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## HOME FIRES

Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore



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## Chapter

### 1

Stardate 53904.8, Earth Year 2376

Domenica Corsi hated landings.

How many times had a rough approach or a bad setdown offered reasons for her never to set foot on the deck of a spacecraft again? Corsi had lost count, though she recalled a few instances with clarity. The entry into the steel-gray atmosphere of Svoboda II, a buffeted drop through a storm of howling wind and dangerous coatings of ice, almost ended her first command of a security detail before it even started.

Getting that beat-up two-seater settled on Pemberton's Point all those years ago had been a chore, too; a landing she would have aborted had it not been for Dar's insistence. Then there was the time that her father allowed her to pilot and land that transport, and a rented transport at that. Her attempts to dazzle him on touchdown almost cost them the vessel as well as its shipment of Bolian spice nectar, a cargo precious enough that its spoilage would have ruined the family business.

Despite the animosity she held for those experiences, separately or together, they and many others had failed to shake her resolve for duty and responsibility to her family, friends, and career. Time after time, the security officer picked herself up from the deck, brushed off the front of her Starfleet uniform, and leapt back aboard whatever passage she needed to press onward.

That was the way it had always been, at least until Galvan VI.

Corsi's memories of that roiling gas giant were more vivid than they had any right to be for her. Visions of being tossed and bobbed within the planet's turbulent and electrically charged clouds of liquid-metal hydrogen should not be putting her so ill at ease. She should not be able to recall most of it. At her ship's time of greatest need, a time when nearly two dozen of her friends and crewmates were sacrificing their lives aboard the U.S.S. da Vinci, the ship's security chief was down for the count.

I was unconscious, comatose, useless to the people who depended on me, she thought as her right hand clenched the armrest of her seat. I didn't go through the hell they did, not really. So why is this even an issue? Damn, for as many times as I've done this and walked, you'd think...

"Whoa!"

The shuttle pitched as it altered course, and Corsi felt her stomach lurch and the blood drain from her face. She pinched her eyes shut, trying to turn away mental flashes of white-hot lightning against boiling gas. Relaxing and letting her eyelids open, she turned to look out the port window with the hope that its view might calm her a bit. As expected, her destination lay below, and she studied the rooflines and landscaping of the well-maintained residence that appealed to her as oddly familiar even though she had never set foot within it.

Corsi felt the touch of a hand on her left forearm, followed by a voice. "You okay?"

"Don't hover over me," she snapped, not even turning from the window. The pressure on her arm disappeared and she missed it immediately, more so than she would have dared admit just a few days ago. Turning to face Fabian Stevens, the shuttle's only other occupant, she saw him offer a slight smile that seemed to work better at calming her stomach than did her view of the ground. "Sorry." She managed a weak smile of her own in return but knew it had to appear forced, especially to someone with whom she had shared so much.

Including, well, my bed.

"Corsi, you're as white as a ghost," Stevens said with concern in his voice. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Fine," she replied as she returned her gaze out the window. Corsi chided herself for appearing vulnerable in front of a shipmate, particularly the one most likely to crack wise about it in front of others back on the da Vinci.

Well, she admitted to herself, maybe that's not giving Fabian enough credit. Things have changed between us. They're changing every day.

In a soft tone, Stevens's voice broke through her ruminations. "We're almost there. Nothing to worry about."

She would have preferred to beam down from the transport ship, but that had not been an option. Many of the settlements on Fahleena III, including the one where her parents had chosen to make their home, possessed rules permitting only minimized use of many forms of technology found on just about any other Federation world. Among the restrictions the settlers chose to live with was on the use of transporters, limiting their employment to emergencies. Otherwise, more traditional forms of land, sea, and air travel were the norm.

Probably just as well, Corsi thought. It's not like I'm in a rush to get down there .

The house and the patch of land surrounding it were growing in the viewport as the shuttle continued its descent. She could not help the smirk as she caught her first look at the property. Its greenish hue, adobe-like finish, and Vulcanesque architectural lines came as no surprise to her; such aspects only fit into the pattern she had seen throughout her life.

She heard the hydraulic whine of the shuttle's landing pads lock into place for touchdown, then felt herself settle into her upholstered seat as the craft softly landed several meters from the entrance to the property.

"Ta-daa! See? Safe and sound," Stevens said as he rose from his seat and reached for the keypad on the bulkhead that controlled the shuttle's hatch. "Ready?"

She said nothing as she got up and grabbed the carrying strap of her Starfleet-issue duffel bag, slinging it over her shoulder. She passed Stevens a hard-shelled travel case, then retrieved from under her seat a rectangular wooden case with a clear top. Tucking the case under her arm, the two stepped from the shuttle. Corsi keyed a command into a panel on the shuttle's exterior and stepped back as the hatch closed. Once they were clear of the craft, she lingered to watch as it rose from the ground and disappeared into the sky.

"Welcome home, Commander."

Corsi cast a look at Stevens. "Yeah, well, this is the first time I've been here. I'm not sure how homey it all feels just yet."

"I don't care how it feels so much as how it smells. Do you suppose your mom baked that Yigrish cream pie she promised?"

She deliberately left Stevens's question to hang unanswered as the two started up the footpath leading to the house. As they walked, she felt her free hand move almost of its own will to smooth some of the wrinkles from the front of her knit blouse. Civilian fashions were hardly her strong suit, she admitted, but the weight and weave of the fabric was well suited to the climate for the time and duration of their stay. She would have preferred to travel in her Starfleet uniform and save the civilian clothes for later, but she knew better.

The last thing that Dad wants to see is me in uniform.

Corsi turned to notice Stevens visibly shudder. A crisp breeze cut the dry air, rippling through Stevens's lightweight, short-sleeved shirt and tousling his hair. She could tell he was gritting his teeth, probably to keep them from chattering.

"I told you to dress differently," she said, allowing herself to have some fun at his expense. "This part of Fahleena III is nothing like the resort cities that get listed in the travel databases."

"What? Oh, I'm okay," Stevens said, belying what his body communicated through gooseflesh and quivers. "Hey, we have to dress the part. We're on vacation, after all."

Once more Corsi shook her head at Stevens's behavior. Since their trip began, the tactical specialist had put out this attitude of leaving the *Vinci* for a fun getaway, and it was this distinction that had acted as a

gulf between them these past days. She could see that it was an act on his part, but one he was determined to carry on despite the anguish and sense of loss Corsi knew he had to be feeling. There had been a few occasions where his façade had slipped, but for the most part Stevens had managed to keep up the appearance of having not a care in the world.

Like now, for instance. There he was, wearing that foolish shirt, acting as if he were heading to summer camp. This was not the time for some sort of pleasure trip, and he of all people should know that.

It was all so wrong.

Our ship is crippled. Our people are hurt. And Duffy...

This is no vacation. We're running away from a situation rather than facing it. That's not the way to serve anybody.

As they walked, Corsi felt herself begin to seethe all over again, just as she had when she had learned how Stevens had set them on this unavoidable collision course with her parents. She bristled once more at the idea of him intercepting that subspace call from her mother and answering her questions about Galvan VI once word got out via the Federation News Service of the disastrous mission. Stevens was the one who told her mother about her getting hurt onboard the U.S.S. Orion when he should have known it would just cause needless worry. And once that story made it back to her father...

And then to top it all off, the guy introduces himself as my boyfriend. He even uses that stupid word. Boyfriend. That's so like him, and damned if Mom didn't take that tidbit of information and run with it. I can't believe she even invited him to come home with me. I'm not sure I'm ready for how all this is going to turn out.

Stevens had called in his marker, however, just as Corsi had known he would one day.

Upon learning of his conversation with her mother, she had unleashed herself on Stevens, yelling about his having no business talking to her parents about her missions. She spat through a rant about his having no claim at all to her private affairs, and how he likely had an overinflated perception of their relationship, and that her reaching out and showing him some compassion on the death of his best friend was turning into a big mistake.

Then he brought up that night. The one that seemed like ages ago. The one that helped me remember Dar...

She remembered his words. "You said you needed me that night, no questions asked. And I've never asked a one. Not one! Now it's my turn. Captain Gold wants us to take a break and we're taking one. You're going home and I'm going with you. Fair enough?"

It was nothing if not fair, so here they were.

As they stepped onto the house's front porch, Corsi reached toward an illuminated button on the door frame to signal their arrival. As she did, Stevens stayed her hand. "Wait a second, Domenica." She snapped her hand back, maybe a bit too sharply, and glared at him. He recoiled a bit, as he always did when he steeled himself for one of her outbursts. "Before we go inside, I just wanted to thank you for this. I know this wasn't your idea, but it means a lot to me." Despite her scowl, he offered a kind smile.

Okay, how is it that his dumb looks can calm me down?

Corsi sighed, releasing the steam that she had let herself build during the walk up here. “Fabian, this will all work out. We’ll be fine.” She had hoped her words would sound more convincing than they did as she rang the doorbell.

Moments later the door before them slid open to reveal a woman who Corsi admitted to herself was, if not for two decades of time, her mirror image. The woman’s face broke into a beaming smile as her eyes darted back and forth in her attempt to absorb instantly as much as she could about each of them.

“Oh, Dommie! I still don’t believe it.” The woman stepped forward and embraced Corsi, wrapping arms around her in the kind of hug that hardly differed in its intensity from when she was half her present size and stature. Corsi rested her chin on the woman’s shoulder, releasing the gulp of air she had known to take before the hug. As she looked over to Stevens, he quietly formed a word on his lips in exaggerated enough of a fashion that she could read it easily.

“Dommie?” he whispered, his eyebrows arcing in delight, and Corsi skewered him with a look that she hoped would communicate that his next usage of the nickname would be his last.

“Hi, Mom,” she said as the two released each other. “It’s good to be here.”

“Dommie, are you okay? I mean, are you still hurt? Can you walk all right?”

She nodded, not surprised that the questions had started right away. “I’m great, Mom. It was a spinal cord bruise and neurological shock, and that’s all.” She looked over at her travel companion and did not mask disdain from her voice. “You probably got a much more dramatic description, I’ll bet.”

The elder Corsi frowned at her daughter. “Oh, hush. He was just as worried as we were, Dommie.” She extended a hand to Stevens. “Welcome to our home, Fabian.”

Stevens smiled at her mother, but in a way that Corsi had not seen before. It was a gentler look for Fabian, she thought. Something...authentic.

“Thanks, Ms. Corsi. I’m glad to be here.” Stevens took the woman’s hand in a gentle grasp, then paused, tipping his face up toward the open door and sniffing the air. “Is that...?”

The woman laughed. “Yigrish cream pie. Just as I promised.”

“I don’t believe it!” Stevens strode into the house right past the Corsi women, his next words echoing out to the porch. “Only you and my Nana have made that pie for me.”

“Call me Ulrika, please,” the woman said around a laugh. “And let me cut that for you.” Then she followed him into the house, leaving Corsi on the porch alone.

With the luggage.

Corsi sighed and whispered, “Uh, thanks for the assist there,” as she hefted the duffel and the suitcase from the porch and set them inside the door. She then lifted the wooden case and took a moment to look in on its contents. Inside, the antique wooden-handled firefighter’s ax rested unscathed. She sighed in relief as her eyes moved over the ax’s rubberized handle to its broad, spike-backed head. After nearly four hundred years and uncounted disasters, the ax persevered and stayed in the hands of the Corsi family.



This last brush with disaster was too close, she thought as she surveyed the centuries-old tool of safety and survival. You're coming home to stay.

As Corsi walked inside, she heard the door slide shut behind her. She followed the sound of voices and laughter through a pair of rooms into the kitchen, where she saw a sight all too common to her during her tour of duty on the *Vinci*: Stevens talking with his mouth full.

"I'm telling you, Ulrika, this is incredible," he said, wiping a glob of purple cream from his chin. "Dommie, you gotta have a bite of this." He grinned at her, knowing that the nickname was not his to use, but thankfully kept his lips pressed tight as he swallowed. Still, she admitted, it was good to see him smile and acting happier than he had been in days.

And all because of her mother, whose smile mirrored Stevens's.

Oh yes, this is just going to be one hell of a week.

## Chapter 2

"Mom! What are you doing?"

Ulrika Corsi turned with a start from an open dresser drawer, clutching a drab-colored sweater knit from Yridian yak wool. "Just helping you get settled. You can't live out of a duffel bag for a week, after all."

"I've only been here for an hour, Mom," Corsi said. "You don't need to cater to me like this." Stepping farther into the room, she studied the arrangement of furniture and knickknacks that was all too familiar. On the uppermost shelf of a painted wooden bookcase rested the same trio of swim-meet trophies that her mother surely had been dusting for more than a decade. She glanced along a wall to find the same framed family portrait, a sepia-toned photograph of herself on Galor IV with her brother and parents, that had hung in similar proximity to the bookcase in probably half a dozen houses on half a dozen planets since it was taken. On the dresser near her mother, a large candle burned, wafting the scent of pine needles into the air.

Although Corsi had never set foot in this room, there was no mistaking this place as her room.

"I just want you to feel at home, Dommie," Ulrika said as she folded the sweater in her hands. "Allow a mother that simple pleasure at least."

"But some of those things are, well, mine."

Ulrika laughed. "I assumed that all of these things were yours or else you wouldn't be carrying them."

Corsi huffed as she moved toward her duffel bag, which sat on the floor next to the bed. "You know what I meant. There are some things in there that I'd like to put away myself."

"You mean like that?" Ulrika nodded to the edge of the dresser and Corsi followed the gesture with her gaze to see her phaser resting next to a satin-covered jewelry box.

“Yes, like that.” With a speed that even Corsi did not anticipate, her hand darted to the dresser and snatched up her sidearm. She slipped the phaser into the pocket of her slacks, where it bulged noticeably. “I’m sorry about bringing it into the house. I know the township rules about weapons, but I just don’t feel comfortable without it anymore.”

The elder woman said nothing in response as she shook out the sweater in her hands, refolding the garment into a more compact bundle. Corsi saw her mother force a smile, a sure signal that a change in topic was coming. “I’m surprised to see this old thing in your bag. Didn’t Roberto give you this for your birthday one year?”

Corsi found it was her turn to smile. “Yeah, he did. And I told him that it looked like the yak had thrown up on it.”

Ulrika laughed softly as she placed the sweater in an open drawer. “You always have such a lovely way with words for your brother. That’s your father talking in you, you know.”

I know.

Corsi silently watched her mother reach into the open duffel bag and pull out a few more pieces of clothing, putting each in a drawer. Then she saw the elder woman pause as she drew out a Starfleet uniform tunic. “Mom? Maybe that ought to stay in the bag.”

Ulrika looked up and met her daughter’s eyes in the mirror above the dresser. As she studied the reflection of her mother’s face, Corsi enjoyed the reminder that the woman before her seemed scarcely to have aged in comparison to the mental images she had carried during her years away from home. It was somehow comforting to believe that her mother seemed as unaffected by time as the objects within the room.

“You probably won’t need it anyway,” Ulrika said as she turned, grabbing the duffel bag from the dresser’s varnished top and passing it to Corsi. “You’re on leave for a while yet, right?”

“A few weeks,” Corsi said. “But some of that will be travel time back to the Vinci. It’s not as if Starfleet runs a shuttle service to come pick us up.”

“Stay as long as you like, Dommie,” Ulrika said as she stepped around her daughter and moved to the bed. She smoothed out a spot on the bedspread and sat down, her light frame not making much of an impression on the mattress. “I left the other thing inside the bag. It looked like a picture frame?”

Corsi felt her throat tighten a bit at that as she nodded in reply.

“I didn’t look at it.”

“You never were one to drop a subtle hint, were you, Mom?” She saw Ulrika smile, and then Corsi knew that she had been roped into a show-and-tell session with the same signature deftness that her mother wielded with each member of the family. The Corsis as a rule never were ones to open up with conversation around the family dinner table, so typically it fell to Ulrika to pepper their talk with loaded questions or open-ended statements that no one dared avoid.

Mom could teach the Cardassians a thing or two about interrogation techniques, Corsi thought as she fished in her bag and brought out a flat black-framed photograph about twice the size of a data padd.

“This is for Fabian. He doesn’t know I have it.”

She passed the photograph to Ulrika and smiled a bit as she saw her mother analyze it with her trademark scrutiny. “That’s your Fabian on the right, isn’t it?”

“He’s not my Fabian, Mother. He’s not my anything.”

Ulrika looked up with a smirk as Corsi sat down on the bed beside her. Indicating the picture with the fingers of her right hand, she said, “That’s the bridge of the *Defiant*, an old Starfleet ship we rescued... well, it seems like ages ago, now. Captain Gold is sitting in the command chair, there, and...” Her hand froze as it moved from the image of her captain to the next figure in the photograph. “And that’s Commander Duffy on the left.”

Ulrika’s smile dimmed. “That’s your friend who died, isn’t it? He’s the one who meant so much to Fabian.”

“Yeah, Mom.” Corsi could not help staring at Kieran Duffy’s broad smile, captured in midsentence as Captain Gold and Fabian looked to be laughing along with whatever story he must have been unreeling at the time. It illustrated best what she knew she would miss most about Duffy: his love for telling a story, particularly an embarrassing one, to whoever would lend an ear.

The photograph’s mere existence startled Corsi when she first saw it in the hands of Bart Faulwell, who had plucked the image from optical data scans made to record the *Defiant*’s condition on its journey back from Tholian space. He slipped the framed shot into her hands moments before she was scheduled to leave the *Vinci* with Stevens. When he did so, she noticed several additional frames under his arm; memorial gifts headed to other members of the crew, no doubt.

“I’m waiting for the right time to give it to him, I guess,” Corsi said to break their silence. “We don’t have much time on duty to take pictures, you know. He’ll be pretty surprised.”

“Well, this is sure to mean a lot to him, Dommie,” Ulrika said. “You mean a lot to him, too, you know. He went on and on to me while you were in showering. He said...”

“Mom, I don’t want to hear it.” Corsi’s desire for her mother to get past the notion that Stevens and she were some sort of romantic item brought an edge of frustration to her voice. “I did not bring him here to ‘meet the parents,’ okay? Fabian is a shipmate. No, I mean... well, okay... he’s a friend, but it stops there. So, let’s drop this talk, please, especially before he overhears it.”

“Then you’d better tell him soon because he’s certainly sweet on you. I think he was just as worried about your getting hurt as we were.”

Great. This is what I get for trying to help the guy.

“Mom, he’s clinging to me because I owed him a favor,” Corsi said, swinging her body away from her mother. “He’s got plenty of other friends on board. I’m not really sure why he’s here.”

Reaching over, Ulrika placed a hand on Corsi’s shoulder. “He could have reached out to anyone, but he chose you. It sounds like he needs you.”

Plenty of other people needed me, too. And what good was I?

Ulrika continued, enough pressure in her touch that Corsi turned back to face her despite the burning desire for this line of discussion to cease. “You have the words he needs to hear, even if you don’t yet realize it. You’ll find them, probably when you least expect it. And he may have a few words for you, too, Dommie. Open yourself to listening.” She paused, then added with a smile, “I know that’s not the Corsi way, but still...”

Motion at the doorway prompted the women to look up with a start and see Stevens’s head and shoulders peering from around the door frame. “Hey, am I interrupting?”

Corsi’s shouted “Yes!” mixed in the air with her mother’s spoken “No,” bringing a laugh from Stevens. She fumbled a bit to speak to her shipmate before her mother could open her mouth again. “I guess not, then. We were just talking, Fab...”

The photograph! He’ll see it!

Corsi snatched the frame from her mother’s grasp and flipped it facedown onto her duffel bag that still sat on the floor between their feet.

Stevens stepped into the room, his eyebrows furrowing mischievously. “Baby pictures, Dommie?”

“Not your business, Fabian,” Corsi said with her best security-officer tone. “Just move along.”

“Well, I guess I can wander back to the kitchen and wait for your father, then. He just pulled up. That’s what I came to tell you.”

Corsi felt her stomach flutter as the news sunk in.

I guess it was too much to hope for his running into an ion storm or something.

Standing, she brushed some of the ripples from her blouse, and with them, she hoped, some of the emotional trappings she had allowed to latch onto her the longer she sat in this facsimile of her childhood bedroom. Though she was not bracing for some sort of showdown with her father on his arrival, Corsi knew that just seeing him for the first time in years would surely fuel her internal fires if she let it. Sighing in resignation, she walked past Stevens and turned toward the kitchen, knowing that her father would come in through the back door and head straight for the food cooler.

Some things never change.

Walking just behind her, Stevens said, “You really haven’t seen him since you finished at the Academy?”

She swallowed hard. “A few times, but it wasn’t for long. He made it pretty clear at graduation that Starfleet officers weren’t welcome in his home.”

“Well, good thing I’m a noncom, then,” Stevens said with a sly grin. “Want me to run interference? Maybe he’ll forget you’re here.”

“What I would like you to do is stop talking about me to my mother.” The curtness of her response was a surprise even to her. “And I definitely don’t want you to start sidling up to my father the way you have with her. I don’t need that kind of pressure.”

“Or maybe that kind of competition?”

Corsi felt heat rise in her neck as she glared back at Stevens, and turned to respond accordingly when the sound of the front door opening interrupted them.

Aldo Corsi stood in the doorway, his eyes widening a bit on Corsi while the doorknob rested in his meaty hand. He drew a breath, making his barrel chest puff out even farther, and narrowed his eyes again as he stepped forward and pushed the door shut behind him.

“You’re home.”

“Hi, Dad.” Corsi could not help judging her father’s appearance against her memories, just as she had minutes earlier with her mother. He had not fared as well against the passage of time. She let her eyes dwell on his salt-and-pepper hair, the frown lines that creased his face, the slight stoop in his posture. The hint of immortality loaned to Corsi by her mother was stripped away when her father’s eyes met hers.

The imposing man nodded quietly, then turned his attention to Stevens and offered his hand. “Aldo Corsi.”

Stevens returned the handshake as Corsi noted his hand being almost swallowed up by her father’s grip. “Fabian Stevens, sir. I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.”

“I heard you were coming,” Aldo said. Corsi knew that was about as committal as her father would get at showing any return interest in their arrival on Fahleena III, at least until he wound down a bit from his latest cargo run.

Stevens must not have picked up on that signal, however, as he kept talking even after Aldo had turned from the pair and moved to open a brushed metal door set into a kitchen wall. “Domenica has told me some about your transport service. I’d like hearing about it and maybe seeing a few of your freighters. My parents run shuttles in the Rigel Colonies. Ever make it out that way?”

Aldo reached into the cooler and took out a bottled beverage, most likely some blend of fruit juice, Corsi thought, and screwed off the top while the cooler door slowly swung shut. Before taking a swig, Aldo leveled a questioning glare at his daughter. “Rough ride you took. I suppose you lost the ax.”

Well, that certainly didn’t take long.

Corsi knew that talk of her family’s most prized heirloom would surface sometime during her visit, though she had not imagined it as the opening volley upon seeing her father. Still, she figured that he would at least ask about its condition, or even ask for its return to a safer haven than a starship. She would not dare tell him that the centuries-old Corsi ax might have been reduced to a mere memory had it not been for the kind actions of Carol Abramowitz, who scooped it up during a hasty raid of thea Vinci for medical supplies on Galvan VI. Not long after its retrieval, her ship’s quarters would be flooded and its contents eradicated by a rush of liquid-metal hydrogen vomited forth from the gas planet.

“It’s fine,” Corsi said, gritting her teeth. “I brought it home, for good this time.”

The man drew another deep breath, then looked past Corsi to Ulrika, who had stepped into the kitchen behind them all. To her he said, “The Thelkan traders are arriving a week early. I’ll be leaving in an hour for the rendezvous.”

Corsi turned to look at her mother as she tried to keep a pained expression out of her father’s view. The

fallen features on her mother's face, Corsi imagined, rivaled her own. "Aldo, that's a four-day round trip."

He tipped the beverage bottle to his lips and swallowed a long draw. "I can't be late. Not with this shipment." Aldo stepped past Corsi without so much as a glance and walked into the living room and down a connecting hall.

"Pretty convenient," Corsi said. "I guess that's one way to avoid an argument."

Stevens frowned. "He didn't seem antagonistic, Dom. Just tired. Give him a few..."

"Not antagonistic? What did you make of the ax remark? Maybe he's wanting it reappraised?"

Stevens did not waver despite Corsi's small hope that he might step back from her. "All right, I don't know what to make of it. Actually, you never told me the whole story about the ax and the family connection. I just know it's important."

Spite tinged Corsi's humorless laugh. "Important enough that he made sure it was unharmed before he asked about me."

As if deciding that a recess was in order, Stevens nodded quietly before turning to follow Aldo. Corsi shook her head as she watched him leave the room.

I really don't need this.

"You're not being fair, Domenica," Ulrika said, her tone the one Corsi knew her mother reserved for making a point above the din of heated talk amongst the family. "Don't underestimate your father and his love for you. You are not here to see him sit in your bedroom, sometimes for hours. Your communications don't come as often as ours go out. If you'd like to raise a point about shows of concern, you ought to choose your words with care."

Corsi started to reply, but stopped as her mother stepped closer. Ulrika leaned in and kissed her daughter on the cheek. "Take a tip from the Thelkans, Dommie. Meet your father halfway."

Then Ulrika left the kitchen, leaving Corsi alone and feeling as though she were frozen in place. She hovered on an edge of emotion that she might have cultivated were she in uniform and on shift as a Starfleet security officer. A good helping of anger would have been welcome, or perhaps a tinge of embarrassment or even an undercurrent of ache for a connection to her father. None of those, she realized, were realistic goals for this trip, if ever. Instead, she felt herself giving in to fatigue and resignation.

Pulling out one of the wooden chairs situated around the kitchen table, Corsi sat down. She propped two elbows on the table and cradled her chin in her hands. Closing her eyes, she began to enjoy the silence, thinking that a few days of rest without the tension of interacting with her father might be just what the doctor ordered.

No sooner had she started to relax, however, than Corsi heard footsteps approaching the kitchen. She opened her eyes to see Stevens wearing a knowing grin on his face. "So, did your mom put away your entire duffel?"

Corsi shook her head a bit to focus. "Yeah. Yeah, she did."

“Better repack on the double,” he said, the grin giving way to a full smile. “I made us some new plans. We’re shipping out with your dad.”

## Chapter 3

What I wouldn’t give for a Starfleet-issue inertial damper right about now.

After just a few hours at warp four aboard her father’s freighter, Domenica Corsi got a big reminder that her space legs just were not what they used to be. The steady humming of the Pharaon’s deck plates, a vibrating sensation that seasoned space travelers equated with being cradled in their mothers’ arms, was exaggerated on this older craft and consequently wreaking havoc on her equilibrium and her nerves. Even more so than during her travels since leaving the da Vinci less than a week ago, the usually stalwart security chief found herself once again walking wobbly and feeling queasy as the ship sped toward its meeting with Thelkan traders.

“Oh, Miss Dee, you’re still lookin’ pretty green around your gills, there. Lemme take one more crack at fine-tuning the fields for ya.”

Corsi smiled toward the voice despite her urge to curl up in a ball on the deck. “Please don’t bother with that again, Mr. Wilson,” she said to the white-haired man standing near the mess hall table where she sat alone in the dim lighting. “It’s not the ship. It’s me. I’m not myself these days.”

Wilson returned her smile as he stepped into a pool of brighter illumination. The man looked to be nearing a hundred years of age, Corsi thought, and had looked that way since joining her father’s business when she was a child. The unusual dialect he employed when speaking was one of the things she liked most about him. It was a product of his having been born and raised in the New Paris colonies, one of the first human settlements established in the early twenty-second century.

His wiry frame showed muscle tone he had acquired over years of loading and unloading freight, running from place to place aboard her father’s various ships, and fixing problems and breakdowns on the spur of the moment. It occurred to her that, in a way, Wilson was her father’s personal one-person S.C.E. troubleshooter. She had long admired the man’s technical skills, which he managed to put to use without the litany of indecipherable mumbo-jumbo that most Starfleet engineers employed. That, along with the man’s genuine warmth and ever-pleasant personality, might very well have had something to do with her own ability to appreciate engineers while at the same time understanding little about whatever it was that they did.

“Never a bother, Miss Dee,” said Wilson, using the name he had given Corsi from their first meeting when she was but ten years of age. “I’m headed back that way to give that cranky intermix chamber a kick in the antimatter pods.” He started to head for the door but instead turned back to her. “Hey, ya need something cold to drink? Maybe some Q’babi juice? You know, your daddy still stocks bottles of the stuff for when we’re on long hauls. I remember ya used to drink us dry back in the day.”

They shared a laugh at the joint memory. “Thanks, but I’ll pass, Mr. Wilson. I probably haven’t had Q’babi juice in ages, and I don’t think it would set well with my stomach just now.”

“Bah!” the elder man replied. “That stuff is perfect for settling a queasy gut. Tell ya what. I’ll go check

on the intermixer and I'll bring ya some juice when I come forward. Why don't ya go look in on your daddy and that Mr. Stevens ya brung. They're in the cockpit."

Corsi groaned at what such a meeting might bring. "I knew Stevens would jump on a chance to prod Dad with all sorts of questions," she said as she rose from her seat. "He's probably ready for a break."

"He seems to be kinda enjoying it," Wilson said. "After all these years, he and I are about talked out. It's a change for us, having warm bodies aboard, that's a fact."

As Wilson headed toward the freighter's engine room, Corsi silently agreed that it must have been a change for the pair to bring someone on board the decades-old ship, which her father had named the Pharaon after a ship featured in a centuries-old novel he had loved since childhood. The ship's two guest cabins had not been tended in what looked like years, states of condition she and Stevens noted as soon as they laid eyes on where they would be bunking for the next few days.

Freighters had come and gone from her father's ownership, but Aldo had held on to this particular vessel, the first that his father had entrusted to him when he had come of age and earned the position of shipmaster in the family business, well beyond its prime operational life. Rarely assigning it to his hired pilots, he ran the ship with only Wilson, knowing full well that its size and operational requirements meant enough routine work to keep six people busy. Her father's theory, however, was that ship work was the best thing to occupy the hands and energize the mind when in space on long hauls.

As she made her way forward, Corsi heard Stevens's voice filtering back to her above the hums and beeps of the ship's various systems.

"...and so while she's away from the table, Duffy tells the waiter to add some Jimbalian fire fruit to Domenica's dessert bowl. I couldn't believe it, but that's just what happened. The stuff looked like it belonged there." Stevens obviously was enjoying this tale at her expense. "So we all dig in, and I don't know what happened next because I was too afraid to look, frankly, but Dom leaps up and just spits the fire fruit out all over Duffy!"

"She never was one for spicy foods, Mr. Stevens," said Aldo with a hint of good humor in his voice.

"I'm surprised she didn't force the stuff down his throat," Stevens said, chuckling. "But we all were laughing and I think she knew it was in fun. She has a bit of a temper, you know."

Is that... Is Dad laughing?

"Oh, I know," Aldo replied. "Allow a father to admit that she comes by it honestly."

As the two men continued to talk, Corsi shook her head in amazement. It had been a long time since she had heard her father laugh, about anything, and it was a welcome sound. The same with Stevens, whom she had not heard expressing that level of joviality in...well, in far too long. It did not even bother her that she was serving as the source of their amusement.

"She'd probably phaser me if she knew I told you this," Stevens said, catching her attention once again, "but some of the crew call her 'Core-Breach' Corsi."

"Not to her face, I'd bet."

Stevens laughed again. "Not after the time Duffy rerigged a security alert klaxon to shout out..."



Okay, that's enough sharing, Corsi decided as her eyes widened in recognition of the tale Stevens was about to recount. Stepping around the corner and into the cockpit, she announced, "Hello, gentlemen. Having a good time, are we?"

The two snapped around in their respective seats at the Pharaon's controls. "Hi, Dom," Stevens said. "I was dusting off some stories for your dad."

"Nice," she said, adding some chill to her voice, "but something tells me you're probably not in a rush to tell him the one about you and the Tellarites on Syrinx III?"

Stevens's smile dimmed. "That one's not so funny."

Though he still maintained his good humor, Corsi noticed that Aldo had returned to the distant, professional demeanor that he normally adopted when interacting with his shipping clients.

And her.

His features once again schooled in the manner she knew all too well, her father said, "It sounds as though you have had many adventures since you joined Starfleet, Domenica."

"You could look at it that way, I suppose," she replied. "Fabian has quite a gift for making things sound more interesting or exciting than they were at the time."

Stevens said, "But I never embellish. I only add perspective."

"So you say," Corsi replied. "I don't want to interrupt. Maybe I ought to hit my bunk for a while."

"There are four seats, Dom." Stevens indicated one of the cockpit's empty chairs. "Why don't you sit? I won't even interrupt you if you want to set the record straight on anything I say." He paused as they made eye contact, and Corsi wondered whether he could read her face and sense what she really wanted. "Or maybe I could go back and get us all something to eat?" he added a moment later.

"No," she said, almost too quickly. "The last thing I need is..."

The ship lurched a bit and slowed dramatically, noises from its systems whining down and fading away. A red light began flashing on the console before Aldo as the view on the forward screen shifted from a pattern of diverging streaks to still points of light.

"We've dropped out of warp," Stevens said. "What happened?"

Aldo grumbled and pulled himself from his seat. "Damn. I thought he took care of this." He pushed past Corsi and stormed toward the engine room as she and Stevens followed closely behind him.

The threesome entered the Pharaon's sizeable but cramped engine room and Corsi saw Wilson, the bottom half of him, at least, protruding from an access hatch in the room's far wall.

"I know, I said it was fixed," he shouted, his voice echoing from inside the access. "I see the problem, at least."

"Is it the antimatter injector again?" Aldo asked, his hands on his hips. "You did warn me against getting

the refurbished one.”

Wilson wriggled his lean body back out of the access hatch and stood up, wiping his sweaty brow with a sleeve. “Nope, but the articulation frame for the dilithium crystals is shot.” He held up a metal alloy piece of the ship’s warp drive for them to see. “I should have known to check it when I made the other repairs.”

Corsi was puzzled. “Just because I fly around with a bunch of engineers doesn’t make me one of them. What’s the problem?”

Stevens spoke up. “This is no big deal. The articulation frame holds the crystals firm in the matter and antimatter streams. I can rig up a...”

“If it’s all the same, Mr. Stevens,” Aldo said, cutting him off, “I’d rather you let Wilson handle it. He’s been keeping this ship at warp since before you even looked at a warp core.”

“I’d bet that’s not true, Captain,” Stevens countered. “When I was young, my parents let me crawl all over their transports back on Rigel. I was passing tools and playing assistant to our engineers from the get-go.”

Corsi spoke up. “And he’s been trained by Starfleet, Dad.”

“Exactly,” Aldo said. A pause hung in the air before he spoke again. “Just keep your hands to yourself, son. If Wilson needs help, he’ll ask for it, I’m sure. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to alert the Thelkans that we’ll be delayed.”

Corsi’s gaze followed her father’s path back to the cockpit, then she turned to Stevens. “Did you really help your parents with warp engines, Fabian?”

“No way,” he said, smiling. “I’m a tactical guy, not an engine guy. But hey, the S.C.E.’s reputation with your father is on the line here. This looks like a minor deal.”

Scowling, Corsi replied, “Yeah, and I know how ‘minor deals’ go back on the *Vinci*. Straight into the waste extraction center.”

“Just think of all that time I spent watching Duff crack these engine problems,” Stevens said. “Some of it had to have rubbed off, right? Just keep your dad out of our way back here.”

Corsi looked to Wilson, who was watching their exchange. The elder engineer smiled approvingly. “I’ll put your young man to work, Miss Dee. We’ll get this old girl up and running again in nothing flat. Go tend to your daddy. Take him a Q’babi juice.”

“You guys have Q’babi juice?” Stevens asked, his eyebrows climbing for his hairline. “I love that stuff.”

Corsi rolled her eyes as she spun on a heel and headed to the cockpit. “Just don’t drink it all, Fabian,” she called back. “Dad hates it when someone drinks it all.”

She stopped at a wall cooler in the freighter’s mess area and grabbed a bottle of fruit juice for her father, paused, and then grabbed one for herself. As she stepped into the ship’s cockpit, her father was concluding his subspace radio transmission to the Thelkan traders.

“This is an unexpected delay, Sebarb, but I assure you that our repairs will not take long. Please know that we have your full shipment and will be back at warp as soon as possible.”

The cockpit’s speakers crackled a bit with the Thelkan’s response. “We have patience, Mr. Corsi, but we have deadlines as well. This might make a difference on our entering into future contracts with your firm should your delay prevent us keeping up our end of other bargains.”

Aldo hung his head a bit. “Understood.” He toggled a switch on the console to terminate the transmission before turning to face Corsi, who offered him one of the juice bottles. He grunted in thanks and took the bottle, twisting off its cap in one of his large hands. “I can’t be late with this shipment. Of course, they seem to have forgotten that it was their idea to move the ship date up an entire week.”

She watched him drink from the bottle as she sat down and twisted the cap from her own beverage. “Fabian said it’s a quick fix, Dad. Things should be fine.”

Aldo scoffed at the assessment. “Sure, it’s no problem at all. We have a Starfleet officer on board to make all our troubles go away.”

Corsi felt the sting of his words, but resisted the cue to take up the same old argument that had ebbed and flowed between them for years. “Yes, we do, Dad, but it’s not Fabian. He’s a technical advisor. I’m the officer.”

Her father leveled a withering gaze at her and she met it, their eyes locking with neither father nor daughter refusing to look away. She searched his face for anything that might reveal the feelings he was harboring, but his weathered features revealed nothing, at least at first. Then, for the first time in her life, she saw him wince before breaking the contact. He opened his mouth as if to say something but almost as quickly clamped his jaw tight again. It was as if he was struggling to find the right words.

I don’t think he wants a fight any more than I do.

“Dad, you took a dig at Fabian just because he’s in Starfleet, and I’ll bet he’s as capable a technician as anyone who works for you,” she said. “Well, except Mr. Wilson. So why not give him some room to help?”

“I don’t need Starfleet’s help,” he said. “Once is enough for me.”

Once?

“What, did you get a tow or something from a Starfleet vessel? I’ve never heard anything about this.”

Aldo’s voice lowered. “Let’s just drop it.”

Corsi stood her ground, hoping that she might get some insight to her father that she had sought for years. “Let’s not. I’ve never heard you talk about working with Starfleet before. I can’t imagine your wanting anything to do with Starfleet.”

“I didn’t!” His outburst made Corsi recoil, sinking deeper into her chair. “And I wouldn’t have...but your Uncle Gi, well, his vision was different from mine.”

Uncle Gi? We haven’t talked about him in so long. She held vague memories of Giancarlo Corsi, Aldo’s younger brother, who at one time had also contributed to the family business when the family was living

on Madellin Prime. He had died when she was young, and when the subject had come up in subsequent years, much against her father's wishes, Aldo's sullen and cryptic response was that his brother had died in an accident during a freight run. Corsi's occasional efforts to inquire further had always met with resistance, and out of respect for her father, she had restrained from pursuing the matter.

Was she hearing him right, however? Had Starfleet somehow been involved in her uncle's death? What hasn't he told me?

Remembering her mother's advice, Corsi decided that now was a time to meet halfway. She sat up a bit straighter in her chair and looked at her father, who had turned away from her to stare through the cockpit viewport.

"Dad, tell me," she said. "Tell me about Uncle Gi and Starfleet."

Drawing a breath as if in resignation, Aldo nodded.

"It was supposed to be just a simple cargo run...."

## Chapter 4

Stardate 32318.5, Earth Year 2355

Aldo Corsi had never harbored much use for uniforms. To him they implied a willful adherence to rules and regulations and subordination to a larger entity that the individual had no part in creating or controlling, regardless of whether those directives were ethical, legal, or even sane. He viewed them as the embodiment of a sense of order and rigid discipline that, while admittedly necessary to a degree in his own line of work, was at odds more often than not with the lifestyle he had chosen to pursue.

Therefore, as he sat behind his cluttered desk amidst the disaster area that was the kindest way to describe his office, Aldo Corsi regarded the man who now stood before him wearing a Starfleet uniform with an expression of unmitigated contempt.

The man looked as though he could have stepped straight out of a recruiting advertisement. His dark hair was short-cropped, and the black-and-gold uniform, which Aldo thought was unforgivably form fitting, hugged his broad chest and wide shoulders. Three pips along the right side of the neckline, two gold and one black, and a Starfleet symbol on the man's left breast, which Aldo knew also doubled for a communicator device, were all that adorned the uniform. The boots he wore reflected the office lighting better than the dirty mirror hanging next to the door.

Where his uniform personified the cold, rigid world of which Aldo wanted no part, the man's cobalt blue eyes and seemingly genuine yet still reserved smile appeared to offer warmth and friendship, even as Aldo snorted in derision and offered two simple words.

"Absolutely not."

As Aldo expected, though, Lieutenant Commander William Ross did not waver one iota from the composed, relaxed persona he had presented since entering the office. Instead, the man nodded slowly once, twice, and finally a third time before responding.

“I understand your reluctance, Mr. Corsi, and believe me when I tell you that Starfleet would not be making this request if there was another way that offered the same or greater chance of success.”

Rolling his eyes, Aldo turned and cast an irritated look in his brother’s direction. Giancarlo Corsi sat behind a desk that complemented his own right down to a matching clutter of padds and other such detritus as was wont to accumulate in the manager’s office of a busy interstellar freight transport service. Like him, Giancarlo was a man of imposing size and physique, with muscled arms and a barrel chest. The thick mop of unruly black hair and the square jaw were near mirrors of Aldo’s own, and more than one person had made the mistaken conclusion that the brothers must be twins.

“What?” Aldo asked, noticing his brother’s look of disapproval.

Giancarlo leaned forward in his chair, the springs of which squeaked in protest beneath his muscular frame. “Try to be reasonable, Aldo. The man’s come a long way to ask our help. Shouldn’t we at least hear him out?”

As always, Aldo realized, his younger brother was trying to be the voice of reason, acting as a counterbalance to his own tendency to react first and consider the consequences of his actions later. It was one of only a few ways in which their personalities differed. Both men, just two years apart in age, had been inseparable in their youth and had carried their relationship into adulthood, and though Aldo was unlikely to admit as much in public, Giancarlo’s cooler head was one of the qualities he valued most about his brother.

That did not mean that his younger sibling could not frustrate the hell out of him at times. Now, for instance.

“We leave for Juhraya in less than two days, Gi, and we’re behind schedule as it is. Have you seen the size of the shipment? We’ll have to use the shuttlebay to fit it all aboard.” Turning back to Ross, he added, “We’re freight haulers, Commander, not soldiers. Let the military handle that sort of silliness.” With that, he grabbed one of the padds from his desk and rose from his chair. “I’ll be in Cargo Bay 4,” he said, not even bothering to give Ross another look as he moved past the Starfleet officer toward the doorway.

The hallway outside the office, like all of the corridors onUlrika’s Hope , was narrow and utilitarian. Metal grating clanked beneath the soles of his boots as he walked. Similar plates covered most of the ship’s corridors and overhead maintenance conduits, offering easy access to the networks of pipes and optical cabling running throughout the ship.

Outside the soundproofed walls of his office, the thrum of theHope ’s engines was palpable even though they had been cycled down to minimal power as the ship orbited Madellin Prime. All of the metal surfaces vibrated in concert with the faint droning sound that had long ago become a comforting friend to him. So attuned was Aldo to the tone of his ship’s beating heart that he could perceive even the slightest variation in the engines’ operation by hearing alone. Having witnessed this for himself on many occasions, the vessel’s chief engineer had told him many times that Aldo had missed his calling and had wasted his life as a shipmaster.

Sorry, Colv, Aldo mused as he thought of the Tellarite overseeing the engines two decks below as though he were an overworked mother hen,you’re on your own there, my friend .

Reviewing the details of their latest shipment on the padd’s display screen, Aldo did not even look up as

he walked. The layout of the Hope had long ago been burned into his memory, so much so that he could walk from the bow of the ship to its stern with his eyes closed. He diverted his attention from the padd only to exchange greetings with one of the seven other men and women who served aboard ship not as a member of his crew but rather as a part of the extended Corsi family.

“Still on for tomorrow night, Aldo?” asked Gret, the ship’s Bolian navigator, as he walked past.

Aldo smiled as he nodded in response. “Nineteen-thirty hours. Don’t be late or you’ll go hungry.” He too was already looking forward to the following evening when he and the crew would beam down to the Corsi home for his wife’s traditional predeparture supper. The festivities would be repeated on the first night after they returned from their trip.

It would be bad luck to leave without some of Ulrika’s Kaferian apple strudel, after all, he mused with a small private smile. Even the gods would not tempt Fate so.

As he continued to walk, Aldo heard the measured footsteps of Commander Ross keeping pace behind him.

“Mr. Corsi,” the Starfleet officer said, “I can appreciate that you’re a busy man, and I assure you that I have no desire to disrupt your schedule, but sending one of our ships near the Topin system will almost certainly attract the Cardassians’ attention. You, however, travel through that sector often enough that they’re comfortable with your presence there.”

Stopping in his tracks, Aldo turned to face the officer, for the first time deciding to use his larger and more muscular frame to his advantage. Leaning closer to Ross, he spoke in a low yet forceful voice. “We have been able to travel freely in that part of space, Commander, because we do not bother anyone. In fact, we’ve even traveled in Cardassian space on occasion, and always with their blessing, precisely because of the trust we have earned from them. The Cardassians have larger concerns than a single small freighter, and I prefer to keep it that way.”

“Aldo,” Giancarlo began, his tone one of caution. “Please.”

If Ross was intimidated by Aldo’s proximity, he did not show it. Instead, he responded with an equally stern tone. “Mr. Corsi, though Madellin Prime and the bulk of the area covered by your regular routes might not concern the Cardassians today, you can be sure that won’t last forever. Our intelligence reports show that they’re working to expand their territory, including into the Juhryan system. It’s critical for us to know how far they’ve progressed if we’re to have any chance of defending against any action they might be planning.”

“We’d be helping to possibly protect our families and friends, Aldo,” Giancarlo added. “That seems worth a little inconvenience, don’t you think?”

Aldo regarded his brother with disappointment and shook his head. For whatever reason, Giancarlo Corsi had always been enamored of Starfleet. Though attending the Academy and serving on a starship in deep space had been a dream of his since childhood, Gi had not passed the entrance examinations. Still, that had not deterred his admiration for the service and his support for other family members who had chosen Starfleet as a way of life.

He had also noticed in recent months that his brother’s infatuation was beginning to rub off on his daughter, Domenica. More than once she had mentioned wanting to join Starfleet when she grew up. At first it was easy to dismiss such statements as those of a precocious child who knew nothing of what she

might want five minutes from now, much less fifteen years hence. Like her mother, however, Domenica was very much aware of the world and indeed the universe around her. Aldo suspected that this topic would be revisited often as his daughter grew older, especially if Gi continued to be an influence in her life.

Once this trip is over, he decided, I'll have to make my feelings on this known once and for all .

However, Aldo found himself thinking with no small amount of reluctance that Gi, damn him, had a valid point. So did Ross, for that matter. The Federation and the Cardassian Union had been at odds for years. Conflicts between the two powers were frequent, and it was not a question of if, he knew, but of when and where such a skirmish occurred in this part of space. When that happened, people like him, his brother, and the thousands of other merchants who traveled this area of space undoubtedly would be placed in harm's way.

He could not help the sigh of exasperation that escaped his lips. "How would this work?"

"My people will install the sensor equipment," Ross said, "and I and a small team will travel with you on the run. The plan is to conduct a brief series of covert scans of the Topin system as we pass nearby on our way to Juhraya. We'll have the equipment calibrated so that it will function without a change to your established route through the area. You won't have to deviate a bit from your normal routine."

"The Cardassians don't look too kindly on spies," Aldo countered. "They'll make no distinctions between Starfleet and simple freight haulers if we're caught."

"Come on, Aldo," Gi said. "They wouldn't be asking us to do this if they thought there'd be any real danger, would they?" He looked to Ross for confirmation, but the commander shrugged as a small frown creased his features.

"I'd be lying to you if I said that there was no risk," Ross said, "but we feel that it's minimal. The whole idea is to get the scans as fast as possible, and when we pass out of range, that's it. No stops, no hanging around the area. We want it to be just another run as far as you and the Cardassians are concerned. In addition, Starfleet will underwrite the cost to you for the entire trip."

At any other time, Aldo might have accepted such an offer. This far out from the Federation's center of influence, the time-honored practice of buying and selling goods and services was still the driving mode of economics, especially when dealing with merchants and customers who were not aligned with the Federation. Maintaining the Hope in good working order, keeping it stocked with supplies, to say nothing of paying the crew enough to carry on with their own lives was all done through buying, selling, or trading as appropriate. Gold-pressed latinum, for example, would be most useful when dealing with his Ferengi clients.

There was every reason to believe that this would be a low-risk undertaking, just as Ross and Giancarlo were asserting. It was rare for the Hope to be stopped by patrol ships even when the freighter traveled in Cardassian space, let alone boarded. This run would take them near Cardassian territory, though they would not actually cross the border.

Why, then, was his gut warning him that getting involved with this Starfleet officer was a huge mistake?

## Chapter

# 5

As he studied his surroundings, Ensign Tobias Donovan had to ask himself, and not for the first time during the past three days, where precisely he had gone wrong.

“This is definitely not what I had in mind when Starfleet Intelligence came looking for me.”

Looking up from a compact control console that mirrored the one Donovan was operating, Lieutenant Hu’Ghrovlatrei regarded her companion with an amused expression. “Feeling a bit misled, are we?”

Donovan indicated the interior of their makeshift operations center. “You have to admit that this isn’t the most exciting way to spend our day. Sitting around hunched over computer consoles, waiting for something interesting to come along? This isn’t what I joined Starfleet for, you know.”

An Efrosian, Ghrovlatrei had a long mane of bright white hair that seemed to glow in the tiny room’s reduced lighting, contrasting sharply with her dull orange-hued skin and the muted gray of the standard one-piece jumpsuit she wore, identical to those favored by many of the Hope’s crew. Her piercing cobalt blue eyes, however, twinkled in the dim illumination cast off from the status monitors arrayed before both officers. “Part of the adventure of serving in Starfleet is waiting for the unexpected to occur. It is also part of the frustration. Patience, my young friend. Everything cannot always be exciting, even in our line of work.”

“Now there’s an understatement if I’ve ever heard one,” Donovan replied, though he knew his friend was right. That did not make it any easier to accept the fact that, for the moment at least, he was bored out of his skull.

A third-generation Starfleet officer, Donovan had grown up listening to the stories told to him by his father, mother, and grandmother of their experiences serving aboard starships and exploring far-off worlds. While his mother had commanded both a science vessel and a patrol ship monitoring the Neutral Zone near Romulan space before retiring, both his father and grandmother had served in the Starfleet Security Division. He had not inherited his taste for adventure from his mother, and it was almost a given from an early age that Tobias Donovan would follow in his father’s footsteps.

One afternoon during his final year at the Academy, however, a woman with three pips on the collar of her Starfleet uniform came to visit him. She told Donovan how she had reviewed his record and about how impressed she was with the test scores he had accumulated during his years of study.

“You have a bright future,” she had said. The natural talents he appeared to possess, if properly cultivated and allowed to mature with the appropriate level of supervision and mentoring, could become powerful assets to Starfleet.

Must have been a standard recruiting lecture, Donovan decided.

It was impressive, however, as was the additional training he had received following graduation from the Academy and receiving his commission. Uncounted hours of classroom and field instruction in intelligence gathering and covert operations had been only the tip of the iceberg, with the promise of even more excitement waiting for him as soon as he undertook his first mission.

What he had not expected was for that assignment to stuff him inside a packing crate.



Along with Commander Ross, he and Ghrovlatrei had installed their sensor equipment inside a large Type XII storage module, a model often used by colonists when first establishing a presence on a new world. Once emptied of its contents, the interior of the Type XIIs could be converted into a temporary shelter until more permanent dwellings were built. Ulrika's Hope was already carrying five such containers in the bowels of this mammoth cargo bay, making it that much easier for theirs to blend in. Should the module be scanned, a masking field projected from within would show the cargo container to be filled with agricultural equipment as described in the ship's manifest.

"I think you will agree," Ghrovlatrei said as she turned back to her sensor console, "that this is one assignment where a lack of activity is not necessarily a bad thing. Besides, it seems that the less Mr. Corsi has to hear from us, the happier he will be."

Donovan chuckled at the remark. While the Hope's master had not been the most cordial of people when the Starfleet officers had first boarded, his brother had been very welcoming. A few of the freighter's crew also were Starfleet veterans and had been enthusiastic about being able to serve once more, even if only in a small capacity. Aldo Corsi, however, had made it clear to Commander Ross that he would tolerate nothing that might distract the crew from their jobs during the run.

"So far it's a safe bet that he'll never see us," he replied. "For a region of space that's supposed to be heavily patrolled by the Cardassians, they certainly don't show themselves very much." In fact, they had encountered only one patrol ship since leaving Madellin Prime, and it had been an uneventful meeting to say the least. The Cardassians had not even bothered to board the ship, and Donovan had detected only a passive sensor sweep as he and Ghrovlatrei secreted themselves inside the modified cargo module and waited to see whether or not their ruse would survive its first test. It had, with the patrol ship leaving the Hope to continue on its way; just another freighter on its scheduled run. The rapport Corsi and his crew had formed with the ships in this sector had worked in their favor, at least on that occasion.

Sighing as he leaned back in his chair, Donovan looked to the ceiling and was just noticing that it had not changed much in the three minutes since he had last looked at it when a telltale beep sang out from behind him. Turning in his seat, he bent forward to examine the sensor control console, ensuring as he did so that the unit's recording functions had been activated. Given the need for the team to maintain absolute stealth, data obtained by the sensors would be retained in the unit's computer memory storage until it could be transmitted to Starfleet Intelligence. Attempting contact while the Hope was still so close to Cardassian territory had been deemed too risky by Commander Ross.

Designed for use by ground troops in rugged environments and enhanced for the specific uses of intelligence gathering by field agents, the compact array of display monitors and computer interfaces was housed within a portable container that was only slightly smaller than a standard Mark V photon torpedo tube. One person armed with an antigravity carrier could move the equipment in its case with little effort. Despite its size, however, the sensor control unit possessed functionality nearly equal to that found on the bridges of most Federation starships, and right now that functionality was calling out to Donovan.

"What is it?" Ghrovlatrei asked as she leaned toward his console.

Donovan shook his head. "Automatic alert signal. We're within scanning range of the Saltok system." He knew from the briefing that Ross had provided prior to the Hope's departure that the ship's route to Juhraya would take them past this solar system. Even as he made the statement, however, he knew that something was not right. The alarm should not have sounded simply because they were nearing the system.

As if reading his thoughts, Ghrovlatrei consulted the array of status displays until she found what she was

looking for and pointed to it. “Sensors are picking up ship activity.”

“Yeah, but just barely,” Donovan replied. “Looks like either a small vessel or a larger one running on minimal power. Judging by these readings, I’d bet the Hope’s own sensors aren’t strong enough to pick it up from this distance.” Even set for low-power passive scanning, the Starfleet equipment they had installed in the cargo module was several times more effective than even the freighter’s primary navigational sensors.

Frowning, Donovan reached for his padd and scrolled through the information he had downloaded to it in preparation for the mission until he found what he wanted. “According to our files, this system’s uninhabited.” He reached to the console and adjusted several controls, watching as two of the status monitors shifted their displays in response to his commands. “That ship has a Cardassian power signature.” That was surprising, as the Saltok system was outside Cardassian territorial boundaries.

So what are they doing there?

“Look,” Ghrovlatrei said as the Efrosian indicated another display where three more readings were registering. “Just like the first. Perhaps they’re escape pods.” She shook her head after only a moment, though. “No, if that were the case then we would be picking up a distress signal. Besides, I don’t see any signs of wreckage or anything that might be a disabled ship.”

“I’m starting to get a bad feeling about this,” Donovan said as he tapped one screen with a finger. “All of the readings are pretty close to the moon orbiting the fifth planet.”

Consulting her own padd, Ghrovlatrei said, “The moon is Class-D according to our information, possessing few useful natural resources, especially for the Cardassians.”

“Well, something about it’s got their attention,” Donovan countered. Of course, their current situation prevented him from really getting a detailed look at the moon or the ships. It would be so easy to bring the vague readings into sharp focus, but that would require increasing the power to the sensors and abandoning the passive scanning mode in favor of more invasive procedures, something they were forbidden from doing, at least for the moment. Donovan was sure, however, that Commander Ross would want to be informed about this.

His hand froze midway to his communicator badge, though, as the sensor console told him that none of their caution mattered any longer.

\* \* \*

Aldo was bringing the first bite of his dinner to his mouth when from across the table he shared with Giancarlo and Commander Ross he heard the sound of the Starfleet officer’s communicator badge saying, “Donovan to Ross.”

Removing the communicator from a pocket of the gray coveralls he wore, Ross tapped it and said, “Ross here. What is it, Ensign?”

“Our sensors have detected four ships in proximity to the moon orbiting Saltok V. They’re on an intercept course and they appear to be Cardassian, but there’s no way to be sure from this distance without increasing power to the sensors.”

The agitation in the young man’s voice was obvious, Aldo thought as he shot a troubled look at both

Ross and Giancarlo. Much to Aldo's relief, however, Ross shook his head at the ensign's suggestion. "Negative, maintain passive scanning mode. How much time until they get here?"

"Less than three minutes, sir."

Aldo did not bother listening to the rest of the exchange. He was up from his seat and heading for the Hope's bridge even before Ross finished giving orders to prepare for possible boarding. Ross had explained to him how that would work, with his people sealing up the cargo module containing their sensor equipment and blending in with the rest of the crew. The Starfleet officers had exchanged their uniforms for the gray jumpsuits his own people wore aboard ship, and Ross and Donovan had taken the extra step of trimming their regulation sideburns in an attempt to look more like civilian freight haulers.

As he raced into the corridor with Giancarlo and Ross following close behind him, he cast an accusatory look at the Starfleet officer. "What's happened?"

"Apparently somebody's interested in the solar system we're passing," Ross replied.

"Did they detect your sensor scans?" Giancarlo asked.

Ross shook his head. "I don't see how. If Donovan and Ghrovlatrei are right, those are short-range Cardassian patrol ships. They don't have the kind of equipment to detect our gear operating in minimal power mode."

Snorting in derision, Aldo saw no reason to continue the conversation. They would know soon enough just who and what it was that had taken such a sudden interest in his ship.

It took only moments to reach the bridge, and the first thing Aldo noticed was the harried expressions on the faces of his two crewmates there. The look on the face of his helmsman, Michael Dillone, spoke volumes.

"A squadron of fast-attack ships, Boss. Two-seaters, all engine. No way we're going to outrun them." Aldo noted how his friend had reverted into the clipped tones that belied his normally laid-back nature. The former Starfleet security officer had slipped back into combat mode, already steeling himself for the confrontation he felt certain was coming.

Leaning over the shoulder of the ship's navigator, Gret, Aldo studied the status displays beneath the Bolian's hands and updated himself on their current position. "We're still three days away from where you wanted to take your sensor readings, Commander," he said to Ross. "I've never heard of Cardassian ships in the Saltok system before."

"That's because they're not supposed to be there," Ross replied. "Have the Cardassians ever intercepted your ship and demanded an inspection when you weren't traveling through their space?"

Aldo shook his head. "No, never."

"Then it looks like things have changed in the Saltok system." Looking over at Dillone, Ross asked, "Are their weapons systems charged?"

The question was answered as the ship lurched violently to starboard, pushing Ross into the bulkhead even as Aldo grabbed on to the back of Gret's chair for support. In the corner of his eye Aldo saw Giancarlo and the others flailing about in desperate attempts to keep from being thrown about the bridge.

“I’m guessing they are,” Gret said, his voice dripping with sarcasm as he held on to his console to retain his balance. To Aldo he said, “They’re moving to surround us.”

Another impact rocked the ship and Aldo felt the deck buck beneath his feet. He steadied himself against the navigation console as inertial dampers struggled to compensate for the disruption to the ship’s flight path. As well constructed as he knew the Hope to be, Aldo held no illusions that the freighter stood any chance of survival if the Cardassians continued their assault. Gripping the edge of the console, he braced himself and waited silently for the next strike.

Only when it did not come after nearly a minute did Aldo realize he was holding his breath. “Now what?”

A beeping sound erupted from the forward bridge console at which Giancarlo had seated himself. Swiveling around in his chair to check it out, he looked up in Aldo’s direction. “We’re being hailed.”

Aldo allowed himself to relax, but only slightly. If the Cardassians had not blown them to space dust already, then chances were good that they might not do so at all, provided any questions or concerns could be addressed to their satisfaction. Would he know whoever it was who was hailing them, either by face or reputation? How much of the rapport that he and his crew had formed with other Cardassian patrol ships over the past few years of running freight through this sector would he be able to draw on?

There’s only one way to find out, isn’t there?

Pausing only long enough to cast another irritated look at Ross, Aldo nodded to his brother. “On screen.”

The image on the viewer shifted from the patrol ship that had taken up station off the Hope’s bow to that of a Cardassian military officer. His dark penetrating eyes seemed to bore straight through Aldo, adding to the alien’s already sinister expression. Still, Aldo was at least pleased to see that it was a face that he knew well.

“Gul Mogad,” he said to the commander of Cardassian ships in this sector, “why are you firing at us?” While Aldo would never consider himself and Mogad to be friends, they had formed a mutually respectful association in the years that Ulrika’s Hope had operated in this area. It was a relationship Aldo had used to every advantage in order to keep his deliveries on schedule and with the fewest possible disruptions.

None of that familiarity seemed to be present now, however, as the Cardassian responded with a formal nod and leaned so close to his own visual pickup that his face nearly filled the viewer.

“Bring your ship to a full stop, human,” Mogad said, “and prepare to be boarded. If you do not comply, I will destroy you here and now.”

## Chapter 6

Watching Mogad stalk around the small open area in the forward section of the shuttlebay, Aldo realized that in all the years he had known him, this was the first time the Cardassian officer had actually set foot

aboard theHope . Even on those occasions when the freighter had passed through Cardassian space and Mogad's had been the patrol vessel to intercept them and request an inspection of the freighter's cargo holds, the gul himself had remained aboard his own ship.

That he was here now only served to underscore, at least to Aldo, just how seriously Mogad viewed the current situation.

With his arms clasped loosely behind his back as he paced back and forth, his eyes moved past the stacks of cargo containers that had been staged here. He appeared to be ignoring Aldo and the rest of theHope 's crew, all of whom had been assembled here at the Cardassian's orders and who were currently under guard by five of Mogad's subordinates. Aldo noted once again the hard expression on the gul's face, which had not changed since the moment the quartet of Cardassian fast-patrol ships entered theHope 's cramped landing bay. They had been forced to dock, given their ships' lack of transporters, and the hassle was compounded by the fact that the landing bay was already being used for extra cargo storage space. All four ships had been able to land, but it was a tight fit.

"We detected sensor scans emanating from your ship, Aldo," Mogad said, the corners of his mouth turning upward slightly to create more of a sneer than a smile. "These sensor scans were more powerful than would be considered normal for a vessel of this type. Perhaps you might explain that anomaly for me."

Aldo had prepared for the question with the help of both Ross and Colv, theHope 's engineer. "We've had some upgrades to our sensor equipment, among other things." He hoped that his answer sounded more natural and truthful to the Cardassian's ears than his own.

"These were not the scans of a freighter's navigational sensors," Mogad countered, "nor were they simply searching for potential hazards. Our own sensor logs show that these were aimed specifically at the Saltok system. Why does that area interest you?"

Shrugging, Aldo replied with another coached answer from Ross. "My sensor officer detected what he thought were lifepods. When he realized that they were ships operating under their own power he informed the bridge to continue on our course."

Mogad appeared to consider this for a moment, directing his gaze as he did so toward the other members of the crew. His eyes moved from face to face until they settled on Ross. Aldo saw the Cardassian's brow furrow in suspicion as he regarded the Starfleet officer, who along with Ensign Donovan had blended in with the rest of the crew. "I don't recognize you, human. What is your name?"

Clearing his throat as if nervous, Ross replied, "Uh, Barry, sir. I'm the assistant helmsman."

"I just hired him on last month," Giancarlo added from where he stood to Aldo's right. "Dillone and Gret were begging me for extra help during the longer trips. You know how Bolians can get if you don't give them what they want." It was a hasty fabrication, one Giancarlo and Aldo had contrived, as well as a feeble attempt to play on the familiarity that the Corsis and Mogad shared, but it was better than letting Ross talk too much.

Mogad's attention lingered on the commander a moment longer before he resumed his slow pacing. "There is much here that troubles me, Aldo, and my concern is compounded by the fact that we have known one another for a long time. I do not want to believe that you have engaged in any activities that might harm our relationship, but circumstances being what they are, I am not allowed the luxury of taking anything for granted." Walking until he stood directly in front of Aldo, his smile widened as he added,

“So I hope you will understand my insistence on an inspection of your vessel in order to assuage my doubts.”

The “request” was more polite formality than anything else, Aldo knew, just as he knew that members of the gul’s crew were already sweeping the Hope from bow to stern in search of anything that could implicate him or his crew. Ross had assured him that the sensor equipment would not be detected with the special masking field in place, but that did little to ease Aldo’s discomfort.

“What doubts?” Aldo asked. “Come on, Mogad, what is it you believe us to have done?”

Leveling a scathing glare at Aldo, the gul replied, “Quite simply, I believe that you were spying, human, and the only reason I have not ordered your ship destroyed already is because of the respect you have earned from me in the past. However, if I find that trust has been violated, you will wish I had simply blown you out of space.”

\* \* \*

Lieutenant Hu’Ghrovlatrei had to fight the urge to fidget as the Cardassians walked through the hold, gradually making their way toward the grouping of Type XII cargo modules.

The unit holding the Starfleet team’s equipment had been sealed and the sensor masking field activated, and other cargo had been situated around it to give the appearance that no one could easily enter the larger model. With just their tricorders to aid them, there should be no way for the Cardassians to know that any of the containers were anything but what they appeared to be.

So why am I so nervous?

Of course she knew the reason, and it had everything to do with being alone in a cargo hold with two Cardassians, a result of Gul Mogad’s directing Aldo to supply a crew member who could guide the search party through the labyrinthine storage bays. It was just such an opportunity that Commander Ross had been hoping for, instructing Aldo in advance to offer Ghrovlatrei for the task if and when Mogad gave the order. The Starfleet officers had so far been accepted as members of the ship’s company, and her assignment to the detail had raised no suspicions as she led the way through the cargo areas, standing where she was told to stand or opening doors or moving the odd container when directed. Otherwise the Cardassians ignored her, intent as they were on their mission.

The scans she and Donovan had conducted, despite the low power setting and the noninvasive nature of their sensors, had obviously been detected by the Cardassians. Whatever equipment had accomplished the feat had to be more powerful than that installed aboard the patrol ships presently surrounding the Hope. That would imply some sort of sensor installation in this vicinity, she knew. Was it located on the moon? If so, that would certainly go a long ways toward explaining the Cardassians’ reaction.

It’s too bad we didn’t get a chance to take a closer look, she mused, trying unsuccessfully to avoid dwelling on the idea that not getting decent sensor readings was really the least of their problems now.

Given the current situation between the Cardassian Union and the Federation, Starfleet Intelligence was expending massive resources trying to keep track of ship and troop movements throughout Cardassian territory. Encounters between the two sides had been anything but peaceful. There were still other attacks on Starfleet ships that were yet to be explained. One such incident had occurred just recently in the Maxia Zeta system, with the crew of the U.S.S. Stargazer forced to evacuate their ship after its near destruction at the hands of an unidentified vessel. Though that confrontation had taken place several light

years from here, it was close enough that Intelligence was not ruling out the possibility of Cardassian involvement.

Watching the Cardassians go about their inspection, Ghrovlatrei could see that the soldiers were getting bored, their behavior in sharp contrast to the manner in which they had begun the assignment. It was obvious in the casual way they examined the cargo modules they passed and in the almost dismissive manner in which they studied their tricorder readings. Still, she found herself holding her breath as one of the Cardassians waved his scanner in front of the module containing the sensor equipment.

From her vantage point, it was difficult to see the tricorder's miniaturized display, but Ghrovlatrei could still make out the scan results, which depicted the false image of the container's supposed contents. As far as she could tell, there was nothing in the readings that should raise suspicion.

"There's nothing here," the Cardassian said to his companion as he returned his tricorder to a clip on the belt of his uniform. "Whatever they are using, it must be installed someplace other than the cargo bays."

The other Cardassian nodded as he took a final look at his own scanner, and Ghrovlatrei was about to allow herself a guarded sigh of relief when the soldier froze in place, a frown creasing his pale features. Facing the cargo module, the heavy brow ridges over his eyes furrowed as he studied his tricorder again.

"Wait," he said after several seconds. "Something isn't right."

The other Cardassian moved closer. "What do you mean?"

Indicating the module with his tricorder, his comrade replied, "The readings show that this contains farming equipment, all packed neatly." He pointed to another of the Type XIIs. "As opposed to the others, the contents of which have been thrown into disarray. That was almost certainly caused by our earlier attack. So why not this one?"

Ghrovlatrei watched as the Cardassian considered the situation before him, her hopes already sinking as she realized what a simple, idiotic mistake she and Donovan had made. Then the Cardassian turned to face her, his expression having grown cold.

"Open it."

It required an almost physical effort for the Efrosian to maintain her composure as she nodded to the Cardassian and stepped to the module. How had she failed to consider that the contents of the other modules would have shifted, violently in some cases, under the brunt of the weapons fire the freighter had suffered and adjusted the masking field's projection accordingly?

What was she supposed to do now? The entire mission was about to be exposed, and there was no telling what Gul Mogad might do once he found out about the Starfleet equipment. The safety of the ship's entire crew was in danger.

There really was only one course of action.

With her right hand blocked as she moved one of the smaller containers that she and Donovan had placed in front of the module's door, Ghrovlatrei was able to reach into the cargo pocket on the right leg of her jumpsuit and retrieve the small Type I phaser she had secreted there.

# Chapter 7

“Gul Mogad! We need—”

Donovan tensed at the words that erupted from Mogad’s communicator, turning as he did so to make eye contact with Ross. The commander exchanged a quick glance with him that spoke volumes: Don’t move.

Static had replaced the voice coming from Cardassian’s communicator and Mogad tapped the device furiously. “Traket, are you there? Traket?” Pivoting on his heel he whirled to face Aldo. “What have you done? What are you hiding here?” Forgetting the now useless communicator, he instead pointed to one of his subordinates. “Cover the entrance.” To the others he said, “If any of them moves, kill them all.”

Donovan could see nervousness working against Aldo, his body struggling to remain still as Mogad’s anger mounted. “I don’t know what’s going on,” he said. It was not a lie, at least not completely. Aldo could not know what was happening belowdecks. Donovan was not even sure himself. The only thing that made sense was that the Cardassians searching the cargo holds had discovered the hidden Starfleet equipment and that Lieutenant Ghrovlatrei had taken some kind of action. Had she also managed to find a way to jam the Cardassian’s communications?

Mogad’s frustration was evident as he failed to make contact with his two soldiers down in the cargo holds.

“Why, after all these years, you have seen fit to violate my trust?” he asked as he stepped closer to Aldo. “Do you realize that espionage against the Cardassian Union is an offense punishable by death? Is that what you wish for your crew?”

Mogad was towering over him now, standing so close to him that Donovan imagined Aldo feeling the Cardassian’s breath on his face, nearly as hot as the palpable anger radiating from the gul’s muscled body.

Shaking his head, Aldo replied, “No, of course not.”

“Then your only hope for their safety is to be honest with me, here and now.” Mogad somehow managed to step even closer to the freighter captain, his voice now low and menacing. “I am being generous with you, Aldo, because of the measure of trust you’ve earned from me, but I will make this offer only once.”

Donovan saw the no-win situation for what it was. No matter how Aldo answered, he was probably forfeiting his own life. Perhaps Mogad would show leniency toward the rest of the crew, but what about him and Ross and Ghrovlatrei? If their true identities were exposed, the Cardassian would waste no time taking them into custody. Would he even bother to have them transported to an appropriate military installation for trial, or would he simply carry out summary judgment and execute the three officers right here in this very room?

No way.

He kept the movement subtle, his hand sliding with excruciating slowness to the small pocket on his right



thigh and the palm-sized phaser there. His fingertips brushed the smooth finish of the weapon as he grasped the diminutive, contoured device. By touch, he verified that the phaser was set to stun. He would only have one chance at this. Was Ross thinking along the same lines? Donovan had to believe that the seasoned Starfleet officer had already considered and discarded a dozen courses of action.

“Mogad,” Aldo said, “I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

With what Donovan interpreted as a sigh of resignation, Mogad regarded the freighter captain, pursing his lips as if in thought. After several seconds, he finally nodded, appearing to have reached a decision.

His eyes never left Aldo’s as he said, “Kill them.”

The other Cardassians stepped forward at Mogad’s command, their phase-disruptor rifles taking aim on the assembled group of cargo haulers. Donovan watched as one of the weapons swung in his direction, its muzzle tracking toward his chest. There was no way he would ever be able to bring his phaser up before the Cardassian fired.

You’re going to die.

The whine of a phaser echoed in the shuttlebay, interrupting the soldier’s movements as a bright orange beam of energy lanced out to strike the Cardassian in the chest. Another volley shot across the room, narrowly missing Mogad as he dove for cover.

Donovan detected movement to his right and turned to see another of the Cardassians aiming a weapon in his direction. He aimed his phaser and fired as he dropped to a knee. The howl of a disruptor bolt screamed past his ear as his own phaser beam missed the shooter, striking the bulkhead just over the Cardassian’s left shoulder.

Then the entire room erupted into chaos.

Bodies scattered in all directions as the Hope’s crew scrambled for storage bins, cargo containers, or equipment lockers, anything that might provide protection. Two of the freight haulers teamed up to subdue another Cardassian, their combined weight and strength toppling the soldier to the deck. Donovan recognized one of the attackers as the ship’s pilot, Dillone, who retrieved the fallen alien’s weapon before scampering for cover.

All this happened as the remaining Cardassians opened fire on anything that moved. Donovan could only stand helpless as one of the Hope’s crew members, he did not know the man’s name, fell victim to a barrage of disruptor energy. The weapon tore through his body, leaving a gaping smoking wound as the man collapsed in a lifeless heap.

As he sought concealment of his own among the stacks of cargo modules, Donovan envisioned the interior of the shuttlebay in his mind. Most of the Hope’s crew had found refuge among the cargo containers arrayed around the room’s perimeter, while a few had been forced to resort to whatever protection they could find closer to the center of the room. The Cardassians who were still mobile had sought similar refuge.

Donovan examined his surroundings. There appeared to be no way to escape from the shuttlebay without drawing enemy fire. A quick survey of the room showed him no alternative means of exit. The situation had devolved into a standoff, with the shooting now all but stopped. Holding his breath, Donovan listened for voices or signs of movement from any of the Cardassians while scanning the gaps

between cargo containers for threats.

Nothing.

The whine of Ross's phaser nearly scared him out of his skin as the bright amber beam passed directly in front of him from left to right. He pivoted away from the shot and saw the intended target, a Cardassian who had been sneaking up on him. The blast struck the soldier and sent him collapsing to the deck.

Donovan scrambled around the other side of his own module even as he felt a hand on his shoulder. He jerked at the touch and looked up to see Ross. The commander's eyes were not looking down at him but rather tracking along with the phaser in his hand. He fired again as he helped the ensign to his feet.

"Move!" Ross hissed, pulling Donovan back the way he had come. The two men darted between cargo containers until they met up with Aldo Corsi and two of the freighter's crew huddled together behind one of the larger storage modules.

"Where's everybody else?" he asked Aldo.

Anger clouded the freighter captain's face as he shook his head. "Scattered. Colv and Walters went down when the shooting started." He pointed an accusatory finger at Ross. "This is your fault. You promised that nothing like this would happen."

"We don't have time for this," Ross countered, though he never made eye contact with Aldo as he continued to search for threats. "If Mogad gets to his ships, we're all dead." Turning to Aldo, he said, "But we need to get your people to better cover. They're sitting ducks out here."

He pointed to the Cardassian near the doorway, and Donovan saw that the soldier was partially concealed behind a single storage locker staged near the hatch, his muscular frame much larger than the bin itself. It was enough, however, to prevent anyone from getting a shot without being exposed to return fire.

"Donovan and I will secure the door," Ross said to Aldo, "and on my signal you run and you don't stop running until you get behind those modules next to the hatch. Once we regroup, we'll figure out what to do next."

It was a risky plan, but Donovan understood it for what it was, an off-the-cuff attempt to capitalize on the meager advantage Ross had fashioned from the situation. Regardless of the risk, it was still better than staying where they were and waiting for Mogad's men to beat them with their superior firepower.

"Go!" Ross hissed as he pushed away from the cargo module, firing his phaser without truly aiming the weapon as he moved. Donovan mimicked the commander's actions, firing at movement beside one of the storage lockers positioned along one nearby bulkhead. Cloaked in shadow there, the Cardassian fired in retaliation but it was a shot that went wide as Donovan fired again, sending the soldier into retreat.

As he and Ross crossed the open area toward the door, firing as they went, the hatch itself opened without warning to reveal Hu'Ghrovlatrei. The Cardassian near the door swung in the direction of the new threat but he was too slow to stop Ghrovlatrei, who leveled a Cardassian disruptor at him and fired. Energy washed over the soldier's body and he crashed unconscious to the deck.

"Good timing," Donovan said as Ghrovlatrei joined him behind a larger cargo container.

The Efrosian nodded. "I though you might need some help." She shifted to her left to make room for Ross as the commander situated himself behind the storage module. On his signal, the three Starfleet officers aimed their phasers back into the shuttlebay, their lines of sight crossing over one another to create overlapping fields of fire.

"Let's go, Aldo!" Ross called out, and Donovan saw the freighter captain and members of his crew begin to head in their direction.

From his vantage point, Donovan saw Giancarlo Corsi hunkered down behind a lone storage module near where he had been standing when the fighting broke out. He was watching his friends heading for cover, and Donovan could see from the look in Giancarlo's eyes that he was sizing up the situation and the energy bolts flying around the room, watching for his own opportunity to dash to safety.

"Come on, Gi!" Aldo yelled as he ran toward the door.

Giancarlo shook his head. "Get everybody else!" he yelled back, keeping himself protected behind the cargo container.

Using the disruptor he had recovered to protect his friend's retreat, Dillone remained in the hiding place he had found for himself and laid down a ferocious blanket of covering fire. Ross and Donovan added their own weapons to the mix, and the chamber echoed with the fierce storm of the continuous energy discharges as, one by one, those members of the Hope's crew who had not fallen during the firefight worked their way toward the rest of the group.

The Cardassians in the room were answering the heavy weapons fire with their own. Energy bolts slammed into the bulkhead near the door, and Ross and Donovan both ducked down to present as small a target as possible.

Aldo was the last of the crew to get across the danger area, turning back to his brother once he had reached the protection of the cargo modules. "Gi!"

Seeing that his friends were safe, Giancarlo turned to run toward them. Weapons fire exploded from two different points in the room, and Ross and Donovan renewed their efforts to provide cover as he dashed across the dangerous open area separating him from the rest of the group. One disruptor bolt hit the deck near Giancarlo's left foot and he dodged to the right to avoid it. The move sent him off balance and he stumbled into another cargo module.

He hesitated only an instant before starting to run again, but even that was too long. The first disruptor blast caught Giancarlo in the side, driving him into another of the storage containers. His forward movement now completely arrested, he was an easy target as a second shot hit him in the back.

"No!" Aldo shouted above the din, but it was too late.

The others could only stand and watch as multiple weapon strikes trapped Giancarlo Corsi in a vicious crossfire, and Donovan felt his jaw go slack in horror as the man fell lifeless to the floor of the shuttlebay.

## Chapter 8

“Gi!”

Donovan grabbed Aldo Corsi by the arm to keep the freighter captain from plunging headlong to where Giancarlo had fallen. It would have been a laughable attempt, except that Aldo was forced to stop as a new hell storm of disruptor fire tore through the air around him. Powerless to help his brother, Aldo instead retreated to the protection of the cargo module, sagging to the deck as he buried his head in his hands.

His features clouded with sympathy, Ross regarded the man for several seconds before directing his attention back to the situation at hand.

Ghrovlatrei’s own features were clouded by anguish as she glanced toward Aldo. “I must accept responsibility for all that has happened, Commander.” She held up the pair of disruptor rifles she had captured. “The two Cardassians sent to inspect the lower cargo decks were about to discover our equipment. I felt that I had no choice but to disable them.”

“You had no choice?” Aldo asked, the question laced with anger and pain. “My brother is dead! Your choice killed him. His death is on your hands!”

Ghrovlatrei’s mouth fell open in muted shock at the verbal assault, and Donovan even took a step backward in response to the man’s raw emotion.

“Mr. Corsi,” Ross said while somehow maintaining his own composure, “no one is more upset than I am for the loss of your brother and the other people, but right now we have to think about the rest of your crew. Mogad was going to kill all of us, and if he gets off this ship, he’ll blow us all to hell. Our only chance is to keep him here, at least until we can figure out what to do next.”

Aldo drew several deep breaths in an attempt to bring himself under control. Though the man’s grief and fury were still palpable, Donovan could see that the commander’s words were having an effect on him.

He watched as Aldo turned and regarded the faces of the four otherHope crew members who had survived the firefight. Huddling behind a row of cargo modules stacked two meters high, none of them said anything, the stress of the past few minutes almost certainly still weighing on them. Just like their captain, they too were hurting over the loss of Giancarlo and the others, but Donovan thought he recognized anger and perhaps even determination in their eyes.

Finally, Aldo returned his gaze to Ross. “What do you have in mind?”

By way of reply, Ross looked to Ghrovlatrei. “What’s our status?”

“I was able to use the sensor equipment to jam their communications,” the Efrosian replied. “Ours are affected as well, however. We cannot signal for assistance so long as the jamming field is activated.”

As he absorbed Ghrovlatrei’s report Ross said, “Pass out those disruptors.” To Aldo he asked, “I don’t suppose you’ve got any other weapons in here somewhere?”

“No,” Aldo replied, shaking his head. “We never needed them before today.”

One of theHope crew members, a human whose name Donovan did not know, stepped forward. “We’ll use clubs if we have to. Those bastards killed our friends, and they’re not getting past us without a fight.” The man’s words invoked a chorus of fierce agreement from the rest of the crew.

Ross looked to Ghrovlatrei and pointed to the tricorder sticking from the top pocket of her coveralls. "Lieutenant, can you tell me where Mogad is?"

Consulting the device, Ghrovlatrei shook her head. "There are three Cardassians scattered throughout this room that are still conscious. One of them is maintaining his position among the cargo containers near the closest of the patrol ships, but the other two are moving, perhaps to join their companion. I cannot determine which one is Mogad."

From his vantage point, Donovan could see the quartet of patrol ships, their cockpit hatches visible along the top edges of their wedge-shaped hulls. There was no way the Cardassians would be able to approach the ships without being seen.

Small favors, he mused.

With a grunt of frustration, Ross shook his head at the report before looking to Ghrovlatrei again. "Cover this hatch. Make sure none of the Cardassians get past you. Donovan, you come with me."

Her brow creasing in uncertainty, Ghrovlatrei asked, "What do you have in mind, Commander?"

\* \* \*

Ghrovlatrei was right, Donovan chided himself. This assignment was better when it was boring .

Moving in a crouch, Donovan scurried between the stacks of cargo containers, his ears straining to detect any signs of the three Cardassians who were still hiding somewhere in the shuttlebay. For the third time in as many minutes, he swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. He cursed himself for not having the presence of mind to have carried a tricorder of his own. The device would have proven invaluable to him right about now.

Of course, you had no idea Commander Ross was going to suggest something this crazy, did you?

Their time and options fading, Ross had decided on a bold course of action. With Ghrovlatrei and Dillone providing covering fire if needed, the two Starfleet officers had set out in search of Mogad. Donovan was circling along the perimeter of the room to the left of their defensive position near the exit hatch, while Ross searched somewhere among the cargo modules to the right. With no tricorders to scan for the locations of the Cardassians, both humans were forced to rely on their own senses to discern any telltale clues of their enemy's presence. So far, Donovan had seen and heard nothing to indicate he was not alone here, despite what his pounding heart and rapid breathing told him.

His thoughts were broken as a voice called out across the shuttlebay. "Mogad!" Donovan froze in place, even holding his breath as the voice, Aldo Corsi's and full of anger, echoed in the room. "Mogad," he repeated, "we have to talk. We have to put a stop to this before it gets completely out of control."

What was he doing? Why was he drawing attention to himself? Surely, Mogad or one of his subordinates would try to home in on his voice. He was placing himself and his crew in danger.

"Mogad, we can't allow this to go any further. Too many people have died or been hurt already, even though you could have prevented it. Are you ready to sacrifice more lives by failing to act?"

Or was he?

Of course.

Donovan smiled to himself, nodding in appreciation for Aldo's savvy. He was trying to get the Cardassian to speak and reveal his location. After years of dealing with Mogad, the freighter captain probably knew the gul as well as anyone outside his own family. But would he know enough to be able to provoke the Cardassian? It was a simple ploy, attacking Mogad's ego and pride.

Simple, yet effective.

"Let us not forget that it was you who chose to engage in espionage, Corsi," Mogad said, his voice crisp as always, though Donovan was more concerned with the fact that it was also close. Very close.

Somewhere to the right, he decided, though the voice was muted somewhat by the cargo containers blocking much of his view of the shuttlebay. He took a tentative step forward, the hairs on the back of his neck standing straight up.

"You have my sympathies for the loss of your brother," Mogad continued, "but his death could have been avoided if you had been honest with me from the beginning."

"You bastard! I'll—"

Donovan heard the words choke off, and his stomach heaved at the Cardassian's unmitigated gall. That, and the fact that he, along with Ross, was more than likely responsible for the death of Giancarlo Corsi as well as the other Hope crew members.

Assuming they survived, the official reports submitted by the three Starfleet officers at the conclusion of this mission would likely exonerate them from blame with regards to the tragedy that had already unfolded here. Such thoughts did not make it any easier for Donovan to cope with what had happened, however.

You don't have time for this, he scolded himself. Focus .

Aldo was not talking anymore. Had Mogad's words wounded him that much? Donovan imagined how the freighter captain must have reacted. Gret had more than likely been forced to restrain the man from yielding to blind rage and storming into the line of fire.

There was movement to his left and he whirled to see a Cardassian, not Mogad, crouched down between two large storage modules. His body and his disruptor were facing away from Donovan, and it was this unfortunate choice that bought the ensign the precious second he needed to fire his own weapon.

Even as the Cardassian succumbed to the stun beam, Donovan heard footsteps behind him. He pivoted toward the sound but he was too slow. Mogad loomed in his vision. Donovan tried to bring his phaser around but Mogad seized his wrist and parried the move, twisting the weapon away from him until it fell from Donovan's hand. The ensign's efforts to resist were useless against Mogad's superior strength and in short order he stood mere centimeters in front of the Cardassian. Then he felt the gul's massive left hand gripping his throat.

"A Starfleet phaser," Mogad said, eyeing the fallen weapon. "I knew this ship carried spies." Sadness seemed to wash over the gul's expression and he actually shook his head as he added, "Aldo was lying to me after all."

The Cardassian's fingers were digging into Donovan's throat, and he could feel his breathing already becoming labored. Light reflected off something metallic and he saw Mogad's right arm coming up, the muzzle of the disruptor pistol in the Cardassian's hand a yawning black maw as it drew closer.

"Hold it right there," a voice called out, and Donovan shifted his eyes to see Ross emerging from behind a cargo module. The commander pushed forward with incredible speed and agility until he was standing right next to Mogad, pinning the Cardassian's weapon arm against his own body and pressing his phaser into the gul's right cheek.

"Let him go," Ross hissed, menace enveloping each word as it left his mouth.

"Lower your weapon or I'll kill him," Mogad replied.

His breath coming in shallow gasps now, Donovan heard more movement behind him and then another voice that made his heart sink. "Drop your weapon, human."

Ross dropped behind Mogad, using the Cardassian for a shield as he pressed his phaser even harder into the gul's face. To the other Cardassian he said, "Drop it or your boss dies." Looking back to Mogad he added, "Make him back off and let my man go."

Smiling as his fingers dug even deeper into Donovan's throat, Mogad said, "It appears that we've reached an impasse."

Stars were swimming before Donovan's eyes and color was beginning to wash out of everything in his vision when another voice joined the fray.

"Wait!"

## Chapter 9

Aldo held his hands out and away from his body to show that he was unarmed as he beheld the surreal scene before him. Mogad held Donovan by the throat, while Ross held a phaser to the gul's head and another Cardassian trained his weapon on the commander. Ghrovlatrei had maneuvered to cover the scene with the disruptor she had confiscated from the Cardassians she had subdued.

Aldo's shout made Mogad look up in alarm, his distraction enough for Ross to act. The commander pulled his phaser from the gul's face as his right arm lashed out, sweeping downward to strike the arm Mogad was using to hold on to Donovan. The Cardassian's grip was broken and Donovan fell to the deck. All of this happened as Ghrovlatrei fired on the other soldier who had been aiming his weapon at Ross, catching the Cardassian by surprise and stunning him where he stood.

Stepping to his left to avoid another attack by Ross, Mogad raised the disruptor pistol he still carried in his hand. Ross was faster, however, striking out with his right foot and kicking the weapon from the gul's hand. The pistol clattered to the deck as Ross aimed his phaser at Mogad once more and the Cardassian froze, though he seemed to be considering his next attack despite the weapon pointed at his face.

"Wait, Mogad," Aldo repeated. "It doesn't have to be like this!"

Standing his ground, Mogad regarded the freighter captain with an incredulous expression. “You are guilty of espionage, Corsi. At the very least, you’ve been aiding this spy. That crime cannot be allowed to go unpunished.”

“This isn’t Cardassian space,” Ross said, punctuating his words with another jab of his phaser into Mogad’s cheek. “You have no authority here. Why are you so worried about what we find in the Saltok system? There has to be some kind of high-power surveillance equipment on that moon if you detected our sensors, so what’s going on there?”

Mogad sneered at the commander. “Do I look like a fool to you? Are you really expecting me to answer that question?”

“All I care about,” Ross countered, “is that you’ve attacked a Federation vessel in Federation space, apparently to cover up whatever you’re doing in a star system outside your territorial boundaries.” Leaning closer, he added, “Even that backward justice system of yours will see you don’t have a case, not to mention how the Federation Council and Starfleet will regard what’s happened here today. I’ve got enough sensor data to prompt a full-scale investigation into whatever it is you’re hiding out there. It could be interpreted as an act of aggression against us.”

Mogad shook his head. “None of that will matter when I make it known that I was protecting our interests in this sector, and you will stand trial for crimes against the Cardassian people.”

“Trial?” Ross countered. “Crimes? Do you really think the Federation will allow that to happen?”

“Shut up, both of you!”

Aldo regarded the human and Cardassian who were now looking at him, the ferocity with which he had bellowed the command muting them in identical shock. In fact, he had the attention of everyone in the room. Even Donovan, the young ensign whom Mogad had nearly choked to death, was staring at him. All of them stood in stunned silence. That was good. He wanted them quiet. He wanted them all to listen, but most especially the two idiots he was looking at right now.

Glaring at Mogad, he said, “You come aboard my ship and murder my brother in defense of your illegal encroachment into an area of space that does not belong to you. Are you planning to enslave another culture like all of the others you’ve crushed beneath your boots? Is Giancarlo but the latest victim in your endless thirst for conquest?”

Rather than the defiant response he had expected from Mogad, Aldo instead thought he saw remorse and perhaps even guilt in the Cardassian’s eyes. “The deaths of your brother and the others are regrettable, Corsi. I did not want any of your people to be hurt, but I have my duty. Soon my people will send ships to see what has happened here, and when they arrive, I will have no choice but to take you into custody.”

“What makes you believe you’ll be alive when they get here?” Ross asked, his phaser still trained on Mogad.

The gul hesitated before answering, and when he did Aldo thought he detected a sliver of uncertainty in his voice. “Perhaps I won’t be, but that changes nothing. You will still be prisoners of the Cardassian Union, and you will be executed for espionage.”



Something in the way Mogad spoke, Aldo decided, was wrong. Struck by sudden inspiration, he turned on the Cardassian. "Somehow I doubt they'll cross into Federation space without your authorization. After all, you're not even supposed to be in this region of space, are you?"

He stepped closer until he stood almost nose to nose with Mogad. "I'd bet that your superiors would even disavow any knowledge of your activities in this sector if you were found to be involved in an incident taking place in Federation space." He knew he had struck a chord when he saw Mogad's once assured demeanor begin to dissolve. The gul tried to school his features but he was not fast enough, and Aldo smiled in triumph.

"Looks like you'll be staying with us for a while, Mogad," Donovan said, his own expression one of barely restrained glee as he pulled himself to his feet.

"No," Aldo said. "We're letting him go." To Mogad he said, "Take your people and get off my ship."

Neither Mogad nor Ross made any effort to hide the surprise on their faces, though the Cardassian was the first to react. "What makes you think I won't destroy your ship the moment after I've launched?"

"Because I'm going to give you the sensor logs from the Starfleet equipment that was used to detect your presence in the Saltok system."

Though he was expecting a negative reaction from Ross, Aldo was surprised when the commander said nothing. Instead, it was Lieutenant Ghrovlatrei who responded.

"Mr. Corsi, that sensor equipment is sensitive Starfleet technology. The data it has recorded is classified. We cannot allow..."

"Enough!" Aldo roared, cutting the Efrosian off as he directed renewed fury at Ross. "I allowed you to install that equipment aboard my ship with the assurance that nothing would happen. The security of the Federation, you said. No one would ever know what we had done, you said. Yet here we are. Those three deaths are on your head as surely if you had pulled the trigger yourself." The commander's jaw slackened in astonishment as he weathered Aldo's scathing verbal assault.

He looked to Mogad once more. "I want it off my ship. Take it all. It will prove that we saw none of whatever it is that you have there. All I ask in return is that you allow us to go on our way."

The Cardassian stood in silence for several moments, his eyes studying the deck at his feet as if considering the offer. Finally, he looked at Aldo and nodded slowly. "I accept your offer, Corsi. You have my word that no harm will come to your ship once I leave." He paused, drawing a deep breath before adding, "I owe you that much, I think."

"Aldo," Ross began, "please. You can't do this."

"I can, and I will," Aldo replied, venom lacing his words. "That equipment is the reason my brother is dead. If you don't approve, you're free to get out and walk home."

"What am I supposed to tell Starfleet?" Ross asked.

Turning away from the group, Aldo stalked across the shuttlebay deck toward the exit, ignoring the compassionate faces of his remaining crew. As he walked, he cast a final answer over his shoulder. "I don't give a damn what you tell them."

Aldo had more urgent things to worry about. How would he explain to Domenica that the organization entrusted to keep the peace with the Federation's enemies, the same group that Giancarlo had idolized and that his young daughter hoped to one day join, had killed her cherished uncle? How would he do so while sparing her the rage and pain that weighed on him? He did not know if such an act was even possible.

He did not know if it would ever be possible.

## Chapter 10

Stardate 53909.2, Earth Year 2376

Silence blanketed the cockpit of the Pharaon, broken only by the periodic beeps and clicks of control consoles and computer displays. It was a silence born of death and despair, of pain buried for far too long beneath a veneer of anger and detachment. Domenica Corsi found it stifling as she regarded her father through eyes blurred by tears, as he sat across from her in the cramped cockpit.

She watched him take a final drink of his juice, then sigh and begin to fidget with the now-empty bottle. Remembering her own beverage, Corsi looked down at the juice in her hand. Though her throat was parched, the thought of drinking the juice made her stomach lurch.

Instead, she returned her attention to her father and saw that his expression was one of misery and fatigue after unburdening himself of the secret he had carried all these years. Corsi thought she saw a hint of relief in her father's eyes, however, as if the confession might somehow have begun the process of cleansing the anguish from his soul.

"I've never told anyone what really happened that day," he said after several moments. "Not even your mother knows. After we got home, I swore the crew to secrecy. I didn't want one of them saying something around you or your mother."

Nodding, Corsi replied, "Thanks for telling me, Dad. It's good to know the truth, about anything." She paused before asking her next question, unsure of the reaction she would receive. "You've always said Uncle Gi died in an accident. Why did you lie about it?"

"It was no lie," Aldo said. "He did die in an accident; a horrible accident caused by Starfleet officers who were incapable of doing their own jobs."

"Dad," Corsi said, her tone one of gentle caution, "Starfleet didn't kill Uncle Gi. The Cardassians did."

It was not the first time her father had endured discussion of this topic, she realized as she watched his features harden. The line of his jaw tightened beneath the weathered skin of his face and his nostrils flared in the way they always did as his temper rose toward its boiling point. The index finger of his right hand leveled at her, his hand still gripping the empty juice bottle, and his eyes were wide with anger.

"Did you even listen to me? Are you so schooled by your superiors that you believe everything they do is right? Is your loyalty to Starfleet stronger than your family blood?"

Corsi felt her own ire mounting at the words, the same ones her father had used against her before on those rare occasions that they actually had spoken to one another. He knew just which buttons to push to set her off, playing her family loyalty against her sense of duty and service, those aspects of her character that made her just like him.

And just like her uncle, as well.

He's not driving me away. This time, I'm meeting him halfway.

"Dad, I listened," she began slowly. "I can't defend what Starfleet asked you to do, but it was a different time then. They were all but at war with the Cardassians and they asked for your help, but you knew what you were getting into. It's not as if you were commandeered."

"I might as well have been," Aldo replied. "As soon as that Ross started talking, he had to have seen the fire in Gi's eyes. Ross knew he was excited about helping, and he played us for suckers."

"Uncle Gi was no sucker," Corsi countered, "and he knew what he was doing just like you did." She remembered the tales of Giancarlo Corsi's life that her parents had shared with her in the years after his death. His enthusiasm and level-headedness in the face of adversity and even crisis were recalled often at the family dinner table, and accounts of his trust and loyalty were cited among them as unmatched, even by Corsi family standards. Her impression of the man was almost larger than life, she knew, a hero to be admired and even emulated. With all of that, it was no surprise that he would jump at the chance to help Starfleet, the organization he had admired but could not join.

Uncle Gi wanted to shine in Starfleet's eyes. He wanted to make a difference.

"But his death wasn't enough for them," Aldo said, his face reddening in seething rage. "Oh, no. Starfleet wanted revenge for my giving up their precious sensors and secret data. They destroyed my business. They restricted access to my shipping routes, and that cut me out of contracts for shipments I had been running regularly for years. I had to sell every ship I owned but this one, *Domenica*. I rebuilt the business from the bottom up, but I didn't have Gi to help me this time. I worked like hell so you kids wouldn't know the difference."

Corsi's own jaw clenched in anger at the remarks. "Starfleet did no such damn thing, Dad, and you know it. Ours wasn't the only family shaken up by the war, either. Much of the territory you and other freighters traveled fell under Cardassian rule, and Starfleet had no choice but to restrict travel in certain sectors. They did everything possible to make the quadrant safe for everyone."

"Not everyone," he corrected. "Not Gi."

Sighing, Corsi shook her head. "It's hard to explain, Dad. It's different for Starfleet officers than it is for other people. It was different for Uncle Gi, too, at least if I'm to believe all those stories you told me about him. He understood the risks, but he was on a mission, not just standing by."

"Your uncle was not a Starfleet officer, *Domenica*."

"He was in his heart!"

It exploded from her lips, startling both of them into momentary silence. Aldo recoiled at the force of his daughter's words, and Corsi herself had to pause to consider how she had reacted before continuing. How could she explain with mere words what drove her to put on her uniform each day?

“Dad, it’s like what I feel for you and for Mom, and for the family, but different. I feel completely responsible for the security officers on my detail, for my captain, my ship and its crew, for, well, the Federation and everyone in it. I’ve been called to serve, Dad. I have duties to perform, and people depend on me. It makes me feel alive to serve them. Uncle Gi felt the same way, and you do too. Who do you think gave that to me?”

Corsi watched as moisture gathered in the corners of her father’s eyes. After several moments, he nodded slowly. “I know. I’ve known for a long time. Your mother has talked of it for years, and I didn’t want to admit it, but I see it now.”

“What, Dad?”

“In your eyes,” he said, “and when you talk like that. I see Gi. All that time you two spent together when you were little, all of the games you would play, all of the dreams he shared with you when you were too small to really remember, Dommie. They really are there, inside you. I see it now.”

New tears welled up in Corsi’s eyes, and she reached over and placed her hand over her father’s. “If that’s really true, then maybe Uncle Gi realized just what he was getting into that day. I bet he was willing to give up everything for what Starfleet was trying to accomplish. That was his chance to live his dream.”

“Your mother said the same thing about him once,” Aldo said. “It took me years to accept that I’d lost him to that dream, just as it’s hard to cope with the idea that I might lose my only daughter to that dream, too.”

The words caught Corsi off guard and she found herself unable to respond to them. She had felt confident while explaining why she served in Starfleet, but during those fleeting moments she had forgotten the price for that service, as paid by half of the *Vinci*’s crew.

Now, her father had thrust her backward in time, back to the boiling, deadly clouds of liquid-metal hydrogen that made up Galvan VI. He had plunged her back to the point of the ship’s near-destruction, to her own near-fatal electrocution, and the deaths of so many friends and shipmates.

Maybe I should be dead, too.

“As strange as it sounds, though,” Aldo said, “I think I understand better now. I’m not saying I’m comfortable with it, but this is good for me, and for both of us.” Looking up from the deck, his eyes locked with hers once more. “And I want you to know, Dommie, that I’m proud of you. If you do have anything of your uncle in you, then you probably feel like you’ve failed your friends and your captain, but you didn’t. You showed them how to fight until you couldn’t fight anymore, and then you showed them how to get up and fight again. That’s what Corsis do.”

Corsi smiled, letting the pride she had sought from her father for so many years, wash over her. “Dad, you know I’ll be in danger again. Maybe not as bad as on Galvan VI, but it’s sure to happen,” she said. “You can’t keep worrying about me.”

“Oh, I’ll worry, but not as much as I might,” Aldo replied, “because you’ll have the ax with you.”

It took a moment for that to register, and when it did Corsi caught herself gasping in shock. “I...Dad, I don’t understand.”

“When I think back to that day,” her father said, “I wonder if things might have been different had the ax been aboard. But it belongs with you now, Domenica. You earned the right to carry it, and you honor the family when you do.”

The tears came freely now, as Corsi absorbed her father’s words. For centuries, the ax had been a cherished family memento, its history rife with both triumph and tragedy. Passed down through the generations, it had grown to be more than a simple heirloom, taking on the role of good luck talisman and even, perhaps, that of guardian angel. Her father had begrudgingly entrusted it to her once, his concern for the upholding of family custom that the ax travel with a member sworn to the service of others winning out over his disdain for his daughter’s commitment to Starfleet.

Now, however, he was giving it to her with his blessing and the assurance that she too had done her part to sustain her family’s tradition.

Rising from her seat to go to her father, Corsi realized he had met her halfway when she felt his muscled arms wrap around her. She sank into the comforting embrace, a welcome act after so many years. Though they were a long way from closing the rift that had separated them for so long, she knew that the healing had begun, even in a small way, today.

As they stood there, the deck shuddered beneath their feet and Corsi heard a humming from somewhere below them that she recognized as the Pharaon’s main warp drive coming back online.

“I guess Wilson and Stevens are finished,” she said, wiping new tears from her eyes.

Pulling away from their embrace, albeit reluctantly, Aldo sighed in relief at the soothing drone of the ship’s engines. “Wonderful! I think we’re back on the road.” They heard footsteps bouncing along the metal deck plates of the corridor outside the cockpit and turned to see Stevens appear in the hatch opening, a smile on his face.

“We’re good to go,” he said. “Wilson’s checking a few readings but I think the replacement articulation frame will hold just fine. We found a couple of pieces in storage that did the trick. I only had to dig into the...”

He paused, the realization of what had just been said now evident on his face. Looking to Aldo, he stammered through the remainder of the sentence. “Uh...dig, into the storage hold and look for spare parts. Wilson did all the work, Mr. Corsi. I didn’t touch a thing without his being right next to me.”

Waving the explanation away, Aldo smiled. “Domenica spoke well of your abilities, Mr. Stevens. Forgive me for doubting them. I trust all went well?”

Stevens smiled and gave a thumbs-up. “Yes, sir. Now if you would excuse me, I’d like to wash up and get something to eat. Can I get anything for you two?”

Aldo shook his head. “I need to get us under way and contact the Thelkans to let them know we’ll be a bit late.”

“I’ll catch up in a bit, Fabian.” Corsi watched Stevens nod and return down the corridor. Behind her, Aldo had retaken his seat and started tapping commands into the control console. She waited in silence for the several minutes it took him to contact the Thelkan shipmaster and to make his preparations to get the Pharaon under way again before saying anything. “Dad?”

“Yes, Dommie?”

“This trip...this talk...meant a lot to me,” she said. “I hope it’s not our last.”

Aldo smiled. “It won’t be. Now go catch up to your friend. He’s a good man, Dommie, from what I can tell. It’s plain that he likes you a lot.”

“Yeah,” Corsi said. “And that’s part of the problem.”

\* \* \*

As she headed in the direction of Stevens’s quarters, Corsi realized her pace was quickening the farther she walked. She wanted to tell him about the conversation with her father. For the first time in years, she felt reconnected to her family and completely proud of her chosen career in Starfleet, and she could not wait to share her newfound good feelings with him.

Tapping the keypad next to the door to Stevens’s room, she stepped inside as the hatch slid aside. “Fabian? Are you in here?”

Then she stopped short as she looked into the room’s small bathroom and saw Stevens standing at the sink, naked but for a towel around his waist.

“Uh, I’ll come back,” she said, turning to head back through the door.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Stevens replied as he turned from the sink, rivulets of water in his hair as he wiped his hands with another towel. “Come on in.”

Nodding, she made a concerted effort to avoid looking toward the bathroom as she stepped into the room and took a seat on the unmade bunk. “You guys made pretty quick work of the warp drive. I think Dad was impressed.”

“Wilson did all the real work,” Stevens admitted as he put away a washcloth and soap. “But play up the S.C.E. angle for your father. Maybe he’ll start coming around on his Starfleet issues.”

Corsi smiled at that. “He might be already. While you were working, we talked like we’ve never talked before. He may be starting to understand why I’ve stayed in Starfleet all this time.”

“That’s great, Dom.” As he moved from the bathroom, it seemed to be Stevens’s turn to avoid eye contact as he went through the motions of tidying up the small sleeping quarters. “Maybe you can explain it to me later, if you want.”

Something in the way he said the words caused her brow to crease in puzzlement. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Stevens turned from a storage compartment to meet her gaze. “I’m getting out,” he said. “I’ve decided to leave Starfleet.”

“What?” Corsi shuddered at the thought, a chill reaching from her belly into her throat with his words, and questions rang in her mind. Fabian is leaving the ship? For good? Where had this come from? “When did you decide this?”

“I’ve been thinking about it the whole trip,” he said, “since before we left the *theda Vinci*, really. Seeing you at home with your family, though, that really set the hook in me. I can do what I do for the S.C.E. in plenty of places and not get myself killed.” He shrugged. “Maybe I’ll head back to Rigel, or maybe your dad can hire me on for one of his freighters. It doesn’t really matter. I just think it’s time for me to move on.”

“The hell it is.”

For the second time that day, Corsi found herself surprised by her tone of voice and the conviction of her words, this time directed toward an unsuspecting and now dumbstruck Fabian Stevens. Once more, Corsi’s thoughts turned to her mother, who was convinced that she would have the strength to find the words that would help Stevens when he needed it most.

If only I could feel so confident.

“Don’t just look stupid at me,” she said, her voice hardening with each word. “You know you’re not leaving. It sounds great, running away when the going gets tough, but that’s not how we handle things on the *theda Vinci*.”

“So that’s how it is,” Stevens said, regarding her with his own look of determination. “You put on your ‘Core-Breach’ mask and charge your way through another situation. That may work for you, Dom, but not for me. I left too much behind on *Galvan VI*.”

The rage Corsi had been holding in check, first with her father and now with Stevens, erupted to the surface. “You did? I lost seven members of my security detail. Seven! Half the crew was killed! Do you know that for over a week I had to keep a highlighted list of the ship’s complement next to my bed, so that when I woke up from my nightmares I could check to see who was still alive?”

Stevens’s mouth fell open in shock, but he said nothing. Corsi did not give him a chance, either, rising from the bunk and pointing one long finger at him.

“This is not just your burden, Fabian,” she said, her pitch and volume continuing to climb. “We all are hurting, and we’ll hurt even more when we start seeing all the new people assigned to the ship when we get back, but we have our duty.”

“Duty!” Stevens shouted in response, the word echoing off the walls of the small room. It was his turn to vent anger, and she had never seen him do so with such force. “It wasn’t Duff’s damn duty to jump out of the ship for that warhead! Now he’s gone! It wasn’t his job but he took it, and now he’s dead!”

In barely a whisper, Corsi spoke. “It was my job.”

Stevens stopped in the midst of drawing breath for his next outburst, her response undercutting him. “What?”

“Fabian, it was my damn job!” She gritted her teeth and turned away from him, not wanting him to see the pain in her face and the tears in her eyes. “I was supposed to disarm the Wildfire device, but I got hurt! I was useless, and a damned engineer did my job! Do you think I don’t know that Duffy died because of me?”

Corsi threw away any restraint she had left and slumped back on Stevens’s bunk. The sobs racked her body with the sorrow, frustration, and anger that she had held within her since the moment she had

learned of Duffy's death.

Sitting down beside her, Stevens put an arm around her shoulders. "Dom. Duff did what he did for all of us. He saved the ship, and he would have done it a hundred times over if he could have. It's not your fault."

Meeting his eyes with tears running down her cheeks. Corsi asked, "If I can remember that and keep going, do you think that maybe you can, too?"

Stevens said nothing for a moment as Corsi tried to regain her composure, offering her one end of the towel slung over his shoulder. She dabbed at her eyes and blew her nose, drawing a disgusted look from Stevens before he handed her the rest of the towel.

"Keep it."

She could not help the laugh that escaped her lips, and she had to wipe her eyes again as more tears flowed forth. "Damn you," she whispered, a small smile forming on her face.

Drawing a deep breath, Stevens said, "You know, back during the Dominion War, when Duff and I hadn't known each other very long, he dragged me out of a Breen firefight and saved my life. He said we were phaser-proof, and even bragged about it at this bar where we...well, that's not important. What is important is that for some silly reason, I believed him. There were times I thought we were invincible, Dom." He shook his head. "I don't think I can go back to the da Vinci knowing that Duff won't be there."

Corsi paused, then offered her hand to Stevens. As he took it she said, "I'll be there, Fabian, just like you were there for me when I needed you. No questions asked, you can lean on me as much as you need to." Squeezing his hand, she added, "We'll get through this together."

"I could use a friend, you know," he said after a moment, "especially one who knows her way around a good bar brawl."

"What, you planning on talking to some more Tellarites, Fabe?"

He chuckled at that as he excused himself to the bathroom to finish getting cleaned up. There was a hint of the old Fabian Stevens in the smile he wore as the door closed behind him, one she was grateful to see. The door closed behind him, leaving her alone in the room with only her thoughts for company.

In just a few hours two men, whose importance to her she was only just now beginning to realize, had taken a few steps toward healing and understanding, both with her help. Corsi steeled herself for the journey ahead, both with Fabian Stevens and with her father, keeping mindful of her duties as a daughter, a friend, and a Starfleet officer. She was ready for anything.

After all, she was a Corsi, and that's what Corsis did.

## About the Authors

DAYTON WARD has been a Star Trek fan since conception (his, not the show's). After serving for eleven years in the U.S. Marine Corps, he discovered the private sector and the piles of cash to be made there as a software engineer. His start in professional writing came as a result of placing stories in each of



the first three *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* anthologies. He is the author of the *Star Trek* novel *In the Name of Honor*, as well as having cowritten several other *Star Trek: S.C.E.* adventures with Kevin Dilmore (the two-part *Interphase* and the three-part *Foundations*). Along with other *Star Trek* projects, Dayton's first original science fiction novel, *The Last World War*, is set for publication in September 2003. Though he currently lives in Kansas City with his wife, Michi, he is a Florida native and still maintains a torrid long-distance romance with his beloved Tampa Bay Buccaneers. You can contact Dayton and learn more about his writing at [www.daytonward.com](http://www.daytonward.com).

KEVIN DILMORE remains very thankful to the person who, at age nine, tipped him off to the fact that *Star Trek* was a live-action television show before it was a Saturday morning cartoon. A graduate of the University of Kansas, he works as news editor and "cops and courts" reporter for a twice-weekly newspaper in Paola, Kansas, where he lives with his daughter, Colleen. Kevin also covers "nonfiction" aspects of the *Star Trek* universe as a contributing writer for *Star Trek Communicator* magazine. He is looking forward to his future writing projects with Dayton Ward, which include additional tales in the *Star Trek: S.C.E.* line. Kevin still harbors his adolescent desire to see his name shared with a doomed redshirted ensign in an Original Series novel.

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