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Star Trek S.C.E. 13
No Surrender

by Jeff Mariotte

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Chapter One

Deborah Bradford clutched Bens small hand tightly as they boarded the shuttle on Kursican Primus. The boy had just turned three; big enough to walk on his own, but small enough that she was concerned about him getting trampled underfoot. She was especially concernd about some of the less-humanoid races also boarding the ship-that Benzite, for example, whose bearing made him appear aloof, even haughty, might not have deigned to look down to notice someone whose head barely reached past his

knees. Once they had taken their seats, though, she relaxed, as much as she could. The flight to the Plat-the Kursican Orbital Incarceration Platform-would take nine hours, the shuttle having been built more for load capacity than speed.

The Kursicans had apparently put little thought or effort into the passenger compartment of the shuttle. It held about a hundred and twenty seats, Deborah estimated, in four rows of three seats each, separated by narrow aisles. The bulkheads were undecorated metal, and there were no ports to show the view outside or anything else to distract the eye. Passengers willing to pay a premium could ride in a private cabin, but there were fewer than a dozen available, and Deborah hadn't wanted to spend that much anyway. She just hoped Ben would be able to sleep in his seat. She wanted him rested and in a cheerful mood when he met his grandfather.

Over the course of the nine-hour trip, he met more of their fellow passengers than she did-not surprising, since he was a rambunctious toddler, and she was, as the single mother of a three-year-old, near exhaustion most of the time. Ben, though, managed to make the acquaintance of Uree, a Deltan diplomat on his way to the Plat on Federation business; the Benzite, who turned out to have a soft spot for children; and three of the guards who kept wary eyes on the group. In the aisle seat of their row sat a medical technician named Isitov, a human from ValJon, which shared this planetary system with Kursican and Szyolith. Isitov seemed glad of the distraction Ben offered-Deborah had the impression that he was nervous about this posting. But then, he was very young, and she was sure that even a more experienced sort might be a bit on edge about taking a job on a space station that held a thousand criminals-well, criminals and political prisoners, she corrected mentally-with a staff of only about a hundred.

She was most impressed that Ben had managed to converse with Uree. The Deltan was part of a mission to consider the three sister planets for membership in the Federation. As a show of good faith, the Federation wanted prisoners from Federation-member planets to be released from the Plat and sent to Federation-approved facilities, or perhaps freed if an examination of the facts proved them not guilty of the crimes for which they'd been imprisoned. Kursican had a reputation as somewhat over-zealous when it came to law enforcement, and the Plat had a worse reputation as a harsh and terrible punishment under any circumstances.

Deborah knew that seeing her father there would break her heart. But not seeing him would have been worse yet. Besides, she owed it to Augustus Bradford to introduce him to his first grandson, Benjamin. After the shuttle docked in the Plats shuttle bay, Deborah gathered her things and Bens and prepared to disembark. Isitov, the young medical technician, stepped aside to let them pass, and managed to back into another passenger, dropping his own bag in the process. He scooped it up quickly with muttered apologies to the passenger behind him, and to Deborah. She noticed a sheen of sweat glossing his upper lip as she stepped past him and toward the exit. Poor guy really is nervous, she thought. She held Bens hand and led him off the shuttle, still thinking about Isitov because it was easier than thinking about her father, incarcerated for life because of his political beliefs. She hoped the trip wouldn't prove overly traumatic on any of them.

Chapter Two

Captain David Gold sat down behind his desk and ran a hand through his hair, thinking, This is why its so white. He had nothing but respect for his crew, and he loved his ship. But the da Vinci bounced all over space like a pinball, it seemed. Anyplace there was a problem, he got the call. Didn't every ship have an engineer or two on board? he wondered. Does S.C.E. have to handle every little thing?

He knew that being indispensable was preferable to the alternative. But no sooner had they picked up Carol Abramowitz and Bart Faulwell from their sojourn on Keorga than Captain Montgomery Scott was sending them out on yet another emergency call. Gold had stepped off the bridge and into his ready room, because Scotty had specifically asked to speak with Gold in private. And, though he didn't yet know why, Gold knew that the only reason for that would be because there would be something singularly unpleasant about this assignment.

Screen on, he said when he felt ready to hear the news.

His viewscreen blinked on. In a moment, Scotty's face was before him. But the usually garrulous S.C.E.

liaison wasn't wearing his typical smile. Good, he said, you're sitting down.

Yes, Gold replied. Why does that matter?

Cause I'm sending you on a mission, even though the da Vinci is the last ship in the fleet I'd send if I had any choice, Scott said.

Where?

The Kursican system. More specifically, the Kursican Orbiting Incarceration Platform.

Gold narrowed his eyes. That's a prison station, no?

That's correct, Scotty confirmed. They're having a wee problem.

Why would you not want to send us? Not that I'm looking for a reason to go, but we're relatively close right now—and I stress relatively, considering they're practically in the Delta Quadrant.

That's why I am sending you—time is definitely of the essence, and you're the closest S.C.E. crew I've got.

As for why I would rather not—there's a personal reason.

Gold didn't like the sound of that. But he knew the decision had been made. He paused long enough to tell Ensign Wong to have the da Vinci change course for Kursica, warp nine. Then he turned back to Scotty's image on the viewscreen. What's the nature of the wee problem? he asked.

The prison—they call it the Plat—has gone completely haywire, Scotty explained. It's slipped its moorings.

There's been no communication with it, so they don't know what's happened. Its stabilizers are shot. It's spinning and bouncing like a tennis ball in a tornado, the way I hear it, and its orbit is degrading rapidly.

Somethin' isn't done soon, it's likely to enter Kursican atmosphere and slam into something. And there are a lot of folks on that planet—it's hard to drop a platform that big and not land on someone's head.

And the Kursicans are doing what? Gold asked. They can't bring it under control remotely?

They've tried. Between you and me, I don't think they've tried that hard. They seem not to care much about what happens to the folks on board the platform—far as they're concerned, it's the dregs of Kursican and her sister planets. But when the thing comes down on them, they might sing a different tune.

Still, Gold said. It seems like they ought to make some effort on their own behalf. For that matter, they're not even a Federation planet. Were involved why, exactly?

You're right, they're not. But they're under consideration, and we happen to have an ambassador—names Uree, a Deltan—whos out there now. In fact, he's on the Plat. That's our justification. We've asked the Kursicans if they mind us stepping in, and they've given their blessings. If nothing else, we've got to see if we can get him off alive.

Good, Gold said. I'm starting to see the picture. One thing, though. Why not the da Vinci? What's this personal reason you spoke of?

Because, David, Scotty said, his voice somber, one of the prisoners on the Plat is a gentleman named Augustus Bradford. I believe you know him.

Know him? Gold thought. Now that's an understatement. He hadn't heard the name in years, but he'd never forget it.

David Gold and Gus Bradford had entered Starfleet Academy the same year. They became close friends. After the Academy, they'd both served on the Gettysburg, under Captain Mark Jameson. Gus in particular had idolized Jameson, and Gold had to admit that back then, the captain had seemed like the real thing. He was courageous, he was smart, he was not afraid of making hard decisions, and more often than not, he made the right ones. He was already justifiably famous in Starfleet for his negotiating skills, with his success on Mordan IV being the feather in his cap. When Gus heard they were being assigned to Jameson's ship, he had literally danced for joy.

But Jameson hadn't been quite the negotiator that he had claimed. Decades later, the truth about what happened on Mordan IV had come out. Both Gold and Bradford had moved on by then, though when the story spread Gold had contacted Bradford and they'd spoken about it, and about the disgrace that had come to Jameson late in life.

He had been dispatched to Mordan IV because Karnas, the son of an assassinated tribal leader there, had captured a starship and threatened to kill its passengers and crew unless Starfleet gave him the weapons he felt he needed to avenge his father's death. Jameson got the ship back intact, saving the lives of 63 people, and he was hailed as a hero for his efforts. But what Starfleet didn't know—until years had

passed and millions had died-was that Jameson had given in to Karnass demands. He had given Karnas the weapons he wanted. Knowing hed violated the Prime Directive by doing so, Jameson tried to fix things by giving the planets other tribes the same weapons hed given Karnas, thereby maintaining the balance of power.

What he had really accomplished, though, was to give Mordan IV the means with which to destroy itself. A civil war began, which lasted for forty years and came close to wiping out everyone on the planet. Decades later, now a retired admiral, Jameson was brought back to Mordan IV on board the U.S.S. Enterprise. Having taken a restorative drug to counter the effects of the Iversons disease that wracked his body, Jameson learned that Karnas had lured him back to the planet to punish him for his long-ago actions. He managed to negotiate a release for captive Federation representatives by turning himself over to Karnas. But it was already too late for Jameson-the drug he had taken killed him, and, at his wifes request, he was buried on Mordan IV.

Gus had been different, after that. Gold had always stayed in touch with him-he had been Bradfords best man, when he married Anita, and Bradford had stepped into a synagogue for his first time when Gold had wed the lovely Rabbi Rachel Gilman. Gold had become godfather to their daughter Deborah, and the two families had often socialized and even traveled together. But learning of Jamesons betrayal of his principles, and his forty-year concealment of his crimes, had turned Gus sour, somehow. It was as if having idolized the man so much, he couldnt deal with the truth about him. That conversation twelve years ago, on hearing the news of Jamesons death, had been the last time theyd spoken. All of Golds later attempts to contact him had been rebuffed. Gus had left Starfleet, even left Anita. The last Gold had heard, through the grapevine, hed moved out of Federation space altogether.

Which meant it was perfectly plausible that hed end up in the Kursican system, Gold realized. He also realized that Scotty was looking at him, questioningly. Sorry, he said. A little reminiscence.

I understand, David. Im sorry to have to spring this on you.

No, its not a problem, Gold said.

Glad to hear it.

Do you happen to know what hes in for?

Theres a political movement, mostly centered around humans who settled on the planet ValJon, opposed to Kursican or the other planets in the system joining the Federation. Apparently they went beyond polite disagreement into violent action. Kursican authorities rounded up the ringleaders, and Bradford was one of them.

Well, that sounds right, Gold said. He went there to get away from the Federation, after all.

So Ive heard.

Dont worry about me, Scotty, Gold assured him. I liked Gus Bradford once. But that was long ago, and theres a lot of water under that particular bridge.

All right, then, Scotty said. Theres one more thing you ought to know, though.

Whats this, the other shoe?

More or less. Someone else is on the station-just went there to visit her father, according to Kursican authorities-arriving on the same shuttle as the Federation ambassador.

Not Deborah, Gold said, remembering the brown-haired little girl who used to climb on his knee and beg for stories.

Aye. Deborah. And her son Benjamin, Scotty confirmed.

Gus Bradford is a grandfather?

These things happen, Scotty said. You ought to know that better than most.

Gold glanced at an array of images phasing, in random order, in and out of visibility on his desk. Family photos. Scotty was right, of course-Ruth, one of his many grand-daughters, was about to provide him with the latest in an even larger number of great-grandchildren. The only thing surprising about Bradford having a grandchild was that Gold hadnt heard about it. I suppose they do. No matter, Scotty. Were on our way. Well keep the thing in space where it belongs, and well rescue anyone on board that we can.

Whether or not their name is Bradford.

I know you will, David. I just wanted you to be warned before you got into it.

I appreciate it, Scotty, Gold said.

Scott signed off then. Gold immediately went to the bridge. Just now, he didnt want to be alone with his thoughts.

Chapter Three

Commander Sonya Gomez and Lieutenant Commander Kieran Duffy studied the schematics of the Orbital Incarceration Platform that the Kursicans had-somewhat reluctantly, it seemed to Kieran-supplied them. They sat close together in the ships briefing room, knees touching. Every now and then one of them would take the others hand to point out something, and would hold that hand just a little longer than was absolutely necessary.

It used to be a jumping-off station, early on, Sonya was saying. They had the hardest time launching anything big enough for serious exploration, from the planetary surface. So all their early launches were from the platform.

Guess they didnt have the right inspiration, Kieran replied.

What do you mean? Like what?

He smiled at her, wishing there was time to lose himself in those deep brown eyes. If theyd known you were waiting out there, Im sure theyd have figured things out a lot sooner.

She laughed, a little uneasily, Kieran thought, and shook her head, then finger-combed strands of thick black hair away from her eyes. Yeah, me and Helen of Troy, she said. The face that launched a thousand starships.

Exactly.

Flatterer.

I only say what I mean.

Sure you do, she said. Come on, theres a lot to cover here. Whatve you found out?

Kieran breathed a long sigh. Back to work, he thought. Sonnie sure has a way of getting down to business when she wants to. Like you say, its old, he said. Fairly primitive. The prisoners are kept here in the middle. He pointed to a conical section, wide at the top, narrowing at the bottom, wrapped around a center core. Theyre in stacked cells through here, the cells ringing the central passageways. Guards move through the core passageways, and they can see into or access any cell from there.

How many prisoners does it hold? Sonya asked him.

A thousand, Kieran answered. The worst of the worst, the Kursicans say. The ones they dont ever want to see again, I guess. He indicated a ring below the bottom of the cone. Down here is where the guard barracks are, between the cells and the support offices and operations facilities. His hand traveled down further. This ring and corridor array is where ops are, all the prison authority offices, life support systems, infirmary, mess, all that. Down here- he pointed to the bottom-most section of the station-is a very closely regulated transporter room-

I would hope so, Sonya interjected. Closely regulated, I mean.

Right. Also, the power supply is down here. And the shuttle bay and escape pods are all here too.

So anyone who wants to get on or off has to go through there, she said.

Thats right. And the prisoners, I gather, go higher up the cone the nastier they are. Your everyday murderers are kept down low, near the bottom. Your mass murderers go higher up, with the lawyers and politicians.

Sonya laughed. He liked the sound of that, and the way her white teeth gleamed, pearlescent in the soft light from the display screen.

Basically, he said, were looking at a small, floating city.

Although not one youd want to live in if you had a choice, Sonya commented.

True. Especially now, since if you lived there youd probably be having your head slammed against the walls of your cell every thirty seconds or so.

Heres the tricky part, as I see it, Sonya said. The station may be old, but the one thing theyve kept up to date on are the defensive systems.

Makes sense. No point in having a prison station if just anyone can land on it and take away the

prisoners.

Right, she continued. So when we get there, we cant simply beam ourselves on board. We cant get too close without setting off phaser arrays, photon torpedoes, a whole range of defensive weapons. Even if we could bypass those, can you imagine trying to land in a shuttle bay thats spinning and whirling around in space with no set pattern?

I guess maybe well find out, Kieran said. He took her hands in his own. You know, sitting here with you-even doing something as mundane as looking over the plans of a Kursican prisontheres just something about it that makes me want to-

Not here, not now. Captain David Gold stood in the doorway of the briefing room. The Kursicans were very hesitant to even hand over those plans. Id rather see you focused on them instead of each other.

Sonya stood quickly. Kieran could see her cheeks flush. We were, Captain, she said. I mean, we had just finished going over them again. I think we know as much as were going to until we see the real thing.

Good, Gold said. Because well be there within the hour. Gomez, Id like you to call your team together and let them know what theyre up against. I wish I could go with you, but thats only for personal reasons. My place is here, on the da Vinci. Youll be heading up the away team, Gomez. Take whoever you need, but get on that station and rest ore its controls.

Well definitely need Elizabeth, Sonya said. Elizabeth Lense was the ships chief medical officer.

Emmett and the other medical crew will be on standby here on the ship, Gold said. Once the systems are back on line over there, those with the worst injuries can be beamed here to sickbay. There are likely to be a lot of injuries on that station. Most likely a goodly number of fatalities, Im afraid. Its been flailing around out there for hours and hours, at this point.

Very well, sir, Sonya said. Ill call a meeting and brief them, right away.

I think that would be an excellent idea, Gold said. And you might think about sitting on opposite sides of the table when the meeting takes place.

Kieran shuddered as Gold left the observation lounge.

"What?" Sonya asked.

"Sorry, just had flashbacks to my father yelling at me when I was a teenager."

Gold had mixed feelings about the relationship between Gomez and Duffy. On the one hand, he firmly approved of being in love, if love it was. He certainly loved Rachel with all his heart. But on the other hand, he didnt serve on board a starship with Rachel. He missed her while he was away and she was home in New York. But he didnt have to worry, every time he went into action, where she was or if she would be harmed. He was afraid that if these two got too involved, there was always the chance that theyd be watching out for each other to the detriment of themselves, or the rest of the crew.

They were both professionals, he knew. Theyd proven themselves over and over again, under every type of circumstance. There was nothing they couldnt handle. In fact, when Security Chief Corsi had raised her own objections to the romance, Gold had defended their right to pursue the relationship, as long as it didnt interfere with their duties.

That was the problem, of course-shipboard romances could cause all sorts of tsuris. The same concerns went, he supposed, for close shipboard friendships, even when there was no romantic element involved. He and Gus Bradford had been that way, for a while. Theyd watched each others backs, tended each others wounds. Along the way theyd come to know each other as well, Gold thought, as two people could.

He found that part of him was looking forward to seeing Gus. In spite of the mans terse dismissal of him twelve years ago, and his refusal to talk to Gold since, he found Gus an enjoyable man to spend time with, and figured that probably hadnt changed. He was an articulate and creative man, a kind of philosopher. He was always thinking, always seeking, investigating new spiritual or intellectual paths. When he had an idea he clung to it with bulldog tenacity. No surrender was his motto in his arguments with Gold. He would argue until he was blue in the face, but it always came down to, No surrender, Gold. No surrender. Until the next new idea came around, at least.

He wondered if it was that stubborn streak that had landed Gus on the Plat. Hed find out soon enough,

he guessed.

Chapter Four

Sonya had chosen an away team consisting of Duffy, Soloman, P8 Blue, and Stevens. Domenica Corsi would head up the security contingent, accompanied by Drew, Hawkins, and Frnats.

Sonya had gathered them all in the briefing room and showed them the stations layout. Another viewscreen showed the prison platform itself, since they were now within visual range.

Thats a prison, Corsi said, belaboring the obvious. As usual, Core-Breachs blonde hair was pulled back into a bun so tight Sonya was afraid the security chiefs skin would tear if she cracked a smile. And we dont know what conditions are like inside. So my people go in first.

Our initial problem is getting in at all, Sonya reminded her. The Kursican authorities cant-or wont-tell us the modulation frequencies of the defensive shields, so we cant beam in. She had already outlined the impossibility of landing a shuttle, and the defensive weapons they would encounter if they took the da Vinci in too close. There are more than a thousand beings on that space station, including a Federation diplomat, prison workers, and families of prisoners, and theyre most certainly getting the stuffing beat out of them, so we will get on board and we will restore system functionality.

Ill have sickbay ready to receive whatever we can take, Elizabeth Lense said, watching the station spin and flop in space. Hopefully therell be some medical staff there as well, and if their infirmary is in any kind of shape at all we might decide to bring staff over. Casualties are likely to be in the hundred percent range.

One would have to be strapped in pretty tight in order to not be injured, Sonya agreed. And even then, were likely to see the most extreme cases of motion sickness in the history of the universe.

Is it too late to back out of this one? Fabian Stevens asked, a half-smile on his face. Because seeing that much vomit is bound to upset my stomach.

Much too late, Fabian, Sonya replied. Just bring a scented hankie. And an entrenching tool.

Stevens made a face, but kept his mouth shut, which was the result Sonya had been aiming for.

What about getting onto the station? Vance Hawkins asked. Given all the difficulties youve outlined for us.

Sonya turned to Kieran, sitting beside her in spite of Captain Golds recommendation. Mr. Duffy and I have been working on that, and weve come up with a plan.

Kieran had been waiting for his cue. Heres what well do

Fabian Stevens had only been half-joking in the meeting. Now, floating through space in an environmental suit, watching the surface of the prison platform slip past the windows of his helmet, he felt his stomach lurch. Conventional wisdom said to focus on a fixed point when in zero-g conditions to avoid space sickness, but the way the platform spun, there were no fixed points to be had.

He had to admit that the plan Duffy and Gomez had thought of was a good one-simple, like the best ideas were, and, so far at least, effective. The away team had been transported, in environmental suits, into space near the runaway station. The theory was that individuals would be too small to set off the automated defense mechanisms, and could make their way to access hatches and get inside. The transporter had dispersed them across a fairly wide range, so that the automated systems didnt read the lot of them as one object, which meant some would have to travel farther than others across the platforms surface. But with the magnetic boots of their environmental suits, that shouldnt be too much of a problem.

He was currently less than three meters from the platform, and closing. It was the closing part that was a little intimidating-the platform hurtled past his face at incredible speed. Making contact was going to be somewhat like jumping out of a moving vehicle at top speed, earthside. Which, he thought, isnt something Id ordinarily do by choice.

As he rushed toward impact, he heard Corsis voice, via communicator. She didnt sound happy. Ooof! Watch out for the-

Then he was there, reaching out with his gloved hands for a protrusion that looked like a good handhold.

It rose past his helmet, but he managed to get a grip on it with one hand. With his other he touched the button on the control panel at his left thigh to activate the magnetic boots. His body rammed into the station, the shock absorbed only partly by his suit but mostly by his own skeleton, which would, he was sure, ache in the morning. But his magnetized feet came into solid contact with the platform's skin, and he let go of the protrusion, the purpose of which was still uncertain. Standing, he felt somewhat better. He knew that he was still spinning and flipping around in space, but he was moving with his main visual reference instead of in opposition to it.

-the landing, Corsi continued.

A little late, Fabian thought.

But no later than he remembered what that protrusion he'd been clinging to had to be. A panel slid back and he realized he was looking into a phaser weapon. He stepped backward as quickly as he could-the magnetic boots made diving out of the way an impossibility-as the phaser blasted into empty space.

Watch for those squarish lumps! he said into his communicator. They're phasers.

You mean the ones we talked about in the briefing? Corsi came back.

Yeah. They don't look quite like I expected them to.

Just assume that every square inch of this thing is a weapon, Sonya's voice suggested. I don't even know that the Kursicans are aware precisely how well-armed this thing is.

Fabian looked at the surface beneath his feet. Sonya's advice made sense, but at the same time, the platform was old, its outer skin pitted and charred. He doubted whether it could be as sophisticated as the commander speculated.

But on the other hand, it was old enough that there could be boobytraps none of the da Vinci crew had ever encountered before. It wouldn't hurt to step lightly-magnetic boots willing.

Looking across at the other members of the away team, he saw that they were following the same advice. A couple of others had inadvertently set off the hidden phasers. Probably a simple sensor set into the hatch that detected the presence of an intruder, he knew. Crude, but no doubt effective.

He started working his way, with the others, toward the bottom of the main core, where they had decided to go in. Corsi had worked her way to the front of the group already. He expected no less from the chief of security and his one-time-and he did mean one-time-lover. She would always put herself in harm's way to protect the rest of the crew. He was near the back of the pack, as it turned out. Everyone looked pretty much alike in their space suits, especially with their backs turned-with the exception of Pattie Blue, who didn't require a suit-but he thought he was following Dr. Lense and Kieran Duffy.

He found out he was right when Kieran turned around to look his way. He pointed to a panel on the platform's surface-it looked almost like the rest of the thing's skin, but not quite as old and worn, less than a meter square. Look out for that, Kieran warned him over the comlink.

Right, Fabian said, remembering this one from the briefing. It was a magnetic field that would reverse the polarity of his boots, if he stepped on it, propelling him out into space. Since these environmental suits had internal thrusters, he'd be able to reverse course and return, but it still wouldn't be a pleasant sensation. This station was so old, though, that it had probably been built in the days before thrusters became common on environmental suits.

Microtorpedo launcher, Corsi's voice reported. Fabian looked up to where she was-really, he supposed, down to where she was, since they were working their way toward what was supposed to be the bottom of the thing. But since it whipped around, out of control, there was no real telling what was up and what wasn't. He saw where she was pointing, though-an array of narrow tubes through which the torpedoes would fly if they were triggered.

In this fashion, each one pointing out hazards to the others, they worked their way to the bottom of the core, where the shuttle bay was. Commander Gomez had decided that was their likeliest entry point from the outside. It took twenty minutes for them all to reach the wide-open space. And when they got there, Fabian had a sense that the hard part was just about to begin.

Chapter Five

Gold watched the away team's progress on the forward viewscreen, though for minutes at a time they

were out of sight due to the twists and turns of the platform. His responsibility weighed heavily on him at times like these—he knew those people were all in his charge, and while they were professionals, fully able to take care of themselves, in the end he was their captain and therefore would answer to himself—his own worst critic, according to Rachel—if anything happened to them.

Concern for their well-being, though, had to be balanced with the necessity of performing the task at hand. He'd been ordered to do this by Starfleet, and that was good enough for him. The fact that a one-time friend of his was on the careening space station entered into it, but not to a truly significant degree. Just as important as Gus Bradford—and Guss daughter, his own god-daughter—were all the other lives, human and alien, at stake. Gold weighed the threat to his own crew against the certainty of death for all those people if action wasn't taken, and he knew what the answer had to be.

He remembered one of his many philosophical arguments with Gus back in their Academy days—an argument, he was sure in hindsight, that every single Academy cadet had at some point. They'd been walking, after dark, on the footpaths across the well-manicured Academy grounds. Crickets buzzed insistently around them and the occasional night-flying bird whisked by overhead. They'd been talking about the Prime Directive—Gus defending it in every instance, and Gold arguing for a more liberal interpretation.

Imagine a planet, Gold finally said, full of intelligent, creative, insightful beings. They're still developing as a society, but beginning to make great strides in medical research, especially. Within a few generations they'll make incredible progress, learning how to prevent thousands of diseases and plagues around the universe. Billions of lives will be saved because of their researches.

But of course, you can't know that they'll achieve this promise, Gus had interjected.

Not at the present, no—you can only judge how advanced they are scientifically now, and estimate what they might be able to do in years to come. But they won't get that chance, because an enormous asteroid is on a collision course with the planet. When it hits, the near-total extinction of the race is a certainty.

They've put their efforts into medicine, not interstellar travel. They have nowhere to go. We could save them—we could try to evacuate them, or we could intercept the asteroid and destroy it, or push it off course. But that would interfere with their normal development, according to you. So not only are they doomed, but billions more across the galaxies because they will never achieve their potential. So tell me, how is the Prime Directive beneficial here?

Gus stopped on the path, hands on his hips. It's beneficial because it has to be applied with equal fairness in all cases, David. If you choose to interfere because you like that race, and you think they'll be useful someday, do you also choose to save a vicious, warlike race from the same fate? Perhaps they will turn out to be a bane on the universe, enslaving and murdering billions.

Perhaps that's a chance you have to take to save the good guys, Gold argued.

No surrender, Gold, Gus said. No surrender.

Which meant, in Guss vocabulary, that the matter was closed, the argument over. It was infuriating, and yet somehow endearing, at the same time.

He turned his attention back to the viewscreen, listening to the away team via communicators. Once they passed into the station, they'd be out of touch behind the prisons still-functioning shields.

Were into the shuttle bay, Sonya Gomez said. Were going inside now.

Be careful, he replied, knowing she would anyway.

My middle name, she said simply.

"Don't believe her, sir," Duffy said. "Her middle name's Guadalupe."

Sonya found the access hatchway from the shuttle bay, and then stepped back to let Corsi and her security contingent go in first. The Kursicans were basically humanoid in size and physique, though with orange, pebbled-looking skin, heads that came to fairly sharp points, and hands that consisted of three prehensile tail-like appendages instead of fingers. But the hatches and furnishings of the station would be of a size and design that would be comfortable to humans.

Corsi held a tricorder out in front of her as she passed through the hatch. Apparently the readings were satisfactory, because she disappeared into the interior, motioning for Drew, Hawkins, and Frnats to

follow her. In a moment, Sonya heard Corsi's voice. It's an old-fashioned airlock, she said. Come on in, and we'll take the next step.

One by one, the others on the away team filed through the hatch. Kieran tried to let her pass first, but Sonya firmly insisted that she bring up the rear. Kieran shrugged and went in. When Sonya followed, she sealed the hatch behind her. There was no light inside so everyone turned on their helmets' overhead lamps, beams cutting this way and that through the gloom.

The internal atmosphere is supposed to be within acceptable range for all of us, Sonya reminded the others. All three inhabited planets in this system are close enough to Earth-like for human habitation, even though Val-Jon is the only one with a substantial human population. And most of the prisoners here—not all, but most—are from this system. But we don't know what the conditions are like inside, or even if the pressurizer will function in the airlock. She touched the control panel that would equalize pressure. Let's find out.

A hissing sound emanated from hidden vents, followed by a greenish fog. Corsi kept her eyes trained on her tricorder's display, and when she spoke again there was urgency in her voice. That's poison gas, people, she said. Everyone's still got filters on, right? The others responded in the affirmative.

Fabian said, I don't understand—this stuff would be instantly fatal to Kursicans and everyone else who lives in this system.

It's another security measure, Hawkins suggested. So unauthorized visitors don't let themselves in. Maybe the airlock has to be operated from inside the station, or with some special code.

Code, Soloman repeated. Allow me. He approached the control panel that Sonya had used to fill the airlock with poisonous gas.

The Bynar floated before the panel—the airlock was still a zero-gravity environment—and began speaking to it in that strange, high-pitched computer language in which he was so fluent. Several minutes passed as he and the Kursican controls had an unintelligible dialogue. At the end of it, he touched the panel, just as Sonya had.

She heard the hissing noise again, and the green fog dissipated. A moment later, Corsi announced, All clear. We're going inside.

She opened the next hatchway, and passed through. There's gravity, but the air's not breathable in here, she said. And is it ever a mess.

Chapter Six

Lieutenant Commander Domenica Corsi stepped through the hatch, into a place where artificial gravity worked and, therefore, the effects of the station's unbound careening through space were immediately evident in the beam of her headlamp. She had entered a kind of staging area, where prison staff would have suited up to make excursions into the weightless, airless space of the open shuttle bay. But everything was, to put it delicately, everywhere. Equipment, EVA suits, even instrument consoles had been uprooted by the g-forces of the station's motion, and were still flying across the large room with every new lurch the platform took.

And that included herself, now that she was inside the station's gravitational field. The station took a sudden tumble and she was thrown head over heels. No longer weightless, she slammed into the bulkhead with enough force to knock the wind out of her. Someone piled into her from behind, and she saw that the rest of the team was also bouncing around the chamber.

This is no good, she thought. She had scanned for any threats from other beings before even going through the hatch, and found the chamber uninhabited. But the motion of the platform could wipe out her whole team, just as surely as it must have killed the prison crew and inmates.

The room took another turn and Corsi started to fall. She reactivated her magnetic boots, which she'd foolishly shut off upon stepping into the station's gravity field. She was on the floor, she realized, even though she was looking down at the ceiling. Some of the away team had fallen down there, and everyone looked a little dazed. P8 Blue had rolled into a ball, using her chitinous armor to shield herself—the others, though, were being battered. Corsi knew that the greatest danger here came not from the team being bounced around the station but from all the loose debris smashing into them. Even big pieces of furniture,

tables and chair and shelving units, that had been bolted down before had broken loose under the tremendous strain.

Boots on, everyone. We have to get to Ops! she shouted over the comlink. We have to bring the gyrostabilizers back online before this stuff kills us.

Either that or cut the artificial gravity, Kieran Duffy replied. That would at least minimize the impact of everything being tossed around.

Id rather restore stabilizers if we have that option, Gomez put in brusquely.

Me too, Duffy said. Im only saying, if we cant, we have a backup plan.

Corsi, you remember the layout, right? Gomez asked. Were not that far from the operations center.

I remember, Corsi replied. She at least had the advantage that she was standing on the floor-though upside-down, with the blood rushing to her head. This couldnt last too long or she might have to drop to the ceiling and then work her way back up to the hatchway.

The stations next tumble, though, solved the problem for her. Suddenly she swung sideways. Now down was precisely the wall she wanted, the one with the hatchway in it. Instinctively putting her arms out to brace herself for the impact, she stepped down the vertical surface toward the hatch. Lets go, people! she called. This is the way out!

Corsi opened the hatch while the others followed suit from whichever surface they happened to be on.

Everybody was able to grab a rail or a rung, and they started moving toward the hatchway. The difficulty came when the station continued its roll, and suddenly she was climbing up into the hatchway instead of simply sideways or down through it. Beyond the hatch, an empty corridor waited. She knew it led to the stations operations room and a command center, what would pass for a bridge on the antique space station. Either one would help, though operations was their preferred destination because from there it would be easiest to appraise the damage and assess how to proceed.

Corsi could see two hatchways ahead-above, just this moment, though she knew that would change-and she was sure that operations had been the one to the right. But for a moment she was not so sure which way was right. She wasnt moving along the floor of the corridor, she was sure-the floor was currently to her left side. Which meant, she deduced, that the hatch she wanted was the one that would be in front of her when she climbed up the corridor to it.

She really hated this whole deal.

Another few minutes, and two shifts in perspective later, she managed to get the hatch into operations open. Something had fallen into it, she guessed, jamming it, and shed had to use a P-38 to get the door open. When she finally did so, she was not at all surprised to see that the big space was full of massive pieces of equipment rolling and falling and bouncing like leaves in a strong wind. Didnt these people secure anything? she wondered. She scanned the room with her tricorder, finding no signs of life.

Commander Gomez.

What is it, Corsi? Gomez asked.

Please join me at this hatchway.

Gomez muttered her assent, and a moment later had slid down the corridor to squat at Corsis side by the open hatch. I see, she said.

There are no lifesigns in there. No security risk that I can determine-except for the incredibly obvious one.

The equipment is pretty much smashed to smithereens. Corsi could hear Gomez sigh through the comlink. Getting any of that repaired and functioning will be a challenge-especially since itll mean dodging the big chunks.

Exactly.

Do you think the command center will be in any better shape?

We can check, but considering what weve seen so far, I dont see any reason to think that it will be.

If its not significantly better, it does us no good. We can access the operations computers from there, but if theyre utterly destroyed we still need to get in here at some point.

Your call, Commander, Corsi said.

They both watched a twisted, scorched chunk of metal that had once been part of an instrument panel

flip past them, smashing into a wall beneath them.

Gomez shrugged and drew a phaser from a pocket of her environmental suit. Corsi understood what she was up to and did the same. They targeted the big pieces of wreckage, and within a few minutes had vaporized them. There would still be some danger from smaller bits of flying debris, but the danger was minimized.

That worked, Corsi said.

Thought it would.

Are we going in, or what, Sonnie? Duffy asked from behind her.

As soon as Commander Corsi clears us to, we are, Gomez replied.

Its all yours, Corsi said.

There you go, Mr. Duffy. Happy?

As a clam, Commander Gomez, Duffy said.

Gomez started into the operations center, but Corsi grabbed her arm, stopping her. One more thing, she said.

Gomez looked at her through their helmet windows. What is it?

Do you realize what we havent seen?

Anything right side up?

A living being. Or a dead one, for that matter. Nobody. There should have been someone on duty in ops, trying to restore equilibrium. I would have thought there'd be crew members in the corridor, or in the staging area by the shuttle bay. Someone, somewhere.

Gomez's brown eyes widened. You're right, she said. We havent seen a soul.

Im going to look around some more, Corsi said. Hawkins, you stay here with Gomez, Duffy, Blue, and Soloman. Frnats, Drew, you and Stevens come with me and Lense. Well go into command, maybe the infirmary, and see what we can find. Even as she made the decision she questioned her own motivation for doing so. Why did she want to keep Stevens close to her?

Makes sense to me, Gomez said, giving her approval.

Stay in touch, Corsi said, gripping a wall rung as the station tipped again. And the sooner you can get the floor to stay under our feet, the better Ill like it.

Empty. Fabian's voice over the comlink was almost weary. This was the third place they'd looked for life-the command center, the infirmary, and now the prison staff's mess hall had all been deserted.

Progress from point to point was slow because of the incessant lurching of the platform, and Corsi felt like her stomach would never settle again. At least none of them had been sick yet, though, and Fabian's fears of encountering vast amounts of vomit had not borne out-since there was no one around to get sick. Still, she didn't like it. This was a busy, populated prison station, she thought. So where is everybody? The ceiling she was walking on started to slip out from underneath her feet, and she latched onto a railing just in time.

And what's taking the engineers so long restoring the damn stabilizers?

Chapter Seven

Progress? Sonya barked.

Kieran was concerned about her. Sonnie could be all business when she wanted to be, when it was important. But she'd been a little snappish since they'd arrived here. It was more than taking the job seriously-he respected that. But this seemed more like an unhealthy degree of tension, revealing itself through her tone, well beyond anything demanded by professionalism.

He didn't like it-but he also knew that to ask her about it now, while she was exhibiting the behavior, would be asking to have his head bitten off. With Sonnie, you just had to know when to push and when to back off. In getting to know her as well as he did-getting romantically involved with her, again-he had learned that lesson the hard way, more than once.

Most of this equipment is so old, Pattie's voice came back. Im making progress, I think, but I still need some time. The bug-like Nasat had rolled herself into a ball and gone underneath one of the remaining

consoles, where she was working on restoring the atmosphere on the station. Kieran didnt want to take the suit off until the gyro stabilizers were restored as well-it provided some cushioning for the inevitable falling objects and people-but he looked forward to being able to getting it off and breathing normally again. The suit felt a bit claustrophobic after too long, and it had already been too long.

Soloman took a moment longer to reply, but the Bynar had been engaged in a verbal dialogue with the computer that controlled the stabilizers. There has been intentional sabotage, he said. Of a crude, but effective, nature.

Sabotage? Sonnie echoed. How crude?

A hammer, apparently, Soloman answered. Thrust through some primary processing units and wiggled around. Simple but very efficient.

Surely the broken units can be bypassed, Sonya offered.

That is what I'm attempting to do.

Sorry, Sonnie said. Go back to it.

Kieran was getting his hands dirty himself-figuratively speaking, since he hadnt been able to remove his gloves yet. He was on his back underneath yet another bank of computers that controlled the defensive systems. Unlike the others, he was trying to circumvent the computers, not repair them. These had somehow missed the original sabotage and avoided getting crushed by falling debris. But the control panels had been destroyed, so he needed to work them from the inside. He wanted to do the job without resorting to the old stick-a-hammer-through-and-wiggle-it-around technique. Though, if he didnt make progress soon, he would get around to that. Pattie was right, the stuff was so old it didnt seem to operate on any principles familiar to him. He had once had a friend who had collected personal computing devices from the very earliest ones of the late twentieth century. The technology he found himself faced with here reminded him of the guts of some of those very primitive devices hed seen in his friends collection. He wished he had dug around more in those early boxes.

Suddenly, though, he felt the station, which was beginning to tilt to his left, stop and turn back the other way. A moment later, it flattened out and remained in one position.

I believe I have rerouted the signal successfully, Soloman announced. Gyro stabilizers are functioning properly.

Thank you, Soloman, Kieran breathed. I am never going on another amusement park ride.

Pattie Blue made a tinkly noise that corresponded to a chuckle. "This from the man who was flying all over Maeglin in his gravity boots. In any case, atmospheric conditions have been normalized. Breathable air and climate controls are on the way. Environmental suits should remain in service for two point seven minutes.

Oh, hell with it, Kieran thought. He, like every S.C.E. engineer, knew about Montgomery Scotts oft-repeated mantra-usually delivered in a full-throated scream. Use the right tool for the job! Kieran didnt have a hammer handy, but he had a manual door opener in a pocket of his environmental suit. He pulled it out, jammed it into the works, and wiggled it around.

Shields are down, Captain, Ina Mar said.

Captain Gold whirled to face the flame-haired Bajoran Operations Officer. Scan the station, tell me what you see. Da Vinci to Gomez.

Go ahead, Captain.

Everything okay over there, Commander?

So far, sir, her voice came back. Weve restored equilibrium, ceased orbital degradation, restored the atmosphere and shut down the defensive systems. So well be able to beam the injured over to the da Vinci. Assuming, of course, that we find any, she added, sounding annoyed. So far the station seems to be deserted.

Lieutenant, are there life signs aboard that station? he asked. Ina nodded and pointed to a display screen. Yes, Captain. See?

Gold swallowed. Commander Gomez, has the away team divided into two units?

Yes, sir, Sonya replied. Corsi, Lense, Frnats, Drew, and Stevens went off to see if they could locate the

crew. They've been unsuccessful, and are returning to our position now.

Yes, I see that, Gold said. I don't know about crew, but they're about to meet somebody. Several hundred somebodies, in fact.

The prisoners, sir? Sonya asked.

That would be my guess. They're on an interception course. Do you copy that, Lieutenant Commander Corsi? You are about to encounter several hundred convicted criminals. They are to be considered armed and extremely dangerous.

Corsi replied, I hear you, sir. But if we've restored the necessary systems and prevented the station from dropping out of orbit, aren't we finished? Can't we all just be beamed back to the ship?

No, Dr. Lense's voice broke in. There are most certainly large numbers of injuries on this station. We went through the infirmary and it was deserted. Whether we treat the injuries here or there doesn't matter, but we need to provide medical assistance.

To a bunch of murderers and thieves? Corsi asked. They're criminals, weren't we allowing them aboard the da Vinci.

They're sentient beings, Lense countered. They're entitled to treatment.

Not everyone on the Plat is a prisoner, Commander Corsi," Gold said tersely. "Kindly keep that in mind."

"Yes, sir," Corsi said quickly.

"I'll relay the news to the Kursican authorities and ask for medical personnel from there, Gold said.

Though it'll probably take them a while to get to the station. In the meantime, be very careful with those prisoners. And if it looks like things are turning ugly, let us know and we'll beam you out immediately.

Yes, sir, Corsi said.

Gold turned back to Ina. Keep a close eye on them.

Chapter Eight

We'll start making our way toward you, Corsi, Gomez said. Corsi and her team had opened the faceplates on their helmets to preserve the suits' air supply. The only drawback was that the air circulation system didn't seem to work very well—the station smelled rank, stale, and close.

I don't think you should do that, Commander.

If you're about to encounter a few hundred murderers and thieves, as you call them, you might need some extra hands.

And some extra guns, Corsi said. She and her part of the away team were making their way back toward the Operations Center, traveling along a corridor that they had previously covered every way but upright. But if we're supposed to treat the injured, it wouldn't do to injure more of them, would it? she added, shooting an annoyed look at Lense.

In self defense, Domenica, of course we would fire upon them, Lense said with a sigh. But not if they aren't threatening us.

Do you think maybe they've been baking for us?

Most likely they're injured, Gomez's voice said. But like the captain said, be careful and assume they're dangerous.

I have them on my tricorder, Corsi said. Looks like about two hundred life forms. They're in the corridor that intersects this one, twenty meters from our position.

Is there anyplace you can hide? Gomez asked.

Corsi looked around. The last hatchway, into the infirmary, was a dozen of meters back. No place we can reach in time.

Do what you have to do, then, Gomez said.

Phasers ready, Corsi told her group. Frnats, Drew, and Fabian complied immediately. Lense didn't draw her weapon.

On stun, I hope, the doctor said.

Of course, Corsi replied. That was SOP.

Now they could hear the group of prisoners coming—the footfalls of hundreds, the rustle of fabric, the scrape of hands and shoulders along the walls. Corsi pressed herself against the corridor wall, for what

little good that would do in a firefight. Behind her, the others did the same. All of them-even Lense, she was pleased to note-had phasers drawn and pointed toward the intersection.

For a split second, she regretted having told Gomez not to come to their aid. But against a couple hundred foes, what could five more do? Better to lean on their own abilities, and the knowledge that the da Vinci could whisk them away if things got out of hand.

Then there was no more time for second guessing. The first of them rounded the corner, and spotted them right off. The prisoners were a diverse mixture of races-a handful of humans, more Kursicans, numerous Szyolithans, and various others-she recognized an Andorian, which surprised her, way out here, and a handful of Klingons, one Breen, and some not so familiar.

The prisoners saw the phasers pointing at them, and came to a stop. From behind, more came, jostling those in front. Corsi didnt know what to expect-she saw no weapons, but there were enough of them that they could overwhelm her little group through sheer numbers alone if they chose to.

The one in front-a Kursican with only one eye, and a network of scars across the uneven orange flesh of his face, took a couple of steps forward. He started to lose his balance, catching himself on the wall.

Help us he said plaintively. Can you help us?

Looking past him, Corsi realized that most of them were injured in some way-bruised and battered, red and green and magenta splotches of blood splattered here and there. Some of them limped or walked with crutches, broken bones showing through torn flesh. They were in no shape for a fight, she saw. She put away her phaser.

You were right, Doctor, she admitted. Lets get that infirmary up and running.

Gomez to Gold.

Gold looked up from the fuel consumption report. Go ahead, Commander.

Three hours had passed since contact had been made with the first group of prisoners. Nurse Sandy Wetzell and medical technician John Copper had been transported over to help Dr. Lense in the prison platforms infirmary-or what was left of it, anyway. More groups of prisoners had been located and some basic triage performed, with the most badly-injured getting priority spots in line for treatment. Some were beamed to the da Vinci sickbay to be treated by "Emmett," the Emergency Medical Hologram. Duffy, Frnats, Hawkins, Drew, Stevens, and Corsi had made a sweep of the prison levels, and found numerous dead in addition to the injured. Gold had kept up to date as much as hed been able.

Weve been taking roll over here, as it were, Sonya said.

Still no prison staff?

No, sir. Only prisoners.

How very odd.

Yes, sir. Extremely. But theres one other thing thats odd, sir.

Whats that?

Either intact, wounded, or dead, every prisoner has been identified-except one.

Gold had a feeling he already knew where this was going, but she would tell it in her own way. Rachel had a brother like that, Joshua, a doctor back on Earth. He told great stories at family gatherings, but he withheld the punch lines for so long Gold wanted to throttle him, sometimes.

Sir, the missing prisoner is Augustus Bradford.

The Kursican Regent was named Aulyffke. The image on the da Vinci viewscreen was that of a squat, toadlike fellow with a voice like ground glass and skin almost as orange as a pumpkin. He sat in an oversized chair in an ornate room of his palace. At his side stood his Chief Magistrate, Juhstraffe. Behind them, extravagant draperies in shades of yellows and oranges clashed, to Golds eyes, with their skin color.

For his part, Gold was flanked by Bart Faulwell, the da Vincis language and cryptography specialist, and Carol Abramowitz, the ships cultural specialist. She had been briefing him for the past couple of hours on Kursican culture and mores, but the more he learned about them the more he thought they sounded like an inc redible race of schmucks.

Aulyffke wasnt proving him wrong.

You have lost the most heinous criminal on the Plat, he accused.

Excuse me, Regent Aulyffke, Gold replied. Bart had coached him on the proper, guttural translation of the name. But I havent 'lost' anybody. By the time we got here, the entire prison staff, our own ambassador, other visitors, and this one particular prisoner, were already gone.

Carol whispered in his ear. I wouldnt stress the fact that they did nothing to help the situation, she reminded him. He wont take it well.

Gold nodded, imperceptibly, he hoped, to the Kursicans.

Nonetheless, you are there, close at hand, while we are here on our planet, Aulyffke went on. It seems like you would have more opportunity to find these missing individuals-most especially including the terrorist Bradford-than we do.

It seems to me, Gold argued, that during the time it took us to get here, they could have gone anywhere. For all we know theyre right there on Kursican with you.

They are not. Aulyffke insisted.

Be that as it may, Gold said. We have done what we came here to do, which was to restore control over the Orbital Platform. Were extending our mission to the point of providing medical care for the injured-though that is something that we would like the Kursican planetary government to take over as soon as is practical. In the meantime, a Federation ambassador and various visitors from Federation planets are still among the missing. We would like to know what steps are being undertaken to find them. Ill be here when youve made the necessary arrangements. Gold out.

The viewscreen went blank, and Gold turned to Carol Abramowitz, a pained look on his face. Are they always so recalcitrant?

Pretty much, yes, the cultural specialist said with a wry smile. The Kursican way, particularly among the upper castes, is to make demands on others, to take without giving, to expect to be served and to have ones orders complied with unhesitatingly. It goes without saying that you wouldnt want to be a member of one of their lower castes.

Why do they want Federation membership? Bart Faulwell asked. It doesnt sound like theyre really philosophically on the same wavelength as the Federation.

Its primarily the upper castes that want to become members. The Kursican system is a relatively small one, with only the three inhabited planets-Kursican herself, Szyolith, and ValJon. ValJon was only settled in the recent past, after colonists from Earth moved out into space when the warp drive became commonplace. They established a colony on ValJon, to which they gave the singularly unimaginative name of New Terra. The population of Kursican has exploded, to the point that theyve been sending their own overflow to ValJon-not yet crowding the New Terrans, but its obvious that within a few more generations they will.

So is it the New Terrans who have applied to the Federation? Bart asked.

No, its the Kursican upper castes. Because their system is so small-even though their population has been expanding rapidly-they are trying to open up new markets. Apparently their main motivation for Federation membership is financial-they think it will increase trade and provide new outlets for Kursican merchandise.

Which it well might, Gold said. Other planets have profited handsomely after joining the Federation.

Thats true, Carol said. And it could happen again.

But if thats their motivation, would the Federation be likely to accept them? Bart asked.

Im reading between the lines a bit, Carol explained. That isnt what theyre saying publicly. But its what is at the root of their application, I believe. In this particular case, though, theres a lot of local sentiment against Federation membership. Because of the way the Kursicans tend to operate, the upper castes, who made this decision, didnt consult any of the lower castes who will have to live with it. The lower castes arent so sure its in their best interests-and neither are the New Terrans, who left Earth in the first place largely because they wanted to try some different ways of life. Your friend, Captain, is one of the primary foes of Federation membership, and hes been a very vocal advocate for his cause. He was imprisoned basically as a way to shut him up, because he had been leading an increasingly noisy

anti-Federation movement. The whole issue has become a flashpoint now-if the upper castes lose on this issue, they just might find themselves on the bottom looking up at the formerly lower castes.

Which makes Gus just a political prisoner? Gold asked. Or has he committed any actual crimes?

Nothing wed consider a crime, Carol replied. Hes led rallies, marches, made speeches. There has been some violence associated with some of the protests, but nothing directly attributable to Bradford. He was arrested on a fairly specious charge of inciting revolution, which is hard to disprove because it is, in fact, revolutionary for the lower castes and the human colonists to disagree so vocally and publicly with the upper castes pronouncements.

As I said, Gold insisted. A political prisoner.

And a missing political prisoner at that, Bart added.

Chapter Ten

Sonya Gomez stood in the corridor outside the infirmary, arms crossed over her chest, phaser in hand. She was trying to look authoritative. These were still prisoners, after all. The hours theyd spent topsy-turvy had knocked the resistance out of them, for now, and they had meekly submitted to her crews command. But she didnt expect that to last long, and had already had Corsis security crew pull those with only minor injuries, or mere nausea from the ride, and return them to their cells.

At some point, she believed, the rest would try to overcome the comparatively few da Vinci crew members on board. Corsi had had five more of her people beam down, but it was still a drop in the bucket when you compared the numbers. She wasnt sure what would happen if the prisoners got unruly. Maintaining order on a Kursican prison station wasnt her responsibility. She could-and she was certain that Captain Gold would back her up on this-simply pull her crew off and turn the station over to the prisoners, if it looked like they were becoming unruly. But she hoped that a little show of force would prevent things from getting to that point, and that the Kursican authorities would send a replacement staff as quickly as possible. To that end, she had decided that every member of her team who wasnt specifically involved in medical treatment or an engineering task should keep weapons visible at all times. Going along with that was the necessity of remaining alert-the last thing they needed was a prisoner getting his or her hands on one of their phasers.

Soloman approached her. Like the others, he had removed his environmental suit in order to move more freely, and his uniform was stained and torn in a couple of spots. He had been in and under and through nearly every component of the stations operations center during the course of the day. P8 Blue was keeping things running while Soloman concentrated on repairing the damage that had been done and trying to figure out exactly what happened. Now he had an expectant look on his face.

What is it, Soloman? she asked.

I've been working on re-creating the sequence of events that led to the damage to the stations systems, Commander, he said. I've been able to access station logs, which have given me some information, and by working backward through the system failures, I've been able to determine the sequence of damages. And what have you found out? she asked. Instead of looking directly at him, though, she looked past his head, toward the prisoners, making sure they could see that she remained armed and observant. A few meters down the hall was Drew, and Duffy beyond him, and where the line of prisoners awaiting treatment turned a corner, Hawkins was stationed.

There were saboteurs in place on the station, presumably in crew positions, he said. Security on the station was such that only crew members could possibly have had access to some of the more sensitive controls. Since those controls were accessed and altered, the only reasonable assumption is that some crew members were actually working for the opposition.

Do we know who the opposition is? Sonya asked.

No, Commander. But we know what their goal was-to remove all the stations crew, any visitors, and the one prisoner, Augustus Bradford, from the station.

So my guess would be that Bradford was the main target. They wanted to break him out.

That's a reasonable guess.

Go on, she said.

The saboteurs disabled the station's defenses and altered life-support systems, decreasing the amount of oxygen in the air. The saboteurs must have been equipped with artificial breathing devices, so they maintained consciousness while everyone else who breathes oxygen—which includes all Kursican guards and crew and most of the prisoners—lost consciousness. With the guards dormant and defenses down, two shuttles approached the station, and the first one docked in the shuttle bay. Several humans came off that shuttle, heavily armed, but the saboteurs' efforts had already paid off and there was no resistance to them. They beamed the unconscious guards and staff onto the two shuttles—even the ones on duty in the cell blocks—and also located and transported Bradford.

Once they were all on the shuttle—except one—that final saboteur reset the defense mechanisms to normal, wrecked the gyrostabilizer units and the atmospheric controls. Since he or she could no longer be transported off, he or she put on an environmental suit and went into the shuttle bay and left the station that way—just as we came on—and was beamed onto the shuttle once he or she was past the shields. That last part is an extrapolation, since by that point the station's logs were no longer recording, he added with an almost apologetic look, but it's the only reasonable one to make considering the evidence.

So it's a safe bet that anyone who was involved in that plot is long gone—and the prisoners still here were not part of it.

Yes, Commander.

And not only that, but they slept through it—only waking up after we restored the oxygen levels.

Yes, Commander.

No wonder they're still kind of dazed. Thank you, Soloman. She watched his departing form as he headed back to the operations center, his bulbous bald head catching the light, his narrow frame. She thought he had recovered nicely from the loss of his bonded pair. Bynars were not supposed to function well as individuals, and she wasn't sure what his emotional state was really like, since he tended to keep that sort of thing to himself. But as a member of her crew, he was as worthwhile as they came, and she was glad he'd been willing to stick it out.

But the big question he hadn't been able to answer remained—what had become of the missing crew, and Augustus Bradford?

Augustus Bradford strode purposefully across the large room toward the communications system they'd set up at one end. He and his fellow fugitives from justice were ensconced in an industrial building in a remote outpost on ValJon, half the world away from the New Terran colony. Now they were truly fugitives, in that they'd gone from merely speaking out to actually committing an act that would be considered criminal by the Kursican authorities.

Are you ready to make the call? Malkety asked him. Malkety was a Kursican, but a sympathizer to the cause, a staunch opponent of Federation membership for the Kursican system.

It's time, Bradford said, suppressing a scowl. But only because Gold's ship messed with our timetable.

Augustus Bradford still cut an imposing figure, as he once had on the bridge of a starship, though he was dressed in old, faded work clothing and his shock of red hair had mostly gone to white. His jaw was still firm, though, his eyes steely, his mouth a thin, determined line.

He had counted on the chaos aboard the Plat to disguise his disappearance for a couple of days, at least, giving him time to get his plan into motion. And his plan was nothing less than an uprising finally motivating the majority of citizens across the system, on Szylith, ValJon, and Kursican herself to rise up, to throw off the yokes of Kursican authority, and to take their futures into their own hands. The groundwork had been painstakingly laid for months, waiting only for Bradford's triumphant return from the Plat to set it off.

Only spreading the word of his return, and setting the wheels of revolution in motion, would take time.

And time, apparently, was what he no longer had—thanks to his old friend David Gold. I owe you for this one, Gold, he muttered to himself. Then, turning back to Malkety, he composed himself and said, Let's do this.

Malkety flipped a series of switches and nodded his head. Bradford looked into the screen. Citizens of the Kursican System, he began, and representatives of the corrupt so-called Kursican Planetary Government, you know who I am. I am Augustus Bradford of New Terra, formerly a political prisoner

on the Kursican Orbital Incarceration Platform. But now I am a free man, thanks to the support of the vast majority of you. Not only do you know who I am, you know what I stand for. I stand for the self-rule of the Kursican system. I stand for an end to negotiations with some distant interplanetary Federation that does not really have our interests at heart. And I stand for the overthrow-armed if necessary-of the outdated, unwanted, unnecessary Kursican Planetary Government. Your time, rulers of Kursican, is over. A new era is upon us, an era of self-rule, by the citizenry for the citizenry. I have with me nearly a hundred prison guards and staff-tools of the corrupt government. We have offered them the opportunity to join our movement, and many of them have agreed, because they understand that they were used by an unjust system to oppress their fellows. Others, however, have declined to join us. I am sorry to say that, unless the Aulyffke, Regent of Kursican, and his puppets step down from their posts within one Kursican day, these hostages will be killed. And that regrettable act will only be the first of many. Aulyffke, you will not survive another day and night, and neither will those who help you cling to power. Unless you step down, blood will flow. It is in your power to prevent this bloodshed. If you have any decency whatsoever, any love for the people you claim to represent, you will announce your abdication from power immediately. Additionally, all Federation personnel, including the Starship da Vinci, must leave the system at once, or risk being violently expelled.

Bradford out.

Malkety shut down the broadcast instantly, lest the source be traced back to this forgotten outpost.

How was that? Bradford asked.

Around him, his people broke out in cheers.

Chapter Eleven

Is that the Gus Bradford you remember? Bart asked.

Yes and no, Gold said. Hes every bit as stubborn as I remember him. But a good deal less sane, I would say.

Well, yeah, Bart said. I mean, he was a starship captain, right? He would have to have been more sane at some point. He sounds pretty much like a madman now.

They were in Golds ready room, watching the recording for the third time with Carol and David McAllan, the ships tactical officer. It had been broadcast all over the system, and Gold had relayed it on to Starfleet. The official response had been to stay and collect Ambassador Uree, after which the Kursicans could deal with their own problems. Collecting Uree could be tricky, though, since Gold had no idea where on the three planets Bradford and his hostages were.

But maybe the Kursicans did

Get me Aulyffke, he said. A few moments later, the Kursican Regent appeared on the viewscreen.

Yes, Captain Gold? I have a bit of an urgent situation developing here, as you are no doubt aware, so I cannot spare you much time.

I dont need much time, Regent. I want to talk to Gus Bradford. Surely you have some way of contacting him to discuss his demands.

He is a terrorist, the Regent said flatly. We will not negotiate with him.

Im not asking you to, Im simply asking if you know how to reach him.

I am given to understand that he is an old friend of yours, Captain Gold, Aulyffke replied. How do I know you arent working with him?

Gold shook his head wearily. Because I represent the Federation that he hates?

This is true, Aulyffke granted.

So how about it? Gold pressed. How do I reach him?

The Regent hemmed and hawed, then finally said, "We not only know how to get in touch with him, Captain-we know where he is."

Gold bit back a comment about how stunned he was that the Kursican government actually managed to accomplish something on its own. "Good. Where?"

"A base in orbit around Val'Jon. And we plan to obliterate it."

"What!" Gold leaned forward. "You can't do that!"

We do not negotiate with terrorists, Captain Gold," Aulyffke repeated. "That is a cardinal rule. There are no exceptions.

Gold's mind raced furiously. He pictured Deborah and little Ben-then pictured them being vaporized.

"Give me an hour, Regent, please."

"To do what?"

"What you're not willing to do-save lives."

"Captain-"

"You may not negotiate with terrorists, but I've been ordered to save the lives of Ambassador Uree and the other two Federation citizens he's holding. Those orders came from the same Federation that you want to join, Regent."

The look on Aulyffke's face told Gold that he'd hit the right note. A negative report on the Kursican government's behavior would damage their application to the Federation, and the Regent did not want that.

"Very well, Captain Gold. One hour. After that, we destroy your friend Augustus Bradford and his cabal of agitators once and for all."

Frnats overheard some talk among the prisoners, Corsi reported. I dont like the sound of it.

What kind of talk? Sonya asked. She maintained her position outside the infirmary, where the line for treatment still stretched down the corridor and around a corner.

You know, Corsi said. There are only a few of us and a lot of them, they could get our phasers, even if a couple of them went down theyd still outnumber us a hundred to one. That kind of thing.

And they said this right in front of Frnats?

They dont get many Bolians around here, apparently, Corsi replied. I dont know if they thought she couldnt understand them, or dont know how keen her hearing is. The point is, what are we going to do about it?

What can we do? Sonya asked. Theyre right.

Then we should get out of here.

Not until they make a move, or were ordered out by Captain Gold, Sonya said with finality. I wont run because of a couple of grumbling malcontents.

Corsi glared at her. You havent liked this assignment from the beginning, Commander, she said. Im surprised youre not willing to leave before the trouble starts.

Youre right, Commander, Sonya replied, clipping the words short. I dont like it. But its the job weve been assigned to do. Now if theres nothing else?

Corsi turned on her heel and walked away.

Sonya watched her go, knowing the security chief was right-the tension in the corridor was sharp as a razors edge, the air thick with the mingled smells of sweat and fear. Something was going to happen soon. Her people just had to be ready when it did.

Ensign Wong turned to look at Captain Gold in his command chair. "We're in orbit of Val'Jon, sir."

"Pull within thirty thousand kilometers, Ensign, and hold position."

"Yes, sir."

"Ina, try to raise Augustus Bradf ord. Tell him I want to talk to him privately."

The Bajoran nodded. "Aye aye, sir."

Gold opened an intercom channel. "Transporter room. Feliciano, can you get a lock on anything in there?"

A few moments later, the transporter chief replied, "No, sir. They're using the same kind of shield that the Plat uses."

"And there's no way to get through it?"

"No, sir."

"I don't buy that. We're supposed to be the damn problem-solvers of the galaxy-so get on it, pronto! Get

Barnak and anyone else you need from engineering to help out. You've got less than an hour to find a way to get those people out of there, Chief."

"We'll get on it right away, sir."

"Captain?"

Gold turned to the ops console. "Yes, Lieutenant?"

"I have Augustus Bradford, sir."

It felt like there was a rock in David Gold's stomach. "In my ready room, Ina."

David Gold. Imagine that. After all these years, you're the one they send after me.

I didn't come here for you, Gus, Gold said. He was alone in the ready room now. And I don't care what mess you've gotten yourself into. I only want one thing.

And what's that?

Ambassador Uree, Deborah, and Benjamin returned to me, safe and sound.

"They're all fine, David. You'll just have to take my word for it. But I can't release them to you. I'm surprised you'd think they weren't safe and sound, to be honest."

I don't know you anymore, Gus. I don't know what you might do.

I'm sorry that your estimation of me has sunk so low. We were friends, once upon a time.

That was long ago, Gus. A lifetime ago.

Lives are short, David.

That depends on how you live them.

Bradford laughed, an explosive sound. I'll tell you, when I wore a Starfleet uniform, with my own ship, I felt like every day was a lifetime long. I've never felt as free as I have here on New Terra.

The Federation isn't as bad as you make it out to be, Gus.

Nor is it as good as you'd like to think. You still wear the tunic. You've brainwashed yourself, David. You don't want to think that your life has been wasted in service of the wrong ideals.

Gold turned away from the viewscreen so Bradford couldn't see him trying not to laugh. When he had regained his composure, he turned back.

The ideals I serve are the same ones you used to believe in, Gus. Decency, fairness, honor, duty. You remember our arguments, Gus? You were always the one defending the Federation against my challenges, my assaults. Turns out the Federation is able to defend itself. It's not the intransigent monolith I believed it to be after all. Maybe it's time you took another look.

No thanks, David. The look on Bradford's face, the smug half-smile that said that the argument was over—at least as far as he was concerned—was so familiar to Gold that he might as well have seen it just yesterday. The expression wiped away the years and Gold felt a sudden wave of sorrow, as if he were looking at his old friend in his Academy days, full of pride and optimism and the sense that all the doors in the universe were open to him, and he had only to choose which one to pass through first.

Come on, Gus. Be a mensch for once. Release your hostages and work this out the right way.

Bradford's answer was slow in coming, as if the man had to think it over, even though in fact it could have been fore-ordained. Sorry, David, he said at last. No surrender.

Gold pounded a fist on his desk. "Dammit, man, they're going to kill you! They don't negotiate with terrorists, and they're going to wipe out the base—including Deborah and Ben!"

"Their deaths will be on Aulyffke's head, not mine."

"What the hell difference does it make whose head it's on? They'll still be dead—just because they had the fool notion that visiting you was a good idea. Does Deborah deserve to die because she just wanted you to meet your grandson? Does Ben deserve to have his entire life taken away from him because you need to prove a point?"

Bradford said nothing. Just the fact that he managed to shut Gus up emboldened Gold.

"I'm not asking you to surrender a damn thing, Gus. I just want don't want to see a Federation dignitary and two people who you supposedly love die just so you can win one more argument."

"Don't you dare try to tell me that I don't love my daughter, David. Don't you dare!"

"Then prove it. Don't murder them needlessly."

"You don't understand, I have to show-

Gold leaned forward. "Oh, I understand just fine, Gus. I know how your mind works. You go out in a blaze of glory, take innocents with you, and that'll prove you right. But it won't help your cause a solitary bit. You want the Federation out of Kursican. That's fine-but if you let Uree die with you, the Federation will be all over Kursican like matzoh balls on chicken soup. If you let them go, though, Uree can report back just what happened here today."

"So can you."

"Think about what I'd say if you let them die, Gus."

The pause that followed seemed to last for hours.

Then, suddenly, Bradford cut off the connection.

"Dammit!" Gold tapped his combadge. "Ina, reestablish communications!"

"They're not responding, sir."

"Feliciano, any luck?"

"No, sir, but-hold on." After a pause, he went on, "Somebody beaming onto the da Vinci from the station, sir. Three figures-bioreadings are one Deltan and two humans."

Gold breathed a sigh of relief.

Chapter Twelve

Commander Gomez, Hawkins voice came over her combadge. He sounded nervous. Some of the prisoners are getting out of the line. They're forming-well, I guess you'd call it a mob. And they're eyeing my phaser.

Now do you believe me, Commander? Corsi asked.

I didn't disbelieve you, Sonya replied. But we have our orders. Stand your ground, Mr. Hawkins.

A thousand prisoners. Sixteen Starfleet personnel. One didn't have to be an engineer to know the math was unfavorable.

Her combadge chirped again, followed by Captain Gold's voice. I'm pulling your team out, Commander, he said. Stand by for transport.

But sir-there are still injured prisoners awaiting treatment. And the Kursicans aren't here yet.

Their ship is on the way, Gold said. They'll be there in twenty minutes or so.

They may have an unpleasant reception when they get here.

That's their problem, Commander. Not yours.

Yes, sir. What about Bradford and the hostages?"

"We have Ambassador Uree and the other two hostages safe on board."

Sonya Gomez smiled for the first time since they'd arrived in the Kursican system. "I'm glad to hear that, sir. And Bradford?"

A hesitation. "Gus and his followers were wiped out by Kursican authorities ten minutes ago."

The smile fell. "Captain-I'm so sorry, I-

"Save it. Get back up here."

"Yes, sir."

Once a course had been set and warp speed achieved out of the Kursican system, Gold joined the away team in the mess hall. None of them had eaten anything since their trip to the Plat, and they were starving. For his part, he was just glad they'd all come out unhurt. He had lost enough for one day.

He had visited Ambassador Uree, then was reunited with his god-daughter, though it was something less than a happy reunion. To Gold's surprise, Deborah's primary emotion wasn't sadness or anger at her father's death-it was pity. Whether for him, for the Kursicans, or both, Gold couldn't say.

As far as I'm concerned, Domenica Corsi said between mouthfuls, they should be banned from the Federation forever.

I'm inclined to agree, Sonya said. She took a sip of Earl Grey. They have a long way to go in terms of being civilized.

But maybe the Federation's influence on them would be a good one, Sonnie, Kieran pointed out. You're

right, they have a long way to go. But if we just turn our backs on them, what motivation do they have to change?

Who cares if they do? Sonya shot back, setting her teacup down on the table with a clatter. She wiped a lock of hair back from her forehead and looked around the table. Im sorry, Kieran. All of you, really.

This hasnt been a good day for me.

We noticed, Corsi said, hiding her smile by touching her lips with a napkin.

I dont even like zoos, Sonya explained. As for prisons? I hoped never to have to visit one in my life. All those people, penned like animals-I dont care what they did. There must be a better way to deal with them.

What about you, Captain Gold? Duffy asked. What do you think?

Gold hesitated a moment before speaking. I just talked with Ambassador Uree. He is going to strongly recommend that the Federation deny their application, he said. But they'll probably reconsider it at some point in the not-too-distant future. Thats why theyre politicians and Im just a starship captain, because they can overlook savagery when its expedient to do so. Im just not built that way. Gus Bradford was wrong, and he was a stubborn damn fool, and if he brought on his own death then so be it. He stopped then, rage and sorrow fighting for primacy in his heart, and swallowed once.

Anyway, he continued. Were well away from there now. God willing, well never go back. Lets talk about something else.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Mariotte has written six novels and two nonfiction books (some in collaboration with other authors) set in the Buffy the Vampire Slayer/Angel universe, two collaborative novels about superhero team Gen13, and a great many comic books, including the critically acclaimed Desperadoes. As Senior Editor for WildStorm Productions, one of his responsibilities has been the Star Trek comic book line. With his wife Maryelizabeth Hart and their partner Terry Gilman, he is an owner of specialty science fiction/fantasy/mystery bookstore Mysterious Galaxy (www.mystgalaxy.com) in San Diego. He lives in San Diego with his wife, two children, two cats and a dog, in a house full of books and toys, comics, music, and laughter.