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by Dave Galanter & Greg Brodeur

14,800 words

CHAPTER ONE

"Arrrrgh!" Christian Basile pulled back his freshly bleeding hand. He gritted his teeth and protectively pulled his wrist toward his chest.

"What happened?" Maria came running up the stone corridor. "What did you do?"

Christian grunted. "I was trying to seal a coupling and my hand slipped. The damn backup generator was down again. I got 'er going but-at a cost." He tentatively showed her his blood-covered hand.

"Oh, my." Maria's eyes widened at the sight of the gash on her husband's hand. She took off her scarf and wrapped it tightly around his palm and the base of his fingers. "We need to let the doctor see that."

He shook his head. "Later. Now that the backup is online again I want to make sure she stays that way."

With his good hand Christian pulled a tricorder from his overalls and flipped it open.

As it chirped alive, Maria took the tricorder from him and put it in the back pocket of her work belt.

"You're going to see the doctor."

He ignored her and pushed passed to the computer console at her left. "I think-" He made the mistake of touching the control board with his bad hand. "Arrgh!"

"Don't do that!" She rushed forward and pulled his arm back.

"Excellent advice," he said through clenched teeth, but had finished pulling up the data he needed. "I think we're going to be okay for a while."

Maria tentatively guided him toward the center of the mining complex. "Until it breaks down again."

"Yes, until then." He shook his head and let her guide him. "She's a finicky one."

He sensed playfulness in Maria's mock-frown. "Why do you keep calling it a she?" she asked.

"Because she has me up at all hours tending to her every need, and I spend the longest time trying to please her, only to get a tiny bit of happiness in return. She's the definition of 'high maintenance.' What else could she be, but a she?"

Maria groaned. "That's mind-numbingly sexist."

"It's the Ferengi in me," he said, chuckling.

"You're from Alpha Centauri," she reminded him unnecessarily. "Not a very sexist culture. And you do not have any Ferengi in you."

"You said you'd never hold my small lobes against me."

She laughed. "Listen to me and get this straight," she said, stopping them both and pulling him to her. "If lobe size mattered, I'd never have married you in the first place." She kissed him.

"I know," he said around the kiss.

"I know you know," she mumbled, touching his lips, then his chin, then his cheek.

"So . . . you don't really think I'm a sexist?" By now he'd mostly forgotten his throbbing hand. He kissed her again.

Maria pulled back just long enough to answer. "You don't taste like a sexist."

"Neither do you," he mumbled, then grunted in pain-she had pressed against his hand.

Her brows knitting, she gasped and saw her scarf was now soaked with blood. "We have to get that looked at."

He nodded and they continued walking. "I'm hoping the doctor recommends bed rest," he said, and winked at her.

"You're hoping bed, but not rest."

"Yes, I-"

A chirping alert from the tricorder cut off his thought and he quickly stopped to check it, pulling it clumsily from Maria's belt.

"It's the backup generator again." Closing the tricorder, he handed it back to her. "Something else this time. How are we on batteries?"

Maria sighed and brushed a strand of dark hair from her eyes. He loved her hair, her olive skin . . . he should be thinking of the reactor.

"Last I checked we had forty-three percent charge."

"I wish we could increase the rate of charge," he said, "but I think we'd blow the circuits again."

"Can you fix the new problem? What is it?"

"Overload because the mix isn't clean on the reactor. I'm going to fiddle with the mix again and reset."

"Of course." She nodded. "Do you need-?"

"A hand?" He raised his bad paw but shook his head. "Tell the doctor I'll stop by the infirmary when I'm done."

She nodded. He could tell she didn't like letting him work on the generator before seeing the doctor, but she also knew how important it was to keep power running on a class-D planetoid.

"I'll let people know the power will be back soon."

"And see if you can reach the da Vinci again," Christian added as he trudged back toward the reactor section. "We've got to get the replacement parts, or we're all going to freeze . . . if we don't suffocate first."

"We'll keep it together," she said encouragingly. "And they'll be here soon."

"Shields!" Captain Gold bellowed from the command chair just as the first volley of phaser fire crackled across the da Vinci's bow. "Red alert."

"They're coming around again," McAllan called from tactical.

Gold nodded. "All hands, battle stations. Evasive action, Wong." He gestured to ops. "Ina, try to hail them."

"They're jamming all the channels, sir," Lieutenant Ina Mar replied.

"Did our message to Starfleet make it out?" Gold asked.

Ina shook her head. "I'm not sure, Captain."

McAllan huffed out a frustrated breath. "Let's hope so. I'm reading two more ships coming in."

"Who the hell are they?" Gold barked.

"Checking configuration." David McAllan's voice was unwavering in the heat of the battle. "Mid-size cruiser . . . design used by the Munqu. We have a file on them, but I've never seen one."

An explosion rattled the bridge and sent a shudder up everyone's spine.

"Well, now you have," Gold said. "With this reception, I could have waited."

"Battle stations! All hands, battle stations! First officer, report to the bridge!" Not a call often heard on the da Vinci, Sonya Gomez thought as she hurried to the turbolift. Battle stations? Who'd be attacking us? Starfleet Corps of Engineers ships weren't usually called into battle—hers was the type of ship that went in after a battle, to clean up the mess left behind.

The turbolift doors opened to a much more chaotic bridge than Gomez was used to seeing. An aft console looked like so much slag and one of Chief Engineer Barnak's noncoms was already working on it. Saber-class ships had cramped bridges to begin with, but for some reason, with the red lights of their alert status blinking and the burned-out console, it felt even more claustrophobic. Like most Starfleet vessels, the da Vinci had a circular two-level bridge, with the captain's chair in the center on the lower level, the conn and ops positions right in front of him, tactical right behind him, and various science and engineering stations lining the wall, broken only by the turbolift to the captain's left, a door to the captain's right, and the viewscreen right in front of him.

That viewscreen presently showed what looked to Gomez like a Munqu ship firing on them.

"I thought the Munqu were pretty reclusive. Why are they attacking?"

"They seem to be coming out of their shell," Gold deadpanned as another aft console exploded and they both cringed just the slightest bit.

"Do we know what they want?"

"They're jamming communications," Ina offered.

"We might have gotten a call out to Starfleet, but I'm not counting on it," Gold told Gomez.

It made no sense. Who attacks such a small ship with a crew of mostly technical experts for no reason? The da Vinci was on a fairly simple mission to restock a mining colony and transport a mineral important to cure a Horta plague on Janus IV. Not exactly a covert mission to steal new cloaking technology or repair the engines of a disabled dilithium cargo freighter.

"Sir," McAllan called, "shields are down to forty-seven percent. We seem to be more maneuverable, but they're packing more of a punch."

"Do we have any data on these ships?" Gomez asked. "Weak spots?"

McAllan shook his head. "Only what we're scanning now. There's nothing but the basics in the database."

Gomez tapped her combadge. "Abramowitz, report to the bridge."

Gold nodded. "Good call."

Grunting as he pushed the ship this way and that, Ensign Songmin Wong spoke from the conn station.

"Sir, I think they're trying to disable us. Multiple shots at our port nacelle, where the shields are weakest."

"Is this about our mission?" Gold thought aloud. "Why would the Munqu want to keep us from the Beta Argola colony? It's the smallest of mining operations."

"I was wondering the same. All I can think of is that we're stocked to the struts with mining equipment," Gomez said. "If they've scanned that, maybe they want it."

"Badly enough to attack a Federation starship?" Yet another explosion racked the bridge, and Gold frowned at Wong. "Ensign, 'evasive' means evade."

Nervously, Wong struggled with his console. "Aye, sir."

Cultural specialist Carol Abramowitz entered the bridge and began to ask what was happening. With a

raised arm, Gold held off her comment for a moment and turned to McAllan. "Continue to return fire. If we're more maneuverable, let's use that as best we can, people."

"It's three to one, sir," McAllan said. "I can keep it up, but they're gonna hit us here and there."

On cue, phaser fire spread out across the forward viewer. A near miss. "I see that," Gold said.

Best not to distract Wong, Gomez thought, and Gold obviously thought the same as he turned to the ops officer. "Ina, try to break through their jamming. At least to the miners. Maybe we can warn them, if this does involve them." The captain then turned to Abramowitz. "What do you know about the Munqu?"

"Off the top of my head, not much, sir," Abramowitz said, her close black hair seeming orange in the red alert lights. "First contact was around Stardate 43200, and has been limited to minor border disagreements. They've been classified as mildly xenophobic."

Gold frowned and ran a hand through his thin white hair. "I'm thinking that way of life is being left behind."

"That's all I get." Christian sighed. He re-coded the frequency scanner, then did it again, and then one more time. Nothing.

"Replay it," his wife offered, and she cocked her ear toward the nearest speaker.

With his now healed hand, Christian tabbed at the console and replayed the sketchy subspace message. Static crackled as it spat from the speakers. "-is the-ship da Vinci-. . .-attack-"

"That's all there is." He frowned deeply and Maria touched him lightly on the shoulder. Sincere if futile reassurance. She was always his strength in times thick with misfortune.

"I think I heard the word attack," she said finally.

He nodded. "Me too." That was why the message was a frightening one. Was da Vinci under attack, or was their going to be an attack on Beta Argola? And more importantly, why? Beta Argola was a nice mining colony, but there were surely others that were nicer. Heck, the thing was only two thousand kilometers from one end to another, and half as thick. Gravity was artificial-meaning expensive. If not for it having the element the Horta needed, Christian and his team would have chosen any number of others. Lingered her gaze on what Christian knew was a cheerless visage, Maria finally said, "Let's try and reach the authorities."

Again, he nodded somberly. "Starbase 413 or wide-band to Starfleet?" Should they risk sending out a wide-band transmission if someone was gunning for them after the da Vinci?

"Both." She began keying in the messages. "We should reach anyone we can."

He nodded agreement. "What about replying to the da Vinci?"

"I've tried," Maria said with a sigh. "No response."

Christian had that sharp rock of concern that would sometimes jab his gut from the inside out. Concern for himself, for his wife, and the thirteen others on the small colony. He inwardly chuckled at calling it a colony. It wasn't as if it was a permanent settlement with a lasting infrastructure and shields. They were pretty defenseless. They had non-military issue hand phasers and a few phaser-rifles, sure, but it was numbers that counted, and those were few. They had a protective dome, but that could be ruptured easily by a ship with disruptors or phasers. . . . he didn't even want to think what a photon or quantum torpedo could do.

He let his gaze settle on his wife, then moved it to the rock and dirt floor at their feet. Anti-matter blasting had cleared out their habitat caverns in a few weeks and since they moved from the cargo ship to the settlement, they'd made what felt like a home. While there was always a danger living in space, it was easy to become complacent.

But now? Now Christian was having a hard time not thinking they might die out here.

He rubbed the wish for sleep from his eyes. He was tired, very tired, and really didn't want to think at all. Unfortunately, it wasn't the time to stop thinking.

CHAPTER TWO

"Any answer from Starfleet?" Gold hovered over Ina's ops console and peered down at the frequency logs. He saw what she did a dearth of incoming messages.

"Just static, sir. I think I'm getting feedback from Beta Argola, though. With some work I may be able to make contact." Her hands did a coordinated dance over her console. "It's possible they got the first message, but I can't confirm it."

"We need to reach them, if no one else," Gold said, pacing toward the command chair. "This attack is no coincidence. And if the colony isn't getting pounded now, they will be soon." The captain didn't know that for a fact, of course, but it seemed the only conclusion. There was nothing civilized out this far but that planetoid and the da Vinci. The Munqu hadn't had a lot of contact with the Federation, but Abramowitz had dug up enough in the databanks to let Gold know something like this attack was within their ability, both technically and politically.

"Tactical," Gold ordered as he settled into the command chair and looked up toward the main viewscreen. He didn't like what he saw. His shoulders and jaw tightened a bit. He had to keep reminding himself that his ship was more maneuverable, but when outnumbered three to one that wasn't the bee's knees. The da Vinci was taking on a lot of damage. Shield generators were showing signs of overload. Warp engines were off-line so they couldn't escape. It seemed their only advantage was that they were avoiding more than half the enemy's shots.

After taking it all in, Gold motioned Gomez to his side. "Commander, assuming we didn't get through to Starfleet, how can we increase the damage we're doing to their ships? If we can just disable them long enough to repair warp drive, we can break away long enough to be out of jamming range, we can call for reinforcements and head for Beta Argola."

Gomez's brows knitted in thought. "Yes, sir. Increase the damage, hm?"

"I have a ship full of engineers here," Gold said with a wry smile and a fleeting glance at the twirling starscape view as Wong maneuvered them away from Munqu phasers. "Surely we can put them to use. What materials do we have aboard that could be used defensively or offensively?"

"Nothing that I can . . ." She paused. Gold knew that look in her eyes drip-drop, drip-drop. Engineers didn't often have a flood of ideas. Their genius was in gathering the dew from leaves of intelligence and experience. "Mining equipment," she said, finally. "The cargo bays are filled with it. They're overflowing, in fact."

"Can you use it?"

Probably not yet quite sure of just how she'd do that, Gomez nodded anyway. "We'll find a way, sir." Somewhere a relay noisily blew itself to bits. The lights went out for a moment, and then the emergency lights kicked in.

"Damn! Three against one!" Wong was struggling with his console and the captain could hear the frustration and tension in the man's voice.

"Steady, son, steady," Gold offered encouragingly as he got up from the center seat and put an heartening hand on the conn officer's shoulder. "Don't be afraid to improvise." He glanced to Gomez who was now holding onto a handrail.

On the forward viewer, as the starscape and the Munqu ships sped wildly this way and that, Gold and the bridge crew watched as enemy phaser fire shot harmlessly away from the da Vinci.

Gold decided he had to be a little more proactive. Bloody a nose and make the Munqu think hard about being so aggressive.

"Come about, two-ten mark thirty. Full impulse."

Wong nodded. "Aye, sir."

One eye on the tactical display, another on the main viewer, Gold instinctively leaned right and called out, "Evasive starboard. Phasers, fire at alpha target."

Hot amber phaser lances sliced into the closest Munqu vessel, sizzling against the enemy's shields and pushing her off her course.

"That was a good hit," Ina said, bowed over her sensors. "We knocked their fore shields down to forty-seven percent."

"Tack the other way," Gold ordered. "McAllan, fire when within range of gamma target."

After a brief pause, the tactical officer stabbed at his console. "Firing."

The Munqu ships flanked the da Vinci on either side as she pursued their sistership. Phaser shots and even a torpedo blast flared passed as the Federation starship bit into its opponent.

With that second blow, all three Munqu ships pulled back a bit, opening a large radius in which the da Vinci was trapped.

"Captain, we're being hailed," Ina said. "Audio only, sir."

"Looks like someone got the message." Gold motioned toward the speaker above him. "Let's hear it."

"Surrender your vessel, or we will be forced to destroy you." A harsh voice, medium-if hyper-in tone.

Gold waited, not hesitating, but making his adversary stew a bit. "And you are?" he asked finally.

"I . . . I am the one who commands you to surrender."

"Oh, you do, do you?" The captain sneered and made a throat slashing gesture with his right hand. "Cut this chiah off."

"What do they want?" McAllan asked, continuing to punch commands into his weapons computer.

"Like I said, my guess," Gomez began, edging toward the command chair but still holding the rail behind her, "is that they want the mining equipment. And maybe the colony as well."

"I thought the colony was only mining cribintium for us," Ina offered. "The Horta need it to cure a plague."

The captain shook his head. "They also mine topaline and aridium. Not exactly as rare as dilithium-"

"It's possible they've after the cribintium," Gomez said. "It's very rare, and the Federation would be willing to pay anyone rather than let the Horta die."

"So they'd mine it out from under us and sell it back?" Wong was incredulous but didn't turn toward the conversation. His intent gaze was squarely on the helm.

"More like they'd mine it and ransom it back." Gold nodded at his own estimation at what was the most likely scenario. "By the time another starship could get here to stop them, they'll have strip-mined the place."

"Assuming we didn't get through to the fleet."

"We'll assume we didn't, and so we have to handle this ourselves," Gold said. "They've probably been monitoring Beta Argola's transmissions and know why were here, with what cargo, and think us easy picking's. Let's show them we're not."

All nodded, but it was McAllan who spoke first with the ray of hope they needed. "I think I have somet hing," he said, calling Gold's attention to the tactical station.

The captain almost leapt up toward him. "Go."

"Their sensor array is basically Paridian technology." McAllan punched up a screen graphic of the Munqu ship's sensor array. As he did this, Gold noticed he was also programming a firing sequence into the phaser control computer. Talented kid.

"There's the flaw we're looking for," Gomez said, reading over the captain's shoulder.

Gold nodded. "I've seen the Paridian systems. Neutrino blast?"

"Yes, sir." McAllan's hands were jitterbugging over his console as he looked at the captain and Gomez and still continued to explain. "A highly compressed neutrino blast from our deflector into their sensor array should overload their grid."

"For a while anyway," Gomez added.

The captain gestured for McAllan to make it happen. "Think positive thoughts."

"Reconfiguring our deflector," McAllan said. "Ina, I'll need your help."

"On it, Mac," Ina called from ops. Another explosion against the shields, and she added, "And I'm hurrying."

A few minutes passed and eventually McAllan looked up, his lips turned up into a smile. "Ready, sir." Lowering himself into the command chair, his back tight with tension, the captain gestured toward the main viewer. "Engage."

An electrical buzz vibrated the deck plates as the first shot missed the nearest Munqu ship.

"Again," Gold ordered.

A connection with the second shot had McAllan mouthing a joyful yes.

Two more shots would fire, before finally the last two attempts connected dead on.

A cheer rose across the small bridge.

"Excellent, Lieutenant. Nice shooting." The captain gave his tactical officer an approving nod.

"Thank you, sir." McAllan was still grinning but looking down at his console as well. "Without sensors, they are retreating."

The captain nodding knowingly. "They don't want to be hurt. That tells me they lack backup. This probably isn't an operation by the Munqu government. It's only by some of their citizens."

"Pursuit course, sir?" Wong asked.

"Negative. They'll aim optically if we get too close." Gold swiveled toward Ina at ops. "Short range scan. We need a rock to hide behind."

"Scanning." The young woman studied her computers a moment, tapped in more codes, then looked up.

"At one one three mark seven-a small nebula."

Gomez and the captain made their way to ops and leaned to look at the console.

"Very small," Gomez said, straining to see the nebula on the sensor grid. "Too small to give us cover."

"Yes, ma'am . . . but it does have a radiation signature. It may befuddle their sensors as they clear-buy us a little extra time."

"I'll take it." Gold pivoted toward the helm. "Wong, course one one three mark seven. Best possible speed."

"Aye, one one three mark seven."

The captain then turned back to Gomez. "Commander, get down to engineering. Help out. Let me know how soon we can get warp drive online. If it's not soon, I'll need you to brainstorm some more . . . creative ideas."

She nodded, and rushed into the turbolift. As Gold settled back into the command chair, threads of the nebula became visible on the main viewscreen. Small nebula indeed. Like a cow hiding behind a sapling. He hoped it would do for now.

Chief Engineer Jil Barnak spat himself out the Jefferies tube. Gomez followed him out and down, and both stood on the deck of the engineering alcove, sharing a dissatisfied glance.

"Have you ever seen circuits that fused?"

Gomez shook her head and pushed out a deep sigh. "Not since the Dominion War." She motioned toward the ceiling, indicating the bridge. "You want to give him the bad news, or shall I?"

Barnak took a step aside as if to get out of the first officer's way. "Please, be my guest."

Taking in a deep breath, she steadied herself and then tapped her combadge. "Gomez to bridge."

"Gold here. Your tone isn't encouraging, Commander."

"No, sir. Neither is my report." One of the tougher parts of being an engineer was having to relate the reality of a bad technical situation. Gomez bit her lip a moment, then continued. "One of the plasma conduits is melted completely. Several of the warp control circuits are badly fused. We don't have enough replacements, or the power or ability to replicate them."

"I see." Gold's response was even, calm, almost nonchalant. The mark of an experienced captain who know how to moderate his demeanor for the sake of his crew.

"Impulse power is still intact," Barnak added, shuffling his feet back and forth just a bit. Obviously he

didn't like bearing bad news either. "But efficiency has been reduced by coolant leaks. We should have those sealed in twenty minutes' time."

"About the time the Munqu will be able to see us again," Gold said.

Gomez nodded slowly. It was possible it would be up to an hour . . . but it was more likely it wouldn't be that long. "About that, sir," she said. "Yes. But maybe we'll have more time than we think."

"Damn!" Christian Basile cursed his luck and the equipment around him and the planetoid and everything but his dog back home. He felt as if his world, his life, were collapsing around him. "Power to the subspace array is down," he huffed. "We're falling apart here."

His wife took his hand from the console, the hand that had been injured, and held it close. "No," she said gently. "The equipment is falling apart. But we're going to be okay, got it?"

Christian gathered the tatters of smile and tried to think positive thoughts. It generally wasn't his nature. Thankfully, it was Maria's. "Got it," he whispered.

She was really the stronger one in many ways, he thought. Christian had always played by the rules and didn't like to take chances. If not for Maria, his life wouldn't be half as interesting. Hell, he'd probably be living in a one-room apartment in New Chicago, where he grew up. Or in a holosuite.

The biggest eyes, he thought, locked in a glance with her. She has the biggest, deepest eyes. He then chuckled at how corny they thought seemed, let alone would sound out loud. "I'm going to try to fix the subspace array again." He took her hand to his lips, kissed it, then released her as he pushed himself up. Maria nodded. "Okay. I'll go see if we can pick up anything on sensors."

Smiling, trying to show her just how much she really had lightened his mood, Christian winked at her.

"Meet you back here in thirty, cutie."

She winked back. "It's a date."

He went his way, and she went hers. Maria had been the one to tell the other miners what was going on. She could soothe them just as easily as she did her husband. The others were mostly single, but there were two other couples. She had told the couples first. She said it was easier to break bad news to more than one person at a time. He'd asked her if that was a two-birds-with-one-stone advantage. She'd hit him and said it was because people tended to support one another.

As she always did him. And vice versa.

Forty-three and some odd minutes later, he had dubbed himself a communications and engineering genius. He'd taken any number of things that had everything to do with mining, or food replication, or bathroom fixtures, and nothing to do with communications . . . and cobbled together their subspace array.

"I did it!" Dropping his tool case on the floor, Christian ran up to his wife in the main control room and grabbed his wife by the shoulders as she turned from one of the computer consoles. "I got the damn thing working again."

"Just in time," she said, and the moment he saw her frown, his smile disappeared. "We have other troubles," Maria continued. "We've lost containment on the anti-matter blasting charges."

Christian's jaw slackened in shock and he thought his face must have flushed-it felt afire. "How? That system is completely sep-" He twisted around Maria and intently scanned the monitor screens. "Oh, god.

No." He curled around toward her. "Tell me we have transporter power and can beam them-"

She shook her head rapidly. She was scared-and that was rare for her. "Even if we did, with our low power we couldn't beam them far enough away. The shockwave-"

"It would still compromise the dome," he said angrily. "And it sure as hell will from the inside."

"And take all of us with it." She wasn't crying, but Maria's eyes were beginning to tear.

"Call in Sanders and the Ochawas. I think they're the only ones still in the mines. Make sure everyone is here ASAP." Christian moved toward the comm station. "We need the da Vinci here in a few hours."

Maria nodded, clasping her own hands tightly. "Let's hope they're okay."

"If not . . ." No. Christian didn't want to think about that.

"Should we break out the EVA suits?" Maria asked?

"I . . . I don't know. Let's wait. Maybe the da Vinci . . ." He didn't know what else to say. "If they can't

get here-" He didn't finish the sentence, because he didn't want to voice his true thought We'll all be dead.

CHAPTER THREE

"We need options, people, or we're all dead." Gold lowered himself into the observation lounge seat at the head of the table, right next to Gomez.

"We've come up with some ideas, sir," she said, and motioned to her Bynar team member. "Soloman?"

The delicate alien bowed his large head respectfully and spoke quickly if softly. "The Bynars once investigated a Munqu computer installation and I have the information gathered from that. Theta radiation might disrupt their computer core, forcing them to work on manual overrides."

Nodding his agreement from across the table, Fabian Stevens added, "We don't have a way just yet to deliver a massive theta wave pulse, though-besides which, there's all kinds of other dangers with that. So Soloman and I are working on a way to infiltrate their computers via subspace carrier wave."

P8 Blue, the pillbug-looking insectoid Nasat team member, hissed and clicked. "Interesting. How so?"

"They didn't disable their identification beacons," Soloman said. "The data in them is meaningless to us, but the carrier, if its frequency can be decrypted . . ."

Stevens pursed his lips into a thin line. "I'm no Bart Faulwell, but I'll do my best." Faulwell, the team's linguist and cryptographer, was presently on the planet Maeglin, helping a small group of other-dimensional aliens assimilate to their new home.

Nodding once, a clipped gesture, Soloman added, "And I will be able to help with the Munqu computer algorithms."

"Once that's done, we may be able to reverse the beacon and use it to get into their computers," Stevens said.

Gold nodded. Smart people, he thought, but all this was maybes and ifs. It was less comforting than it might be.

"Lt. Commander Duffy and I also have some work." Gomez tapped a command into the computer before her and a cargo manifest appeared on the screen beyond the table. "Ship's phasers are diminished from battle damage, and one bank has had an unrepairable overload. But we're transporting several of these A9667L-lithium phaser drills." The entry of the drill on the manifest began to blink.

"Aren't they too narrow against a starship?" Pattie asked.

"We're hoping to modify the mount muzzle to enlarge the beam. We'll work on it." Gomez handed her captain a data padd.

Gold glanced over it. "Very good."

"I have an idea as well." Pattie said. She seemed to lean forward from her specially designed seat, though with her insectoid form and dark exoskeleton her body posture look different than it actually was. "But I will need to read schematics on the lithium phaser drills."

"They're in the computer." Gomez smiled and then turned back toward the captain.

"Let's check the rest of the cargo again, too," Gold said. "There may be other items of use that on their own don't seem it. If you can build an item into something useful, even if it wouldn't ordinarily be in this situation . . . well, that would be just what the doctor ordered." He rose, trying to end the meeting on a positive if serious note. "We don't have much time before the Munqu are back at us. Let's get to it,

people."

The engineers, each with their own specialties, nodded and there was a chorus of "Aye, sir."

As Gold stepped toward the door, the voice of Ina Mar sounded from his combadge. "Captain?"

"Gold here."

"I have a message coming in from Beta Argola, sir. It's very weak."

"Patch it through." The captain twisted back toward the table and pulled Gomez with him before she left the briefing room. He swiveled the computer toward them both and a United Federation of Planets logo appeared on the monitor.

"Audio only, sir. Here it is."

"-is Christian Basile of the Beta Argola mining colony, do you read?"

"This is da Vinci. We read you Basile. Go ahead."

"Oh, thank God! We've got them! Maria! They're answering!"

Gold shook his head and strained to hear through the static and an interference that warped the transmission. "You're breaking up, Basile. Are you in danger?"

And if he wasn't in danger, would this message put him in danger, Gold wondered. The Munqu could be listening. A private mining colony wasn't privy to Starfleet codes and so there was no way to safely encrypt the communication.

"You bet your arse we're in danger! In a few hours-blown to kingd-come!"

"Repeat that, Basile." Gold tapped his combadge. "Ina, boost the gain."

"Trying, sir."

"Basile, repeat. Blown to kingdom come how?"

"Anti-matter blasting caps. Twenty gross of them. Usually containment-" The message broke up, but regained itself just as Gold was ready to call Ina again. "-but we can't do anything. No power for transporters, and we cannibalized our one shuttle to boost reactor life."

"How long do you estimate before they become unstable?" Gomez asked.

"Repeat that, da Vinci. We lost that."

"How long before they blow?" Gold asked the shorter, more to the point question. Sometimes engineers talked too much.

"We est-two hours, max." There was chatter in the background of the transmission, and Gold leaned closer to the speaker. "Hold on, da Vinci. What? That depends on our power usage. We're shutting down life support and breaking out the EVA suits."

"We have some replacements suits we're transporting to them," Gold asked Gomez. "Do they have enough?"

"Copy that, da Vinci we have enough. We replace every third cargo trip, S.O.P."

"We'll be there as soon as we can, Basile. Keep your people safe."

Static spat back.

"Basile?" The captain punched the intraship comm again. "Ina, what happened?"

"Jammed, sir."

Gold sighed and shared a glance with his first officer. "Welcome back, Munqu."

She started for the door, and Gold followed.

"Duffy and I will get to work on those phaser drills."

"I'll be on the bridge. Keep me informed of your progress." The captain was already rushing for the door, barking orders into his combadge. "McAllan, I want full power to the shields. We need to get rid of these Munqu chias in less than two hours." And if they couldn't . . . it would mean more than just the lives of the da Vinci crew, Gold thought. And more than the lives of the colonists as well. No one could forget . . . if they failed now, it would be the Horta who would suffer as well.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Owww! Damn!" Gomez dropped the autotorq wrench to the deck and yanked her right hand away from it with her left. "Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

Kierian Duffy rushed to her side from across the room. "Hey, you okay?" He leaned down to look at her hand, and when she wouldn't present it, Duffy kneeled on one knee and pulled it into view.

"I'm fine, it's nothing." She noticed it was red, but not bruised. Just pinched. Her outcry had been more frustration than anything else. Their refit of the phaser drills hadn't been going as well as she'd planned, and on top of that, the Munqu had found them. Thankfully, the salvos weren't connecting that often, leaving them all to believe the da Vinci had hampered the enemy's sensors more than hoped for. "I didn't think this would be quite so difficult, is all."

Duffy nodded his understanding and gave her hand the very lightest of brushes with his thumb as he released it. "Well, we're trying to fit peg 'b' into hole 'a,' so it's not surprising."

"Of course not. I said I was frustrated, not surprised." Gomez tried to smile but it felt weak on her face, like her lips were probably just a thin line.

"You're thinking about the colonists," Duffy said, and wasn't really asking a question.

"Sure. Aren't you?"

He made his way back toward the outer bulkhead. "Yeah."

"I hate not being able to go fast enough," she said. "And when that happens, I hate things that slow me down."

Duffy chuckled. "Sometimes, you're such an engineer."

"And you're not?"

"Course I am." He picked up the phaser torch he'd been working with and double checked the settings.

"That's how I know you are."

"You just keep working and-"

An explosion that rattled the deck and jostled the tools in Gomez's case cut her off.

When it died down, just from the sound she knew it was likely another relay overload. And though she couldn't feel the maneuvers, she knew Wong was doing his best to twist and turn around the enemy fire. She looked over to Duffy. He was going to cut away a hole in the bulkhead, exposing open space in the hull, so they could push the phaser drill out, giving it access to the enemy. A small force field was the only protection from the cold vacuum outside the ship. "You know if they fire directly there while you have that field up, it could burn of us both to a cinder."

He winked. "I know it. You know it. Just let's not think about it."

This time she chuckled. "Agreed."

Another explosion. This one distant.

"What time is it?" Duffy asked after a few moments of silence.

"Five minutes after the last time-"

"Computer, what time is it?"

"Twenty-two hundred hours, seventeen minutes."

"It's late," he told Gomez. "I skipped dinner."

She heard him, but wasn't really listening. She didn't want to think about dinner. She'd not eaten either and the last thing she wanted was for her stomach to start growling. Not to mention she'd perhaps start

thinking about a romantic, candle-lit dinner with Duffy. That's not where her mind was right now. Rather, she was thinking about a colony full of people who were counting on the da Vinci to save them. And she was thinking about all those people on Sarindar that she was responsible for who died before she figured out a way to stop the monster shii. She wasn't going to let that happen again. "This isn't going to work. All it will do is scatter the phaser beam and weaken it. We'd have to fire at point blank."

"Well . . ." Duffy shrugged. ". . . that may be an option."

Shaking her head, Gomez shifted the drill to show him. "I have a better idea. If we can set the cannon end to pivot quickly-" She demonstrated by miming the spin an imaginary joint. "See what I mean?"

"Yeah, I see. Not a bad idea. Increase the arc of fire, rapidly, and you-"

The force of an explosion-from the looks of it, one of the EPS conduits that ran through the outer bulkhead of the cargo bay-forced Gomez against the inner bulkhead. As she quickly recovered and looked up, Duffy was scrambling across the deck, chasing the cutting phaser that had obviously tumbled out of his hand

"Finish cutting that bulkhead," she groaned out. "We've got to hurry."

Maybe she couldn't modify the drills exactly how she wanted, and so what they were doing wasn't brilliant by any means . . . but it was working with what she had. Sometimes that was what being a member of the S.C.E. was all about working with the cards the situation dealt. Heck, that's what life was, she thought.

She ran to the nearest replicator and got a list of possible motors she could have instantly created. She scanned the catalog quickly. "No . . . no . . . ah, good enough." With a shimmer and hum the small device appeared and she plucked it close then sprinted back down the corridor.

As she ran in, she stumbled and her vision went blurry. She probably got a mild concussion from when she plowed into the bulkhead. Duffy noticed and turned back toward her again.

"Sonnie?"

She shook the cobwebs from her mind. "Fine. Go on. I'll be ready for that hole in a few minutes."

Duffy's glance locked on her a long moment, and she nodded again that she was fine. He turned back to his work, grudgingly. Half the size hole she needed had now been burned away, that small portable force field filled the gap, but to her it looked like an open wound in the ship. She could see the stars beyond, and had she looked long enough she might have even seen a fleeting glimpse of one of the Munqu ships that pursued them as it spun passed.

Back at it, she thought, and she hooked the small motor, usually used for a type of pivoting holo-matrix emitter, to the phaser-drill's power pack.

A few more modifications and she had what she was looking for. The drill's muzzle now could pivot. It wouldn't be too difficult to link it into the bridge. Not via a direct connection, but a tricorder could probably relay just fine.

That's what she did. As Duffy finished opening the access port in the outer bulkhead, Gomez rigged a connection from the drill's control pad to the transceiver on the tricorder. It wasn't pretty engineering, but make-shift work never was. All she really cared about was whether it would work.

"You ready?" she asked Duffy as he approached.

"Yeah. Need a hand?"

She nodded and rose, hefting the phaser-drill with his help.

"You know, we could have grabbed an anti-grav from supply," he reminded her with a grunt.

"It's only, what? Seventy kilos? We can-ooof-do this."

It wasn't so much the weight as it was the bulk for the unit, and the rattling and shaking of the ship around them as the shields took Munqu phaser shots that did not help. Neither did the dips in power that were obviously affecting the inertial dampeners.

"Hold on a sec," Duffy said, and Gomez stopped where she was, just a half meter from where they needed to place the drill.

He leaned down, moving more weight onto his shoulder, and with one hand reconfigured the force field emitter. Now they'd be able to push the drill through the shielding and the field would wrap itself around the contours of the casing-without exposing the deck to the outside space.

"It's in," Gomez called as they pushed the drills muzzle out the port. "Use gravity clamps to keep it in place and seal the crack with the bulkhead with a fast-fusion laser."

Duffy put the last of the small grav-clamps in place and then took a small laser device from a case on the deck. With a bright flash he sealed the drill into place.

"If they hit this direct, it'll blow out the deck."

"Then we better put a few more of these drills in place, so they'll think twice before firing on us." It felt good to get one done. Like she was being more proactive than reactive.

"Where next?" Duffy asked.

"Two more here on port side, then three on starboard, and we can put one dorsal. Then we're out."

"Sounds good. Hope the others are faring as well."

Rubbing her temple where she felt a bump had risen, Sonya sighed and whispered. "I know I wish we were."

He pulled her hand from her forehead, kissed her fingertips, then returned it to the bump she'd been massaging. "We are," he told her. "So no worries, ok?"

"Okay."

Captain Gold felt the tension on his bridge, and didn't like it. The battle hadn't been on long, but it was exhausting for his crew, especially Wong and McAllan.

Then he noticed that Ina was smiling. That had to be good news.

"Captain, Commander Gomez reports one of the phaser drills is now online. She's transferring firing ability to Lieutenant McAllan."

Gold turned toward tactical. "Got it?"

"Aye, sir," McAllan said. "It's a tricorder link."

The captain pushed himself out of his chair and took a step toward McAllan. "Will it work?"

"It'll have a brief delay, and I'll have to aim manually."

Sparks flew from a rear console and a fire suppression force field cascaded over, dousing the flame and muting the smoke.

"Lieutenant, I suggest we test it now." Gold returned to the command chair. "Tactical display."

As the tactical grid appeared on a corner of the forward viewscreen, the captain thought that while they weren't winning, and they weren't quite holding their own, for three against one they were doing well.

They'd dealt the Munqu ships some good licks . . . but without more fire power it wasn't going to be enough.

"Torpedoes?"

"Fourteen left, sir," McAllan replied. "But one launcher is malfunctioning. And their shields are stronger than we thought."

"Wish ours were," Wong said in something just above a whisper.

Regular battle tactics weren't working any more. There are only so many maneuvers one can implement before they're learned by the enemy and their computers. Gold was now relying on older, forgotten tricks. Had they had warp power available, he might have even attempted the old Cochrane deceleration stunt, or maybe Jean-Luc's hoary old "Picard maneuver."

"Wong, swoop in starboard and protect the dorsal shielding. McAllan, fire at will. Test our new phaser-drill. Let's see what she's got."

"Here goes." McAllan tapped into his console and a loud whine filled the bridge. On the forward view screen, the nearest Munqu ship, flown close to by Wong's excellent piloting, lit up with amber phaser flame. After a prolonged blast the Munqu ship finally fell away, venting a trail of plasma behind.

"My!" Gold nearly jumped from the command chair. "That was a zots!"

"Yes, sir." McAllan was grinning.

Ina reported on what the scanners told her. "The phaser-drill might not be strong as a phaser bank, but it is tenacious. Enemy vessel has a plasma leak in one of their shield generators. They're moving off for repairs."

"Beautiful. McAllan, keep firing."

As Gold turned back around, Ina spoke up again. "No! Oh, sir. They've already sealed the leak. Their shields are weakened, but still up. Just-up more weakly. But if they sealed the--" Ina thought for a moment. "I think it's the frequency of the phaser-drill. It's lower than standard ship's phasers."

"Well, well, well. We may be on to something." The captain dropped back into the command chair and tapped the intercom. "Gold to Gomez."

"Gomez here."

"We need more of those phaser-drills, Commander. They might just save our hides yet."

"Number two is ready to go in, Captain. Give us three more minutes."

The captain rubbed his chin. "Is this something you can teach someone so we can get these deployed faster?"

"It'd take longer to explain it than to do it ourselves, sir. We're going faster now. Rest will be deployed in ten minutes."

"Good. Gold out." He looked down at the tactical display and the ship they'd injured was even now returning to battle. "Let's hope that's soon enough."

"They won't be here soon enough," Sanders said, a bit of panic marbling his voice, and Christian wished there'd been some way to organize this without telling his more nervous colleague the exact level of danger. All Sanders ended up doing was upsetting the others.

"Maybe they will, maybe they won't," Dr. Galinski said. "That's why we're taking these precautions. Go on, Christian."

The doctor had always been more supportive, and it was good to hear him put Sanders down, as he often did when the other man went off half-cocked about this thing or that.

Christian only hoped his precautions would be of some use. But what else were they to do? Sit and wait to die? That wasn't him. That wasn't any of them. Well, it might have been Sanders. How he became a miner was beyond Christian's imagination. Sure, the mining life was nowhere near as hard as it was even a hundred years ago, but it wasn't easy, either. It was mostly boring, if financially lucrative, but Christian and Maria were good at it, and they'd planned to only do it for a set number of years before they settled down and raised a family, and traveled and . . . none of that might happen now.

He didn't want to think about that. "The plan is to move as far away from the storage area with the anti-matter blasting caps, yet still be accessible to the da Vinci, should they make it in time," he told the thirteen others. "The lights will go out in about five minutes, and we'll use our flash lights and the emergency lighting. I want all available power going to the containment so we get as much protection for as long as we can. On that note, our subspace array is down again, and I'm not going to bother with it. There's nothing left to say, anyway." He put the helmet to his EVA suit on, and gestured for them to do the rest. They all followed suit, and when he motioned for them to follow him, the fifteen of them began what was going to be a long procession to the far end of the dome.

After a few minutes of silence, Christian watched his wife code a private channel into the comm pad on her suit's glove.

"Penny for your thoughts," she offered.

He turned awkwardly so she could see him smile. "You even know what a penny is worth?"

"Hundred pennies in a dollar," she said. "We read the same books and watch the same movies. If we had a holosuite here we'd play the same holonovels. You think I don't pay attention to history?"

"Touchy." He chuckled. "No, I mean how much it would be worth to have one today. They haven't been used in centuries."

"Okay," she said, and he knew it was her I'll-play-along voice. "We talking United States?"

"Yes."

"I'll say . . . four hundred strips of gold-pressed latinum."

"I don't know the cost in latinum. In credits, it's about six credits."

Shocked, she almost gasped. "You're kidding me! That little? For a coin hundreds of years old?"

He nodded, a movement probably invisible within his EVA suit. "Toward the end of their minting, people were just throwing them away. Or they'd hoard them in jars or toss them in drawers, thinking them too

much trouble to keep in their pockets. There are millions still around. Coin shops are stupid with them. I used to collect."

"I never knew that," Maria said, truly surprised.

"Before I met you I sold them all. Was just a hobby as a kid." Fond memories. Is this what people meant by one's life flashing before them when they were about to die? "I thought they'd help pay for a trip to Rigel when I was in college. I found out I only had a handful of really expensive coins."

"No pennies in there?"

"The best wasn't even Terran. Was a Vulcan coin someone gave me, knowing I liked coins. Only reason it was valuable was because the dealer I sold to had no real understanding of off-world moneys."

"Ah."

Christian knew that tone too. Maria had checked out of the conversation.

"Boring, huh?"

"Well, it wasn't what I was asking you," she said. "I wanted to know what you were thinking. I don't think it was about coins."

He huffed out a short breath and it steamed his helmet window for a brief moment. "I was thinking about my last anniversary gift to you."

"What about it?"

"I didn't really get you that." He turned toward her, looking to meet her eyes. "I wouldn't get you spindle bearings for our anniversary. I . . . Things were busy and we'd just found the new south vein and I completely forgot. Steve ordered those bearings and I didn't have anything ordered so I just bought them from him and-"

Maria smiled. "I know."

"You know?" Christian's face felt flush.

"Well, not for sure until now, but really-who buys spindle bearings for anyone?"

"You weren't angry at all?" he asked.

She took his gloved hand in hers. "I figure two things . . . one, you gave up your university geology professorship to come here with me . . ."

"And two?"

Glint in her eye, she grinned. "Next year my gift will be enormous and expensive."

Quietly, separated by the walls of two space suits, they laughed.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Damn!" Stevens didn't mean to make his Bynar crewmate jump when he yelled, but with an explosion punctuating the frustration of every other moment, Stevens hated forgetting things.

"What's wrong?" Soloman asked.

At a loss for the word, Stevens mumbled, "I forgot my thingie."

The Bynar looked at him quizzically. "Pardon?"

"My . . ." Hard as he tried, he couldn't think of the name of the tool, but he could picture it in his mind's eye. "My . . ." He closed his eyes, then opened them quickly. "Ah! My Bouse's code distiller."

"Oh," Soloman said, and handed the item to the human from his own case. "I have brought mine. Please, use it if you wish."

"Thanks." Stevens dropped himself into the seat at the computer console next to Soloman and began a download from the main computer into his-Soloman's-code distiller. "How's your part coming?"

Soloman sighed, and for a Bynar that was a quick little huffed-out breath, almost like a scoff. "I do not like the Munqu computer systems, from what I've seen of them. They're inefficient and seem . . . I believe the idiom would be 'cobbled together.'"

A wry smile pulling his lips upward, Stevens chuckled lightly. "Don't you pretty much think that about most non-Bynar computer systems?"

Silently considering that for a moment, Soloman finally nodded. "Most. Yes, I suppose I do. Is that wrong of me?"

Stevens shook his head. "Everyone's entitled to an opinion."

"Then that is mine."

Nodding again, Stevens glanced at the chronometer. "We have to hurry. If anything, shouldn't your superior skill make their system easy to infiltrate?" That came off sounding a bit more snooty than he intended. "You know what I mean," Stevens quickly added, more softly.

"Yes, I understand you," Soloman said, probably missing the subtlety of human tone and thinking Stevens was asking if the Bynar understood the words as the Universal Translator interpreted them.

"Unfortunately," Soloman continued, "one can know a great deal about languages but not understand the jabbering of a small child."

"Ah, point taken."

"But," he added, "I am beginning to see an odd scheme to their system. Can you-"

Soloman stopped, interrupted by a severe shudder that ran the deck plates beneath them. When nothing more happened, he continued.

"Can you complete your decryption of their code perhaps using the pattern I've found in their algorithms?" The Bynar handed him a padd.

Stevens took it. "I really wish Bart was here . . . but let's give it a shot." For the next few moments he looked from the data padd to his console and back, filling in information and codes and replying on any possible trick he might remember from other, similar encryptions. There were, believe it or not, only a certain number of ways things could be encrypted, even with a computer. He remembered from Starfleet training that there had been non-computer codes and cryptography by cultures as ancient as Rome on Earth, and the pre-Surak S'loka Empire on Vulcan, but they were simple compared to modern computer encryptions. Well, the Roman ones were. Some of the Vulcan encryptions had been pretty complicated. Okay, Fabian, get a grip on what you're doing. Talk it through. "Asymmetric patterns in their key encryption . . ." he said more to himself than to Soloman. "That's different, but not unheard of. I think you're right . . . they're using the same pattern. It might even be cultural. I bet Carol would be interested in this."

"Do you have the code key?"

"Not yet," Stevens said excitedly. "But you've given me what I need. With this pattern, I can find the hash value and the hashing algorithm and . . ."

He paused a long moment and saw Soloman staring at him. "Just a second," he whispered, then his hand hovered toward a monitor. He finally pointed to the screen, and the streaming code that flew by, unencrypted.

"You did it!" Soloman said.

"We did it, my friend." Stevens now brought his hand down for the Bynar to shake it, and Soloman took his hand.

"I'll alert the captain." Stevens moved to tap his combadge as Soloman was already working on accessing the Munqu ship's systems via their I.D. beacon. "And you see if all this work will mean anything."

Gomez and Duffy pushed the last phaser drill into place with a huff and a grunt. She quickly slapped at

her combadge. "Gomez to bridge."

"Gold here."

"Captain, the last of the phaser-drills is online."

"Just in time, Commander. We've managed to pick up some speed on them, but they're catching up."

"Sorry for the delay, sir. Duffy and I are going to follow up on some other lines of thought for defensive or offensive weapons. And we'll check on the others."

"Very good. Gold out." As if these people who served under him were his own children, the captain couldn't help but feel some level of pride-what he called nachus-over their accomplishments. What an amazing group these engineers were. A captain was obliged to know a fair degree about his own ship, and Gold certainly did, but the engineers on his staff had flashes of engineering brilliance that he could barely comprehend. Not that he didn't understand their ideas once explained-but in that they imagined them in the first place.

"Lieutenant," he called to McAllan, "let's see just what we can do with this 'mining' ship."

Sounding instilled with new morale, McAllan replied with a hearty, "Aye, sir," and a moment later announced, "I have computer control of the mining phaser cannons."

The captain nodded. "Mr. Wong, let one get close, but try and keep the others away."

"We're within twenty-nine thousand kilometers of the closest, sir," Wong said.

McAllan shook his head. "Range will need to be closer, sir. These drills don't have the scope of our phaser banks."

"I'm aware of that, Lieutenant," Gold said. "Believe it or not, in my time I've had the chance to run a phaser-drill." The captain gestured with his hand, giving his pilot free rein to improvise. "Wong, lure this one in."

"Working on it, sir."

"Easy, son, easy." Gold could see the man's hair was matted with sweat and he was probably one large, tense, knotted muscle.

"That's as close as I can get, sir."

The captain found himself at Wong's side, a hand placed on the navigator's shoulder for support. "A little more . . ."

"He's flying erratically," Wong said. "I can't stay this close and avoid fire."

"You don't need to," Gold smiled. "Close enough. Now, McAllan! Fire!"

A shriek of power filled the bridge and on the tactical display, a small, red line connected the da Vinci with the Munqu target. Outside the ship, the light show was probably spectacular-oranges and yellows painting damage in their path.

"Target is arcing away," Ina reported.

Gold pivoted back toward the command chair. "Wong, spin around. McAllan, get him with the port side drills. Fire at will."

"Firing!"

Another whine of noise, and another direct hit.

"Captain, they're damaged. Their shields are down, and . . ." Ina paused, probably making sure her scanners were reporting right. "Sir, their propulsion is off line."

"One down," McAllan said. "Two to go."

"Excellent people, excellent." The only problem Gold could see was that the Munqu wouldn't fall for that again. Not unless they were stupid.

And they weren't "They're staying out of range of our weapons. We're still in theirs." McAllan went from one scanner to another, then back to his tactical console. "We have one regular phaser bank, but power's only at fifty percent. . ."

On the forward view screen, a plasma bolt could be seen just missing the umbrella of the shields.

"That's bad aim," Gold commented, mostly to himself. "Worse than it was an hour ago." He straightened himself in his seat and noticed his back was aching a bit-all the strain of trying to stay stable as the ship shook around him. That, and his legendary awful posture. Well, legendary to his wife, anyhow

No time for a visit to sickbay now, though.

"Maybe their weapons lock is still hampered by the sensor disturbance?" Ina suggested.

Gold sighed. "Let's hope so."

The turbolift doors parted, and Gomez and P8 Blue entered, the latter balancing a canister in two of her legs.

"We've got another idea, sir," Gomez said with a triumphant smile.

Gold whirled his command chair around to face them. "Let's hear it."

"I found these among our cargo," Blue said. "Collapse charges."

Gold wrinkled his brows. "Pardon?"

"Gravitic charges," Gomez explained. "They're to be used for collapsing previously used and spent tunnels or caverns so that a structure can be erected above them."

The captain felt a soft chuckle rising in his throat. "And if they went off onboard a ship?"

"It would depend on the internal structure of the vessel," Blue said. "From what we scan of the Munqu ships, two or three decks could be pulled closer together."

"At least enough to wreck havoc with structural integrity," Gomez added.

"Enough to disable one of them?" McAllan asked.

She nodded, and beside her Blue made an odd noise that Gold knew qualified as an affirmative. "If placed right."

"Then we need to place it right," the captain said encouragingly.

"It would have to be inside for that, sir," Gomez said. "We were thinking about beaming it outside the ship and trying to sling it with a tractor beam. It would do less damage, but it might disrupt their warp field."

Gold shook his head. He wanted better than that. He wanted this over-now-before the colonists were "over" with their lives. "What about beaming it aboard their ships-right where we need it?"

Turning her head to one side, Gold could tell Gomez was already thinking of a way to do what he needed.

"Well, if their shields were down-"

"McAllan?" Gold prompted.

"Not as long as they're out of range of those drill phasers."

"Standard phasers?" Pattie asked.

"Not as weak as they are now."

"We are at extreme transporter range," Ina offered.

"Beam through their shields?" Gomez was shaking her head but the captain grabbed her gaze with his and locked on.

"Find a way to make it work," Gold said quietly. "I know you can."

CHAPTER SIX

"There's got to be a better way."

All Christian could think was, Shut up, Sanders. It was dark, and they were saving their flashlights, and they'd been stuck in uncomfortable EVA suits for two long . . . and Christian desperately wanted to have

Sanders sedated or maybe get his butt kicked.

To top it off, the gravity was off in this area, which Christian had planned and expected, but still it irritated him. The planetoid was too small for its own mass to have a noticeable gravity. They all had to be careful not to launch themselves into a bulkhead or the ceiling, or the floor.

"They'll make it in time." He couldn't see her face, but that had been his wife's voice. Still playing the consoler.

"Maybe they'll make it in time," Sanders said. "But would you stake your life on it?"

"We don't have much of a choice," one of the others said-probably Lawson.

"Couldn't you at least have left us lights?" Sanders's voice. Again. And again. If they survived this, Christian was going to get that guy fired. Out a torpedo tube, if possible.

"The emergency lights are working," Maria answered for her husband.

"They're too dim. And the peripheral vision in these . . ."

Sanders's voice droned on and on, probably, but Christian had decided to cut audio to the other suits and now only had his wife's comlink open.

"I'm glad we don't have kids," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"I mean everyone here, not just us. We may all . . ." He didn't want to say it again. He wished he could stop thinking it, too. "I don't . . . I don't know if I could take it if there were kids here, you know?"

"Yeah." Her voice was light and almost a whisper but not quite. "I know."

He knew she was thinking the same thing he was. Why didn't they have kids yet? What if now they never would? One was supposed to be doing well in life if they could, at the end, count their regrets on one hand. It wasn't the case. Not if even one of the regrets was a big one.

"How much longer?" Maria asked.

"I don't know. No way to tell unless we're at the console."

"When it blows . . ."

Christian sighed. "When it blows it blows. Try not to think about it and do what you're always telling me. Think good thoughts."

P8 Blue skittered along side Gomez as she made her way up the corridor. "Commander?"

"You have something else for me, Pattie?"

"I'm not sure. It may be nothing." Pattie was clicking two of her legs together, and that usually meant she was nervous about something. "However, it might also be something."

Gomez smiled. "Spit it out, Pattie, but you'll have to talk as we walk."

"Spit it-? Yes, of course. In addition to using the collapse charges, I believe if we use the lithium crystals from each of the phaser drills, we can boost output to one of the drills by one thousand seven hundred per cent."

That stopped Gomez in her tracks and she turned to her fellow crewman. "You've worked this out? How many times would this work? I mean, how many shots could we expect from a drill so designed?"

"At least two."

"Not a lot."

Pattie admitted that with her bug version of a nod. "Yes, but it will be even more powerful than a normal phaser bank. For at least two shots."

"Yes." Gomez liked it, mostly. "However, we'll lose operation on all the drills but one."

"I am sorry if this is not sufficient," Pattie said quietly.

"No, it may be just the ticket. I'll ask the captain, and prepare to make it happen, okay?"

"Very well!" Excited, P8 Blue skittered off.

A few moments later, Gomez joined Soloman and Stevens in one of the labs. "Anything yet?"

As she entered, Soloman turned and nodded, but his tone was discouraging. "We can send a signal back, but all it will allow is access to their communications subsystem."

"Can't you break into their computers from there? We need a way to take down their shields."

Fabian Stevens spoke up. "They have everything but the beacon on a completely different system. We're

assuming they at some point realized this little hole in their defenses and this was their solution." Kneading a knot at the back of her neck with one hand-and wishing Duffy was around to give one of his famous massages-Gomez whispered, "Damn."

"If it helps any, we did break their codes," Stevens offered.

"It doesn't. But . . ." She narrowed her eyes and thought a moment. Just an abstract wondering-an idea seed that might just flower. "The communications array they use for the beacon . . . can you tell it to accept a broader signal?"

"Open up more bandwidth?" Soloman asked. "Easily."

"Enough for a transporter beam?" Gomez questioned with a smile.

"I-I'm not sure," the Bynar said. "I suppose so. Even if there is a limitation, with their codes we can expand them. But we would not be able to get a scanner lock on anyone we tried to beam off."

Gomez shook her head, and continued the sly smile as her idea developed. "Not to beam them off, but to beam something in."

With a chuckle, Stevens nodded his understanding. "You know, that could work."

"I know," she said, that seed now a plant promising fruit, and that small smile now a grin. "So, get on it."

It seemed to be forever before Gomez returned to the bridge, Gold thought. But when she came through that turbolift door, and said those words . . .

"Captain, I think everything is ready."

Gold turned to the main viewscreen. There was no time to waste. None. "Tactical."

Odd . . . it has been two to one for the last twenty minutes and yet there had been a stand off. Why? The Munqu didn't like that the da Vinci had dealt one of their ships a harsh blow with the phaser drills, obviously. But why hold off? The only reason that made sense was because they knew they couldn't take the Federation ship close up. And they apparently felt they had time to wait.

But the captain couldn't wait-not anymore. The mining colony, by their own estimate, had maybe twenty minutes left before their anti-matter blasting caps cracked the dome that protected them. It was at least a fifteen-minute journey to the Beta Argola planetoid at high impulse. That was cutting it far too close. Five minutes, with two ships to one, and twenty minutes before the colony dome was destroyed. The math didn't add well.

"Pattie's finished," Gomez reported from the auxiliary engineering station.

Gold tapped his combadge. "Corsi? Is your team in place?"

"We're standing by in the transporter room, sir," Security Chief Domenica Corsi replied.

"I'll get down to the cargo transporter," Gomez offered. "We'll want this to be simultaneous as possible."

The captain nodded. "Wait for my command."

"Aye, sir," she said, and vacated the bridge.

Leaning back, Gold took in a breath and began the end of the battle, one way or another. "Ahead, one-eighth impulse, Mr. Wong."

"One-eighth, sir?"

"That's right. Here." Gold stood and walked to the conn where he played with the impulse inducer controls. "See, coax it back and forth a bit. Like our impulse manifold has a leak."

"Aye, sir, but we're just limping along." Wong looked up at his captain a bit cautiously.

"Exactly."

"But they won't fall for it," the man said. "They won't come close just for this."

"I don't expect them to." Gold shook his head and returned to the command chair. "But they'll be thinking about it. Wondering. Let's get their mind off what we're really doing." Again, he tapped his combadge.

"Gold to Gomez. Commander, are you ready?"

"Transporter range of the beta target in five ... four ... three ... two ... "

"Energize!"

Corsi materialized next to the Munqu captain-a shortish man with a close beard and a shocked expres

sion. Shocked, because the business end of Corsi's phaser rifle was an inch from his left ear.

"Phasers down!" she barked, and her security team fanned across the Munqu bridge, covering every station and crewman. "No one move."

"You dare-" The Munqu captain tried to lunge forward, and Corsi thought he must be addle-minded. She had two feet and probably twenty kilos on him and swatted him back down.

"I dare, buddy. I dare you to make me use this. Now . . . order your people to power down this ship."

The Munqu captain grumbled, but finally relented. "Do as she says."

"Wise choice." One hand still holding her rifle on her captive, the security chief used her other hand to slap her combadge. "Corsi to da Vinci."

"Gold here, go ahead."

"Captain, beta target is secure."

"Now," Gold barked. "Go!"

"Full impulse available."

"Target alpha ship's shield generator."

"Locked," McAllan called, and was almost chuckling about it. After so long on the defensive, he was enjoying being on the offensive. Admittedly, so was the captain.

"We're at extreme transporter range," Ina called. "They're firing."

"Wait . . ." Gold was on the edge of the command chair. "A little longer . . . we have to get their shields down."

"Ten thousand kilometers, sir."

"Fire!"

The sound alone rattled the deck plates and bulkheads. A large cylinder of power spread across space from the da Vinci and into the last active Munqu ship. It was over in seconds, though it seemed much longer.

"Their shields are down to fifty-two percent, sir," McAllan said.

"Not enough." Gold held onto the arms of his chair as the ship quaked around him.

"They're returning fire."

"I can see that, Lieutenant."

Another explosion and sparks arced between two power cables that fell from a power coupling above the command chair. Gold shielded himself as best he could.

"Plasma charges causing damage. Decks two, three, and five. Hull breach on deck four." Ina coughed around smoke that billowed from her station.

"Wong, come around for another blast from the phaser drill," the captain ordered. "We can't have them pursuing us. We'll never make it."

"Aye, sir."

They might never make it anyway, Gold thought, glancing at a flashing graphic of current damage. It was a laundry list of just about every ship's system.

"Extreme range again, sir."

"Closer, Wong, closer."

Ina's voice was controlled but could have gone to panic if she'd not been so well trained. "We're losing containment on the breach."

"Evacuate the section," Gold directed. "Lock it off."

"Aye, sir."

"Two thousand kilometers, sir."

"Close enough," the captain yelled. "Fire!"

Another large bolt of phaser lightning sprang forward from the da Vinci. Under the weight of it, the Munqu shields sparked and shook and vibrated odd colors.

"Their screens are down to two percent," Ina said, "But our shields aren't much better off."

"Torpedoes?" The captain twisted to McAllan.

"Ready."

Gold nodded. "Point blank! Fire!"

At tactical, McAllan didn't even wait for Ina to confirm it. "That's it! Alpha target's shields are down!"

Captain Gold jabbed his combadge. "Gomez, go!"

"Energizing."

On the main viewscreen, the Munqu ship spun out of control. Lights winked out all over its hull and as if a giant hand had reached out and grabbed it, the ship crimped in on itself, pinched like a giant drinking straw between massive fingers. Electrical flame zapped this way and that across the ship's skin. Gravity was the weakest of the four universal forces, but still darn strong when used the right ways.

The Bajoran ops officer gasped and looked down at her console, then back at the forward viewer, then back down at her scanners. "Uh . . . alpha target is . . . bent. I mean disabled, sir," came the sweet song from Ina's lips.

Allowing himself only a moment of awe, Gold almost gasped himself. Bent indeed. He wouldn't have wanted to be the captain on that ship when it was returned to port.

"Corsi, we'll be back as soon as we can. Are you secure?" Gold asked over the comm.

"No worries, sir. See you soon."

The captain winced as he twisted and his back pinched, but he shoved the pain away and ordered their escape. "Go, Wong, go!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

First there was the rumble, and Christian knew it had begun. He'd been waiting for the gentle tickle of a transporter beam. This was no tickle.

"Go, go, go!" He wrenched open the door to the airlock and shoved it out of their way. As fast as he could he began hustling people through.

"Where? Where are we going?" someone asked. In the flurry of action and the rumble of decompressive explosion, he only knew it wasn't Maria.

As he continued elbowing people past him, he saw the first sign of a fireball that shouldn't have been coming up the long tunnel. When the anti-matter blasting caps exploded, they should have blown the dome out. And by the sound of it they obviously had-but something else had happened as well-some equipment must have been charged and caused-

It didn't matter. He had only seconds as a fireball barreled toward them all.

"Get in!" He growled at the last one of them, and by count she was the last. He then desperately looked for Maria and reached out for her. "Maria, blow the doors!"

"Wait," Sanders protested. "If we don't decompress the lock we'll be blown out!"

"That's what I want, you bloody moron!" Christian lunged for the emergency release, and tried to grab the Maria's arm at the same time.

He missed her, but jammed his fist into the door discharge and with a crack of light and sound the doors boomed out into space. With them, all fifteen people erupted forward and out into space, chased by a fiery ball of orange-hot plasma.

"We're too late." Ina's voice sank in on itself until it was the softest Gold had ever heard it. "No life sign readings from anywhere in the dome. What's left of it. No active power. No atmosphere . . . "

Looking over her shoulder, Gold sighed and gave Ina's arm a squeeze. But that probably made her feel no better, and Gold himself had a rock the size of the colony in his stomach. "Maybe they got their shuttle working," he offered.

"No, sir. It's still in dock."

The captain sighed again and crept down to the command chair. He glanced around the bridge, and every station was ghosted by a long faced crewman. Ghosted. Poor choice of thoughts.

If only they'd been here a little sooner. Five minutes, even. The colonists probably didn't even suffocate-there were signs of a large plasma-wait. "Wait," Gold said aloud, and twisted back to ops.

"Ina, scan outside the dome!"

"Outside, sir?"

"They had EVAs he said. Scan for external power and-"

Bowed over her scanners, Ina slowly shook her head. "Nothing, sir. No life or power from the planetoid."

"No," Gold said. "No, no, Lieutenant. Off the planetoid. If they're in suits, there's not enough mass to keep them-"

Eyes wide and bright, Ina yanked her head up. "Got 'em! Fifteen power signatures. Federation based!"

Gold almost jumped to her station. "Life signs?"

She breathed a heavy sigh of relief, and the sound and feeling echoed across the bridge. "Fifteen, sir. Fifteen."

Tense muscles melting for the first time in hours, Gold leaned against the ops console as sighs and cheers made rounds on the deck. "Get a transporter lock," he said wearily. "Beam them to sickbay and alert Dr. Lense."

"Aye, sir," Ina said, chuckling an emotional release.

The captain smiled. "And let our fantastic engineers know-and meet-just whom they've saved."

"Good evening, Doctor," the Emergency Medical Hologram, version three, said as he appeared in sickbay.

Dr. Elizabeth Lense nodded and tried to look pleasant. "Emmett," she said as she tapped a console that brought the biobeds online. "We have fifteen miners who have been in space suits for an indeterminate amount of time. They may need radiation or even oxygen deprivation treatment."

"Minors?" Emmett asked. "Children?"

"No," Lense chuckled. "Miners as in people who mine."

The EMH nodded his understanding and began pulling out equipment trays just as fifteen columns of sparkle and flash materialized the miners into the center area of sickbay.

"You handle the patients," Lense ordered Emmett as she edged away from the miners and toward the rear sickbay computer console. "I'll set up for cellular scans just in case there are any cosmic radiation concerns."

If only for a moment, Emmett hesitated. "Are you . . . certain you want to handle it that way, Doctor? I could calibrate the computers for-"

"I'm sure, Emmett. Please see to the patients." She turned on her heel and went to the computer.

"Yes, Doctor, of course."

Gold marched into sickbay quickly, having heard yelling from halfway up the corridor. "What in my bubbie's kitchen is going on in here?" the captain barked.

The EMH was tending to a small group of miners near one biobed, and Dr. Lense was on the opposite side of the room talking to another group who had apparently been examined and were now standing, chatting, the top halves of their EVA suits removed. All the miners, in fact, were in some stage of undress from the bulky space suits.

His glance hanging on Lense for just a moment, Gold quickly turned his attention to the miner who was verbally attacking Gomez. He came up behind his first officer, and asked what the problem was.

"The problem," the man said, "is that your crewmate here has just informed me that more than half our cargo has been destroyed!"

Gomez let out a sigh and rolled her eyes. "Mr. Sanders is disgruntled because we had to cannibalize some of their equipment to save our own lives and his."

"Get grunted," Gold said.

"And who are you?" Sanders demanded, red-faced.

"David Gold. Captain Gold to you, young man. So stow your attitude somewhere before I beam that part of you back into deep space. Got it?"

Sanders took his rant only down a notch. "I appreciate being saved, Captain, but do you know how much we had invested in your cargo hold? Have you any idea the cost of that equipment you just took to use as if it were your own? I'm telling you right now, Starfleet will need to replace it or-

"I'm sure Starfleet will listen to your complaints with great interest," Gold said, cutting Sanders off. "But I won't. Now you apologize to Commander Gomez, and while you're at it, apologize to everyone in this room." By now Gold himself was yelling. "This is a sickbay, and you're disturbing patients with real problems. Am I making myself clear, Mr. Sanders? I hope we don't need to have this little chat again-so learn to curb your jackass tendencies!"

"N-no, sir," Sanders said. "I mean, yes. I understand. I-I'm sorry." Sheepishly, Sanders turned toward everyone else in the room, and rather quietly repeated, "I'm sorry."

"Good!" Gold thundered. "Anything else I can do for you, Mr. Sanders? Or are you about finished for now?"

His face a bright red now, Sanders pushed himself up on the biobed nearest him. "Finished, Captain."

"Good," Gold said, and twisted around as sickbay broke into applause. All the miners, all except Sanders, of course, were clapping at the captain's tirade.

Smiling, the captain nodded as Gomez, Lense, and even the EMH chuckled. "At ease, people," Gold said. "Commander, a word?"

Gomez nodded and followed him out into the corridor.

"Report," he said as they ventured up the corridor.

"Emmett says they're all in good health based on initial examinations. Signs of stress and such, but that's to be expected he said. Dr. Lense is talking with some of them."

"I saw that. Well, good that we didn't lose anyone," Gold said as they entered a turbolift. "Bridge," the captain ordered, then turned back to Gomez. "Corsi said the Munqu databanks explained their plan. We guessed right. They wanted the colony and the cribintium to ransom back to the Federation. The mining equipment we were transporting was just the icing on the cake for them. It wasn't part of the original plan, but when they scanned us they thought disabling us would be just as easy as destroying us."

"Is Corsi staying there?"

"Just until the Sugihara arrives. They'll take over, and help us with materials for repairs. We might need you to pitch in again, speed things along."

Gomez nodded and she and the captain shared another brief smile.

As the lift door opened onto the bridge, Gold motioned for her to precede him. "Then we should probably get Beta Argola back on its feet. The Horta can wait a while, but they'll eventually need the cribintium."

"Big job," Gomez said.

The captain grinned at her. "Commander, I'm pretty sure there isn't any engineering task you and your people can't handle. I'm proud of you-and of them."

"Well, sir, there's one thing I couldn't engineer that you did wonderfully with?"

"Pardon?"

A chuckle bubbling from her throat, Gomez followed her captain as he lowered himself into the command chair. "Mr. Sanders, sir," she said. "I couldn't get him to shut up for the life of me."

"Well," Gold said with a wink, "you know the saying, 'different strokes for different folks?' Sometimes it

takes a different decibel. Once it's known how loud I can yell, backtalk is a minimum." The captain looked out across his bridge, met by the knowing glances of his crew. "Right people?"

Silence responded, and Gold's lips turned up into a wide grin.

"Ahead full, Mr. Wong, to rendezvous with the Sugihara."

"Aye, sir," Wong whispered, and what had been a tense bridge in battle just a few hours before, erupted into laughter.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dave Galanter and Greg Brodeur have penned four other Star Trek novels (Foreign Foes, Battle Lines, and the two-book Maximum Warp), and would appreciate it if you bought several copies of each—they make lovely stocking stuffers. Both natives of Michigan, Dave and Greg have never been arrested, and believe this is because their hearts are pure. Greg, who also writes with his wife Diane Carey under her name, has co-authored many best sellers. Dave has only written books with Greg, but hey, those haven't sold poorly, you know? Dave, fond of Canadian Southern Fried flavor Shake'n'Bake, will continue to write with Greg for reasons that mystify the both of them.

Greg and his wife Diane have been married over twenty-two years. They have three great kids, a cat, a dog, and yes—believe it or not—a house with a white picket fence. Dave is fenceless, wifeless, kidless, and dogless. He has cats that help him in his search for Miss Right by lying around and sleeping a lot. Dave co-owns the Internet web site ComicBoards.com and also works a day job as a Network Administrator. He's always hard-working and very busy, as opposed to Greg, who uses the Internet sometimes, and mills around smartly so people think he's busy.

Dave also wrote this bio, and hopes Greg doesn't read this far.

COMING NEXT MONTH

Star Trek S.C.E.

12

SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

By Scott Ciencin & Dan Jolley

Keorga is a haven for artists and musicians, a place of contemplation and artistic appreciation. When their request for a planet-running computer is denied by Starfleet, they go elsewhere—unfortunately, the instruction manual is in a language they cannot understand.

A team from the U.S.S. da Vinci is brought in to help them out, but soon they realize there's more to this than a simple translation problem. The computer seems to be running a test—one that the Keorgans are failing! If the S.C.E. team can't get the information they need out of the recalcitrant Keorgans and figure out how to stop the rampaging computer, Keorga may well lie in ruins!

COMING IN JANUARY FROM POCKET BOOKS!