Morhenza during the war, but that also had affected those former soldiers now being manipulated by Dolanara's final set of insurgency protocols. The problem, Sarjenka had discovered, was in triggering such a response without the accompanying neurological damage that had resulted in those instances.

Studying her tricorder, Sarjenka could only shake her head. "While the computer simulations were most promising, there is always a risk when administering a new regimen to a living test subject, Commander."

"It's a good thing you didn't use that sales pitch on the captain," Commander Corsi said as she and the other member of the away team's security detail, Makk Vinx, moved across the room to join them.

"Otherwise, there's no way he would've approved this test."

Sarjenka could only nod in agreement. While she felt it necessary to view the results of the forthcoming test firsthand, it was not a sentiment that Captain Gold or Commander Gomez originally had shared, particularly given what had happened to Leslie Banks and Chief Hawkins. It was only with a great deal of passion and verve as she explained her reasons- her responsibility as a physician to be on hand when the theory she devised was put into play against the Morhenza, as well as her need to be close by if the procedure ended up inflicting further damage- that Gold finally had relented and approved her request. There were conditions to that approval, of course. Gomez was in charge of the away team, and Gold also had ordered Corsi and a security detail to accompany them to the surface. The captain had drawn the line at allowing Dr. Luluma to participate in the excursion, unwilling to place a civilian life in potential danger. Also underscoring that recognition of risk was the phaser Sarjenka wore on her hip, the first such time during her brief Starfleet career that she had been issued a weapon for an away mission.

I won't need it, she thought, struggling to ignore the hint of doubt she felt. Soloman had succeeded in creating a means of isolating the locations of Morhenza in relation to the rest of the reformants, and Captain Gold had relayed that information to Lisqual governmental leaders. At this moment, military and law enforcement units were moving to the locations Soloman had specified. If Sarjenka's test worked and the Morhenza's implants were neutralized, the immediate danger of violence they posed would be contained, and efforts could then be increased to regain control of the remaining reformant community.

"Why all the fuss, Sawbones?" asked Vinx. "Why not just zap all those boys and put 'em all on ice?"

It took Sarjenka an extra moment to decipher the guard's actual question, owing to his peculiar speech patterns. A native of the planet Sigma Iotia II, Vinx represented a unique and highly imitative culture that for reasons surpassing understanding had chosen to model their entire society from a book left on their planet by an Earth vessel more than two centuries earlier. The tome, *Chicago Mobs of the Twenties*, contained textual accounts and photographs depicting one of the more violent times during Earth's history. Despite the Iotians having interacted with other races and even aspects of human civilization since that initial contact, they still seemed content to continue perpetuating the ideas and trappings as put forth in that book. For natives like Vinx, who had been born and raised into such a culture, what once might have been nothing more than mimicry was now simply an accepted way of life.

"Simply neutralizing all of the implants across the continent would put the rest of the population at undue

risk, Mr. Vinx," Sarjenka replied. "Don't forget, the majority of the reformant community does still consist of legitimate criminals carrying out lawfully imposed sentences of punishment." Of course, she had considered that notion herself before dismissing it, knowing full well that the ramifications of such drastic action- while seemingly noble and altruistic in so far as the reformants and the question of free will were concerned- presented far too many unpleasant and immediate problems.

One step at a time, she reminded herself.

Looking down at her tricorder, Sarjenka studied its reduced image display, which depicted a wire-frame rendering of the target building. Crimson dots indicated the positions of reformants, and a pair of blue dots represented the two Morhenza. A quartet of emerald pinpoints marked the location of wide-field broadcast transmitters Soloman had transported down from the da Vinci. Amplifiers for the signal he would transmit at Sarjenka's command, the devices had been positioned twenty meters away from the building at its four corners.

Tapping her combadge, she said, "Sarjenka to da Vinci. Soloman, please initiate the broadcast."

"Transmitting now," the Bynar replied, and Sarjenka watched on her tricorder as a series of curved green lines began to emanate from the indicators representing the broadcast amplifiers, expanding outward in a cone shape and bathing the perimeter of the building.

The reaction on the ground was immediate. Though the majority of the reformants visible along the promenade made no move nor offered an indication that anything was amiss, both Lisqual identified as Morhenza abruptly jerked as if subjected to an electrical shock, dropping their weapons and reaching up to grasp their heads in their hands. Both men fell to their knees, convulsing in response to the signal now being received by their implants. After a moment, the Morhenza stopped moving, their bodies still, while their facial features were twisted into expressions of pain and fear. All the while, the surrounding reformants gave no indication that they even were aware of what was happening to their companions.

"They're alive," Sarjenka said after a moment, studying the scan results on her medical tricorder. "I'm not detecting any neurological damage."

"Not so fast, doll," Vinx said. "You got yourself one in dutch."

Sarjenka followed his gaze to see another reformant near the building's far corner, gripping his head and screaming in obvious pain. He fell to the ground, his body jerking and twitching in a violent seizure. In mounting horror, Sarjenka consulted her tricorder. Thankfully, there was no indication of neurological trauma, but the test was still not going according to plan.

"Soloman!" Gomez shouted into her combadge. "What's happening?"

"There appears to be some breakdown in the signal," the engineer replied. "Implants other than those of the Morhenza seem to be susceptible. I will have to refine the transmission to avoid affecting other reformants, but there is a new problem."

"Of course there is," Gomez said, punctuating her remark with something under her breath that Sarjenka still heard- and recognized as a particularly colorful Andorian profanity. "What now, Soloman?"

"Our actions have triggered another of Jannim's protocols," answered the Bynar. "It seems she anticipated any attempt to override the directives she issued to the Morhenza."

"Tell me about it," Corsi said, her phaser in her hand.

In response to her warning tone, Sarjenka looked up to see that, all around them, reformants were seemingly being spurred into action. No longer standing idle in the streets, they now were moving about, picking up bricks, metal shards, or whatever else they happened across. While many of the reformants resumed their destructive activities from earlier in the day- taking aim at abandoned vehicles or the store fronts, Sarjenka felt a slice of cold grip her spine as she realized several of the rioters were instead turning their attentions toward the courtyard.

"We got company," Vinx said, drawing his own phaser.

"Stand by to lay down some covering fire," Corsi ordered, checking the power setting on her own weapon. "Keep your eyes open. Don't let them surround us." Tapping her own combadge, she said,

"Corsi to da Vinci. Stand by for emergency transport."

"No!" Sarjenka yelled. "Not yet."

Moving so that he could kneel on the ground to her left, Vinx said, "Don't gum up the works, Sawbones."

"We're gonna have to scram."

"We can't leave now," Sarjenka argued. "If this keeps up, the Lisqual military will have no choice but to enact more extreme measures. They won't have a choice." Hundreds, perhaps thousands of soldiers, reformants, and innocent civilians were at risk.

Of course, continuing the broadcast and widening it to encompass all the Morhenza carried a similar risk. While it would certainly quell the renegade legionnaires currently acting under Jannim's control, what of those reformants who would also likely be affected?

Sarjenka caught movement in the corner of her eye and ducked as a large chunk of brick sailed through the space occupied an instant earlier by her head. It crashed to the soft earth behind her, landing with a dull thump, underscoring its heft.

"Vinx!" Corsi shouted.

The Iotian responded by loosing several wide-dispersal bursts from his phaser, the energy beam expanding outward from the weapon to envelop several reformants approaching from the away team's left. Corsi repeated the tactic on the other side, catching a smaller number of protestors.

"If we've got a plan," she said as she selected new targets, "now would be a good time to implement it." In the distance, Sarjenka heard the muted sounds of shouts, sirens, and projectile weapons as the unrest was beginning to worsen in the nearby streets, and reformants were engaged by Lisqual security and military forces. The situation was deteriorating rapidly, she knew.

What can we do?

"Gomez," the voice of Captain Gold echoed from the first officer's combadge, barely audible over the sounds of Corsi and Vinx firing their phasers. "We're picking up indications of escalating violence in several of the major cities. The whole thing is coming apart. I'm pulling you out of there."

"Transmit the signal," Sarjenka said. "Broadcast it nationwide."

"Are you sure?" Gold asked, the skepticism apparent in his voice.

She wasn't sure. That was the problem. All she knew was that regardless of what happened in the next few minutes, many lives would be lost because of what she had done. "We no longer have a choice," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

Several seconds passed, during which Corsi and Vinx succeeded in dispatching those rioters who seemed bent on attacking the away team. Dozens of reformants still were visible in the streets, though they appeared focused on the more immediate tasks of destroying whatever they encountered as they lumbered about the promenade. Sarjenka still heard the reports of weapons fire and even a few muffled explosions echoing between the buildings, audible testimony to the upswing in violence occurring elsewhere in the city. Closing her eyes, she offered an appeal to Traiaka, pleading to the benevolent Dreman deity to reach across space and protect the reformants from the consequences of her noble intentions.

"I'll be damned," she heard Gomez say, moments later.

Looking up, Sarjenka could see immediately that the scene around her was undergoing massive change. Across the promenade, reformants were abandoning their riotous efforts, dropping their makeshift weapons to remain standing wherever they were. Once more, she saw the blank unknowing expressions on their faces, signaling their apparent lack of awareness of anything happening around them.

"What the hell just happened?" Corsi asked.

"Gomez," Sarjenka heard the voice of Captain Gold coming from the first officer's combadge. "Are you there? We're reading no reformant activity anywhere across the network. Can you confirm?"

"Look at 'em," Vinx said, gesturing toward the courtyard's outer boundary. "They just petrified."

Releasing a relieved sigh, Gomez said, "Confirmed, Captain. All's quiet down here. What happened?"

"Soloman happened," Gold replied. "He's been working around the clock trying to figure out how to transmit instructions directly to the reformants via the global network. Long story short, he issued an abbreviated set of instructions similar to those provided by Jannim's automated protocols that were broadcast after her death. In this case, he put them back in their catatonic state, but he told them to remain there until they receive new orders, regardless of what happens."

Stepping closer to Gomez, Sarjenka asked, "What about the Morhenza?"

"Your signal worked, Doctor," the captain said. "Soloman transmitted it after sending his own instructions. According to him, the implants of the surviving Morhenza are all off-line. Preliminary scans show no signs of neurological damage to any of them. Nice work, Sarjenka."

Placing her hand on Sarjenka's shoulder, Gomez smiled. "Congratulations."

"I shouldn't have hesitated," Sarjenka replied, feeling guilt gnawing at her. How many lives could have been saved if she had been more assertive? "I put our entire mission at risk."

"You hesitated for a grand total of about five seconds, Sarjenka," Corsi countered, "but you were the only one who could make that call, and you made it."

Anything Sarjenka might have said in argument was interrupted, as all around them the large video monitors came to life. On the screen nearest to the away team's location, Sarjenka saw Dolanara, once more cloaked and shadowed in her adopted persona of Jannim.

"My fellow citizens, if you are seeing this message, it means that my campaign to bring justice to the most oppressed members of our society is at an end. I no longer control the reformants. Does it mean that I failed, and the result has been a tragic loss of life, or have I brought about a necessary first step toward a new and lasting respect for all of our people? Only you can provide the answer. It is you who will have to act, boldly and decisively, and perhaps even in the face of what you once believed to be true and just.

Only then can we move toward a future of promise and hope, whether as members of greater interplanetary allegiance or on our own. Regardless, it is up to you."

Wiping tears from her eyes as the image faded, Sarjenka said, "It's a shame Dolanara did not live to see this."

"I don't think she ever expected to see it," Gomez replied. "She anticipated that the fight would outlast her."

"Maybe that's why she chose the Jannim identity," Corsi said. "It was larger than she was, larger than life. It was a symbol rather than an individual, ideal for being at the forefront of her cause. Even though she's gone, her imagery and her words remain, hopefully as a reminder to future generations to avoid making the mistakes of the past."

Taking a final look around the promenade and the sea of now-motionless reformants, as well as the growing number of Lisqual who now were emerging into the open to see what had been left to them, Sarjenka reflected not only on the words of her companions, but also those of Dolanara herself. Her hopes echoed those embodied by Jannim, that the people of this world would find the path to a brighter future, and that perhaps they might accept the assistance of those willing to guide the way.

CHAPTER 9

"So then, Fabian here decides that maybe he's expressed his first volley of greetings- spoken in the native Tellarite tongue no less- in a manner inappropriate for the dialect he's attempted to adopt. His suspicions are confirmed when the Tellarites he's just addressed knock their chairs to the floor and are now standing and glaring at him."

Carol Abramowitz paused in her recounting of the story to smile at Sarjenka, who felt the warmth of acceptance at being included in the small impromptu gathering in the da Vinci sickbay. Standing next to Abramowitz at the bedside of the reclining Vance Hawkins was Fabian Stevens, one of the da Vinci's enlisted engineering specialists and the current target of Abramowitz's storytelling. Stevens rolled his eyes and twisted his face into a bizarre, overplayed expression of disgust, an act that elicited a giggle from Sarjenka.

"Duff told this story better, you know," Stevens said, propping one arm against the diagnostic bed.

"Well, it's my story to tell now," Abramowitz countered, "and I tell it the way he'd want me to."

Sarjenka suppressed another laugh as Stevens and Abramowitz paused in their joint recollection of this apparent comedy of errors, sharing a meaningful glance. She knew of Kieran Duffy, of course, from conversations with Commander Gomez. There was no doubting that he still was missed by those members of the da Vinci crew who survived the mission to Galvan VI.

"She's making me look bad, Doc," Stevens said, offering a mock frown to Sarjenka. While this gathering around Hawkins's recuperative bed marked their first true conversation, Sarjenka found Stevens's employment of the "Doc" moniker appealing. Despite its casual-sounding nature, the Earth origins of the

diminutive title carried respect for her calling as a healer- or so she had been told at Starfleet Medical Academy- and she took a measure of comfort in hearing Stevens use it now.

There was a lull in the conversation, during which Sarjenka was unable to keep from looking over at the empty patient bed which until the previous evening had held the stricken form of Leslie Banks.

"The memorial service is at 1400 hours," Abramowitz said after a moment.

Nodding, Hawkins replied, "I'll be there."

"Assuming you behave yourself and follow your doctor's orders, Chief."

Sarjenka turned at the sound of the new voice to see Dr. Lense standing in the doorway leading to her office.

Stepping into the room, Lense moved close enough to make a show of examining the diagnostic monitor at the head of Hawkins's bed. With her hands clasped behind her back, the doctor's state of pregnancy was made that much more obvious, and Sarjenka's initial response was one of embarrassment. After all, among her people, such brazen displays of advanced gestation were considered rude in mixed company. Nevertheless, Sarjenka tempered her initial reaction with the tolerance and experience she had acquired during her time in Starfleet.

"Don't blame Hawk, Doctor," Stevens said as Lense regarded the small assemblage around his head.

"We cornered him."

Her right eyebrow arching in almost Vulcan-like fashion, Lense asked, "And so you used the opportunity to subject Lieutenant Sarjenka to Mr. Stevens's Tellarite story?"

Abramowitz shrugged. "Actually, that was my idea. Fabian can't tell it to save his life."

Eyeing the group for a moment, Lense turned to Hawkins. "Bed rest means exactly that, Chief. Get some sleep and avoid stressing that shoulder, or you'll get another twelve hours in here." As Abramowitz, Stevens, and Hawkins chuckled at that, Lense turned to Sarjenka. "Lieutenant, a word with you, please." Nodding in response to the summons, Sarjenka followed Lense across the sickbay and into the senior physician's office. She watched Lense waddle a bit as she made her way around her desk and eased herself into her chair in an awkward manner, thanks to her swollen midsection. At that moment, for some reason, Lense seemed more vulnerable than Sarjenka had seen since her arrival.

"Is there something wrong, Doctor?" she asked.

Lense shook her head. "No. That's not why I called you here, Sarjenka. I wanted to tell you that you did a decent job while I was busy with Banks."

"Thank you," Sarjenka said as she moved to the lone chair situated before Lense's desk. "And I know that you did everything possible to save her."

Lense looked at her with eyes reddened by stress, fatigue, perhaps even sadness. "As antiquated as projectile weapons are, they still are quite effective at causing extensive trauma. I thought there was a chance to do more, but..." Drawing a deep breath, she said, "I was unavailable when you could have used a hand. Despite that, you stepped up and performed."

Still unsure how to respond to the unexpected praise, Sarjenka again said, "Thank you, Doctor."

Lense looked away for a moment, releasing a small tired sigh. "I've come across as cold and cranky since you've arrived. Whether it's hormones or stress or any number of things, I just don't feel as though I'm at my best. I'm learning to deal with it; and the truth is, you're going to have to learn to deal with it, too. I'm not offering an apology for that. I prefer to work alone, but this mission has pointed out that there might be a need for a second flesh-and-blood doctor on occasion."

"Of course, Doctor," Sarjenka replied, figuring this was as much of an olive branch as Elizabeth Lense was likely to offer at the moment.

"Good," Lense said, nodding in apparent satisfaction. "Now, I'll tell you what. Why don't you release Chief Hawkins to the custody of Dr. Abramowitz? Inform her that he's to stay in his quarters until the start of beta shift tomorrow, with the exception of the memorial service, of course. Does that sound like a reasonable prescription to further his healing regimen?"

"Absolutely." Sarjenka rose from her chair and turned to exit Lense's office.

Reaching for a padd laying atop her desk, Lense offered a final curt nod. "Then see to it...Doctor," she said, seemingly emphasizing the title for Sarjenka's benefit.

Sarjenka liked the way it sounded, particularly as it came from the person who would serve not only as her superior officer but also her guide and mentor for this, her first assignment of what she hoped was a long and rewarding Starfleet career.

"Bridge to Sarjenka," a voice said via the ship's intercom, pulling her from her brief reverie. "Report to the captain's ready room."

Excellent, Sarjenka decided. Now that the immediate crisis had passed and the da Vinci was en route to its next assignment, there now was time to address one final lingering issue.

CHAPTER 10

Sarjenka stood outside Captain Gold's ready room, waiting.

Nearly thirty seconds had passed since she'd pressed the call button outside the door. It was long enough for her to consider odd, to say nothing of making her feel self-conscious as she stood at the entrance to the captain's private office. She was certain that the eyes of everyone on the da Vinci's bridge were fixated on her- in particular those of Lieutenant Commander Tev. The burly Tellarite second officer was sitting in the captain's chair, doubtless wondering why a member of the medical staff was here in the first place. Rather than look over her shoulder to confirm her suspicions, Sarjenka instead kept her eyes locked on the ready room doors.

Finally, salvation arrived when she heard Captain Gold's voice through the door's intercom. "Come." The door slid aside, and Sarjenka saw the captain seated in his customary place behind the room's small austere desk. His right hand rested on the interface pad of his desktop computer terminal, but he did not seem at all interested in whatever information might be displayed upon the screen. His features were darkened by melancholy- at least, that was how it seemed to her- looking much as he had during their initial meeting soon after her arrival aboard ship.

"Sarjenka," Gold said, swiveling his seat so that he faced her. "Please, come in." As he motioned her toward one of the two chairs positioned before his desk, she saw a small smile pull at the corners of his mouth, but she perceived the expression as being forced for her benefit.

Lowering herself into the proffered seat, Sarjenka clasped her hands together and placed them in her lap. "You asked to see me, sir?"

"Indeed I did," Gold replied. "I wanted to tell you how proud and impressed I was with your actions during this little incident we had to deal with. Pretty remarkable for a first mission, if you ask me." Even as he spoke the words, Sarjenka was certain it was an effort for him even to generate the level of enthusiasm he was struggling to convey. "According to the report I received from Minister Qrana, twenty-eight Morhenza were killed in action against Lisqual law enforcement officers, with an additional sixty-one injured. As bad as that figure sounds, it would have been a lot worse if not for you. It was some inspired thinking on your part. That's just the sort of behavior I've come to expect from this crew, and you rose to that standard as though you've been with us for years."

"Thank you, Captain." Despite her concern over the captain's emotional state, Sarjenka could not help her broad smile, feeling her cheeks warm as she blushed in response to the unexpected praise. She knew from experience that while Gold could be a no-nonsense commanding officer, he also never wasted an opportunity to recognize deserving individuals when it was appropriate. She was delighted to be on the receiving end of such compliments after only her first few days as a member of the crew.

Leaning back in his seat, Gold regarded her in silence for a moment, and Sarjenka could see from the dark circles beneath his eyes that he was in need of sleep. Experiencing such fatigue was understandable during the events unfolding on Betrisius III, but with that mission behind them, the captain should now have the opportunity for what she suspected was some overdue rest.

"Captain, is something wrong?" she asked, blurting out the question even as Gold was opening his mouth to say something.

Whatever that might have been, it appeared to be forgotten now as the captain's brow furrowed, and any hint of a smile was instead replaced by a disapproving frown. "I beg your pardon?"

Her mind scrambling to ascertain what- if any- protocol she may have breached with respect to relations between superior officers and their subordinates, Sarjenka plunged ahead. "Forgive me for saying so, sir, but you haven't been yourself since I came aboard. It's obvious to me that something's troubling you."

"You're mistaken," Gold countered, too quickly in Sarjenka's opinion.

She shook her head. "I know you too well, sir. You have yourself and Rabbi Gilman to thank for that."

Not for the first time, Sarjenka was thankful for the frequent visits she had made to the Gold-Gilman home during her tenure at Starfleet Medical Academy. In addition to acquiring a fondness for Rachel Gilman's cooking, she also had been around David Gold enough to know when something was bothering him, particularly when he was going out of his way not to share his worry with anyone else.

"I'm not the only one to notice it, Captain," she said. "Several members of the crew have made mention of it. They're concerned for your well-being, and so am I. Is there some assistance you require?"

"No," the captain replied, but when he spoke this time, the fatigue was evident in his voice. Looking away from her, Gold directed his attention to the computer terminal, the screen of which Sarjenka still could not see. "It's- it's a personal matter." He released a sigh before adding, "I have to deal with it on my own."

The sound of the door chime echoed in the ready room, and Sarjenka saw irritation cloud Gold's features. "Come," he said.

Turning toward the door, Sarjenka was in time to see it slide open to reveal Commander Gomez, who entered the room with a purposeful stride and a determined look.

"Gomez," Gold said. "What can I do for you?"

"With all due respect, Captain, you can tell me what the hell's going on." Stopping in front of Gold's desk, Gomez placed her hands on her hips. "According to Lieutenant Shabalala, you were sitting alone in the mess hall, drinking brandy, and nearly took his head off. Something about wanting to be left alone for one damned minute, is how he put it. Well, you've had your minute, sir, and now I'd like to know what's bothering you."

Then, as if only just realizing that the captain was not alone in the ready room, she looked down at Sarjenka before returning her gaze to Gold. To her credit, she masked any awkwardness she might have been feeling. "Of course, if this is a bad time, I can come back."

Without warning, Gold erupted into hearty laughter.

Sarjenka exchanged a puzzled look with Gomez before both women returned their attention to their captain, who was emitting a last chuckle even as he reached up to wipe his eyes. "Thank you for that, Gomez. You have no idea how badly it was needed."

"I do what I can, sir," Gomez replied, her expression remaining fixed.

Gold drew a deep breath, and when he nodded, Sarjenka got the sense that he had reached a decision. Waving Gomez to the other chair in front of his desk, he said, "The good doctor here has already expressed concerns similar to yours, Gomez, and you're both right. I've been somewhat out of sorts these past few days, and I apologize if it's affected how I deal with the crew. Believe me when I tell you it's unintentional." Sighing, he added, "I received some bad news when we were at Starbase 347, and it's been eating at me."

"If there's anything I can do, sir," Gomez said, but did not finish her sentence when Gold held up a hand. Shaking his head, the captain said, "It's nothing like that." He paused again, closing his eyes and reaching up to rub the bridge of his nose. When he returned his gaze to her and Gomez, Sarjenka saw new sadness in his eyes.

"As silly as this sounds, I was thinking about my youth."

* * *

Earth Year 2328

Location: Moon orbiting Delavi III

Mission Elapsed Time: 3 hours, 19 minutes, 42 seconds

Lieutenant David Gold was no stranger to death, but witnessing it firsthand remained as difficult as it had been on those rare yet still too-frequent occasions when he could do nothing save watch a shipmate die in the line of duty.

Sitting on the floor and resting with his back against the side of one of the command center's freestanding control consoles, Gold stared at the still, lifeless form of Lieutenant Commander Dilat th'Sena. The Andorian's powder blue lips already were beginning to lighten as blood and other fluids pooled in the

lowest areas of the body. She had been placed on the floor near the rear of the command center, her hands clasped atop her chest, and covered with a blanket retrieved by Ensign Rha-Teramaet from a storage locker inside what Gus Bradford had determined was the office of the Cardassian outpost's ranking officer.

"David? You okay?"

Hearing the voice at the same time he became aware of the shadow falling across him, Gold looked up to see Bradford standing over him, phaser rifle slung over his right shoulder and holding a half-empty bottle of Saurian brandy in his left hand. "How's the arm?"

"It'll be all right," Gold replied, feeling the throb in his bandaged right forearm where the Cardassian's knife had sliced him. It hurt even worse than the injury to his left arm.

"Want a refill?" Bradford asked, holding up the bottle. It was one of several- each containing a different exotic spirit- that he had found in the outpost commander's office. The outpost commander, it seemed, had rather exotic tastes when it came to his recreational drinking, for which both Bradford and Teramaet had expressed more than a bit of gratitude.

Gold looked down at the heavy mug he cradled in his hands and realized for the first time that he had yet to drink from its contents. In truth, he had not been a brandy drinker in the past, and had only taken the initial serving at Bradford's insistence that they toast their fallen leader. Looking toward th'Sena's body once more, he shook his head. "No thanks, Gus."

Pausing to regard their fallen comrade for a moment, Bradford said, "She was a damned good officer, and damned good friend."

Gold had gotten to know th'Sena fairly well, even though the commander had only joined the Gettysburg less than six months earlier. The Andorian had proven to be a daunting poker player, and her sense of humor and ability to tell an engaging and hysterical- if somewhat unbelievable- bawdy anecdote had been as wicked as her gambling skills. For all her talents in those areas, however, they had been dwarfed by the security officer's dedication to ensuring the safety of the ship and its crew. Gold knew that Captain Jameson also held th'Sena in high regard, which only worsened the prospect of conveying the news of the Andorian's tragic passing. At the very least, the captain could take some measure of comfort from knowing that th'Sena had not suffered. The weapon wielded by the Cardassian who had shot her had been set to a lethal intensity, and the commander had died even before falling to the ground.

I suppose that's something, Gold thought, but I'll be damned if I know what that might be.

"Yeah," he replied after a moment, as he pushed himself to his feet. If anything good could be said about the loss of their leader, it was that hers was the only death that had been suffered during the operation.

According to status reports received from the other teams scattered throughout the complex, eleven members of the assault group- Gold included- had sustained a variety of injuries, none of which were life-threatening. Of course, that did little to ease the sting of pain the away team currently felt.

Bradford looked around the command center. "I only hope she didn't die for nothing. Starfleet Intelligence better be right about raiding this place, because you can bet the Cardassians are going to throw a fit when they find out what we did here."

"They're going to throw a fit no matter what," Gold countered, before taking his first taste of the brandy he had been holding. "They don't really need a reason, but the fits are more entertaining when we give them one." He held little confidence that the away team's actions here today would remain secret for any significant length of time. The events of this day would soon be known, and would provide fodder for much discourse between the Federation diplomats and their Cardassian counterparts in the coming weeks if not months. The discussions, as well as the arguments, that would erupt from them would no doubt prove to be exasperating and ultimately futile.

Good thing we've got Vulcans on our side, Gold mused, recalling that Ambassador Sarek had led the original delegations that had met with the Cardassian diplomatic representatives. Indeed, it was Sarek who had attempted to warn the Federation Council that caution should be exercised when considering how to proceed with negotiations. With his son, Ambassador Spock, Sarek also had uncovered a plot by the Cardassian Union to disrupt treaty negotiations between the Federation and the people of Legara IV in the hopes of annexing the planet and plundering its vast wealth of natural resources. Relations with

Cardassia had been tense since that incident, and Gold knew that there were those in the halls of Federation leadership, as well as the upper echelons of Starfleet Command, who were certain that war with the hostile race was all but inevitable.

"Lieutenant Bradford?" a new voice asked, and Gold turned to see Ensigns Jolev and Teramaet exhibiting matching expressions of concern as they regarded Bradford, who by virtue of seniority had assumed th'Sena's position of team leader. "The prisoners have been secured in the landing bay with the others," the young Bolian reported.

Bradford nodded in approval to the junior officers. "Excellent. Both of you performed in exemplary fashion during the entire operation. Commander th'Sena would've been proud." He cast a glance toward the fallen Andorian before continuing, "According to Commander T'Vel, the entire outpost has been swept and all Cardassians accounted for. The final count was thirty-seven, by the way, not twenty-two." Shaking his head, he added, "Starfleet Intelligence is sounding more and more like a contradiction in terms every day, isn't it?"

Offering what to Gold sounded like a humorless chuckle, Teramaet asked, "What are our orders, sir?" "Sit tight," Bradford replied, "and wait for the Gettysburg to come back." Gold knew that computer specialists already were hard at work, attempting to gain access to the outpost's storehouse of encrypted data files. They had plenty of work with which to keep busy, but those security personnel not assigned to guarding the contingent of captured Cardassian soldiers had found themselves with nothing to do except find a comfortable place to relax until the Gettysburg returned in something less than four hours' time. For Gus Bradford and Teramaet, that meant sampling the contents of the outpost commander's liquor cabinet, as well.

His momentary reverie broken by the sound of someone approaching, Gold turned to see Lieutenant Mairin ni Bhroanin moving to stand next to Bradford. Like his friend, the young Irish woman also was carrying her phaser rifle slung over her shoulder, but instead of a bottle of spirits, the lieutenant carried a vicious-looking knife, its serrated double blade gleaming in the harsh lights of the command center. Gold had no trouble recognizing the weapon, given that it was the one that had almost been driven into his chest.

"What the hell are you doing with that?" he asked.

Ni Bhroanin shrugged. "My father collects exotic weaponry," she replied, holding up the knife for emphasis. "He doesn't have anything like this yet. It will make a nice complement to the Klingon blades he has hanging on the wall of his study."

"To each their own, I suppose," Gold said, glancing again at his bandaged forearm and recalling how close the blade had come to slicing him open. While a few of his friends or relatives held similar collecting interests, it was not something to which he ever had been drawn. He considered his regular Starfleet weapons proficiency training- to say nothing of occasions like this one, where the real use of such implements was required- to be more than sufficient exposure to the more martial facets of the career he had chosen.

Meeting ni Bhroanin's gaze again, Gold suddenly remembered what he had failed to tell the lieutenant in the moments after the fierce firefight, which had preceded the team's taking of the command center.

"Mairin, I meant to thank you. Before, I mean." He paused, swallowing the lump that had chosen that moment to lodge in his throat. "You saved my life."

It had happened fast, so very fast. The Cardassian soldier had appeared as though from nowhere. His blade already had found Gold's right arm, and the Cardassian was attacking again, his arm outstretched and the edge of the knife ni Bhroanin now carried aimed directly at his chest. He had been too close for Gold to bring his phaser rifle around in time, but still far enough away that ni Bhroanin had been able to take a shot. She had done exactly that, halting the Cardassian's mad advance and leaving the unconscious soldier to collapse on top of Gold, inflicting a final wound on the lieutenant's pride.

"No problem," ni Bhroanin said, offering what perhaps might have been her first smile since well before the start of the mission. "Feel free to return the favor someday."

Releasing a small tired laugh, Gold nodded. "Consider it returned." He looked to Bradford. "Well, Gus, what do you suppose we do now?"

Bradford paused for a moment, his eyes apparently fixed on a point in the air before him. When he returned his attention to Gold, he held up the bottle he still carried in his hand. "We have this, and a few more bottles of Saurian brandy. I think it'd be a shame to let it go to waste."

"I cannot imagine that Captain Jameson, or Commander T'Vel for that matter, will be pleased should they find us in an inebriated condition," said Jolev.

Shrugging while keeping his expression neutral, Bradford replied, "Not pleased? Hell, Ensign, they'll probably want to keelhaul us the minute we beam back to the ship." He looked to Gold and ni Bhroanin.

"Do they still do that?"

"You can bet the captain will bring it back just for us," Gold said.

As though satisfied with that answer, Bradford offered a confident nod. "Good enough." Then his features softened, and Gold noticed a new contemplative quality in his friend's eyes. "Besides, I think a toast or three for Commander th'Sena is in order. If that puts us in the captain's targeting sights for a while, so be it. At least we'll be in them together, and for a good reason." Looking in turn to ni Bhroanin, Jolev, and Teramaet, Bradford asked, "Any objections?"

There were none.

CHAPTER 11

Silence all but engulfed the ready room as Captain Gold finished the story, the omnipresent hum of the da Vinci's warp engines providing the only backdrop. Looking across the table at her commanding officer, Sarjenka saw a slight moistening in the corner of his eyes, his lips pressed together in a deep frown.

As if sensing that his mood was having an effect on his audience, Gold abruptly straightened in his seat.

"We spent the next four hours or so sitting there, drinking the Cardassians' liquor and swapping whatever stories we'd accumulated during our relatively short careers at that time." He paused, a small smile forming on his lips. "Just as we figured, Captain Jameson was more than a tad upset when Commander T'Vel reported to him that five of his officers were drunk off their asses."

"I take it you and the others paid for that," Gomez said.

Gold shrugged. "He mellowed a bit when Gus presented him with the last bottle of brandy we'd taken from that Cardassian's office. It was a calculated risk, and one that paid off for the most part. The five of us were only on waste extraction detail for two weeks."

Despite herself, Sarjenka giggled at the statement, and when she turned to Commander Gomez, she saw that the first officer was smiling as well.

"We were all but inseparable after that mission," Gold said a moment later. Reaching toward the computer interface, Gold swiveled it so that Sarjenka and Gomez could see the image displayed upon it. Sarjenka recognized a much younger version of the captain, standing closely with four other Starfleet officers- a Bolian female, a human man and woman, and an Efrosian male. "Eventually we were assigned to different ships or starbases, but our paths would cross from time to time. As the years passed it became harder for all of us to meet at once. Then Gus resigned from Starfleet and eventually got himself arrested and sent to that orbital prison." Looking to Gomez, he added, "You remember what happened there. Well, after that, it didn't take long to realize that time was catching up with the rest of us."

Listening to him relay the story- and with it the deep friendship he shared with his friends- Sarjenka thought she might finally understand what had been troubling the captain. Such a bond, forged under fire and nurtured through years of common experiences and hardships, would have equaled and perhaps rivaled the love he held for members of his own family. It would have done much to define the person David Gold eventually became. The successes he had enjoyed were no doubt made more satisfying and the disappointment of failures lessened, because he had faced them with people he respected and even trusted with his very life.

"Mairin died in battle against a Klingon warship," Gold said, his expression now wistful. He was not looking at either Sarjenka or Gomez now, but rather an undefined point in the space above their heads.

"It was during that time a few years ago when the Empire withdrew from the Khitomer Accords. Jolev was killed in the Dominion War, and Gus Bradford died during that business at the prison." Casting a pained glance toward his desk, he added, "Of course, our friendship had been over for some time before that, anyway."

Realizing for the first time that she had been leaning forward in her seat, her attention captured by Gold's recollections, Sarjenka could not help asking a question, even though she suspected she already knew the answer. "What about Teramaet?"

"He died earlier this week," Gold said, the simple statement uttered without emotion. It was as though the captain were reading information from a cold sterile report. "He'd been sick for a long time, suffering from a rare degenerative disease. Don't ask me to pronounce it, but it affects some Efrosians when they reach their version of middle age. There's no cure, and he spent the last four months of his life at the medical facility on Starbase 515." He shook his head, and Sarjenka watched as his hands clenched into fists. "I talked to him via subspace the day before he died, and I'd been planning to visit him later this month, but then something happened." Reaching up to wipe his eyes, he added. "It was sudden, and I'm told he didn't suffer, so I suppose that's something."

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir," Gomez said, and Sarjenka detected the slight trembling in her voice. "It's obvious they all meant a great deal to you."

Nodding, the captain said, "Which brings me to Shabalala. He was unlucky enough to catch me when I was in the deepest part of the pity I've been heaping upon myself these past few days." He paused, releasing a tired sigh before adding, "When Mairin, Gus, and Jolev died, I took a moment to have a drink in their memory. I always thought of it as a way of remembering how our friendship really began, back there on that moon.

"When Teramaet died, and as I poured myself that brandy, part of me knew it was the last time I'd be doing it, and also that when I...die, there'll be no one left to raise a toast to me." Waving his hand as if attempting to push away the notion, he frowned. "I know how silly that sounds, as though the ritual I'd created was my last link to my old friends, but you'll just have to forgive an old man a pesky quirk or two."

The sadness gripping Gold was palpable, and even as Sarjenka felt tears welling up in her own eyes, she imagined she could feel that sadness as it fought to break out of the cage in which the captain had imprisoned it. He was fighting to keep it under control and out of sight of anyone close to him. It was a battle he was waging alone, and while Sarjenka suspected he would welcome assistance, he seemed unsure how to ask for it, but why?

Of course.

Everyone else aboard the da Vinci, every single member of the crew, was at least one generation removed from the captain in terms of age. Their careers, their experiences, their relationships, all of that and more differed drastically from those of the man who commanded them. Simply put, there was no one aboard with whom David Gold could relate.

"I don't think it sounds silly at all," Gomez said after a moment, her voice sounding as though it might be catching in her throat. "They were your friends, for longer than a lot of us have even been alive. It makes sense that you might not want to discuss this with any of us."

Gold shook his head. "What makes sense is that I was being a jackass about this whole thing. Gus and the others were the friends of my youth, but now that they're gone, I've been so busy feeling sorry for myself that I've forgotten just how fortunate I've been."

Rising from his chair, he stepped from behind his desk and reached out to place a hand on Gomez's shoulder. "You've been a good first officer, Sonya, but you've also been an even better friend. I don't think I really started to realize that until after...after Galvan VI. Duffy was a good friend, too, but I never got a chance to tell him that, and it's something I'll regret for the rest of my life."

"Thank you, sir," Gomez replied, her voice soft, as a single tear slid down her cheek. Watching the exchange, Sarjenka reached up to wipe the moisture from her own eyes, and she straightened her posture as Gold turned to look at her.

"Sarj," he said, "I couldn't be more proud of you than I am right now, and I'm thrilled for you to be a part of this very special crew. You not only represent the future- for your people and for Starfleet- but you also signify a new chapter for me."

Exchanging looks with her and Gomez, the captain added, "That goes for this entire crew. As much as my old friends meant to me, that part of my life is over. I know now that the friends I have here mean just

as much, and it's long past time I turned the page and got started moving on."

Sarjenka could think of nothing to say. In all the time she had known the captain, he had never revealed as much about himself as during the past several minutes. He always had been an extremely private man, and she could now appreciate the effort it had taken for him to lay bare his troubled soul.

"If there's anything we can do," Gomez began, sniffing as she wiped her face.

Clearing his throat, Gold shook his head. "You've both done more than enough, and I appreciate it." He drew a deep breath, pulling down on the front of his uniform jacket as he did so. "Is there anything else?"

"No, sir," Gomez replied, shaking her head.

"Good," the captain said. "If that's the case, I believe you're scheduled to relieve Tev about now." As he spoke the words, a smile crept back to the corners of his mouth. "Thank you, Sonya."

Gomez offered a respectful nod as she drew herself up, straightening her posture in renewed pride. "My pleasure, Captain."

Swinging his gaze to Sarjenka, Gold waved toward the door. "And you. Go. Go and be a damned good doctor, why don't you?"

"Aye, sir," she replied, smiling as she rose to her feet and moved to follow Gomez.

Leaving the captain to his privacy, the first officer waited until the ready room doors were closed and they stood alone at the rear of the bridge before turning to Sarjenka. "What was it the captain called you? Sarj?"

Nodding, Sarjenka said, "That was what my friends and family called me on Drema. Only Captain Gold and Rabbi Gilman have called me that since I left home."

"Well, Sarj, something tells me you're going to fit in with this crew just fine."

Gomez moved to the command chair, while Sarjenka turned toward the turbolift, feeling the rush of new satisfaction at the first officer's acceptance of her as a part of the da Vinci family.

Finally, she was certain that she belonged here.

Acknowledgments

Much appreciation is due to Keith R.A. DeCandido- fellow writer, mentor, S.C.E. editor, and friend- for asking us to write this story. It's an important job, kicking off the "relaunch" of a book series that has a great number of dedicated fans, in the hopes of broadening its appeal to an even larger audience. Keith entrusted the task to us, and we're grateful for his faith, confidence, and patience. Thanks, Boss.

At this point, we'd also like to thank all of the writers who have contributed to the S.C.E. series since its inception in 2000. The efforts of these fine ladies and gentlemen have kept things fresh and engaging for six years and sixty-six installments, and keep drawing us back to writing new entries for the series.

Which brings us to the fans of the series. Your loyalty and passion is unwavering, in the finest tradition of the best Star Trek fans, and inspires us to work ever harder to remain deserving of what you've given us. To each of you, we offer our sincere thanks.

Kudos especially to Alex Rosenzweig, he of the "Timeliners," for assisting us with proper placement for the flashback portions of this story. The devil's in the details, and Alex is about the most devilish guy we know when it comes to this sort of thing.

As always, we reserve our final acknowledgments for our wives, Michi and Michelle, who continue to tolerate our all-but-trademarked brand of idiocy. Special thanks are due this time around for Michi.

Why? For making it possible for us to offer yet another salute to our favorite rock band, Rush, by coming up with an appropriate title. It encompasses everything we hoped the story would convey-

acknowledging what has occurred while at the same time setting sights on what is yet to come. Nice job, Mich!

About the Authors

DAYTON WARD has been a fan of Star Trek since conception (his, not the show's). His professional writing career began with stories selected for each of Pocket Books' first three Star Trek: Strange New Worlds anthologies. In addition to his various writing projects with Kevin Dilmore, Dayton is the author of the Star Trek novel *In the Name of Honor* and the science fiction novels *The Last World War* and *The Genesis Protocol* as well as short stories that have appeared in *Kansas City Voices* magazine and the Star Trek: New Frontier anthology *No Limits*. Though he currently lives in Kansas City with his wife,

Michi, Dayton is a Florida native and still maintains a torrid long-distance romance with his beloved Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Be sure to visit his official website at <http://www.daytonward.com>. For more than eight years, KEVIN DILMORE was a contributing writer to Star Trek Communicator, penning news stories and personality profiles for the bimonthly publication of the Official Star Trek Fan Club. On the storytelling side of things, his story "The Road to Edos" was published as part of the Star Trek: New Frontier anthology No Limits. With Dayton Ward, his work includes stories for the Star Trek: Tales of the Dominion War and Star Trek: Constellations anthologies, the Star Trek: The Next Generation novels A Time to Sow and A Time to Harvest, nine installments of the original eBook series Star Trek: S.C.E., and the first part of the six-eBook Star Trek fortieth anniversary miniseries Mere Anarchy. Their latest full-length novel, Summon the Thunder, the second in the Star Trek: Vanguard series, was published in July 2006. A graduate of the University of Kansas, Kevin lives in Prairie Village, Kansas, with his wife, Michelle, and their three daughters, and is a writer for Hallmark Cards in Kansas City, Missouri.