

Star Trek S.C.E.  
Fatal Error

by Keith R.A. DeCandido

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For David, Alexandra, & Steven

The holo in the center of Ansed's living room showed a comedy program that had stopped production a decade earlier, and for which Ansed owned no recordings. A minute ago, it had been showing archival footage of the landing of the Pevvni ship that colonized the ninth planet fifty years ago. A minute before that, it had been showing a real-time image of the weather on Hendorf Island.

But for the life of her, Ansed, First Speaker of Eerlik, could not get the holo to open a simple communications channel.

That was only part of the problem.

Scratching her hairless teal-colored head, Ansed looked around the living room, currently illuminated by candles since the lights no longer worked, and out the window at the hailstorm that should've been stopped by the weather control system. She pulled the blanket around her shoulders with her short arms-necessary as the house's heating system was no longer functioning properly.

The unthinkable had happened. The great Ganitriul was breaking down. And if someone didn't stop it, the entire fabric of Eerlikka society would collapse.

Suddenly, the staccato slamming of hail against the outside of Ansed's house ceased. She looked out the window to see that the storm had finally abated.

There was no chance she'd be able to convince the holo to go to communications mode. She'd tried for hours to contact anyone she could, from her fellow Speakers and the priests who kept the knowledge of Ganitriul on-planet to the Pevvni colony or the nearest Federation outpost off-planet. Nothing worked.

The priority at this point was to consult the clergy. Ansed feared that even they could do nothing-after all, the transporters and spacefaring vessels were also operated via Ganitriul, so they probably didn't function any better than the weather control system, the heat, the holo, or the lights. Still, they were the experts. Left with no traditional method of speaking to the priests, Ansed was forced to go outside and walk to the temple. Ansed couldn't remember the last time she'd walked outside, nor the last time she'd gone from place to place in that manner. The inconvenience annoyed her.

She almost bruised her forehead on the door, which would not open at her approach like it was

supposed to. Sighing, Ansed opened a window. She had closed her living room window for the first time in years today; usually, there was a nice breeze coming in. Now, though, she had to use the window as a door.

Clambering out, she was assaulted by the bitter cold. Since the construction of Ganitriul-long before Ansed was born-the capital city had always had an even climate. She was forced to continue to huddle inside the blanket in order to stay warm, since she did not have proper clothing for this weather, and the clothes provider wasn't functioning any better than any other device.

For three millennia, the computer on the moon had provided every creature comfort the Eerlikka could want or need. Since Ganitriul's auto-repair components had been installed a century ago, there had never even been a hint of a problem, and, though tourists did make regular pilgrimages to the public parts of the caverns that housed Ganitriul's terminals, there had been no need for anyone to travel to the moon to effect repairs.

Until now.

After an exhausting walk of almost fifteen minutes, Ansed arrived at the temple. It was the only structure in the capital city that still retained the hideous Yarnallian architectural style, and Ansed had to admit to finding it painful to look at. But the priests insisted that the temple look as it did when it was constructed, and Ansed could not blame them for that.

Of course, the temple's greeter wasn't working properly. She wondered how she would be able to gain the attention of those inside.

Then, noticing the ornate handle in the center of the door, she remembered that the temple still had those old-fashioned doors that opened manually. She could only hope that it wasn't locked.

First she tried to slide the door to the side, the way normal doors worked, but it didn't budge. Then she pushed the door at the handle, but still it did not move.

Pulling, however, seemed to work.

Winded after all the walking and the effort of pulling the door open, Ansed took a moment to compose herself before entering the temple.

"Is anyone here?"

Her words echoed throughout the temple, which was almost pitch dark.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, Ansed thought. She considered turning back and going home to try the holo again-but she didn't fancy the idea of walking anymore, and dammit, she needed to talk to the priests. At least one of them had to be here.

Suddenly, the lights in the temple came on-at about twice their usual intensity. Ansed's wide eyes were momentarily rendered useless by the sudden onslaught, and she blinked both her upper and lower eyelids furiously to clear the spots that now danced in front of her face.

When her vision cleared, she screamed. Ansed was the foremost political personage on all of Eerlik, and she'd been a respected scholar and politician for years prior to that. She hadn't screamed since she was in her creche.

But she screamed now.

Seventeen priests and twenty acolytes served in the temple. In addition to their other spiritual duties, the priests were tasked with guarding all the knowledge that related to Ganitriul. If anyone would be able to solve the current crisis, it would be them.

Right now, Ansed stared at a pile of corpses that seemed to number approximately thirty-seven, all wearing the robes of either priests or acolytes. They looked like they had been placed there in a semi-orderly pile. Blue blood was splattered all over the bodies and pooled on the floor around them. A shiver passed through Ansed that had nothing to do with the unnatural chill in the air. The numerous malfunctions were bad; this was worse. Ganitriul could, in theory, be fixed. But to have all the clergy decimated like this

"Help me! Somebody please, help me!"

The voice seemed to come from amidst the corpses. Ansed felt as if her short legs had grown roots. She couldn't move. Someone was obviously still alive in the midst of the carnage, but Ansed couldn't bring herself to investigate further. This was a task for Enforcement, not the First Speaker.

"Help me, please," the voice said, this time much smaller. Ansed saw someone crawling out from under the pile of bodies.

Somehow managing to overcome her fear and revulsion, Ansed made her feet move toward the voice and reach out one short arm to him.

With a grateful expression on his face-at least, Ansed assumed the expression was grateful; it was hard to tell under all the blood-the young man reached out to grab the offered arm. Now that she got a look at him, Ansed recognized the young man as Undlar, who had only just been ordained a month earlier.

And now it seemed he was the only priest left.

The recognition went both ways, as Undlar stumbled to his feet, gazed upon Ansed and said, "F-First Speaker? Is-is that you?" Ansed noticed that the young man had a very large gash all the way down his right arm, and dozens of cuts and abrasions all over his person.

"Yes, Reger Undlar," she said. "I came to speak to the clergy."

With a sardonic tone that impressed Ansed, given Undlar's physical state, he said, "I-I'm afraid that w-won't really be possible, First Speaker."

"What happened?"

Undlar seemed to deflate. "I-I wish I knew. The-the power-it went out-obviously s-something has gone wrong with the Great One-and then-then we were all assaulted-brutally. We-we tried to fight back, but our guns wouldn't-wouldn't work. They had some-some kind of edged weapons."

That edged weapons were used was obvious given the types of wounds, but Ansed said nothing.

"We need to get you to a hospital." And hope their equipment is functioning, she did not say aloud.

Undlar did not need to be reminded of that. "And then we need to call Enforcement. They probably have their hands full, but this is something that will need to be dealt with right away."

"I-I'm sorry, First Speaker. I-I failed."

"You did no such thing, Reger. On the contrary, you showed tremendous courage." And you may be the only hope we have, she thought. Saying that aloud was equally inadvisable.

Supporting the young man-who started shaking as they began to walk-Ansed moved back outside into the cold, hoping that the trip to the hospital wouldn't exhaust her.

For thousands of years, Eerlik had prospered. There had been no reason to doubt that the golden age brought on by the construction of Ganitriul would ever end.

Now the First Speaker of Eerlik had to wonder if that golden age was over-and if it was, whether the Eerlikka could survive its ending.

Captain David Gold was dreaming of his wife's chicken matzoh ball soup when he was awakened by the duty officer on the bridge of the U.S.S. da Vinci, telling him he had an urgent message from Earth.

Gold blinked the sleep out of his eyes and said, "Screen on." The viewscreen in his quarters flickered to life, first with the Starfleet logo, then with a familiar visage.

"Did I wake you? Sorry about that, lad," said Captain Montgomery Scott. "Bloody time differences."

Gold waved a hand dismissively. "Fact of life."

"I can give you a few minutes if y'need it."

Shaking his head, Gold said, "No need. Rachel's the one who needs four cups of tea to get going. When I'm up, I'm up."

"Good. There's a wee bit of a crisis on a planet called Eerlik. You'll need to set a new course there right away."

Without hesitating, Gold contacted the bridge and requested the course change, with speed at Warp 9. "How long'll it take to get there?" he asked the duty officer.

"Fourteen-and-a-half hours at this speed, sir."

"Good. Gold out." He turned back to the image of the head of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers. "So, you gonna tell me what this is all about?" he asked with a small smile.

Although Scotty wasn't biologically that much older than Gold himself-about seven years, which at their age wasn't a significant difference-Scotty had in fact been born eighty-one years before Gold, which was the only reason Gold let him get away with referring to him as "lad." Scotty had spent some

seven-and-a-half decades in a bizarre sort of suspended animation as a regenerating transporter pattern until he'd been freed a few years previous. Gold had come to enjoy working alongside the older man. Scotty had also done a fine job of whipping the S.C.E. into shape. After all, who better to supervise Starfleet's "fix-it" squadron than the original miracle worker himself?

In answer to Gold's question, Scotty said, "I'm sendin' you the full mission profile, but the short version is that Eerlik's in a right fix an' the S.C.E. needs to get 'em out of it."

"They're not part of the Federation, are they?"

"No, but we do trade with 'em. Turns out their entire bloody planet is run by one big sentient computer on their moon. Problem is, the computer-they call it 'Ganitriul,' whatever that means-is breakin' down. The planet's in a state o' chaos."

"Do they need help?"

"Hard to say, but apparently their internal security is dealin' with it. The problem is, they're completely cut off from the moon-whatever's bollixed up Ganitriul is keepin' their transporters, comm systems, an' ships from workin' right. In fact, we didn't get the distress call from Eerlik-we got it from Ganitriul itself."

"Really?"

Scotty nodded. "It knows it's broken, but it can't fix itself." Shaking his head, the older man said, "Why in my day, when we saw a planet that had been taken over by one'a those- Ah, but that's neither here nor there. Your priority is to get the thing up an' runnin', pronto. I know you were supposed to report to Starbase 505."

Gold nodded. "I've got crew to replace-and one to drop off."

"Aye, I heard about the Bynars. Extend my sympathies to 110, will you?"

"Of course. And we'll need a new computer specialist." He had been about to finish that sentence with the words, to replace 110 and 111, but that wouldn't be possible. They'd find someone to fill the position, but Gold doubted that he'd find anyone who could fill their shoes. A damn shame, too, he thought. The Bynar pairing weren't even Starfleet, they were civilians, part of an exchange program-although they had agreed to abide by all Starfleet rules and regulations.

Not wanting to dwell on the recent unpleasantness, Gold added with a sardonic grin, "Plus La Forge is itching to get back to the Enterprise."

"Nothin' worse for a chief engineer than to be separated from his ship," Scotty said with a chuckle. "I understand the difficulty, lad, but Eerlik's whole bloody socio-economic structure's collapsin'. They canna wait."

"I know the drill, Scotty. When they put that funny-looking 'A' on your chest, you dance where they tell you."

"Aye, that you do. Oh, by the way, I took your advice. Had dinner with your wife last night. Lovely woman. Makes a fine chicken matzoh ball soup."

Shaking his head, Gold chuckled. The universe is full of damn strange connections. For months, Gold's wife-Rabbi Rachel Gilman, the finest cook on the east coast of the Americas-had been bugging her husband to get "the legend" to come over for dinner.

Returning the chuckle, Scotty said, "'Twas a lovely evening. I now know everything there is to know about your entire family. Oh, and your granddaughter's pregnant again."

"You're kidding," Gold said. I'm a great-grandfather again, he thought with a certain pride.

"She only found out yesterday, and Rachel asked me to pass it on. She really is a fine woman, lad. Pity she's all alone" Scotty had a slight twinkle in his eye visible even on the viewscreen across the gulf of light years.

"Don't even think about it," Gold said with an amused glare. "Otherwise I'll set her congregation on you, and then you'll be sorry."

Grinning, Scotty said, "In any event, she really is a fine chef. You should convince her to make haggis."

"Sorry, but she's a Jewish mother-she's only allowed to make edible food."

Putting his hand over his heart, Scotty said with mock indignation, "My dear lad! Haggis is a delicacy!"

"I refuse to accept culinary judgments from a man whose idea of a good drink is liquid peat bog."

"Lad, people who live in Manischewicz houses shouldn't throw stones." Shaking his head, Scotty said,

"In any event, I'll be off. The Sugihara will be in the area if you need any kind of backup."

"Good."

"Scott out."

The screen went blank again. "Computer," Gold said, "leave messages for all personnel about our course change and let the S.C.E. crew know that there's a staff meeting at-" he thought a moment, then finished, "-0800." That left him with three more hours to sleep and would still give everyone over ten hours to prepare for the mission. "Leave copies of the mission profile with Commander Gomez and Lieutenant Commander Duffy. Oh, and instruct Duffy to compile a complete report on Eerlik based on the profile." "Acknowledged."

He thought a moment, then added, "Also let Lieutenant Commander La Forge know that he's welcome to sit in on that meeting."

"Acknowledged," the computer repeated.

Within three seconds, David Gold set his head on his pillow and was fast asleep again. A few seconds after that, he was dreaming of drinking a nice Manischewicz red with his wife's soup.

Or maybe it was Scotch.

110 stared at the ceiling of the quarters that, until recently, he shared with the love of his life.

For hours, he had been trying to imagine how he could possibly go on without 111. It was proving to be impossible.

So was getting any rest. Bynars only required a couple of hours of downtime per day, but every attempt 110 had made to try to offline resulted in nightmares where he relived those awful moments when 111 died. Through their link, 110 had felt his bond-mate die.

He was not sure if he would ever be able to rest soundly again.

The da Vinci computer then conveyed a message directly to him through his belt unit-110 had never understood how the others could communicate with a computer by so clumsy a method as voice.

According to the message, the da Vinci had changed course to a planet called Eerlik, delaying their arrival at Starbase 505, and there was a meeting of the S.C.E. staff at 0800.

110 doubted he would be welcome at that meeting.

He could not stand to remain alone in his quarters any longer. For lack of anywhere better to go, he went to the mess hall. The da Vinci was a small ship-there were few places to relax outside one's quarters. The mess hall was really 110's only other option.

His steps as he moved down the corridor were awkward. After spending all his life walking in tandem with another, walking alone was proving more difficult than he would have thought.

Only one person was present in the mess hall Bart Faulwell. He was dictating quietly into a padd. 110 had been hoping to have the room to himself, but he found that he was grateful for the presence of the S.C.E.'s linguist and cryptography expert. Bart-the only alien 110 or 111 had ever met who came close to truly understanding the Bynar language-was a good person, and one that both Bynars had always felt comfortable talking to. Perhaps because he had made the study of how people talk to each other his life's work, he had an easier time communicating than others. Most aliens at best saw the Bynars as an odd curiosity and at worst were completely uncomfortable around them.

As 110 entered, he heard Bart's voice say, "Love you. 'Bye!" Then he looked up and said, "Oh, hi, Six," using the nickname several da Vinci crew had given 110, since his appellation was that number in base ten. Setting down the padd, he asked, "Couldn't sleep?"

"I have not been able to offline-" he hesitated, then finished, "-since 111 died." He had expected 111 to finish the sentence for him. That was perhaps the hardest thing of all to get used to.

"I guess that isn't surprising, all things considered." Bart pointed to the chair opposite him as he himself got up and angled himself toward the replicator. "Have a seat. You want anything? I was gonna get some coffee."

"No, thank you. I have not eaten since 111 died, either."

Bart shook his head. "I'm really sorry, Six. I wish there was something I could say." He turned to the replicator. "Coffee, French roast, half-and-half, no sugar."

After Bart retrieved his coffee, he sat back down. 110 had taken the seat opposite the linguist's. "Why are you up-at this hour?" 110 wanted to scream-each time he paused, he expected 111 to continue the sentence.

"I'm usually up this early, actually. I'm a napper-I get snatches of sleep here and there. Starfleet doesn't always allow that kind of luxury, but that's the nice thing about this ship," he said with a smile. "I'm allowed my eccentricities."

"That must be-beneficial."

"So," Bart asked after a pause, "what're you going to do once we reach starbase?"

110 hesitated. "Bynar custom is such-that we must immediately re-bond with another-if one of us dies and the other does not. We are-designed to function in pairs."

"Designed?"

Frowning, 110 said, "A poor choice of words. We are not genetically engineered." 110 knew that humans had had bad experiences with such things. "Our evolution has taken us to the point where we function better in twos." 110 was proud of himself he got through that entire sentence-ironic, given the subject matter-without hesitating.

Bart blinked. "'Better'? That's interesting. I always thought it was necessary for you to work in pairs . I was actually kind of worried when I heard we were taking this little diversion-can you survive without her?"

"In the literal sense, I can. Our effectiveness and ability to contribute to society is greatly lessened without a bond-mate, however," 110 said easily enough. But then, this had been indoctrinated into all Bynars from the moment they emerged from their birthing chambers. "That is why we traditionally do re-bond." "But don't you bond from birth? I mean, how can you-" Bart cut himself off. "I'm sorry, I'm being nosy." "There does not appear to be anything amiss with your nose."

Chuckling, Bart said, "One of these days, they'll design a universal translator that handles idioms. No, I mean I'm asking a lot of probing questions."

"I do not object. In fact, I appreciate having someone to talk to. Perhaps you could advise me."

"About what?"

"You are in a stable, loving relationship, yes?"

Bart smiled a bright smile. "Very much so, yeah. I just finished a little note to Anthony."

"What would you do if he died?"

Recoiling as if he had been slapped, Bart straightened in his chair. 110 realized he had committed a blunder-he tended to forget how little some aliens appreciated straightforward speech.

Reaching a hand forward, 110 said, "I am sorry if I have-given offense. I-"

Bart shook his head. "No, no, it's okay, really. I'm sorry, I just wasn't expecting that question-though I guess I should've." He took a sip of his coffee. "The honest truth is-I haven't the first clue what I'd do. It's funny, if you add it up mathematically, I've spent more of my life without Anthony than with him-and we don't even get to spend that much time together what with his being assigned to Starbase 92-but I tell you, I can't imagine my life without him now. It's like he's a part of me, you know?"

110 leaned forward. "Really? So you do understand! We-I had assumed that others did not comprehend or share our total devotion to each other."

"Well, I can't speak for other races, but-well, humans may not have bonded pairs on the same level as you guys, but we can get pretty silly about each other," Bart said with a chuckle.

"Our experiences led us to think otherwise. Commander Gomez and Lieutenant Commander Duffy, for example."

Bart rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well, I don't know what the story is with those two."

"But if something did happen to Anthony, would you re-bond? Find another to love?"

Blowing out a breath, Bart said, "I don't know. I wasn't looking for a relationship when I met Anthony, it just sort of happened. So I suppose it could happen again. But I doubt I'd be in any kind of rush to get involved with someone else-and I seriously doubt I could find anyone as wonderful as Anthony."

"The problem is-" 110 hesitated. What he was about to say would shock his fellow Bynars to their very core. "I am not sure that I wish to re-bond."

Shrugging as he took another sip of coffee, Bart said, "So don't."

"You do not understand-we must re-bond."

"Hold off, you just said it wasn't necessary."

"Biologically, it is not. Culturally is a different matter altogether. If I do not re-bond, I will be considered an outcast from Bynar society. I will lose my name and be deleted from the master file. But the alternative is even more difficult for me to contemplate. Like you with Anthony, I cannot imagine my life without 111. I would rather die than bond with another."

Tensing somewhat, Bart said, "You're not thinking about-"

Remembering that this was another subject about which humans were touchy, 110 quickly said, "No, I am not contemplating suicide." This was not entirely truthful-110 wanted very much to die with 111 at the end rather than have to endure without her, but he hadn't been given a choice. And now, truly, the idea of killing himself was not one he was comfortable with. But at the time

He continued, "From the perspective of my people, if I do not re-bond, I will be dead. I do not know if I am ready for that-but I also know I cannot bond with another. I will not sully 111's memory that way.

That is why I wish your advice."

Bart started to take another sip of coffee, then noticed that the mug was empty. "Y'know, there are few sensations more annoying than trying to take a sip of coffee when there's no coffee in the mug." He got up and ordered another from the replicator, then sat back down.

"You are stalling," 110 said impatiently. If there was one aspect of dealing with aliens that always irritated 110 it was their inability to move at anything like a reasonable speed. Bad enough that they naturally moved too slow, but to then compound it by hesitating and stalling so much

"Sorry, it's just-I don't know how to advise you. But I can tell you one thing. If I had been born in the same place but four centuries earlier, I at least stood a chance of being assaulted solely on the basis of the fact that I'm sexually attracted to men rather than women. If I had been born in the same place but four-and-a-half centuries earlier, I wouldn't have even been allowed to admit that preference publicly. By three centuries ago, though, it didn't matter all that much, and now nobody even bats an eyelash. My point is, times do change. Cultures change. And maybe the Bynars can accept your choice the same way humans accepted the choices made by my ancestors."

"Perhaps you are right. But I am frightened."

"Well, if it means anything, Six, no matter what you do, you've got my support."

110 found himself smiling for the first time since 111's death. "Thank you, Bart. That means a great deal to me."

"Well, I'm glad that this new mission isn't going to be a problem. Heck, maybe the extra time'll help you sort things out."

"I hope so. I wonder what the mission is."

Bart shrugged and sipped his coffee. "They'll tell us at the meeting."

"I do not believe I should attend it. I do not believe that Commander Gomez will want me on the team in my diminished state."

"Don't be silly, Six, of course you should be at the meeting. You're still one of us, even if you are technically a civilian. Let Gomez make the decision about the team-that's her job. Nothing COs hate more than their subordinates anticipating them."

110 had not thought of that. "I will accept your advice. Thank you."

Grinning broadly once again, Bart said, "My pleasure."

Unfortunately, 110 did not feel any more settled with this decision made. He was quite sure that Commander Gomez would not want him. After all, of what possible use was a single Bynar?

Sonya Gomez entered the briefing room at 0750, figuring Kieran Duffy wouldn't have arrived yet. In this she was correct-in fact, the room was empty when she entered-and so she went to the replicator with a clear conscience. "Computer, hot Earl Gray tea, please."

"That's not a hot chocolate, is it?" came Kieran's voice from behind her.

Sonya tried very hard not to scream. She also resisted the urge to dump the contents of the

now-materializing mug all over the second officer.

Kieran had a huge smile on his face as he approached her from the still-open entrance. "Cause you know what happens when you order hot chocolate."

"Ten years, Kieran. It's been ten years since I spilled hot chocolate on Captain Picard."

"And yet the joke remains funny."

"To you, maybe," she said, dolefully sipping her tea.

"All right, I'm sorry," Kieran said, hitting her with those puppy-dog eyes that she'd never been able to resist. "Forgive me?"

Rolling her eyes, Sonya went to sit at the table. "What'm I gonna do with you?"

"Well, I have some creative suggestions" Kieran said as he sat down next to her. Sonya noticed that he had a padd in his hand.

The doors parted to allow Geordi and P8 Blue in, which came to Sonya as something of a relief. The conversation with Kieran was starting to get a little too comfortable for her.

Geordi was in the midst of a laugh, which didn't surprise Sonya. Pattie had a nasty sense of humor, and Geordi was probably the only person on the da Vinci who hadn't heard all of her jokes yet.

Sonya had hoped that the S.C.E.'s next task wouldn't come until after they stopped off at starbase for a number of reasons, one of which was that Geordi La Forge wouldn't be on board anymore. She liked and admired Geordi, and he was certainly of great use on their last mission, but she felt so damned awkward around him. After all, he was her first CO out of the Academy, and now she outranked him. It didn't seem right, somehow. Geordi himself wasn't making a big deal of it, but Sonya always felt like she was walking on eggshells around him.

Pattie had walked in on her hind legs, as Nasats generally did when they walked alongside other humanoids, since even at full height they were shorter than most. However, once she came into the room, she skittered on all eights to her specially designed seat at one end of the table.

"Duffy, Gomez," Geordi said as he went to sit down, nodding to each of them. "Hey, that's not hot chocolate, is it?"

Sonya banged her head against the table. Geordi, of course, had been present for the infamous hot chocolate incident. "No," she said through clenched teeth, "it isn't."

"Good. 'Cause you know what happens-

"-when I order hot chocolate, yes, I know."

"See?" Kieran said. "I told you it was still funny."

Geordi peered at the mug. "That's Earl Gray, isn't it?"

Sonya nodded as she took a sip.

"That was Sonya's way of making penance," Kieran explained, even though Sonya really didn't need him to. "She avoided hot chocolate like the plague, and started drinking the captain's favorite drink."

"Now I'm addicted to it," Sonya said ruefully.

Pattie made the tinkling sound that passed for a chuckle among Nasats. "The price we pay for the follies of our youth."

Glaring at Kieran, Sonya said, "Some of us pay more than others."

Within minutes, the rest of the S.C.E. crew arrived, as did Captain Gold. They all took their seats around the table.

Sonya couldn't help but notice the empty chair next to 110. That was the other reason why she wanted to stop off at Starbase 505 before they got their next assignment. 110 was supposed to go home to Bynaus-and, if Sonya had her Bynar customs right, re-bond with another. Indeed, Sonya hadn't been entirely sure that 110 was going to even attend the meeting, though she was glad he did. He was still part of the team, after all.

The captain said, "All right, boys and girls-and bugs and Bynars-here's the story. We're heading to a planet called Eerlik. The planet is entirely run by a computer called Ganitriul. Unfortunately, Ganitriul's broken, and we get to fix it."

"They named the computer?" said Fabian Stevens, sounding surprised.

"It's got a personality, believe it or not. Might even be sentient."



Carol Abramowitz shook her head. "And they can't fix it why, exactly?"

Turning to Kieran, the captain said, "Duffy?"

Kieran nodded, touched his padd, and an image appeared on the screen. Sonya looked up to see an image she recognized from the mission profile she'd studied before the meeting on Eerlikka. As a rule, these teal-skinned people were short, hairless, with almost stubby arms and legs, and very wide eyes.

"Eerlik is a thriving, vibrant planet," Kieran said, "that is technologically quite advanced—at least in some ways. They only recently started venturing into space—the Eerlikka's focus has been more in the direction of technology-for-comfort. They've got very little by way of an urge to explore. They actually developed space travel several thousand years ago, but never bothered much with it beyond going to the moon and back. About fifty years ago, a sect went out and colonized the ninth planet in their system—"

"How come?" Carol asked.

Trust the cultural specialist to zero in on that, Sonya thought with a smile.

Kieran's eyes went wide. "Uh—not sure, I— Hang on"

And trust the engineer not to have a clue, Sonya thought with a wider smile. Luckily, she had read the entire thing, unlike her second officer. "A group of Eerlikka that call themselves the Pevvni broke off from the mainstream religion, and they wanted to start over in a new place."

Carol nodded.

"Uh, right," Kieran said. Sonya noticed several people trying and failing to hide smiles. "Anyhow, the Federation made contact shortly after the colony was established. They weren't interested in joining, but Eerlik has a rich supply of uridium, so a bunch of trade agreements were made."

Kieran touched his padd again, and an image of Eerlik's moon appeared. "For the last three thousand years or so, Eerlik has been completely run, maintained, and administrated by Ganitriul, which is a giant computer located on its moon." As he spoke, the display slowly changed to a schematic that showed how the moon had been excavated and Ganitriul installed. "Everything on Eerlik is run by Ganitriul, and it hasn't failed them once. It has some of the best diagnostic software and auto-repair components that anyone's ever seen." He looked at 110. "Might even put the master computer on Bynaus to shame."

"That is unlikely," 110 said simply.

Kieran grinned for a moment, then got serious again as he went on. "Like I said, Ganitriul hasn't failed them—until now. Nothing is working right on the planet anymore—climate controls, entertainment, communications, food distribution, planetary defense, everything. It's complete and total chaos."

Bart Faulwell shook his head. "That doesn't really answer the question. What do they need us for? Surely, they can fix their own computer."

Fabian smiled. "Not if they can't get to it. Commander, you said that Gani-whatsit—"

"Ganitriul," Kieran corrected.

"Right—that it runs everything. That includes transporters and ships, right?"

Nodding, Kieran said, "That's it, exactly. And also communications. The only reason we know there's a problem at all is because Ganitriul itself contacted the Federation Council asking for help. Eerlik is cut off from any useful communications, and from what Ganitriul said in its message, none of their modes of travel are functioning."

"So it's up to us," Pattie Blue said.

"Why should today be any different from any other day?" Captain Gold said with a small smile. He looked at Sonya. "Commander?"

"I think we can keep this down to a two-person team, plus," she added with a look at Domenica Corsi, "a security detail." The security chief nodded her blonde head.

Kieran fixed her with a look, but said nothing. Pattie and Carol were less reticent.

"Only two?" the Nasat asked, at the same time Carol said, "We're talking about the collapse of a culture here."

Patiently, Sonya said, "The results of the problem are large, but the problem itself is pretty straightforward fix the computer. If we send a big team down there to do, in essence, one thing, we'll be stepping all over each other. Two of us should be able to handle it just fine—if we need more, we'll call."

"Who'll be on the team?" the captain said before anyone else could say anything—and he spoke in a tone

that implied that the discussion was at an end.

"I'll lead it, and I'd like to take 110 with me."

110 sat up straighter in his chair. "Me?"

"You're still our best computer expert."

"111 and I were the S.C.E.'s computer experts. By myself-

"By yourself," Sonya interrupted, "you've still got a computer efficiency rating of ten. That's your rating, not yours and 111's. She also had a ten, but the point is, the best person in Starfleet has an eight."

"I do not believe that-you will be satisfied with my-diminished performance."

Pattie spoke up. "I can go if 110 is uncomfortable, Commander. I know my way around tricky software."

"That won't be necessary," Sonya said. "You're the right person for this job, 110. Unless you're refusing a direct order, you're on the team."

Sonya's strategy was risky. After all, 110 was a civilian. But he and 111 had agreed to be under Starfleet orders for the duration of their time on the da Vinci, and until they actually reported to Starbase 505, that agreement was still, technically, in place.

The Bynar took a look at Bart for some reason, then seemed to relax. "I would not presume to go against the commander's judgment. I will accompany you on the mission."

"Good," the captain said. "Meantime, I want the rest of you to read up on the Eerlikka. It's possible they'll need more help from us beyond fixing Ganitriul, and I want us to be ready."

Sonya looked at the security chief. "Commander Corsi, I'll leave the size and personnel of the security detail to your discretion."

"Yes, sir," Corsi said.

"Good," the captain said again. "Oh, and I have one other bit of news."

Sonya leaned forward.

"I'm gonna be a great-grandfather again!"

Several congratulatory noises went around the table. Shaking her head, Sonya got up, finished off her tea, and put the mug back in the replicator to be recycled. Some of the crew stuck around to hear the captain tell of his granddaughter's pregnancy, but Sonya wanted to get started on the day's work.

"Nice job defusing Blue and Abramowitz there, Sonya," said Geordi La Forge, walking alongside her as she left the briefing room.

"Yeah, well, they're not officers, and no matter how many times you tell them they're not supposed to question orders"

Geordi laughed. "Yeah, I know the problem. Given me an eager-to-please young ensign over a cranky enlisted engineer any day."

Glancing sideways at him, Sonya said, "Don't be so sure of that-eager-to-please young ensigns have a habit of spilling hot chocolate all over their captains."

Geordi looked a bit sheepish at that. "I'm sorry I brought that up again."

Waving him off, Sonya said, "It's okay, I'm used to it by now. For years, every time I went to a new assignment, I'd be introduced to new people and they'd say, 'Oh, you're the one who spilled hot chocolate on Captain Picard'-like I didn't know or something. It's gotten better lately, but then I find myself here with you and Kieran who were actually there, and I see Captain Picard again"

"Well, I really am sorry."

"I know. And I'm sorry, too, that this'll delay you going back to the Enterprise."

Geordi shrugged. "I'll live. Danilova should be able to muddle through without me a little while longer."

"Danilova?" Sonya said, her eyes going wide. "You mean Raisa Danilova? She's your assistant chief now?"

Laughing that staccato laugh of his, Geordi said, "She made lieutenant last year, and I made her assistant chief after the war ended."

"But she was the slowest person in that whole engine room," Sonya said, returning the laugh. "She'd spend all day on a sensor recalibration."

"She picked up some speed after you left. Actually, what mostly got her going was the war. I always

kept her out of emergency situations 'cause of her lack of speed, but I didn't have that luxury when we were being pounded by the Jem'Hadar-and something about having Engineering falling apart around her lit a fire under her butt or something. She blossomed into one of my best people."

Sonya shook her head. "Pretty amazing."

They arrived at Sonya's quarters, where she was planning to set out a game plan for the mission. "In any case," Geordi said, "I think the Enterprise is in safe hands. Besides, this mission sounds like it might be interesting. I was half-tempted to ask if I could tag along."

Sonya tensed. After relaxing around Geordi for the first time since they rendezvoused with the Enterprise last week, Sonya found herself back on eggshells again. Geordi obviously noticed this-if nothing else, his ocular implants allowed him to notice biological shifts that normal vision couldn't detect-and said quickly, "Hey, don't worry, I'm not trying to horn in on you or anything."

"I know, it's just- This is my team, not yours. I meant what I said about too many people stepping on each other."

Nodding Geordi said, "That's why I said I was 'half-tempted.' Don't worry, Sonya, I know this is your show," he added with a smile. "And, for what it's worth, I think you're doing a great job."

Letting out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding, Sonya said, "Thanks. Coming from you that means a lot."

"I'll talk to you later, okay?"

Sonya nodded in reply and entered her quarters.

Five of the Speakers had managed to assemble in Valandriw Hall. Ansed was impressed with their fortitude. Three of them, including Ansed herself, lived in the capital city; the other two happened to be in Valandriw Hall working. Another Speaker lived in the capital city, but he was not present; he had sent his son with a message that he'd broken his leg tripping over his furniture when the lights went out.

Rather than take their usual seats, which were spread around the large table that was intended to seat all thirty-one Speakers, the five of them bunched up at one end of the table around the head where Ansed traditionally sat.

Also present in the Hall was a heavily bandaged Undlar, who sat to Ansed's right. He was no longer shaking, but Ansed thought the young man still seemed a bit out of it.

The first order of business was to discuss how Enforcement was dealing with the crisis-and also the investigation into the murder of the priests. Both were proceeding as well as could be expected. A clever Enforcement officer had found some old radios and they'd been issued, allowing communication, and a top investigator had been assigned to the slaughter.

After that, they turned to the issue of getting to Ganitriul.

"I've just come from the transportation center," said Speaker Biral. "They've been doing tests with inanimate objects. Every attempt has failed-and it's a different failure every time, too. Sometimes the object goes to the wrong place, sometimes it's inside-out, sometimes it never rematerializes, sometimes the console goes down, someti-"

"The point is," Ansed put in-Biral had a tendency to babble, "that transporting to the moon is not an option."

Speaker Miko said, "We can't risk taking a ship, either. Even if some of them do work now, what if they fail en route?"

"And who do we send?" asked Speaker Torin. "Reger Undlar here is in no shape to travel."

"I can make the journey," Undlar said quietly. "And I believe there is also a way to get me there."

Ansed whirled in surprise. "There is?"

"I believe so."

Miko said angrily, "Why didn't you mention this before?"

"I'm sorry," Undlar said, and the sardonic tone Ansed had noticed earlier returned, "but I've been a bit preoccupied with the brutal murder of my brothers."

Softening, Miko said, "Of course, I'm sorry, Reger. These are troubling times, and I forgot myself."

"That is all right, Speaker," Undlar said, his voice getting more subdued again. "It's just that-there is a

Pevvni trading ship in Brioni Port that might be able to make the journey. It is an experimental ship that has circuitry independent of the Great One."

Ansed's already-wide eyes went wider. "What?"

Shock spread around the table, as the other four Speakers expressed similar outrage. "Who approved this?" Biral asked.

Undlar straightened. "We did. The Pevvni came to the clergy with a special request to construct this prototype. They built it as an experiment, in case further dealings with the Federation led to more out-of-system travel beyond the Great One's ability to control."

Angry once again, Miko said, "That should never have been approved without consulting the Speakers!" "I don't see how that matters," Undlar said indignantly. "We are the Caretakers of the Great One, and so the Pevvni wisely came to us to gain approval for this prototype. We thought it was a worthwhile experiment for precisely the reasons they gave."

"And you didn't think to consult us?" Biral asked, his face turning indigo with outrage.

"Reger," Ansed said calmly, trying to keep this from turning into a shouting match, "perhaps you didn't realize the political implications of what you were doing."

"What political implications?" Undlar asked, now looking confused.

Ansed sighed. Priests are wonderful for spiritual matters, but they can be shockingly nave. "One of the reasons why we have remained so stable over the millennia is because we are united under Ganitriul. We have had no war, no upheavals, and no strife for three thousand years."

"The Pevvni colonization could safely be called an upheaval."

Save me from youth, Ansed thought, trying not to groan. Undlar hadn't been born when the ninth planet was colonized by the Pevvni. "Not at all. It was an orderly process that was debated around this very table, and voted on by the people. Eventually, the Pevvni were granted permission, but the process by which they got there was orderly. To secretly grant the Pevvni the right to construct vessels independent of the system is not orderly."

"It was never meant to be secret," Undlar said defensively. "We simply did not see it as a concern."

"Well, you should have," Ansed said, trying and failing not to sound condescending. "There are those among the Pevvni who have expressed an interest in breaking off from Eerlik-and from Ganitriul. This is exactly the kind of thing they might use as a weapon against us."

Before Undlar could respond to that, Speaker Talu said, "Ah, First Speaker, with all due respect, is this really the time to reprimand Reger Undlar for information that may well save us?"

Ansed was brought up short by Talu's statement, which was delivered in the older woman's usual measured tones. But then, she thought, Talu has always been the voice of reason among the Speakers.

"You're right, of course, Talu. If this ship does have circuitry that is independent of Ganitriul, then we must see if we can use it to fly to the moon immediately. If no one objects, we should adjourn to Brioni and see if this ship-"

"The Senbolma," Undlar said.

Ansed nodded. "If the Senbolma is truly spaceworthy."

"I'm not going out there," Biral said. "It's insane. And just walking from my home left me dehydrated.

You're not getting me to Brioni-that's at least a couple hours' walk."

Every other Speaker chimed in with similar responses-even Talu, from whom Ansed had expected more (though she was quite elderly). Truth be told, Ansed felt the same way in her heart, but she had a duty to perform, and she would not shirk it, even if the others would.

"Then I will go myself," she said, getting to her feet.

"As will I," said Undlar, doing the same, albeit somewhat less steadily.

"That is unnecessary," Ansed said, not relishing the idea of supporting the wounded priest throughout the walk. "It would be a waste, Reger, especially if it turns out that the Senbolma is not spaceworthy." She put an encouraging hand on his shoulder, hoping he would forgive her earlier patronizing tone. "I will send for you if and when it proves to be the case. We will, after all, need your guidance to fix Ganitriul."

Undlar looked like he was about to argue, but then he cut himself off. "Of course, First Speaker. I will await word from you."

"Excellent. You should hear from me soon."

And if-no, when this is all over, Reger Undlar, we will have a long talk on the subject of appropriate behavior for the clergy. Undlar was the last of the priests left, and whatever new ones were ordained after this would look up to him as their leader, for better or for worse. Which meant that his navet would have to be dealt with, and quickly.

But first things first, Ansed said, steeling herself against the ordeal of another endless hike and heading once more into the cold.

Sonya Gomez took one last look over the schematics that presently occupied the display on her tricorder. Thankfully, the Eerlikka had, several years back, allowed a team of Federation computer experts (including a team of eight Bynars) to inspect Ganitriul, so Starfleet had detailed specs on the installation.

Which was, in a word, huge. Fully twenty-five percent of Eerlik's moon had been excavated in order to house the computer. In fact, most of that equipment had fallen into disuse as-typically, with advancing technology-the Eerlikka were able to miniaturize over time. Only about ten percent of the original installation was still active, though the auto-repair components included small robots that could cannibalize the older equipment as needs be.

All in all, a very efficient system.

She looked up to see that 110 still hadn't arrived yet. She stood in the transporter room with Corsi and two other security people, Drew and Hawkins. Sonya had thought that three security people might have been a bit excessive to guard a two-person team, but she trusted Corsi's judgment.

"Where the hell is he?" Corsi said after inspecting her phaser rifle for the fortieth time.

"He'll be here. Cut him a little slack, Commander. He's been through a lot."

"With respect, sir, if he's too wrecked to even show up for a mission on time, then I have to question whether or not he can perform the mission."

"And it's a valid question, but I'd like to give him at least a chance to answer it."

Corsi let out a breath. "Yes, sir."

Just then, the doors parted and 110 entered, walking even faster than normal. "My apologies, Commander Gomez. I-I can offer no excuse."

"I don't expect you to," Sonya said gently. "Let's go."

As she moved to step onto the platform, the doors opened again and Carol Abramowitz entered. "Yes, Carol?" Sonya asked.

"I just wanted to let you guys know that speed is of the essence here. I've been reading up on the Eerlikka and they have two major facets as a culture they are fanatical about maintaining order and they pride themselves on being well informed. Both of these stem from Ganitriul. So it's pretty likely that conditions on Eerlik are deteriorating and going to get worse the more time passes. So don't dawdle down there."

Sonya smiled. "Wasn't planning on it an yhow, but I appreciate the report. Thanks, Carol."

"No problem."

The five of them arranged themselves on the transporter pad. To the transporter chief, Sonya said, "Energize."

They materialized into pitch darkness. Oh great, Sonya thought. She switched on her wristlamp, and the others did the same. Now the space they were in-which felt cold and stuffy-was illuminated by five light sources that cast odd shadows. Unfortunately, this did nothing but make it bright, cold, and stuffy

"Oooh look, rocks," Drew said, shining his light on one of the walls.

"Hello," said a voice that seemed to come from everywhere. "Are you from Starfleet?" The voice was very pleasant-Sonya couldn't place it, gender-wise, but it set her at ease immediately.

"Yes," she said. "I'm Commander Sonya Gomez of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers."

"Excellent. I am glad you replied to my call. I am Ganitriul. Welcome."

"Thank you."

"And who are the others? I am registering five bodies."

Indicating the Bynar-though having no idea if Ganitriul could see the gesture-Sonya said, "This is 110, who is part of my engineering team. The others are Lieutenant Commander Domenica Corsi and two of her security team, Stephen Drew and Vance Hawkins."

"I welcome all of you. I apologize for the darkness, but I cannot seem to get the lights working."

"That's all right." She consulted her tricorder, which glowed quite brightly in the near-darkness. It showed that the main terminal was only a few meters away. "If you don't mind, we'll go to your main terminal and try to determine what's wrong." She started walking in the right direction, 110 right on her heels, the security detail right behind them.

"I hope you can, Commander Gomez. I am afraid that my own attempts to diagnose the problem have failed. I do not understand why I have not been able to function properly. I should also warn you that there are several security devices that are meant to prevent anyone from tampering with the system. My control over them is sporadic. Please be careful."

The voice was almost pleading. Or maybe Sonya was projecting. Either way, she resolved to watch her step, and was suddenly grateful that Corsi had taken a team of three.

Corsi said, "Ganitriul, which security protocols don't you have control over right now?"

"I am afraid it varies. Are you familiar with my security specifications?"

"Yes."

"At the moment, I have complete control over everything in the immediate vicinity. If that changes-or if you move into an area that I do not have control over-I will inform you."

"Thank you."

Within moments they turned a corner, and the walls were replaced by what appeared to be a giant smooth slab of obsidian marble. Corsi, Drew, and Hawkins also shone their wristlamps on it, giving Sonya a better view. The slab, she suspected, was a large viewscreen. In front of it, she could see a very comfortable-looking chair that was also distressingly close to the ground. Various buttons dotted the wide arms of the chair.

"All right, I give up, what is it?" Corsi asked.

"The main terminal," Sonya said. She pointed at the slab. "That's the viewscreen. The operator sits in the chair and operates it with those buttons."

Hawkins looked dubiously at the chair. "They sit in that?"

"The Eerlikka are fairly short," Sonya said, "with small legs for their height, generally, so this is the right size for them. And the viewscreen can afford to be this large-they have wide eyes and a breadth of vision much greater than we do."

As if on cue, the viewscreen lit up with several images. Some were views of parts of a city being subjected to bad weather-Sonya assumed it was a city on Eerlik. Others showed bits of data in a language Sonya recognized as Makaro, the most common language on Eerlik-she couldn't read a word of it, of course, but she had seen similar writing in the mission profile. In addition, a small hole that looked like some kind of dataport opened in the smooth surface. Sonya could detect no seams. It was as if the hole just appeared, though that could have just been a function of the dim light.

"I must warn you not to sit in the chair," said Ganitriul suddenly. "The chair is designed only to allow those whose DNA patterns match those of the presently ordained clergy to sit in it. I have been unable to disable that function."

"That's bad, isn't it?" Drew said.

"There is an alternative. 110, you are a member of the Bynar race, are you not?"

"Yes, I am," 110 said.

"In that case, you may interface directly with my dataport."

110 hesitated. "Very well." He moved toward the dataport.

As he did so, Corsi, who had been gazing at her tricorder, cried, "Wait!"

"What is it, Lieutenant Commander?"

"I'm reading a ton of electricity flowing through that port."

"That is normal," Ganitriul said.

"Yippee skippy, but I really don't think that 110 can handle it."

"Bynar epidermis is able to conduct electrical charges, Lieutenant Commander," 110 said.

"Not this much. We're talking eighty thousand kilojoules."

"That is not what my readings indicate. Please wait a moment." A pause, then, Ganitriul continued, "My apologies. It appears my readings were incorrect. Lieutenant Commander Corsi, please tell me what you are reading now."

Corsi looked at her tricorder. "Two hundred kilojoules. That's within 110's tolerances."

Nodding, 110 said, "Yes it is."

110 placed a small hand inside the dataport. The 'port altered its size to accommodate the size and shape of the Bynar's hand. A nimbus of electricity started to form around 110, further illuminating the chamber. Then the Bynar let out a rapid-fire burst in the binary language of his people, which the universal translator simply rendered as a high-pitched whine. (Kieran had said when Sonya first arrived on the da Vinci that the translators could be modified to understand the Bynar tongue, but Sonya had never seen the need. Now she was sorry she hadn't taken him up on it.)

While this went on, Drew said, "Sir, I've got some weird readings here."

"Define weird, Drew," Corsi said.

"I'm getting occasional life-form readings-but then they just disappear. The tricorder thinks they're Eerlikka."

"My apologies," Ganitriul said. "Those are sensor ghosts. That is a part of the tour that is given to visitors to these caverns. I provide a re-creation of the excavation of the moon, and it includes representations of the workers. That program sometimes runs in part. The simulation includes sensor readings of the workers. I did not mention it sooner, as it is not part of the security program. I will attempt to prevent that program from running, but I can make no assurances that I will be successful."

"Do the best you can, Ganitriul," Sonya said, trying to sound understanding.

Corsi walked up to her and said, in a low tone that only Sonya could hear, "It's a computer, Commander, not a kid with a toy."

Matching the security chief's tone, Sonya said, "It's an intelligent computer. I think treating it with respect is perfectly reasonable."

Shrugging, Corsi said, "Yeah, I guess."

Sonya noticed the light in the cavern growing dimmer. She turned to see that 110 had removed his hand from the dataport. "I have found the problem," he said as the glow faded from around him. "An invasive program has been introduced into Ganitriul's system."

"Sabotage," Corsi said.

"Yes, Lieutenant Commander."

"I do not doubt your diagnosis, 110, but I do not understand how it came to be. I have no record of any invasive programs being inserted into my system."

"Once we have fixed the problem, I can show you how it was done, Ganitriul."

"Can the program be safely removed?" Sonya asked.

"It is possible, yes. We will need-"

Sonya did not learn what 110 would need, as he was interrupted by some kind of blaster fire, which struck Hawkins in the left shoulder.

The security guard screamed and fell to the cavern ground, grabbing his left shoulder with his right hand and dropping his phaser rifle.

As Corsi raised her own rifle to return fire, Ganitriul said, "A security measure has activated. No energy weapons will fire within the confines of the installation."

Corsi pressed the firing button on her rifle anyhow, but nothing happened. "Dammit," she muttered.

It was then that the lights came back up.

Sonya blinked the spots out of her eyes and found herself surrounded by twelve Eerlikka. Some of them were also blinking-with upper and lower eyelids-in response to the greater illumination. Some were holstering their blasters and unholstering large, curved bladed weapons.

"Death to the aliens!" one of them cried.

Several more repeated, "Death to the aliens!"

Then they charged.

Ansed held her breath as the Senbolma left the atmosphere of Eerlik. So far, she thought, so good. The owner of the Senbolma was an old man named Emarur, who expressed a certain reluctance to testing his ship in quite this manner. He had been hoping to remain in dock until the crisis passed. However, he could not turn down a specific request from the First Speaker and the last remaining priest, especially since they were willing to share the risk with him by taking the flight.

Besides, the Senbolma going to the moon was likely the only way the crisis would pass.

The ship's pilot said, "We've cleared the stratosphere. Now entering orbit of Eerlik. We'll have our window to the moon in fifteen minutes. All systems reading nominal." He sounded almost surprised.

"Good," Emarur said from his seat to the pilot's right. The flight deck of the Senbolma was small, with only two chairs at one large console. Ansed stood behind Emarur, looking at the amazing vista on the viewscreen in front of her. She had seen pictures of what Eerlik looked like from orbit, but nothing could have prepared her for the experience. No picture had adequately conveyed the deep burgundy of the oceans, the swirling, majestic patterns of the clouds, or the deep brown of the land masses. As they orbited, she saw the Lankap mountain range just outside the capital city. After a minute, they flew over the teardrop-shaped form of Maryllo Island where she was born. Then came the ragged, beautiful Kyepas Coast where she'd spent so many summers as a girl.

It took her breath away. To see the landmarks of her life this way was staggering.

Undlar was in the small cabin he and Ansed were sharing-space was at a premium on the Senbolma-meditating. Ansed was half-tempted to run down, grab him, and force him to look at this view. She certainly was determined, now more than ever, to do whatever she could to save her world.

Emarur turned around to look at Ansed. "Nice view, huh?"

"Yes it is."

"Never been up here before have you, First Speaker?"

"No, I haven't." She smiled. "It's funny, I always used to dismiss people who took trips to the moon to tour Ganitriul as silly tourists. Now I'm sorry I never did take one of those trips. It would've been worth it just to see this. I had no idea the oceans were so burgundy. And the mountains" Her voice trailed off.

"I never get tired of it, either. Although personally I think the view is better back home," Emarur said, referring to the Pevvni colony. He turned back to his console and entered some commands into it.

"Compensate for that, will you?" he said to the pilot, then turned back to Ansed. "Gotta say, it's weird flying without a net like this. Still, it's kinda thrilling, too."

"Thrilling?" Ansed asked, surprised.

"Oh sure. Not knowing every possible variable, being surprised by a random meteor or another ship in the same orbit. That doesn't happen with Ganitriul controlling everything. Never any worries about that. Makes you get lazy, y'know?"

"What you call lazy, sir, I call safe. I see no benefit in taking unnecessary risks."

With a wide, infectious grin, Emarur said, "Well, First Speaker, I guess that's why I own a spaceship and you're a politician."

Ansed couldn't help but return the grin. Emarur was right, of course. His reaction made perfect sense for one in his position. Ansed herself had never understood the urge that drove the Pevvni to colonize in the first place, but that didn't mean she would demean it. And it was perfectly possible to thrive without Ganitriul-all the major powers of the Alpha Quadrant did just fine without one central computer. Indeed, Ansed wondered if one computer could administer something as large as the Federation.

Enough, she admonished herself. Let us first see if one computer will ever administer Eerlik again before we wax philosophical.

"Approaching window now," the pilot said. "This is interesting. I'm reading a ship in orbit around the moon. Too far away for a positive identification."

"Another ship?" Ansed asked. "That could be the answer. Whoever is on that ship could have sabotaged Ganitriul."

"That certainly would explain everything," Emarur said. "Get ready to head for the moon," he said to the



pilot.

Emarur initially kept the viewscreen on the view of Eerlik even as they headed toward the moon. The planet receded as they got further away. Within a few minutes, however, he switched the view to that of the moon-and the ship in orbit around it.

"That's a Starfleet ship," the pilot said. "Registry is NCC-81623, U.S.S. da Vinci, Saber-class."

"Which one is Saber-class?"

The pilot shrugged. "Don't know. We don't have a database, remember? I just got this from the scan."

"It doesn't make sense," Ansed said. "Why would Starfleet sabotage Ganitriul?"

"Well, we could ask them," Emarur said. He touched a few buttons on his console, and a small whistling noise emitted from it. "This is the Senbolma, on behalf of the government of Eerlik, contacting the U.S.S. da Vinci. Please state your business."

After a moment, the face of an older human male appeared on the screen. Like most of his race, he had tufts of fuzz on top of his head, though this one's was white and wispy.

"This is Captain David Gold of the da Vinci. We're here in response to a distress call from Ganitriul."

Ansed blinked. "From Ganitriul?" She cleared her throat. "Captain, I am First Speaker Ansed."

"A pleasure, First Speaker. If you don't mind my asking, how did you get up here? I was led to believe that none of the Eerlikka ships worked."

"With all due respect, Captain, I would ask that you leave orbit. This is an Eerlik matter, not a Starfleet one." Ansed did not want to give Gold any information. If they were responsible for the sabotage, telling them that this was the only working ship, and that they carried the last remaining priest, would be tantamount to suicide. She had no idea what kind of armament this ship carried, but the Federation was less than a year out of a nasty, prolonged war. While Eerlik had managed to avoid becoming embroiled in the Dominion War, they had heard quite a bit about it. Ansed doubted that any Starfleet ship was anything but fully armed.

"I already have a team from the Starfleet Corps of Engineers in the caverns working on the problem, First Speaker. If you want us to pull out, that's fine, but my people are the best. Let them do their work."

Ansed was torn. Starfleet's reputation was generally a good one, but with everything else that was happening, she didn't know who to trust.

Another voice sounded on the speakers, and it was one Ansed was grateful to hear. "First Speaker, this is Ganitriul. The da Vinci is here at my request. Their team has just transported down, and they will arrive at one of my primary terminals in two minutes. Please allow-"

Then the signal cut off.

Emarur made some adjustments to his console. "I can't get the signal back-but it did seem to come from the moon."

Ansed let out a long breath. "My apologies, Captain. When we first saw your ship-"

"Say no more, First Speaker," Gold said, holding up a hand. "Can't say as I blame you, really."

"I have one of the clergy on board. I believe that his help will be invaluable in aiding your team."

"Couldn't hurt."

Ansed heard the door open behind her. She turned to see Undlar enter. "Here he is now," she said to Gold. "Reger Undlar, this is Captain David Gold from Starfleet. It turns out Ganitriul asked the Federation for help."

"Yes, well, we were afraid of something like this. Now, Emarur," Undlar said as he unsheathed a knife from under his robes and stabbed Ansed in the chest.

As Ansed collapsed to the deck, blue blood spilling from her punctured heart, she cried out an anguished, "Why?"

Undlar smiled a vicious smile. "You'll never know."

Then her vision went black.

Domenica Corsi shot Drew a look. Drew nodded, closed his eyes, and covered Hawkins's eyes as well. Grabbing the grenade from her belt, she thumbed it on, tossed it into the crowd of advancing Eerlikka, and closed her eyes.

She could see the brightness of the photonic grenade even through her eyelids.

As soon as the lights dimmed, she opened her eyes, and saw exactly what she'd hoped a dozen Eerlikka blinking furiously, temporarily blinded.

Of course, Gomez and 110 were similarly blinded, since Corsi couldn't warn them about the grenade without warning their attackers, but that wasn't an insurmountable problem. "C'mon!" she cried.

Slinging her phaser rifle behind her shoulder, she grabbed Gomez and 110 by the arm and quickly led them out of the area. Drew led the wounded Hawkins-thankfully, Hawkins wasn't hit in the leg.

"I am all right," 110 said as he gently shrugged out of Corsi's grip and dashed ahead. Guess Bynars aren't as sensitive to bright light, she thought.

"What happ-" Gomez started, but Corsi cut her off as she led the commander around a corner.

"Photonic grenade. Keep moving, Commander."

Gomez nodded, blinking furiously as she picked up the pace, trusting Corsi not to let her walk into a wall.

With the hand that wasn't guiding Gomez, Corsi held her tricorder, currently showing her a map of the caverns. She led the way with Gomez, 110 right behind, and Drew leading Hawkins behind him. Corsi moved as fast as she could without losing the others. The display also showed that the twelve Eerlikka hadn't moved from terminal chamber.

No, wait, she thought as the display changed, now they're moving. And spreading out in what looks like a search pattern, which means they have no clue which way we went. Good.

She led the team around a few more corners, and then finally into a small cul-de-sac. Like the main terminal area, the walls here looked like a big slab of marble, but this one was covered in dust.

According to the records in the mission profile, there used to be a terminal here, but it had been consolidated into another unit.

Although the lights had remained on in much of the complex, they'd apparently been removed from this area. The only illumination was provided by the wristlamps, and whatever light was coming in from the corridor.

Switching hers off, Corsi said, "Everyone kill the wristlamps. I don't think they have any scanning equipment, so they'll be searching by sight."

110 walked up to Gomez. "Are you all right, Commander?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," Gomez said, blinking furiously. "This dim cavern is actually helping." Letting out a breath, she said, "Let's get the hell out of here." She tapped her combadge. "Gomez to da Vinci. Five to beam up."

Silence answered.

Oh hell, Corsi thought. She tapped her own combadge. "Corsi to da Vinci."

Gomez immediately whipped out her tricorder. "The combadges are functioning normally. And there's no security measure of Ganitriul's interfering. Which means the da Vinci can't answer."

Shaking her head, Corsi said, "That fits. We were ambushed-they probably were, too. If they're not answering, they-"

"We know what it means, Commander," Gomez said quickly. "Right now, let's focus on what we can do."

Corsi nodded. Gomez was right, actually. "Drew, stand guard."

Drew nodded, gave Hawkins a quick encouraging look, then headed out to the mouth of the cul-de-sac.

Corsi knelt down to check on Hawkins. Conveniently, Hawkins himself had been carrying the mini-medikit. She opened it and treated his wound as best she could. It would do until they got back to the da Vinci.

If they got back.

"We need to figure out how to proceed with the mission," Gomez said.

Looking up sharply at Gomez-who looked rather sinister with the light from the tricorder shining up on her face, casting odd shadows on her pale complexion-Corsi said, "Commander, I don't think we should be proceeding anywhere. We're actually in a defensible position right now. There's twelve armed Eerlikka out there, and all we've got are phaser rifles that are basically glorified clubs thanks to our friend the computer-who's already lied to us."

"I have not lied to you intentionally, Lieutenant Commander Corsi." The voice of Ganitriul startled Corsi, and she got to her feet and raised her phaser rifle on instinct.

Gomez, however, didn't look at all surprised, as if disembodied voices spoke without prompting to her all the time. "You told us those were sensor ghosts that Drew picked up, Ganitriul."

"I believed that they were—just as I believed that the current running through my dataport was safe for 110. I was in error in both cases. It is not something I am accustomed to, but it has become a regular occurrence since this invasive program was placed within me. I also know what has happened to your ship."

"Are they okay?" Gomez asked, sounding concerned.

"They were attacked by a Pevvni ship. For some reason, the Pevvni have constructed a vessel that is beyond my control. This is in direct violation of Eerlikka law. The First Speaker is on the vessel, as is one of the clergy. Unfortunately, I was unable to maintain contact with either ship, so I do not know what precipitated the conflict. Captain Gold and First Speaker Ansed were discussing working together amiably when I lost contact. The Pevvni ship opened fire moments later. I am unable to detect the da Vinci any longer."

"What about the Pevvni ship?" Gomez asked.

"It is still in orbit, but damaged."

Corsi gritted her teeth. She didn't like the sound of this at all. Of course, the da Vinci just could have been off Ganitriul's sensors—or those same sensors could have misinformed Ganitriul. Or, she thought with a sigh, the damn computer could be lying to us.

No matter what, though, the away team was on its own.

Gomez turned to the Bynar. "110, you said that there might be a way to remove the invasive program?"

"Yes, there is. It is possible that we can—that I can remove it, but I would need access to Ganitriul's central core. Even then, I am not sure that I am capable of performing the programming necessary to fix Ganitriul. If 111 were here" His voice trailed off.

Corsi rolled her eyes. "The core is at least a kilometer's walk from here, and it's sealed in a large bunker with a computer lock. With the security system on the fritz—"

"Actually, Lieutenant Commander Corsi, the systems that lock and seal the computer core are independent of my systems. It was a precaution against precisely this kind of malfunction. That lock will open and close as normal with the proper codes, which I will provide."

Gomez smiled. "That's good planning."

Unimpressed, Corsi said, "That still doesn't change the fact that it's a kilometer from here to there. And I'm willing to bet there are all kinds of entertaining little security measures that you don't have control over, right, Ganitriul?"

"That is true. I can do my best to guide you, but my control is limited."

"Commander, there are only five of us, and one of us is injured. We don't have any weapons aside from three more photonic grenades, and those are only good for a fancy lightshow. We're not likely to get reinforcements anytime soon, if ever. There are twelve people out there with big swords who are trying to kill us. We're better off staying here."

"Maybe we are," Gomez said, "but Eerlik isn't. Remember what Carol told us? The longer we take to fix Ganitriul, the worse off Eerlik is."

"The people hunting us are Eerlikka, Commander. Their leader was on the ship that fired on the da Vinci. Maybe they don't want our help."

"Maybe not," Gomez said calmly and confidently, "but until I know that for sure, we have a mission to perform, and we can only perform it at the core."

Gomez was half a meter shorter than Corsi, and significantly smaller in build. And yet, anyone walking into this cul-de-sac right now would know exactly who was in charge, and it wasn't Domenica Corsi. The security chief had raised her objections, and they had been responded to—not the way she would have liked, but that was the way things worked. "Whatever you say, sir," she said. "But I can guarantee you that things will go wrong."

At that, Gomez actually smiled. "If things didn't go wrong, Commander, the galaxy wouldn't need

engineers." She then looked up. "Gantriul, are you using a scattering field to jam the weapons?"

"Yes. It is an automatic feature whenever unauthorized weapons fire is registered. Normally, it can only be deactivated by one of the clergy or someone else with sufficient clearance. However, I cannot guarantee that it will last."

Gomez consulted her tricorder. "Here it is, Security Measure 7."

"Correct."

She studied the tricorder for a minute. Unable to stand the silence that followed, Corsi finally said, "What are you doing, Commander?"

"Looking over the schematics of the scattering field. If I'm right, I can adjust the phaser rifles so that they can function anyhow. When I was on the Sentinel during the war, we pulled this trick on a Breen platoon that tried to jam our hand weapons. Gantriul's scattering field has a similar design. We'll only be able to get as high as light stun, but we can do it." She closed the tricorder. "Here's the plan. Drew will continue to keep watch. 110, you keep an eye on Hawkins, make sure he doesn't get any worse. Corsi, go over the map, find us the best route from here to the core. Gantriul, if there's anything you can do to distract our pursuers, it would be greatly appreciated."

"I can make no promises, but I will do my best."

"Thanks. I'm gonna modify the phasers. Shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes. You have your orders, people-get to work."

Sighing, Corsi handed Gomez her rifle, then opened her tricorder. She had a bad feeling about this, but she couldn't fault Gomez, either-she was finishing the mission she was given, which was, ultimately the right thing to do.

I just hope we live to tell Gold's great-grandkids about it.

"Yes, well, we were afraid of something like this. Now, Emarur."

Alarm bells went off in David Gold's head at the priest's words. He turned to Lieutenant McAllan at tactical and started to say, "Shields up," but he couldn't get the words out before some kind of weapons fire struck the da Vinci.

"Shields up, red alert!" he was able to say this time as alarms started ringing out around the bridge. He also saw the priest stab the First Speaker and watched her crumple to the deck. There's a helluva lot more going on here than we thought. I should live long enough to find out what, exactly. "Return fire!"

"Phaser controls aren't responding," McAllan said. "Arming torpedoes." Pounding a fist on his console, he added, "I can't get a lock."

"They're taking evasive action," said Ensign Wong from the conn position.

"Pursue 'em," Gold said. "McAllan, target manually-use a damn scope sight if you have to, but target that ship!"

"Yes, sir."

"Damage report."

Duffy's voice sounded over the intercom from Engineering. "I don't know what kind of weapon they're using, sir, but it took out half our tactical systems. Shields are fine, but phaser controls are shot to hell and the targeting systems are offline."

"This, I knew. Can you fix it?"

"Working on it."

Gold thought a moment. They had someone on board who probably knew as much about repairing battle damage on the fly as anyone. "Gold to La Forge. Get your tuchas down to Engineering and help Duffy out, Commander."

"Already on my way, Captain."

"Good." Turning to the tactical station behind him, Gold said, "McAllan, some good news, maybe?"

"I can't target them unless we get within thirty thousand kilometers."

"Can you close the gap, Wong?"

"Working on it, sir," said the young ensign. "That ship's as fast as we are at impulse."

From ops, Lieutenant Ina said, "They're firing again, sir!"

After the impact, McAllan said with surprise, "Shields down! Sir, I don't know what they did, but the shields are completely gone."

"Captain, I can get the shields back online, but you've got to give me ten minutes." That was La Forge.

"They're firing again!" Ina said.

"Veer off, Wong, give us distance."

Sparks flew as the phaser fire struck the unshielded ship.

"Stevens to bridge. Sir, if you set course for the second planet in the system and maintain a low orbit, we won't be picked up by their sensors."

"You heard the man, Wong. Set course for the second planet, full impulse."

"Yes, sir," Wong said.

"McAllan, full spread of torpedoes-doesn't matter where they're aimed, they're just cover fire."

Nodding, McAllan said, "Torpedoes away."

"Go, Wong."

"Engaging at full impulse."

"They following?" Gold asked.

"No, sir," said Ina. "They did take some heavy damage though."

McAllan smiled. "Guess my aim was true."

"We should be so lucky," Gold muttered.

The Bajoran ops officer continued, "They're setting course back for the moon."

"All right, give us a low orbit, and keep an eye on them, Wong."

"Yes, sir."

Getting up from the captain's chair, the captain said, "Gold to S.C.E. Briefing room, five minutes.

McAllan, you've got the bridge. Contact the Sugihara and tell them to get their butts over here, pronto.

And the nanosecond something happens, let me know, got it?"

"Got it, si r."

"Good."

He headed to his office, wondering how the hell the mission managed to go so bad so fast.

And why, exactly, one of the Eerlikka clergy killed the First Speaker in cold blood.

"Where are they?" Undlar bellowed. He couldn't believe it. They had that Starfleet ship, and now it was gone.

"Scanners aren't picking them up anywhere," the pilot said.

"Maybe they blew up," Undlar said, though it was wishful thinking.

"Then we'd be reading debris. There isn't anything."

Undlar slammed his fist into a bulkhead. It had been going so well.

The pilot continued to lean over his readout. Next to him, Emarur turned to look at Undlar. "I can't believe you killed the First Speaker."

"She was in the way."

"You never told me you were going to kill her-especially not on my ship!"

Laughing, Undlar said, "What did you think I was going to do, Emarur? Ask her politely to go along with the destruction of Ganitriul? Don't be ridiculous. She had to die, the same way my brother clergy had to die. Revolutions don't succeed if the people you're revolting against remain breathing." Undlar closed his eyes and once again relived the death of the other priests in his mind's eye. He had so enjoyed killing those self-righteous imbeciles. "Besides," he said, reopening his eyes, "the role of nave young priest was getting tiresome."

Emarur blinked several times. "You killed the priests?"

"Of course. It's no good destroying Ganitriul if the people who know how to fix it are still up and about.

Besides," he added with a grin, "it was so much easier to convince the Speakers that this ship was built with the clergy's authorization when I was the only clergy left alive to verify it. Now then, unless you have any other tiresome questions, I'd like to get on with this before that Starfleet ship comes back-or worse, brings friends. Contact the surface. I need to know if Hagi has neutralized whatever team Starfleet sent

down."

Emarur glared at Undlar. "I'm the owner of this ship, Undlar, not you. You don't give me orders."

Undlar moved closer to Emarur and unsheathed his blade, which was still blue with Ansed's blood. In a low, calm voice, Undlar said, "I hired you, Emarur, and I'm the one who paid to have your precious ship equipped with non-Ganitriul components. Right now, you've got the only working vessel in the system. I think, therefore, you should modify your tone before you join the First Speaker. Now I repeat, contact the surface."

Continuing to glare at Undlar, Emarur reached back and opened a channel. "Senbolma to Hagi."

After a moment, a voice replied, "Hagi."

"This is Undlar," the priest said, resheathing his weapon. "We're proceeding mostly according to plan. Apparently Ganitriul called for help from the Federation and they sent one of their starships to try to fix our 'great one.' We took care of the ship, but they sent people to the surface."

"I know," Hagi said. "We found them at the main terminal, but they got away. We wounded one before the security protocol kicked in and neutralized the blasters. Luckily, we've got the blades, and all they've got are useless energy weapons. They're outnumbered by more than two to one, so they should be dead soon."

"Excellent. I will join you shortly."

"I wouldn't recommend that, Undlar. The security systems are going completely haywire."

"Of course they are. Ganitriul itself is haywire. That was the point of the exercise," Undlar said slowly, as if talking to a small child.

"Yes, but if you transport down and a security shield chooses that moment to activate, you could wind up scattered to the solar winds."

Undlar sighed. He hadn't thought of that. "We'll have to land, then."

"I'm afraid not," Emarur said. "One of those torpedoes the da Vinci hit us with damaged our landing gear. We can only land with a tow-which is impossible since, as you so kindly pointed out, we're the only working ship in the system. Well, except for the da Vinci, but even if they do come back, I doubt they're going to be accommodating enough to help us land."

Growling, Undlar said, "Fine. Hagi, let me know as soon as you've killed the Starfleeters."

"I will. Hagi out."

Emarur turned to Undlar. "If you don't mind, will you please do something with the First Speaker's body?"

Undlar blinked his lower eyelids. "Excuse me?"

"I don't like dead bodies on my flight deck. Remove it."

"What am I supposed to do with it?"

"Dispose of it."

Undlar's face twisted. He took great pleasure in killing, but the idea of touching a dead body "I can't do that."

"You're the one who killed her, Undlar. If you're squeamish about touching the body-well, you should have thought of that before you killed her. Now get that body off my flight deck!"

Emarur stared hard right at Undlar. The priest was sorely tempted to slice open the ship owner's neck. But that would be foolish. The Senbolma only had a crew of two, and if he killed Emarur, Undlar would probably have to kill the pilot, too-and Undlar hadn't the first clue how to fly one of these things. His specialty was computers, after all-it was why, among all the Purists, he was the one chosen to infiltrate the clergy and infect Ganitriul.

"Very well," he finally said. And, fighting down his revulsion, he dragged Ansed's limp corpse off the flight deck.

Hagi backed up against the wall, counted to six, and then whirled around, swinging his blade upward in order to catch any humans that might be there in the chest.

There was nobody in the cavern.

"Clear," he said to Yanasa.

"This is ridiculous," Yanasa said. "If we had proper scanners-"

"-they wouldn't work anyhow," Hagi said. "They'd be tied into Ganitriul. Besides, the whole point is to get away from all this dependence on technology. This is the way it should be-searching on foot, with a blade in your hands, only relying on your own instincts."

Yanasa sighed, scratching the side of her head. "I still wish we had a scanner."

"Don't worry, we'll find them. There's a dozen of us, and we know these caverns better than they do. We'll-"

Hagi was cut off by a sudden jolt and an invisible force impeding his forward progress. "What the-?"

He took a step back, then gingerly reached forward. His finger tingled with the feeling of a forcefield, and he pulled it back. "Dammit. Let's go back," he said turning around, but Yanasa was shaking her head.

"No luck," she said, performing the same action and also touching a forcefield.

"We're trapped."

"Yes," Yanasa said, sounding annoyed, "we're trapped. So, what do your instincts tell us to do now?"

"I don't appreciate your tone, Yanasa."

"And I don't appreciate being stuck in a cavern on a moon with a malfunctioning computer. I said from the beginning that it was stupid to leave people here for precisely this reason, but I was outvoted."

"First of all, we needed to secure the location in case something like this happened. Unscheduled civilian and alien ships come to the moon all the time, and one might have been on the way here when Ganitriul went down. We had to be here to stop them. Secondly, the security measures are constantly flipping on and off. The forcefield will come down eventually."

Yanasa rolled her eyes. "And then what? The Starfleet people-"

"Are hitting the same problems we are, only they don't know the caverns, and they're unarmed except with those useless rifles of theirs."

"Did it occur to you, Hagi, that the same security measure that deactivated their weapons may also 'flip off'?"

Hagi found himself fighting the urge to take his blade to Yanasa's throat. Impatiently, he said, "In that case, our blasters will work as well, and we'll still outnumber them."

"Something else you probably didn't think of, Hagi. The Starfleet people have working scanners. And all the people in their team had gold trim on their uniforms."

Now it was Hagi's turn to roll his eyes. "I wasn't aware you were such an observer of fashion, Yanasa."

"You really are an idiot, aren't you?"

Turning angrily on Yanasa, Hagi said, "I warned you to watch your-"

"Gold trim on a Starfleet uniform," Yanasa continued calmly as if Hagi hadn't spoken, "means either operations or security. Which means the people here are either techies or experts in doing things like roaming around unfamiliar caverns. These people are professionals."

"Yes, we are," said a voice from behind Hagi. He turned around to see a tall human woman with blonde fuzz atop her head. She stood on the other side of the forcefield from Hagi and was aiming her weapon at him.

Hagi laughed. "If that's supposed to scare me, human, it's not working. That thing in your hands is useless." To demonstrate his point, he took out his own blaster and pressed the trigger. Nothing happened. "And even if it did work, it can't fire through this forcefield."

The human just smiled.

"Ganitriul," she said, "lower the forcefield."

With a sharp glow, the forcefield dissipated. Before Hagi could move to charge at the human, an amber beam fired from the weapon and struck Hagi square in the chest.

All at once, his nerve endings flared up, as if he'd been jolted with a massive electrical discharge, and then went dead. He fell to the cavern floor, but felt no impact. He saw another beam go over his head, which, he assumed, hit Yanasa.

How did she do that? he wondered, but could not say aloud. His mouth wouldn't work right.

"All clear, Commander," he heard the human's voice say. "Two down, ten to go."

Another voice said, "Good work, Corsi."

Encouraged, Hagi thought, They've only gotten the two of us. The others will stop them, I'm sure of it. The human woman stood over him now. She was still smiling. She aimed her weapon at his chest and fired.

Sonya watched as Corsi checked over the two Eerlikka. "They're both out for the time being," Corsi said, "but I have no idea how long they'll stay that way. Unfortunately, we don't have anything to tie them up with."

Smiling, Sonya said, "We'll have to just hope that we can get to the core before they wake up."

Corsi got up from the kneeling position, and started to walk toward Sonya when her tricorder beeped.

Sonya's did likewise, and she checked it. "Ganitriul, why did you put the forcefields back up?"

"I did not."

Corsi had stopped walking and was looking with annoyance at the ceiling. "Well, something did. I'm trapped in here."

"I am afraid that there is nothing I can do, Lieutenant Commander Corsi. I am sorry."

Behind Sonya, Drew said, "We can't just leave her here."

Sonya looked at Corsi, who simply stared back with her steely blue eyes. She knew that look.

"We don't have a choice," Sonya said to Drew. "We can't afford to waste time trying to get the forcefield down. We have a mission to accomplish."

"But-"

"You heard the commander," Corsi said, interrupting Drew before he could argue further. "I'll be fine here. Just get down to the core-that's the main thing."

Drew sighed. "Yes, sir."

Giving Corsi a significant glance, Sonya said, "We will be back for you, Domenica."

Smiling a lopsided smile, Corsi said, "I'll hold you to that, Commander."

Amused at Corsi's inability to be casual even when prompted not to be by a superior officer, Sonya gave the security chief one last encouraging smile, then led Drew back to where they'd left 110 to care for Hawkins.

"Let's get moving," she said.

"Where is Lieutenant Commander Corsi?" 110 asked.

"She got stuck behind a forcefield. We don't have time to get her out, so we're proceeding."

As Drew helped him to his feet, Hawkins said, "We can't just leave her."

"That's what I said, but Core-Breach herself overrode us," Drew said with a smile.

Sonya set her mouth tightly. "Mr. Drew, I gave the order to leave Commander Corsi behind. That's because, in case you've lost track of the chain of command, I'm in charge of the mission. Are we clear on this?"

Swallowing, Drew said, "Yes, sir."

"Good. Now let's get moving."

110 was studying his tricorder. "We need to go twenty meters down this corridor and then climb down a service ladder. That will lead to another corridor. None of the Eerlikka patrols are in that area."

Nodding, Sonya said, "Good. It's about time something went smoothly today."

They walked in silence, Sonya leading the way, 110 right behind her, Hawkins moving semi-steadily next to the Bynar, and Drew bringing up the rear. They reached the ladder without incident and started to climb down.

Sonya reached the bottom of the ladder, followed quickly by 110 and Hawkins.

Then a bulkhead closed between Hawkins and Drew, cutting the latter off from the other three. Quickly tapping her combadge, Sonya said, "Gomez to Drew."

"I'm okay, Commander. It kinda caught me by surprise."

"Did another bulkhead open at the top of the ladder?"

"Uh, yeah, one did. I'll try to cut through."

Looking at her tricorder, Sonya said, "That'll never work, you can only get light stun on the rifles. This bulkhead's made of rodimium."



"Damn."

"Gantriul, is there any air being pumped into there?"

"There are no air vents in the section that Crewperson Drew is presently in. However, there is enough air to last him approximately three hours and seventeen minutes."

"Drew-" Sonya started.

"It's okay, Commander," Drew said. "I'll be fine. Maybe the bulkheads'll open up again, maybe the scattering field'll go down-or maybe I'll get through some other way. You just get to the core. And hey, Vance?"

Hawkins said, "Yeah, Steve?"

"Keep an eye on them, huh?"

Snorting, Hawkins said, "Don't talk, pal, you'll just waste air. I know that's hard for you, but do your best."

"Hardy har har."

"Commander," 110 said, "there is an Eerlikka patrol moving in this direction. It behooves us to continue forward."

Nodding, Sonya said, "Stiff upper lip, Drew. We'll be back for you soon."

Gantriul spoke "Commander Gomez, I do apologize for this turn of events."

"It's not your fault, Gantriul," Sonya said soothingly. Listen to me, she thought, trying to calm down an inanimate object.

"However," the computer continued, "I do have good news. The patrol that is heading your way is presently coming down another ladder. They are now trapped in the same manner as Crewperson Drew. Assuming the bulkheads do not raise without my consent-which is a possibility-they will remain trapped."

"That just leaves eight of them," Sonya said.

"And three of us," Hawkins muttered.

Hoping her smile was as encouraging as she intended it to be, Sonya said, "It beats twelve against five, Hawkins. C'mon, let's move."

They continued on in silence for several minutes, 110 providing directions toward the core. Many of the walls, like the cul-de-sac where they'd taken refuge earlier, were occupied by dusty, marble-like interfaces. According to the schematics, this section used to house the weather control systems and was heavily used up until about a century earlier. Then it was consolidated into a smaller system located one level up.

"Commander Gomez," Gantriul said, "I have some good news."

"That's a nice change," Sonya muttered. "What is it, Gantriul?"

"I have regained control of Security Measure 7. I can deactivate the scattering field now."

Before Sonya could tell Gantriul to go ahead and do so, Hawkins said, "Commander, I don't think we should do that."

Frowning, Sonya asked, "Why not?"

"Right now, we've got the advantage. Even with light stun, we're better armed than the Eerlikka even with inferior numbers. If we turn the scattering field off, we lose that, 'cause they'll be just as well armed."

"Good point," Sonya said with a nod. She thought a moment. "Gantriul, is there any way to change the frequency of the scattering field so it will only affect the Eerlikka blasters but not our phasers?"

"I might be able to. I will attempt to adjust the field."

"Okay. In the meantime, leave it on." She turned to Hawkins. "Good work, Hawkins."

"No problem, sir," the security guard said with a tired smile. "Just doing what Core-Breach'd want me to do-keep us all alive." Hawkins's dark skin had gone almost gray for a while, but he seemed to be getting his energy back up. Whatever was in the medikit seemed to have done the trick. Still, his left arm hung uselessly at his side while he carried the rifle with his right. Sonya hoped he'd be able to fulfill Corsi's mandate if and when things got down to the nitty-gritty.

110 had never been more miserable in his life, and he cursed Bart Faulwell for talking him into agreeing to sit in on the meeting. He should not have come on the mission. He should have just stayed in his

quarters and tried to figure out what to do when he got back to Bynaus.

Instead, he was walking through a strange corridor-stumbling, really, as he kept expecting 111 to be by his side; he wondered if he would ever be able to adjust to walking alone-being pursued by people trying to kill him in order to reach a destination at which point he would be required to, as humans put it, save the day.

And he didn't know if he could.

The feeling did not sit well with him at all. 110's entire life had been defined by computers. He understood them, lived them, breathed them, knew them in a way no non-Bynar could truly comprehend. Or, more to the point, he and 111 did.

Without her, he suddenly doubted his own instincts. Always in the past they checked each other, each constantly confirming the other's work, providing a comforting redundancy that made them so much more efficient. With her, he would have instantly known what was wrong with Ganitriul, and quite possibly have been able to fix it without requiring access to the central core-though that, in all likelihood, would have been safer in any event. Now, though, he could not even be completely sure if his diagnostic was correct.

That had never happened before.

He wondered if this was how the Eerlikka felt when Ganitriul malfunctioned. To suddenly have all the order and sense of your life be taken away from you

His tricorder beeped. Gazing at the readout, he said, "Commander, I am reading a forcefield around this corner."

As they turned the corner, they saw what the tricorder read.

"Great," Gomez said. "Any way around this?"

110 studied the map of the caverns. "There is an alternate route, but it will add an hour to our travel time. In addition, two of the Eerlikka patrols are on that route. This is the most direct way to the core, and is presently free of any of our pursuers."

"Ganitriul, can you release this forcefield?"

"I can, but at the moment the forcefield is holding back a gas that will render all of you unconscious. I have been unable to vent the gas, which is why I put up the forcefields."

"Damn."

110 asked, "Ganitriul, is there a manual override to the ventilation system?"

"Yes, there is. Would you like me to show it to you?"

"Please," 110 said.

110 heard Hawkins mutter, "Why the hell couldn't it mention that sooner?" as a small panel opened up on the floor.

Gomez smiled at the security guard and said, "GIGO."

"Excuse me?" Hawkins asked.

"Garbage in, garbage out. Old saying about computers. They're only as good as what you put into them. Kind of a nice reminder that Ganitriul, for all its sophistication, is still a machine. It didn't volunteer the information about the manual override because we didn't ask."

Meanwhile, 110 got down on his hands and knees and peered into the manual override. Its operation was fairly complex, but his interaction with Ganitriul earlier served him well-he knew his way around the supercomputer's systems now. He started entering the codes that would allow access to the override controls.

As he worked, the forcefields went down. The air quickly turned an odd shade of green as the gas that the forcefields had held in check started to spread throughout the cavern.

His vision swimming, 110 worked frantically at the console, fighting against unconsciousness

"Talk to me, boys and girls."

Unlike the casual atmosphere of the meeting that morning, David Gold thought the tension in the briefing room of the da Vinci was thick enough to cut with one of Rachel's boning knives.

Gold sat once again at the head of the table, with La Forge and Duffy on either side of him, Abramowitz

and Faulwell next to Duffy, Lense and Stevens next to La Forge, and Blue in her usual seat at the other end.

"We got the shields back online," Duffy said, "but I don't know how long they'll last."

Stevens put in, "I've never seen anything quite like that weapon they used. I've gone over the sensor data three times-so has Commander La Forge," he added with a nod to the officer, "and we can't figure out why it knocked out our shields."

"I have some guesses as to how to defend against it," La Forge added, "but until we actually get shot at again by them, I don't have any idea if it'll work."

Gold leaned back and sighed. "So basically we're defenseless. What about weapons?"

"They're all fine," Duffy said. "We had to reroute half the-"

"Bridge to captain."

Gold looked up. "Go ahead, McAllan."

"Sir, the Sugihara is in the midst of a rescue operation of their own. Apparently there's a Talarian freighter whose warp core went critical. They're going to try to finish up as fast as possible, but the soonest they can get here is in twelve hours."

"Damn. All right, McAllan, tell them to do the best they can. Gold out." He looked around the table. "All right, people, you're supposed to be the cream of Starfleet's engineering crop. Let's have some ideas."

"Actually, Carol and I have come up with something, sir," Faulwell said.

"Don't keep us in suspense, man, out with it," Gold said when the linguist hesitated.

"Well sir, the Senbolma has a very simple computer system. Since it's not linked to Ganitriul, it was constructed from scratch. And their cryptography is basically nonexistent."

Abramowitz added, "It's a cultural bias, actually. Since every computer system is linked to every other computer system, they never really had to develop any kind of external computer security, since it's all one machine."

"Right," Faulwell said, "so I think I can break into their ship's computer pretty easily. I was able to get some pretty detailed sensor readings when we were talking to them, and-well, not to gloat or anything, sir, but I'd have a harder time hacking into an old twenty-first-century mainframe. A lot of their subsystems aren't even encoded. We'd need to get within communications range, but I can probably get access to their control systems in about a minute, and then we can run the ship from here."

"One minute'll be pushing it," La Forge said. "Especially since they'll see us coming as soon as we leave orbit of this planet, and we won't be in comm range for a good thirty seconds."

"Then it's up to you and Duffy to hold us together, Commander," Gold said. He stood up. "Let's do it, people." As everyone filed out of the room, Gold stopped Lense briefly. "With any luck, we won't need your services, Doctor."

Lense waited until the room cleared of everyone but herself and Gold before saying, in a somewhat bitter tone, "Let's hope for luck, then. I did join this ship to get away from combat medicine."

"I know. We'll do our best," he said in as reassuring a voice as possible.

It seemed to work, as Lense nodded and said, "I know you will, sir. I'll go get Sickbay ready."

Domenica Corsi watched as the Eerlikka woman started to stir. Aiming her phaser rifle at the woman's head, Corsi said, "I'd suggest not making any sudden movements, or you go back to sleep."

Sitting up slowly, the woman said, "Don't worry. I'm not eager to get shot at again. How'd you do that, anyhow?"

"What?"

"Shoot me. I thought weapons were deactivated."

Smiling, Corsi said, "Oh, they are. Well, yours are. Obviously our equipment is better than yours."

The woman shook her head and laughed. "You Starfleet types. Everything has to be bigger with you, doesn't it?"

Corsi couldn't help but laugh at that. "Maybe."

"So why are you still here?"

"Wasn't given a choice." She reached behind where she was standing-never taking her eye off the

woman-and tapped the forcefield. "These kicked in after I took you two down. Ganitriul can't lower them."

"So you don't have control of Ganitriul?"

The woman sounded surprised, and Corsi cursed at herself for giving that away. Then again, there was no other reason for Corsi to have trapped herself behind two forcefields, so she would have figured it out before long.

Aloud, she said, "Ganitriul doesn't have control of Ganitriul. You folks saw to that."

"Yeah, we did. And it's working. The Eerlikka are finding out what it's like to live instead of having everything handed to them."

Corsi rolled her eyes. "If you're gonna start spouting rhetoric, I'll shoot you again."

To Corsi's surprise, the woman actually looked contrite. "Sorry. Occupational hazard when you hang around with fanatics."

"So why hang around with them?"

"I wonder that sometimes, especially when they pull dumb moves like this."

Corsi frowned, but inwardly she smiled. This was the best way to gather intelligence-casual conversation, don't let the subject know she's being interrogated. "Like what?"

"Leaving people here in the middle of a computer complex that's falling apart at the seams on the off-chance that someone might come by was not the brightest of moves."

"It wasn't that off a chance-after all, we came by."

"Yeah, but we're just as trapped in here as you are. Actually, we're more trapped. Your scanners and weapons work."

Corsi nodded. "Bad tactics."

"Yeah, well, us fanatics don't always think things through," the woman said with a bitter chuckle. "I'm Yanasa, by the way."

"I'm the person holding the rifle. Pleased to meet you." Corsi saw no reason to give Yanasa any more information than needed.

"Okay, Rifle Woman, what's the plan?"

"The plan is, you don't move until I tell you to."

"That's it?"

"That's the only part that concerns you."

A beeping noise filled the air, and then a voice said, "Senbolma to Hagi."

Yanasa looked at the still-slumbering form of her comrade, from whose belt the voice was emitting.

"Hagi, this is Undlar, answer me, dammit!" said a different voice.

Corsi mouthed the words, Don't touch it to Yanasa, who obligingly didn't move.

"Something must have happened to him," said the first voice.

"Close the channel," said Undlar. "Hagi's got the only comm unit. We may have to beam dow-"

Then it cut off. Corsi sighed. She had been hoping they might say something about the da Vinci before they cut off communications, but that would've been too convenient.

"Only one comm unit? That wasn't very bright," Corsi said.

"We only had one hand-unit that wasn't tied into Ganitriul," Yanasa said. "I wanted to wait until we had enough units for everyone, but like every sensible suggestion I made, I was outvoted." She indicated Hagi with her head. "Why's he still out if I'm up?"

Not seeing any harm in answering that question, Corsi said, "Different people react to stun different ways. You've probably got a faster metabolism than him or something."

"Well, you should be grateful, Rifle Woman, 'cause Hagi's the field leader of this merry bunch, and he'd give you more rhetoric than you'd know what to do with."

"Lieutenant Commander Corsi," said Ganitriul, "I have successfully altered the settings on the scattering field. The Eerlikka weapons still do not function, but your phaser rifles should now function as normal."

"Thank you, Ganitriul." Corsi turned to Yanasa and smiled. As she did so, she adjusted the rifle to the heavy stun setting.

Yanasa was just shaking her head. "We weren't expecting this. It never occurred to any of us that

Gantriul would actually work against us. I had thought that it wouldn't function at all, but I guess they underestimated that personality. I honestly had thought it was just an interface, not a separate AI personality unto itself."

Oh God, not technobabble, Corsi thought. She almost would've preferred the rhetoric. She got enough of this nonsense on the da Vinci.

Just then, the forcefields went down.

Without even hesitating, Corsi fired on Yanasa. She crumpled to the ground.

Hagi started to stir. Corsi fired on him, too, and he was still.

That ought to keep them out for a while, she thought. She tapped her combadge. "Corsi to Gomez." No one answered.

Fighting through the haze that was starting to cloud his vision, 110 entered the last of the codes needed to activate the manual override on the ventilation system in this cavern. The next step was to actually get the vents going, but he had to fight his fingers to make them work properly.

He wished 111 was there beside him. Together they would have worked twice as fast and gotten the vents clear before the forcefields failed.

But she was dead. He felt her die. He still could feel it even now, as his consciousness started to fade. In the background he heard two filtered voices. One sounded like Gantriul, and he caught the words phaser rifles, but he couldn't make out the rest. The other was Lieutenant Commander Corsi.

The world started to go an odd shade of green. 110 just wanted to lie down and offline. But no-then he'd re-live 111's death again. Besides, if he did, the three of them would succumb to the gas, and then they'd be left for dead. It was bad enough that 111 died, 110 would not be responsible for letting Gomez and Hawkins die as well.

He entered the command.

Within seconds, his vision cleared. His thought processes once again settled into the orderly pattern he was accustomed to. And the green haze faded.

Gomez was coughing furiously, but she managed to get out the words, "Good work, 110" between coughs.

"I did what any of us would have, Commander," 110 said, not wanting to take undue credit for something so routine.

"Don't sell yourself short." More coughs. "You're the only one who knew your way around Gantriul's circuits enough to perform the override." Yet more coughs. "So stop being so modest and take credit for your work."

110 blinked. He supposed that the commander was right.

So why didn't he feel like he did anything special?

"Corsi to Gomez, are you there, Commander?"

Tapping her combadge, Gomez managed to say, "I'm here. We had a bit of a scrape with some gas, but we're okay now."

Prompted by those words, 110 went to the mini-medikit that Hawkins-who was coughing even more than Gomez-had on his belt pouch and removed the medical tricorder.

"Well," Corsi was saying, "I'm out of the forcefield, and we've got full weapons now. I nailed both prisoners with heavy stun, so they won't be a factor for a while."

"All right, head for Drew's position and see if you can cut him free from the bulkheads-or at least a hole for some air for him. Then get to the core. We'll meet you there."

"Yes, sir. Corsi out."

110 said, "According to the readings, both of you suffered minor damage to your esophageal passages from the gas. It can be repaired when we return to the da Vinci."

"How about you?" Gomez asked between two more coughs.

"No deleterious aftereffects," he said calmly.

Smiling, Gomez said, "Lucky you. C'mon, let's get a move-on to the core. How much further?"

"Approximately fifty meters," 110 said, consulting the tricorder, "then down another ladder, and we will

be there, Commander."

The two humans' coughs were now coming at longer intervals, which was a good sign. Gomez said, "Let's go."

Undlar had finally disposed of First Speaker Ansed's body. It was a revolting task, and one he never wanted to be even remotely involved with again as long as he lived. He swore that, one day, he would kill Emarur for forcing him to commit this depraved action.

But for now, he needed the owner of the Senbolma, so he restrained himself.

As he reentered the flight deck, he said, "Contact the surface. Hagi hasn't checked in, and I want an update."

Emarur asked, "Is the body-"

"Yes, the body is disposed of. I hauled the damn thing to the transporter bay and dispersed her atoms into space. Now contact the surface!"

Turning his back on Undlar, Emarur opened a channel. "Senbolma to Hagi."

There was no response. Angrily, Undlar leaned over Emarur's shoulder and said, "Hagi, this is Undlar, answer me, dammit!"

"Something must have happened to him," Emarur said, showing a phenomenal grasp of the blindingly obvious.

"Close the channel," said Undlar. "Hagi's got the only comm unit. We may have to beam down and see for ourselves."

"Hang on a second," Emarur said, turning to the pilot. "What're you picking up down there?"

The pilot shook his head. "I've been reading the same life signs all along. Some of them are faint, though-they're going deeper into the infrastructure of Ganitriul, and it's hard to get a reading that far down. And some people have dropped out as they went into some areas, and-"

Undlar had no patience for this. "Are there still twelve Eerlikka down there?"

"Yes," the pilot said.

"Are there still five aliens?"

"Yes. Four human and one Bynar, in case you're interested."

"I'm not," Undlar said. "We'll have to-"

An alarm went off. The pilot looked at his readout. "It's the da Vinci! It's back-it was in orbit around the second planet."

Emarur frowned. "How could they have been in orbit around the second planet?"

"I don't know, but that's where they're coming from."

"It doesn't matter," Undlar said. "This time we'll finish them off. Arm the weapons."

To Undlar's annoyance, the pilot looked at Emarur first. Emarur nodded, and only then did the pilot say, "Arming weapons. Shields up."

"This time I want them destroyed," Undlar said.

"Then shut up and let me work," Emarur replied. Then he turned to the pilot. "Fire as soon as they're in range."

"Firing," the pilot said a moment later. Then he grinned. "Their shields are down."

Undlar smiled. He had no idea why their ship blasters were so effective against Starfleet shields, but he was willing to accept that they were.

The pilot said, "Firing again." A pause. "A direct hit, but no hull damage. Interesting-they managed to reconstruct the shields partly. They're down again, though. They took damage to their weapons, propulsion, and secondary systems." Smiling a bit, the pilot said, "They've got a good engineer or two over there."

Maybe, Undlar thought, we should consider selling the weapon to the Federation after we take over Eerlik.

Of course, the Federation might not want to deal with a government that had destroyed one of their ships, even if one could consider it a field test. So maybe we can sell it to someone else. The Ferengi or the Breen. The Breen would probably love a chance to even the score after the Dominion War

Undlar shook his head, bringing himself back to reality. Time enough for that after we've triumphed, he thought. "What are you waiting for?" Undlar said impatiently to Emarur and the pilot. "Destroy them." "Targeting them n-" The pilot cut himself off. "I've lost the lock." He stabbed at his console, but nothing happened. "I can't reestablish."

Emarur cried, "The shields have gone down!"

"What?"

"I've lost helm control," the pilot said, continuing to stab pointlessly at his console.

"Dammit, Emarur, what happened?"

Emarur also was stabbing at his console. "I can't access any ship's system. We've been completely locked out."

"That's impossible!" Undlar cried.

The human captain of the da Vinci's face appeared suddenly on the viewscreen. "We're the S.C.E., Undlar. Impossible things are our business. Now then, are you folks gonna surrender?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Undlar said. "Fine, you've taken over our ship. Now what? You don't have enough power to do anything to us. Your transporters and weapons and shields are down, so you can't fire on us and you can't board us. It's a stalemate, Captain. And I have righteousness on my side."

"Righteousness? You call cold-blooded murder righteous?"

The human sounded indignant. Well, let him, Undlar thought. "Every revolution has its executions, Captain. And this is a revolution. We will bring Eerlik out of its decadence and into a new era of greatness. And I can assure you that I will never give up. I will never surrender to you!"

"Screen off," Gold said, not wanting to look at Undlar's smug, teal-colored face. "Bridge to Engineering. Duffy, La Forge, give me good news."

"Wish I could, Captain," La Forge said. "I might be able to get the shields reconstituted again, but I doubt it. And the weapons systems were jury-rigged as it is-it'll take at least four hours to fix them now."

"Get on it," Gold said with a sigh. At least La Forge had been able to reconstitute the shields after the first shot. That was all that saved them-if he hadn't, that second shot would've done major structural damage instead of "merely" taking out half their systems. In fact, he thought, that second shot would've more than likely destroyed the ship.

He turned back to McAllan. "Contact the surface."

"Yes, sir." A pause. "Sir, I'm only reading two combadges-Corsi and Drew."

"Gold to Corsi," the captain said.

"Corsi here."

"Situation report, Commander."

"Commander Gomez, 110, and Hawkins are currently approaching the computer core so they can do whatever they need to do to fix the thing. I'm on my way there now. Drew is trapped between two bulkheads that fell down. The security systems have been switching on and off-that's how I got separated from the others-but Ganitriul's doing its best to help us out."

"We're not reading Gomez, Hawkins, or 110 up here."

"The core's pretty deep in the moon. Don't worry, I'm reading all three of them on my tricorder."

"Good. We're in a stalemate up here with the Eerlikka ship. The sooner you people get Ganitriul up and running again, the better."

"Understood, Captain. Can we get reinforcements?"

"Negative," Gold said, hating the fact that he had to say it. "Transporter's down. I'm afraid you're on your own, Corsi."

"That's fine, sir. We'll get it done."

"Keep me posted for as long as you can. Da Vinci out." He looked around the bridge, then hit his combadge. "Duffy, La Forge, how soon until the transporters are up?"

"Maybe six hours," Duffy said.

"Make that the priority. We can end this if we can board them."

From the conn position, Wong said, "Why don't we board them with a shuttle?" The da Vinci had two

shuttlecraft, the Archimedes and the Franklin.

McAllan was shaking his head. "Too risky. They'll know we're coming when we approach the shuttle bay and open up the bay doors-and they've got hand weapons. I can't tell what kind they are, but if they're anything like the shipboard weapons, the shuttle will be a sitting duck."

Gold sighed, then looked at Faulwell, seated with Abramowitz at one of the rear science stations. "Can you maintain the hold on their computer system?"

Faulwell nodded. "No problem, sir. I installed a dozen passwords on all the systems, and they're all in-jokes that only about three people in my family would even guess."

"I doubt they even know what a password is in this context," Abramowitz said. "We should be fine."

"Is there any kind of security device we can use against them?"

Faulwell shook his head. "They don't have anything like that. Best I can do is either cut off their oxygen or their gravity."

"Killing them's only a last-ditch option," Gold said, "and knocking out the gravity'll hardly matter." He sighed again. "All right then, we'll wait." He hated waiting. Rachel always said his impatience would be the death of him. Hope she's wrong this time, he thought.

Sonya Gomez felt like someone had scraped her throat with a rusty knife. She didn't particularly want to cough, as it hurt like hell every time she did, but it got to the point where not coughing was worse. So she coughed. And was sorry she did.

This went on for the entire time she, 110, and Hawkins walked the rest of the way to the core.

"Corsi to Gomez."

"Go ahead."

"Good news, Commander-the da Vinci is okay."

Sonya had been trying very hard not to think about the fact that they hadn't been in touch with the ship.

The idea that she'd never see Kieran again

Aloud she simply said, "That's good to hear."

"You're too far deep for them to pick you up-and I will be soon. I tried to get Drew out, but one rifle can't cut it without exhausting the power pack. I was able to make a small blowhole for him, so he should be able to survive until we can get everything under control."

"All right," Sonya said. "We're almost at the core. We'll meet you here. Be careful."

"Always, Commander. Corsi out."

About ten minutes passed in silence, and then Ganitriul's ever-pleasant voice sounded once again.

"Commander Gomez, I am afraid that the scattering field has gone down. Any weapons will work within the caverns now, not just yours."

"Okay," she said with a sigh. That had been a handy tactical advantage, but they'd have to live without it.

After another five minutes, Sonya figured they arrived at their destination when they were confronted with a massive bulkhead. "I'm assuming this is the entrance to the core and not another security protocol we have to work around?"

Ganitriul's voice said, "No, Commander Gomez, this is the entrance to the core."

"I've got the code to open the door," 110 said.

The Bynar walked up to a keypad, which was right at arm level for him. Sonya smiled. Good thing that the Eerlikka and the Bynars are roughly the same average height, she thought.

"Commander, a patrol's coming toward us," Hawkins said, looking at his tricorder. Then he dropped the tricorder and picked up his rifle, bracing it against his shoulder, since he only had the one good arm.

"How many?" Sonya asked.

"Only two."

The bulkhead started to slowly slide open.

Blaster fire whizzed by Sonya, only missing her by a few centimeters.

She turned and ran for the opening bulkhead. Behind her, Hawkins lay down covering fire.

A sharp pain seared into her left leg, and she went sprawling to the ground, her jaw colliding with the cavern floor.



Her leg felt like it was on fire, but she managed to clamber the rest of the way into the core with her right leg and arms.

She looked back and saw that 110 had made it in, but Hawkins was still on the ground outside the core, firing at their assailants.

Then the door started to slide shut.

"110, keep the door open!"

"I can't," he said. "Not until it closes again-it's on a strict cycle."

The door slammed shut.

Vance Hawkins did not like the position he was in.

Getting shot at by two people while lying on a cold stone cave floor with a useless left arm, wielding a phaser rifle designed as a two-handed weapon, and separated from the rest of his team was not his conception of the ideal tactical situation.

So far, his two assailants hadn't struck. Part of that was because he was flat on the floor, which made it harder to hit him than if he was standing up, but not as difficult as if he were behind a wall.

By an annoying coincidence, behind a wall was precisely where his assailants were. There was one on either side of a corridor, hiding mostly around a corner. Thus far, Hawkins had been able to lay down more-or-less continuous cover fire that kept them around their respective corners except when they poked their heads out long enough to shoot-another reason why they hadn't hit, as they hadn't been able to aim properly. But sooner or later, they were going to get lucky.

A shot came frighteningly close to his left arm. The magic of modern medicine meant that he could no longer feel the pain, but the limb was also functionally useless until he got back to Dr. Lense's care on the da Vinci. Hawkins didn't really like the idea of it being injured further.

The door had slammed shut and showed no signs of reopening. Since Commander Gomez and 110 weren't armed, Hawkins couldn't afford to move from his position even if it was open, unfortunately.

No, he thought, I definitely don't like this position.

Then he heard something that sounded like, "Urk!" and a shot went flying a meter over his head. Neither of the Eerlikka had missed by that much before.

The reason became apparent soon enough when he saw the assailant on the right fall to the ground.

Hawkins then saw the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen in his life Lieutenant Commander Corsi pointing her rifle at the head of the other Eerlik.

And she was smiling. The smile that meant whoever she was pointing her rifle at was not going to go home a happy person.

Good ol' Core-Breach, Hawkins thought. Can always count on her to save our asses. He started to clamber upright with his good hand.

"Drop it," she said.

The Eerlikka dropped his weapon.

"And the blade."

Reaching into his tunic, the Eerlikka pulled out his sword and dropped it, too.

"Now put your hands out where I can see them and walk very very slowly forward. Don't stop until I tell you."

As the Eerlikka walked forward, Corsi asked, "What's your name?"

"I-I'm Utaka."

"Well, congratulations, Utaka, you're now a hostage of Starfleet. Stop walking," she added when they arrived in front of the bulkhead-  
-which started to slide open.

"Good to see you, Commander," Hawkins said. "Where's Drew?"

"Still in the bulkheads. I cut him a breathing hole, at least."

The door opened to 110 and Gomez, the latter sitting on the floor clutching her left leg. She was also bleeding from a gash in her jaw.

"Glad you could make it, Commander Corsi," Gomez said with a small smile. "And I see you brought a

present."

"This is Utaka," Corsi said. "Walk inside the core, Utaka."

Corsi led the prisoner into the core. Hawkins followed behind, first shouldering the rifle, then taking out the medikit. He knelt down to check on Gomez.

As Hawkins one-handedly checked over Gomez's leg wound and gingerly applied the appropriate hypospray, the prisoner said, "It's no use, you know. We still outnumber you. We alerted the others-they'll all be here soon. And that door won't protect you."

Gomez nodded. "I guess they know the code for the door, then. 110, can you change it?"

"Yes," the Bynar said.

"Do it, then shut it. We may as well get some privacy."

Corsi was staring at her tricorder. "Utaka's right. I've got eight Eerlikka moving toward this position."

The door started to slide shut. "I have changed the code," 110 said, "and it's unlikely that they'll determine what it is."

Hawkins finished awkwardly applying a salve to Gomez's jaw. "You should be able to at least limp on that leg now, Commander." He stood, put away the medikit as best he could, then offered his good hand to help her up.

"Thanks, Hawkins," she said, getting to her feet.

"Commander Gomez, all security protocols have gone offline. I cannot access any of them."

"Does that mean Drew is freed?" Hawkins asked.

"Yes, but it also means that the other two who were similarly trapped are freed-and I will be unable to use any security devices against those who are heading this way."

Hawkins breathed a sigh of relief. He'd been worried about his friend.

"Okay," Gomez said, "we'll have to hope that the door will keep them out."

Corsi tapped her combadge. "Corsi to Drew."

"Drew here. The bulkheads just raised."

"We heard," Corsi said. "Proceed to the core, but with caution. There's a band of eight hostiles coming here, and two more wandering around as well, and I don't want you to get taken down by them."

"Understood, Commander."

Sonya turned to the Bynar. "All right, 110, get to work on the core. We need to end this."

Sonya Gomez looked at the Bynar-and her heart fell. She'd never seen 110 like this his eyes were almost dilating, he was fidgety, and he spoke with a motormouth that reminded Sonya uncomfortably of herself as an ensign.

"I-I don't know if I can perform this task, Commander. I'm-diminished without 111, and-"

Sonya put her hands on 110's shoulders. "I understand, but you have to try."

"But it might go wrong. I've been fearing this moment since you first put me on the away team. In fact, to be honest, I've been fearing it since 111 died. Up until now, everything's been simple. The interface with Ganitriul, activating the manual override, changing the code-those were basic tasks that even the most inept Bynar pair can do without thinking, much less one as mature as I, even without a mate. I know that I'm supposed to be able to fix any computer problem, but this may be beyond my capabilities."

Great, Sonya thought. My throat feels like raw uridium, I've got a bum leg and a sore jaw, and now I have to hand-hold a Bynar.

"Listen to me. It's true that you're not as efficient without 111 as you were with her. But you were never infallible. It may have seemed that way, but you're not. There's always a chance of failure. That doesn't mean you don't try. You still know your way around computers better than anyone I've ever met. And even if it doesn't work, at least you'll have made the effort. If you don't even do that, you'll never succeed."

That has to be the hoariest load of clichd crap I've ever uttered in my entire life, she thought. Hope it worked.

110 gazed up at Sonya, who saw only fear in those eyes. The question was, could he get past that fear?

Finally, the Bynar nodded and said, "Very well, Commander. I will try."

Slowly, 110 walked toward one wall. Like all the other interfaces, this looked like a giant marble slab, but this one was lit with a variety of symbols in the Makaro language. 110 activated his belt unit and started letting loose with a rapid-fire stream of binary code.

The symbols started to flash by more quickly. 110 only occasionally actually touched the interface—mostly, Ganitriul was responding directly to the binary code.

Every time Sonya saw the Bynars in action, it amazed her that people could be so in tune with a computer that they could communicate directly with them.

However, having seen 110 and 111 working in tandem, she could tell that 110 was working at about a quarter of the speed. She also noticed that he was getting frustrated with certain elements and going back and trying something again.

"What's he doing?" Utaka asked.

"Undoing your sabotage," Sonya said.

"How?"

Sonya just smiled. "It's what he does."

Minutes passed, and still the rapid-fire stream of binary code came from 110's mouth. The rhythm of the code started to fall into something like a pattern that Sonya could detect. 110 didn't seem as frustrated, and did less backpedaling and hesitating.

"What's taking him so long?" Hawkins asked. "I thought these guys could walk through computers like nothing."

"Two of them can," Sonya said angrily. "One of them takes a little longer. Anytime you want to step in and help out"

Holding up his good hand and backing off, Hawkins said, "No, Commander, 'course not. It's just—"

He was interrupted by a loud thud against the door.

"My guess?" Corsi said, looking at the door. "The remaining Eerlikka just realized that the code doesn't work and they're trying to break the door down."

"That's a pretty reasonable guess," Sonya said sardonically. "If they get through, protect 110 at all costs, understood?"

"Yes, sir," Corsi said, taking up position at a forty-five degree angle to the door on one knee. Hawkins did likewise at an equivalent point on the other side of the door.

Smoke started to show through the door. Sonya now could hear the whine of the Eerlikka blasters through the weakening rodinium door.

The pure simplicity of the binary code washed over 110. At first, it was like coming home again. He was comfortable for the first time since he felt 111 die in his mind.

At least until the first glitch.

It was a simple mistake. He went down the wrong subroutine. A simple error—a misreading of a command.

If he'd been working with 111, it would never have happened.

He continued to navigate his way through Ganitriul. It was a complex system, and one that had many different facets. The Eerlikka had spent the millennia improving Ganitriul, building new processes over the old ones. But some of the older ones were still in place, never having needed to be improved. The newer routines were almost completely compatible with the older ones, adjusted for maximum efficiency.

Although Lieutenant Commander Duffy's statement that Ganitriul might put the master computer on Bynaus to shame struck 110 as unlikely at the time, he now had to admit that Ganitriul was, in its own way, almost as impressive. For that alone the Eerlikka deserved commendation.

Once again, he lost his way, this time exploring some of the older programs that regulated the economy, and which hadn't needed any alteration for almost a thousand years. He let his curiosity get the better of him—something 111 would not have tolerated.

Eventually, he found the source code for the invasive program. It had taken far longer than he'd expected, especially since the fruits of the program were all over every system he'd visited, going back to when he interfaced with Ganitriul at the other terminal.

110 had to admire the simplicity of it the invasive program simply changed the numeric values or the operators of random mathematical equations. Addition would become subtraction, values were doubled or halved, a use of two variables would instead be a use of seventeen. The changes were random, and were restored just as randomly. This served to explain why the specific problems were a loss of control and a rearrangement of functions.

Most impressive of all, none of the errors the program introduced would actually cause the system to shut down. After all, if the system shut down, it was easy enough to diagnose the problem at the spot where the system crashed. But as long as the system was still operating-if not functioning properly-it made it that much harder to seek out the problem.

But 110 had found it.

Now he had to get rid of it.

The problem was, he could not simply eliminate the program. That is to say, he could, but that would not solve Ganitriul's problem. Whatever changes the program had initiated would remain once the program was wiped, and it would still not be able to function properly. What 110 had to do was backtrack find all the changes the program made, fix them, keep it from making any further changes, and then, finally, wipe the program.

With 111, it could have been done easily.

By himself, it would be extremely difficult.

But, as Commander Gomez said, he had to try.

So he did.

The process was slow. He almost missed a few of the equations that had been altered.

In the end, however, he found all the changes that had been made.

Then he eliminated the program.

I did it! he thought, triumphantly.

He turned around to tell Commander Gomez that he succeeded, only to find himself knocked to the ground by Hawkins. Some kind of blaster fire went over his head.

110 looked up to see a large hole in the door and an Eerlikka standing on the other side firing a blaster.

Then a forcefield came up in front of the door. The Eerlikka still fired into it, but the forcefield simply absorbed the impact.

The Eerlikka tried to fire again, but her weapon no longer worked.

"Security protocols activated. Hostile forces have been neutralized," Ganitriul said. "I once again have full control of all my operations. The hostiles outside the door are now trapped behind forcefields, their weapons deactivated."

The three humans all broke into grins. "Good work, 110," Gomez said.

110 returned the smile. "Thank you, Commander."

Gomez asked, "Ganitriul, can you show us what's happening with the da Vinci?"

"Of course. The da Vinci is presently in standard orbit around the moon," Ganitriul said as an image of the da Vinci and another ship flickered to life on the interface. "The Pevvni ship is the same one that engaged the da Vinci earlier."

"Can you put us in touch with the da Vinci?"

"Yes. I have boosted the signal in your combadge so it can penetrate the crust of the moon."

Tapping her combadge, Gomez said, "Gomez to da Vinci."

"Gold here. Good to hear your voice, Commander."

"Likewise, Captain."

"Assuming that is your voice. You sound like a Horta."

Gomez laughed, then coughed once. "I got on the bad side of some gas. It's nothing that can't be dealt with, sir. In any case, mission accomplished 110 has fixed Ganitriul. All its operations are back to normal."

"Good. We've got a bit of a standoff here-we have control of the Senbolma, but our transporters and weapons are out. We'd like to send a boarding party over there."

Corsi said, "Ganitriul, can you send Hawkins, Drew, and I to the Senbolma?"

"Yes."

Turning to Gomez, Corsi said, "With your permission, we can be that boarding party."

Gomez nodded. "Permission granted."

It would have been inaccurate to say that it was all over, but still, Sonya Gomez was impressed with how quickly things calmed down. Corsi, Hawkins, and Drew took control of the *Senbolma*, subduing Undlar and his two accomplices in fairly short order. The three Eerlikka were taken into custody by the first Enforcement ship that had been able to get itself into Eerlik orbit. The weather on the planet had stabilized, as had transportation methods. Everyone who was supposed to get food now could. Closer to home, Dr. Lense had treated Sonya and Hawkins-removing the lingering effects of the gas from their throats and patching up their wounds.

There were still plenty of relief efforts that needed to be coordinated, and the *Sugihara* had at last arrived in order to aid in those matters, freeing the *da Vinci* up to resume its course for Starbase 505.

Sonya sat in the mess hall with Carol Abramowitz and Bart Faulwell, who were filling her in on what happened on the *da Vinci* while she was dealing with Ganitriul.

"I'm just glad things'll get back to normal," Sonya said.

Carol snorted. "Fat chance of that. The First Speaker's dead, the only surviving member of the clergy is a mass murderer, and now everyone's questioning the efficacy of having one big, vulnerable computer. Even if they do keep things as they are, their entire spiritual base and the people who are capable of fixing Ganitriul are all dead. You don't just recover from that by taking out an invasive program."

Bart shrugged. "Maybe they'll decide to join the Federation. Or at least work something out so that some computer experts can be nearby until they can train people. Or something."

"Maybe 110 and his new mate could do that after he re-bonds," Carol said.

"Maybe," Bart said, looking down, and suddenly very interested in his root beer.

Sonya frowned, and wondered what that look was about-especially after that odd look 110 had given Bart before accepting the assignment.

Oh well, she thought. It's not my business. She polished off her mug of Earl Gray and said, "Still, that's not our lookout. We're the fixit squad, not the diplomats. We've done what we're supposed to do-now we go on to the next assignment. Or, in this case, to Starbase 505. I'm sure both 110 and Geordi will be happy to finally be heading home."

"Oh, I don't know," Carol said with a smile, "they both were pretty handy. Maybe they'll stick around."

Returning the smile, Sonya said, "Trust me, nothing will get Geordi off the *Enterprise* for any length of time. And 110 does have obligations."

"True," Carol said.

Bart continued to stare at his root beer.

110 stared at the ceiling of the quarters that, until recently, he shared with the love of his life.

He had received accolades, not just from Captain Gold and Commander Gomez, but also from the new First Speaker of Eerlik, a man named Biral who went on for quite some time about how grateful the Eerlikka were to the S.C.E. in general and to 110 in particular.

And now, finally, the *da Vinci* was headed back to Starbase 505, from which 110 was supposed to take a transport to Bynaus.

110 got up off the bed and stared at the viewscreen, which presently was programmed to show the stars as they appeared when at warp. Humans always liked to gaze at the stars whenever they sought out answers, but 110 and 111 had always found the practice to be pointless.

Now that he was alone-it was just as pointless. The stars had no answers.

If he did not return to Bynaus, he would be an outcast.

If he did return to Bynaus, he would have to re-bond.

He found each choice to be repugnant in some form or other. While he could not imagine not being a true part of Bynar society, nor could he imagine living without 111.

At least he knew that he could function without 111. He fixed Ganitriul. He saved Eerlik. That, at least,

counted for something.

110 lay back down on the bunk and stared at the ceiling.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Keith R.A. DeCandido, the co-developer of Star Trek S.C.E. with John J. Ordovery, is an author, editor, and musician. Among his credits are the best-selling Buffy the Vampire Slayer books *The Watcher's Guide* (with Christopher Golden & Nancy Holder) and *The Xander Years Volume 1*, the Young Hercules novels *Cheiron's Warriors* and *The Ares Alliance*, and the Spider-Man novel *Venom's Wrath* (with Jos R. Nieto). His other Star Trek work includes the Next Generation comic book miniseries *Perchance to Dream* and four upcoming novels the Next Generation novel *Diplomatic Implausibility* (February 2001), the Deep Space Nine novel in the "Gateways" crossover (September 2001), and the cross-series duology *Brave & the Bold* (2002). When he isn't writing, he plays percussion for the Don't Quit Your Day Job Players, an acclaimed rock/blues/country band. Learn more than you needed to know about Keith at [www.sff.net/people/krad](http://www.sff.net/people/krad) and about his band at [www.dqydjp.com](http://www.dqydjp.com).