

# CONTENTS

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[COMING NEXT MONTH: Star Trek™: S.C.E. #40](#)

## **Other eBooks in the Star Trek™: Starfleet Corps of Engineers series from Pocket Books:**

#1: The Belly of the Beast by Dean Wesley Smith

#2: Fatal Error by Keith R.A. DeCandido

#3: Hard Crash by Christie Golden

#4: Interphase Book 1 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#5: Interphase Book 2 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#6: Cold Fusion by Keith R.A. DeCandido

#7: Invincible Book 1 by David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido

#8: Invincible Book 2 by David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido

#9: The Riddled Post by Aaron Rosenberg

#10: Gateways Epilogue: Here There Be Monsters by Keith R.A. DeCandido

#11: Ambush by Dave Galanter & Greg Brodeur

#12: Some Assembly Required by Scott Ciencin & Dan Jolley

#13:No Surrender by Jeff Mariotte

#14:Caveat Emptor by Ian Edginton & Mike Collins

#15:Past Life by Robert Greenberger

#16:Oaths by Glenn Hauman

#17:Foundations Book 1 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#18:Foundations Book 2 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#19:Foundations Book 3 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#20:Enigma Ship by J. Steven York & Christina F. York

#21:War Stories Book 1 by Keith R.A. DeCandido

#22:War Stories Book 2 by Keith R.A. DeCandido

#23:Wildfire Book 1 by David Mack

#24:Wildfire Book 2 by David Mack

#25:Home Fires by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#26:Age of Unreason by Scott Ciencin

#27:Balance of Nature by Heather Jarman

#28:Breakdowns by Keith R.A. DeCandido

#29:Aftermath by Christopher L. Bennett

#30:Ishtar Rising Book 1 by Michael A. Martin & Andy Mangels

#31:Ishtar Rising Book 2 by Michael A. Martin & Andy Mangels

#32:Buying Time by Robert Greenberger

#33:Collective Hindsight Book 1 by Aaron Rosenberg

#34:Collective Hindsight Book 2 by Aaron Rosenberg

#35:The Demon Book 1 by Loren L. Coleman & Randall N. Bills

#36:The Demon Book 2 by Loren L. Coleman & Randall N. Bills

#37:Ring Around the Sky by Allyn Gibson

#38:Orphans by Kevin Killiany

#39: Grand Designs by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

## COMING SOON:

#40: Failsafe by David Mack

#41: Bitter Medicine by Dave Galanter



## GRAND DESIGNS

Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

An Original Publication of POCKET BOOKS



POCKET BOOKS, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.  
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY  
10020

Copyright © 2004 by Paramount Pictures. All Rights Reserved.



STAR TREK is a Registered Trademark of  
Paramount Pictures.

This book is published by Pocket Books, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., under exclusive license from Paramount Pictures.

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information address Pocket Books, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

ISBN: 0-7434-8086-4

POCKET and colophon are registered trademarks of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Visit us on the World Wide Web:

<http://www.SimonSays.com/st>

<http://www.startrek.com>

## CHAPTER

1

Now...

Alarm klaxons wailed across the bridge of the *Vinci*, echoing off the bulkheads and driving directly into David Gold's skull.

"Captain!" Lieutenant Anthony Shabalala shouted from the tactical station. "Orbital Station 4 is moving out of position and beginning a descent toward the planet!"

"Kill the alarm and go to yellow alert." Gold rose from his command chair. "Shabalala, put the station on screen."

The image on the main viewer shifted and he recognized the stout, utilitarian lines of one of Rhaax III's four orbital cargo transfer platforms. It was his first time viewing one of the stations this closely. More than half the size of Spacedock, the Rhaaxan platform possessed none of the more artistic blending of form and function that characterized Earth's primary starship maintenance facility. Even from this distance, Gold could make out the numerous docking ports and cargo storage bay hatches adorning the station's outer hull.

"Hail them," he said, silently counting as contact with Orbital Station 4 was attempted and his anxiety level increasing with each second the link was not established. It only got worse when Shabalala shook his head.

"No response, sir."

“Tev and the away team are on that station,” Commander Sonya Gomez said. “Have you tried contacting them?”

Nodding, Shabalala replied, “None of the team is answering, Commander.”

Sitting at one of the bridge’s rear science stations, Fabian Stevens turned in his chair. “Captain, the station isn’t just falling from its orbit. It’s a controlled maneuver, descending toward the planet at a constant speed and moving under its own power.”

“Where the hell is it going?” Gold asked. “It’ll burn up if it enters the atmosphere.” What was happening over there? Already on board as part of his assigned inspection duties, Tev would have called in the moment anything unexpected occurred. Was he hurt? What about the rest of the away team?

Oh no.

It was so simple, he realized. Even though the station likely would break up as it passed through the atmosphere, killing everyone aboard, the facility’s size and mass would still be enough to cause widespread damage when it impacted on Rhaax III’s surface. And if some lunatic was currently maneuvering the station so that it would fall on or near a populated area...

“How much time until they enter the atmosphere?” he asked.

Shabalala checked his console before replying. “At their present course and speed, about twelve minutes, sir.”

“Something else, Captain,” Stevens called out. “Sensors are detecting a massive chemical reaction underway inside some of the modules storing oxygen and other compounds for their life support systems.”

“Is it a threat to the people on board?” Gold asked.

Stevens shook his head. “I can’t say just yet, sir.”

“Well, find out,” the captain snapped.

Though Ambassador Marshall had been standing silently at the back of the bridge to this point, Gold knew that he would not be able to hold his tongue much longer. The captain’s suspicions were confirmed when Marshall stepped forward.

“How many people are aboard the station?” he asked.

“Sensors show two hundred and five life signs,” Shabalala reported.

“You have to do something, Captain,” Marshall said, his face a mask of anguish.

“I am doing something, Ambassador,” the captain replied. Despite being irritated at the diplomat’s observation of the obvious, Gold chose to ignore it and channel that energy elsewhere. Turning back to the viewscreen, he ordered, “Wong, move us into transporter range.”

“Captain,” Shabalala called out, “I am receiving an incoming hail from the station.”

“On-screen,” Gold said.

The viewer changed images again, this time to show a Rhaaxan male, muscled and wearing dark gray worker’s coveralls. His orange features were clouded in apparent anger.

“Federation ship,” the Rhaaxan said, “our quarrel is not with you, but rather the government of our home planet. Do not attempt to interfere with us in any way. You are directed to keep your vessel out of range of your weapons and matter transfer systems. We have your officers in custody here and though I do not wish to harm them, I will kill them if necessary.”

“What do you want?” the captain asked.

“Our freedom, once and for all. Either that is granted today, or everyone on Rhaax will die.”

## CHAPTER

2

Three weeks earlier...

Sitting in his customary place at the head of the table in the U.S.S. da Vinci’s conference room, Captain David Gold schooled his features and put on his best smile, and with practiced ease allowed none of the irritation he felt toward Ambassador Gabriel Marshall to show.

Gold had dealt with the ambassador on infrequent occasions in recent years, but all of those encounters had taken place via subspace communications link. Most of those interactions had also been quite unpleasant. With little patience for diplomats in general, and Marshall in particular, Gold was thankful to have avoided face-to-face meetings with the man to this point. Being the captain of a vessel assigned to deep space duty helped in that regard.

Naturally, karma had therefore seen fit to bring the ambassador across space to him.

“We’ve been here nearly a month now, Captain,” Marshall said, “and your people haven’t found anything. I’m sure I don’t have to remind you that the longer this process takes, the longer the approval of the Rhaaxans’ application for Federation membership is delayed.”

Gold knew that the government of Rhaax III was enthusiastic about joining the United Federation of Planets, having tendered their application several years ago. Though the process of admitting a new member to the Federation was anything but simple, it was not until discussions between the Rhaaxans and the Federation started that things became truly chaotic.

“Ambassador,” Gold said, “my people are working as quickly and thoroughly as they can. This whole megillah has been problematic from the start, and even you have to admit that Starfleet and the Federation haven’t made things any easier.”

It was during initial talks with the Rhaaxan government that Starfleet expressed interest in establishing a base on the system’s fifth planet, where a colony had been founded nearly two centuries earlier. The

system's proximity to Romulan space made it an attractive location for a Starfleet facility that might serve as the base of operations for a new series of observation outposts along the border. Rhaax V, or Numai as it had been named by the colonists, also possessed rich deposits of dilithium and other useful minerals. With all of this on the discussion table, along with the government of Rhaax III's eagerness to open up trade routes with Starfleet and the Federation, membership and cooperation seemed a certainty.

Unfortunately, the people already living on Numai had other ideas.

"Of course I can admit that things haven't gone as smoothly as we would like, Captain," Marshall replied, "but it's because they haven't that I'm here. It's my job to see that this dispute between the Rhaaxans and their colonists is settled quickly and amicably for everyone involved."

Unable to stop himself, Gold chuckled at Marshall's bold statement. "No disrespect to your diplomatic prowess, Ambassador, but that's obviously a goal that's easier stated than accomplished. From everything I've seen, the Rhaaxans on both planets appear to be set in their ways."

Established at great expense in money and matériel, the colony on Numai had remained an independent entity since its founding, charting its own development while maintaining ties with Rhaax III through trade of minerals, crops, and the like. Part of the original agreement between the settlers and the government was that just over a century from now, the colony would become a sanctioned state of Rhaax III, falling under its control while sharing the fruits of

its development for the betterment of all. In the beginning, that had seemed a sensible and agreeable course of action.

Then, the Federation arrived.

Since learning of Starfleet's interest in establishing a base on the colony planet, the Rhaaxan government had been applying steady pressure on the colony, trying to force its early return to the fold. The colonists so far had resisted such a move. Fearing that the identity and culture they had labored to create over two centuries would be lost upon being absorbed back into the larger Rhaaxan civilization, the colony's leadership had instead made known its intent to apply for separate Federation membership.

"Let me worry about smoothing things over between Rhaax III and its colony, Captain," Marshall said. "It's only a matter of time until I steer them to an agreement."

Had he not forced himself to keep his expression neutral, Gold surely would have rolled his eyes at the ambassador's pronouncement. While Theda Vinci's current assignment had taken several weeks to become boring, tiresome, and frustrating, the diplomat had arrived with those qualities already operating at full capacity—and yet still had done his level best to improve in those areas.

However, despite any animosity Gold might feel toward Marshall, the captain knew that the diplomat was good at his job. He would have to be, from what Gold had learned in his own research into the Rhaaxan situation. The populations of both worlds had mixed feelings about how to solve the problem between Rhaax III and its colony. Polls had shown that while many citizens agreed with their governments, a nearly equal number of both planets' populations felt the colonists had earned the right to run their world as they saw fit.

The Federation had mediated several attempts to debate the issues, but in the end, neither side was willing to budge from its position. As time passed, tensions rose, rhetoric sharpened, and the rift between the two planets had grown to a chasm, a fact soon demonstrated with alarming clarity.

“This latest incident would seem to be a major obstacle to overcome,” Gold said. “It was just arguing around a table until the Rhaaxan government authorized an attack on the colony.”

And it had not stopped there. Rhaax III’s military resources were limited, and the colonists were able to defend themselves long enough for the assault to be called off. Following that failed action, the Rhaaxan leaders had upped the stakes by threatening to unleash a biogenic weapon. Such an attack would force an evacuation of Numai. By cooperation or coercion, the government rationalized, the colonists would return to the embrace of their mother world.

“The very idea is appalling,” Gold continued, “but what’s even more alarming is that after all of this, we’re still sitting here, considering Federation membership for these people.”

For the first time since his arrival aboard the *Vinci*, Gold saw Marshall’s normal bluster falter. The ambassador leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and rubbed the bridge of his nose. The captain said nothing, allowing the other man a moment to collect himself.

Returning his attention to Gold, Marshall said, “Ordinarily, you’d be right, Captain. It goes against everything we represent to welcome with open arms one society willing to decimate another for its own ends. However, we caused the problems between the Rhaaxans and their colonists through our own stupidity. Our putting the cart before the horse, getting excited about the strategic possibilities this system offers, has brought these people to the brink of war. Now it’s my responsibility to resolve this situation peacefully, and I can’t do that without the help of you and your team.”

Though he was amused at the notion of how painful such an admission had to be for a man like Marshall, Gold chose not to mention it. Instead, he said, “The Rhaaxans could have chosen a path other than confrontation to solve their problems. The colonists were the ones who called for disarmament, so at least they appear to want to work things out.”

The Federation had responded by sending in the *Vinci* and its S.C.E. contingent tasked as weapons inspectors to oversee the collection and disposal of any large-scale weapons, conventional or otherwise, the Rhaaxans might possess. Commander Gomez had wasted no time putting her team of engineers to work, sending them to key facilities on both planets as well as the family of space stations orbiting both worlds that were used to transfer cargo shipped back and forth across the system.

Having apparently regained his usual smug demeanor, Marshall said, “The colony’s desire for a quick resolution is precisely why I find your team’s progress discouraging.”

“It’s only discouraging if you hope to find something, Ambassador,” Gold replied. “According to Gomez, there’s nothing for us to find. All large-scale conventional weapons were accounted for, and there’s no evidence of any biogenic weapons or that there ever were any.” The inspections had been underway for nearly three weeks when Gomez made the pronouncement: The threat against the colony was a hoax. When the Rhaaxan Assembly was confronted with her team’s findings, the governing officials had confessed that no biogenic weapon existed, despite their best efforts to produce one.

“It was all a ruse,” Gold continued. “The assembly saw it as their last chance to convince the colony to stand with them in their quest to join the Federation.” Shaking his head, he added, “If that’s true, and so far we have no reason to believe it isn’t, then perhaps we can concentrate on working out a lasting agreement between these people.”

He leaned forward until his forearms rested on the conference table. As he did so, he caught himself



staring for an extra moment at the prosthetic that had replaced his left hand, lost months earlier during the tragic mission to Galvan VI. The biosynthetic hand looked real, felt real, and was superior to his original hand in every measurable sense, a triumph of biomechanical engineering that had been the best way to provide him with a replacement for the loss he had suffered.

In a similar fashion, it now fell to Marshall and the *theda Vinci* crew to craft a solution here, one that was better than leaving the Rhaaxans to their own devices.

“What happens after all of this?” Gold asked. “Once we straighten this mess out, it still leaves the issue of allowing the Rhaaxans to join the Federation. You can’t possibly think they’re ready.”

Marshall shook his head. “Perhaps not the home planet, but the colony has potential. Even after the threats leveled against them, they’ve handled this situation with remarkable poise and grace. There may be a bright side to this whole thing after all.”

“Starfleet wanting that base on their planet doesn’t hurt, either,” Gold countered.

To the captain’s surprise, Marshall did not refute the observation or even respond with his usual air of irritation. “I’d be lying if I said that wasn’t a factor, Captain. Given what the Federation has been through, we need eyes, ears, and friends wherever we can find them.”

Before Gold could comment further, the whistle of the ship’s intercom filled the air.

“Bridge to Captain Gold,” called the voice of Lieutenant Commander Mor glasch Tev, the *theda Vinci*’s second officer. “Commander Gomez is hailing us from the surface and is requesting to speak with you and Ambassador Marshall.”

“Put her through, Tev,” Gold replied, directing his attention to the viewscreen on the conference lounge’s far wall. The image on the display shifted from a schematic of the *theda Vinci* to the face of Sonya Gomez.

“What can we do for you, Gomez?” he asked. Though her appearance was as immaculate as always, Gold noted the shadows under his first officer’s eyes and her slightly paled complexion. Gomez and her teams had been working steadily for weeks on their current assignment and the strain was beginning to show around the edges, but Gomez herself had also been pulling double duty as she kept Marshall apprised of the current situation. The diplomat had deluged her with his various requests, demands, and whatnot for weeks now.

Gold had wanted to step in and say something, but this mission was one of those rare occasions where the S.C.E. team’s autonomy worked in Marshall’s favor. Gomez and her team had received their orders on this mission directly from Captain Montgomery Scott, head of the S.C.E. back at Starfleet Command. Scott’s superiors had directed full cooperation and support for Marshall’s mission to the Rhaaxan system, leaving Gold and the rest of the *theda Vinci* crew as little more than interested bystanders.

Gomez had taken a small away team to investigate one of the prime target areas on Rhaax III’s southern-most continent, a scientific research laboratory that was one of several sites suspected of housing secret weapons development operations. Even before she replied, a twinge in his gut told Gold that for Gomez to want to talk to both him and Marshall, she must have found something noteworthy.

His instincts were confirmed as soon as he heard the commander’s voice.

“Hello, Captain,” Gomez said. “I’ve got good news and bad news. We’ve found evidence of advanced

biogenics research. Advanced for them, anyway. Their level of technology is roughly equivalent to mid-twenty-second-century Earth.”

“So they do have biogenic weapons?” Gold asked.

On the screen, Gomez shook her head. “Not yet, sir, but they’ve been working hard to create just the type of weapon they threatened to use against the colonists. If they keep to the same track they’re currently on, they’ll be able to field a weapon in about eighteen months.”

Leaning forward in his chair, Marshall’s brow furrowed as he listened to Gomez’s report. “Commander, what do you mean by ‘keep to the same track’? I take it you haven’t given us the bad news yet.”

Gold noted not only a distinct pause after Marshall’s question, but also a fleeting look of unease on Gomez’s face. Was she hesitating for some reason?

Whatever was giving her doubts, she got control of it quickly before replying.

“We’ve scanned their computer records, Ambassador, and found a lot of data on numerous failed experiments they’ve conducted over the last several years. The thing is…”

Her voice trailed off and Gold again saw the uncertainty in her eyes. What was wrong with her? Was whatever she and her away team discovered that serious?

“Gomez?” he prompted after a few more seconds.

“Captain,” she continued, “even with the conclusions reached during some of these botched attempts, they got close to a solution a couple of times without even realizing it. Someone could actually stumble across a correct biogenic sequence by accident and have the makings of a superweapon in just a few months. Sooner, if they push it.”

Neither Gold nor Marshall said anything as the revelation sank in. Though the Rhaaxan government had been bluffing when they had threatened the colonists with a global weapon, they had been working to create just such a device. Had the means been at their disposal, would the assembly have actually authorized its use?

Anxiety clouding his features, Marshall looked to Gold. “What do you suggest we do about this?”

To Gomez, the captain said, “Gomez, impound any research data and material you feel relevant to your discovery. Have it transported back to the ship for further analysis.” Then he looked to Marshall. “Knowing just how close the Rhaaxans are might be good information to have at some point.”

“One more thing, Captain,” Marshall added. “I recommend that we refrain from discussing what the commander’s found with anyone, not even any of the other inspection teams, at least until we have the situation completely under control.”

Gold did not like the idea of keeping potentially vital information from the rest of the crew, particularly those involved in inspections around the planet, but he could see the ambassador’s point. “I’m going to have to agree with Mr. Marshall. Pass the word to the rest of your team, and let’s keep this under wraps for now.”

“Aye, sir. I’ll take care of it. Gomez out.”

As the communication ended and the viewscreen went dark, Marshall said, “Meanwhile, your people should finish out the inspections. There’s no telling what else they might find.”

Gold agreed, knowing that the ambassador would use the time to continue mediating discussions between the Rhaaxans and the colonists, working to find some common ground upon which to build a peaceful, lasting solution that would eventually allow the Federation to welcome new members.

Good luck, the captain mused.

## CHAPTER

3

“...the makings of a superweapon in just a few months. Sooner, if they push it.”

Even as she reached out to silence the playback of the recorded message, the human female’s voice continued to ring in Randa Palakur’s ears.

Could it be true? Did mere months, possibly weeks, separate the people of Rhaax from unlocking power of a type unmatched in their history? The Starfleet engineers seemed to have confirmed it, apparently choosing to keep that information to themselves.

“Do you need to hear it again, Prefect?” A voice from the seat next to hers broke Randa’s thoughts, reminding her that she was still in the meeting that Shalowon, her director of security, had requested in her private chambers.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” she replied. “How did you come to have this transmission?”

Shalowon leaned closer to her, his features turning smug. Dressed as he was in the normal dark green uniform of the security service, impeccably tailored to his muscular physique, and contrasting sharply with his pale orange skin, the confident smile he affected made him seem even more dangerous than Randa knew him to be.

“My people have been monitoring the Federation teams’ communications since their arrival,” he said. “There was little of interest until we heard this exchange just today.”

“I suppose it was prudent to eavesdrop, Shalowon, given the circumstances,” Randa said, “but allow me to feel a little uncomfortable that we have reached such a point with the Federation.”

“I am starting to forget why we wanted them here in the first place, Prefect,” Shalowon replied, straightening in his seat. “I daresay our problems with the colony might be manageable without their interference.”

Randa allowed the security director his jaundiced view, despite the fact it was he who coordinated the ill-fated military action against the colony that had resulted only in a decimation of the Rhaaxan forces not equipped for such an engagement. Shalowon made no secret of his belief that Rhaaxan armies were hamstrung by the reluctance of the assembly to use all military options at their disposal, and his pronouncements of that view only served to turn a wave of popular sentiment against the leaders who

authorized the attack. That led to the assembly's attempt to threaten the colony with a nonexistent biogenic weapon, a threat that was defused by the very Federation officers invited by the assembly to help mediate the whole affair. Randa knew Shalowon remained convinced that the colonists' fears of biological warfare would have led to the dissolution of the jurisdictional pact and paved the way for Federation admission.

"Prefect," another voice said from across the table, "if I may?"

Randa smiled a bit as Malik leaned forward in his chair, noticing the cool look he directed toward Shalowon. Her aide had long been a supporter of the colony's interests during discussions of the Rhaaxan Assembly. Of them all, Malik had spent the most time in person at the colony, making visits there as part of numerous official delegations. The content of his remarks would not likely come as a surprise, but Randa had grown to appreciate his perspective on Rhaaxan issues as they might relate to the colonists.

"You have been uncharacteristically silent, my friend," she said. "Please, share your thoughts."

"I think even Shalowon would agree that the objective eyes of the Federation delegation serve both Rhaaxans and the people of the settlement on Numai. It is a potentially volatile triangle of negotiation we find ourselves within, but no one side is pitted against any other."

"If the Federation is poring over our databases and preventing our scientists from reaching research goals," Shalowon countered, "that should be enough reason to believe they have sided with the colony and have lost interest in what we have to offer."

Holding out his hands in a gesture of supplication, Malik said, "Or maybe they are just protecting us from ourselves."

"Both of you, please," Randa said, hoping she could separate the men from their personal agendas for the time being. "Shalowon, the Federation is not preventing us from accomplishing anything. They merely observed that we were closer than we realized in our research. Given the circumstances, their alarm is justified. But we know they will see many things we cannot, and that benefits us more than it harms us. Their resources and technology are much greater than ours, and that is but one reason we have petitioned for membership these past years."

"Then why aren't they offering to help?" Shalowon asked. "Surely they can..."

"Help create a weapon?" Malik laughed derisively. "The Federation is not in the business of giving a society the means to subjugate another people."

Shalowon glowered at the political adviser. "We are one people, Malik, although I am sure you and the colonists think that we are some sort of oppressors waiting to strike."

"We threatened to wipe them out with a weapon..."

Shalowon cut him off. "It was a bluff."

"With a weapon," Malik repeated, this time with an edge in his voice, "that we seem very close to be developing for real!"

"Enough!" Randa surprised herself with the force of her outburst. "I called you here to offer me clear

counsel, so set your tempers aside. I recognize now that our rush to threaten the colony was wrong. Regardless of where our research on biogenic agents may be, we have agreed to halt it. This is not the issue at hand now.”

Shalowon spoke with a softened tone. “You heard the Starfleet woman as clearly as I did, Prefect. Do you not agree that the issue must be revisited? We must be on the verge of a discovery that will make the colonists seriously consider our intent to establish our authority there. Continuing our research and reviewing our studies allows us to have the option of force should we need it.”

Randa paused, searching her mind once again for a means through which she could convince the people of two worlds to share her vision. She felt so close to a solution that it seemed tangible: an alliance with the Federation that would benefit Rhaaxans as well as the Numai colony, and possibly provide a way for the colony to enjoy its independent state while securing enforceable trade agreements vital to life on Rhaax.

Have we come to this?

Turning to Malik, she said, “If only I could understand why the colony so strongly opposes the idea of joining the Federation.”

“You have answered part of your own question, Prefect, and you don’t even realize it,” Malik said and offered a smile. “Centuries have passed, yet we on Rhaax still refer to the Numai settlement as a colony; our colony. Look at how things have evolved there. Yes, we remain one people, as Shalowon said. Many on Numai want to honor the original pact and rejoin the fold under one jurisdiction. However, they want to do it as a union of two equals, not as one government exerting its authority over another. In a sense, a growing number of those on Numai see a Federation membership as trading one offworld ruler for another. Their world is thriving and expanding. In recent years, we on Rhaax have demonstrated only that we are growing in our dependence on them.”

“We do depend on them,” Randa admitted. “Their shipments of ores and energy sources have become necessary for our economy’s continued growth. But, Malik, surely the colo—well, the Numai settlement’s leaders recognize that we continue to offer them a great deal of support as well?”

“They certainly do recognize that, and are willing to lord it over us when the time is right,” Shalowon said. “Without adherence to the pact as written, the colony could simply abandon its trade with us. It would not surprise me if they secretly want to ally with the Federation on their own, without us.”

Malik said, “I can assure you, Prefect, that is not the case.”

“But you can see,” Shalowon said, “the Federation is courting us because it has its eye on the colony. From a strategic point of view, Rhaax offers nothing. Without something to tie us together, we have no unique appeal to a group of worlds as vast and as diverse as the United Federation of Planets. But the colonists might enjoy individual membership in a group that lets them avoid their obligations to Rhaax while we wither away and die.”

Randa felt a growing sense of alarm as Shalowon voiced precisely what she secretly feared. Rhaax might have bluffed about having a biogenic weapon to wield against the colony, but the colonists did not need to bluff about the potentially devastating weapon they themselves held, one born of dependence. All that was required was for the colonists to cease interplanetary trade with Rhaax. Should colony leaders ever wish to bend the wills of the Rhaaxan people, the merest threat of such action would carry the weight of a dozen attack fleets.

“Can’t the colonists see how Federation membership is best for us both, Malik?” She was unable to keep the sound of a plea from her voice. “Don’t they understand that benefits are afforded to us both?”

Her aide paused before answering. “I am getting the idea, Prefect, that Shalowon’s opinions of the Numai settlers’ motivations are starting to color yours. Do you think that they are plotting against Rhaax?”

I wish I knew.

Her failure to say anything after a moment seemed to be answer enough for Malik. Nodding in resigned acceptance, he rose from the table and bowed his head. “At this point, I have little to add to this conversation, so if you will excuse me, I will return to my duties.”

As she watched Malik leave the chamber, Randa hoped she might not hear any gloating words from Shalowon. It would make what she had to say that much more difficult. She turned to her remaining advisor but could not meet his gaze. Thankfully, he held his tongue.

“Please notify the science ministry of this new development,” she said softly. “It might be best if they reviewed their studies and pursued new courses with haste.”

“Say no more, Prefect,” Shalowon said, nearly springing to his feet. “I cannot help but think this is the best way to proceed.”

Randa kept her eyes on the table and slowly nodded.

But at what cost?

## CHAPTER

4

Absently sipping from his glass, Fabian Stevens tried to clear his head of the day’s events while sitting in the fourth new eatery he had tried in a week.

His feet and lower back ached from hours of walking, scouring warehouses and industrial sites, scanning and rescanning areas that raised the concerns of security specialists, peering into storage containers of all types, and ultimately writing and submitting reports for everything that he saw and, more typically, did not see. He had lost track of the times this routine had been repeated. Now that he had finished this latest site inspection, he and his team would be transported to the next location fitting the profile for weapons manufacture or storage and begin the seemingly futile process all over again.

In the weapons department, as far as Stevens was concerned, Rhaax III was turning out to be a dud.

He politely held off his meal order for a third time from a passing server, a heavysset Rhaaxan woman whom Stevens could tell was losing her interest in him. He arched his spine against the unyielding wooden back of his seat, an uncomfortable bench in a cramped booth situated in what he hoped would be an inconspicuous area of the eatery.

Given the political climate of Rhaax III these days, he thought a low profile might be best for him and any fellow S.C.E. members, should they still join him for dinner as planned. A few weeks ago, Captain Gold had given permission for the crew to visit the planet during their off hours, and it had not taken long for Stevens to set his tastes on a small resort town in the planet's temperate zone, one with a respectable pub in walking distance to a quiet beach.

That was before the Rhaaxan Assembly decided a few days ago to restrict the travels of Starfleet personnel to the limits of the capital city of Longon. The entire area was grimy and unappealing in Stevens's eyes, nothing if not the polar opposite of a resort town, and he found his amusement factor for all of Rhaax III dropping several notches since the dictum. Now, he was weighing the relative merits of his current surroundings with that of the mess hall back on the *Vinci*.

At least this place has free snacks, he mused as he used a finger to flick a path around what appeared to be seasoned, toasted bits of purplish grain in a bowl. I'm assuming this stuff is edible. Of course, I assumed that on *Kharzh'ulla*, and spent three days in sickbay for my trouble.

A clatter of sound from the establishment's front door made Stevens look up to see a trio of Rhaaxans, burly laborers from the look of them and ones who obviously began their evening revelry much earlier than Stevens had, making their way through the dining area. They were laughing, one reeling a bit after a hearty backslapping from another, as they settled at a table near Stevens.

One of the trio, an older male judging by the harsh lines etching his orange face, made eye contact with Stevens and stiffened a bit. Stevens smiled and raised his water glass in reply, but the Rhaaxan loudly scooted his chair to face away from him. He leaned in to his fellow diners and said something in a low voice that elicited a derisive chuckle at the table.

The assembly's dictum meant Starfleet personnel faced much more frequent contact with the populace of Longon than they had in other locations. Stevens was quick to note that the residents of the capital city seemed more attuned to the political nuances of the *Vinci*'s mission than the general public elsewhere on the planet. Not that the situation had led to anyone being in danger, but he felt that the general air of tension had been ratcheted up in the city. Stevens took another sip from his glass as his thoughts led him to one inexorable conclusion.

Duff would have hated this place.

Even with the unwelcome feelings he had been getting from the locals of late, Stevens did not waiver in his support for the *Vinci*'s mission on Rhaax III. In his time on the planet, he saw that the Rhaaxan society would reap many benefits from Federation membership. While being warp-capable for only a few years, the Rhaaxans' general enthusiasm for learning and for accepting offworld cultures was obvious to him, politics aside. He also understood the tactical advantages that a starbase or outpost of some sort in this system would afford the Federation given its proximity to the Romulan border. It seemed on the surface to be a mutually beneficial arrangement.

With that, it was obvious why Federation leaders wanted these people and their planet thoroughly checked out by Starfleet personnel. The idea that the Rhaaxan Assembly would threaten its own colony with compliance or destruction obviously went against the grain of Federation thinking, and the thought of colonists being strong-armed by leaders on another planet rankled Stevens. Growing up in the Rigel Colonies and assisting with his parents' shuttle service there, he had a great appreciation for the struggles of a burgeoning colony and the drive and goals of the people who lived there.

Okay, too much thinking and not enough eating, Stevens thought as he felt his stomach grumble. He

toyed with the idea of trying the purple stuff before him, when a clear voice rose above the surrounding background noise.

“Mr. Stevens, you are in violation of a direct order,” said a voice from right behind him. “No one is to be in a civilian area without a security escort.”

He smiled in recognition as the speaker made no attempt to disguise her voice. “I don’t pay much attention to orders like that, Commander, since my girlfriend runs secur...”

Stevens’s voice trailed off as he looked up to see Sonya Gomez accompanied by her escort, Domenica Corsi. “Uh, hi,” he said, fumbling a bit at the appearance of the very girlfriend he had just glibly mentioned. “I didn’t expect to see you both down here.”

Gomez laughed as she slid into the booth seat across from him, and he shot her a glare in return. She obviously enjoyed seeing him embarrass himself in front of Corsi, whom they both knew continued to be unsettled by mentions of her personal relationships while on duty. Theda Vinci’s security chief was known among the crew for her strict, professional demeanor, something she had told Stevens many times would not change where he was concerned no matter what their personal connection might be.

“The commander asked me to accompany her for dinner,” Corsi said, allowing a slight smile as she slid into the seat next to Stevens. “At least she’s mindful of a standing security order.”

“I guess my request for an escort got lost in the shuffle,” Stevens replied. “Mind pulling double-duty for us?”

“It depends on what they’ve got to eat in this... place,” Corsi said, running a fingertip along the tabletop and scoffing at the greasy streak it created. “What is it you see in these bars? The foo—”

“Oh good, more Starfleet,” came a loud voice from the nearby group. “Guess we’d better behave, boys. We have guests tonight.”

Making eye contact once again with the aged laborer, Stevens tried to smooth things a bit by laughing along with the man. “And here I was the one trying to behave,” he said, but the man returned only a deadpan expression. Turning back to the table, Stevens said in a lower voice, “They’ve been drinking.”

“That’s obvious,” Gomez said. “We ought to leave.”

Shaking his head, Stevens replied, “This is the first time they’ve said anything all night, and if we get up and go, it’ll look like we know we don’t belong here. It’ll be fine.”

Gomez looked at Corsi, who shrugged in reply. “Okay, but at the first sign of trouble, we’re out of here.”

“Promise,” Stevens said as he searched the dining area for their server. “So, how go the inspections?”

Gomez sighed and slumped a bit in her seat. “Nothing new, if that’s what you mean.” Both engineers knew better than to talk in public about the one key find they had made several weeks ago. In fact, Gomez had not wanted to talk much about that discovery at all, even in the relative privacy offered aboard ship. She claimed that Ambassador Marshall had ordered her not to discuss the subject, a directive that, so far as Stevens could tell, was not sitting well with her.



“Sometimes,” Gomez continued, “I get the feeling they’re trying to hide something from us, but damned if I know what it would be.”

Stevens shrugged. “There’s some discomfort from my Rhaaxan escorts, kind of like they’re just waiting for the other shoe to drop on their admission request. But I’m not getting a feeling of anything underhanded going on, if that’s what you mean.”

“I’m not sure what I mean, but they seem to be watching us pretty closely for people who claim they’ve got nothing up their sleeves.” Rubbing the back of her neck, she added, “We can talk more about it later. I’m just glad to be sitting for a change.”

“Fine by me,” Stevens replied. “I haven’t seen a menu yet, but I’m sure we’re in for a taste treat to please the senses.”

“Or assault them,” Corsi said. “I think I smell some sort of petroleum by-product coming from the kitchen.”

Stevens laughed. “That’s gravy, my dear. I saw someone eating an open-faced sandwich smothered in the stuff. I don’t know what it is, but I’m going to try it.”

“Then maybe you could eat somewhere else,” Corsi retorted.

“An excellent suggestion,” announced a baritone voice. “Then I can take his seat.” Stevens turned to see a smiling Mor glasch Tev standing alongside Carol Abramowitz.

It was not long ago that Stevens would have refused to yield his place at any table to Tev, the da Vinci’s recently added Tellarite second officer. His haughty and self-important demeanor rubbed Stevens wrong, especially since Tev now occupied the position once held by his deceased best friend, and Tev fit into the shoes of Kieran Duffy like a square stem bolt in a round socket. Still, Stevens knew he played an equal role in the two of them getting along as shipmates, so he had done his level best lately to set any raw feelings aside and be civil.

“Pom glittathay na,” he said, gesturing to the seats opposite his.

Tev gave Stevens a look of genuine surprise. “That’s as close to a proper intonation of my native tongue as I’ve heard from a human other than Bartholomew in quite a long time. And with a southern-continent accent, I might add. Gradunk, merchubo.”

“Uh, sure, I think.” Stevens smiled. “It’s been a while since I’ve practiced my Tellarite language skills.”

“Especially in a bar,” said Abramowitz, smirking as she slid into the seat next to Gomez. “Come to think of it, I remember the last time you—”

“Moving right along,” Stevens blurted to cut her off. “May I ask, before the lieutenant commander here does, just where is your security escort?”

“Why, I brought her,” said Tev with a nod toward Abramowitz. “But I hardly expect any trouble.”

Stevens was about to point out that Abramowitz was a cultural specialist, not a security guard, but he froze as he watched Tev turn and approach the table with the vocal Rhaaxan laborers. “Pardon me, might I make use of this empty seat?”

The elder Rhaaxan turned from his conversation to look up at Tev. “Oh, be my guest, Starfleet,” he said. “Take it and go home.”

“I’ll just take it over here, thank you,” Tev said. “There’s no need to cause a problem.”

As Tev returned to the booth with his chair, the man called back, “We had no problems until you arrived here.”

“We are here by invitation of your own assembly, sir,” the Tellarite replied. “Perhaps you might do well to pay closer attention to the dealings of your leaders.” He smiled to his companions as he slid his seat to the table. “So, what’s for dinner?”

Stevens moved to put a lid on what he thought could brew into a conflict with the locals. “Tev, those three look like they might have had a bit much to drink, so it might be a good idea to…”

“Please, Specialist,” Tev said with a wave of his hand. “I don’t want a problem either, but I’m hardly one to shy away from a civil conversation.”

Stevens looked to Gomez with wide eyes. A civil conversation in a Tellarite’s opinion typically included name-calling, slurs against one’s appearance and heritage, and a good deal of shouting. “Uh, Commander?”

“He’s right, Tev,” she said. “Those guys—”

“Hey, Starfleet!”

Stevens winced. It looked as though the shouting would begin from the Rhaaxans’ table, after all.

“Perhaps you might tell us what our leaders are doing?” the elder Rhaaxan asked. “Maybe you could also tell us how to run our colony and our businesses, as well?”

Tev turned toward the shouting man. “By Kera and Phinda, I might have quite a number of good ideas for dealing with your colony,” he said, “starting with your letting it develop rather than making empty and cowardly threats.”

The Rhaaxan bolted from his chair, which tipped and clattered to the floor. “I do not make threats that I cannot back up.”

Tev rose as well, but in a calmer manner that Stevens hoped might not translate to the Rhaaxan as a challenge. “There’s no need to show off for your friends when it is obvious you are in no physical condition to best me in a fight.”

Knowing this was not the time for Tellarite candor, Stevens got up and put a hand on Tev’s shoulder. “Look, why don’t we all just agree to respect each other’s positions and eat in peace.”

But the idea did not slow the approach of the Rhaaxan worker, who staggered a bit as he stepped forward. “I have a better idea.” He took a swing at the jaw of the stocky Tellarite, who easily dodged the drunken punch. The worker followed with a second swing, which found Tev’s paunchy gut but was not enough even to make the stocky officer waver from his stance.

Tev stepped forward, drawing a breath and sucking his large belly inward before huffing and throwing out his chest and stomach. The impact knocked the Rhaaxan to the floor, but before he could scramble to his feet, the two other laborers were up and heading over to the brawl.

Corsi squirmed in her seat in an effort to reach her phaser while sitting in the cramped booth. Stevens saw that Gomez also caught sight of the weapon now coming up in her hand.

“No, Domenica!” she shouted as she slapped the combadge on her chest. “Gomez toda Vinci. Five for emergency beamout. Now!”

As Stevens felt the telltale sensations of being grabbed by the transporter’s energy beam, he wondered what Captain Gold’s reaction would be.

I can just hear it now, he thought. “This is just what I was hoping to avoid down there, and I’m...”

## CHAPTER

5

“...very disappointed in all of you,” Gold said, pacing the floor before the quintet of his crew assembled in the da Vinci’s observation lounge.

The last thing the captain expected to be doing before bed was hearing a report on a planetside bar brawl and meting out punishment to his highest ranking officers. It was not that word of an altercation on Rhaax III took him completely by surprise, but were he to have made a list of likely candidates for that first blowup, the names of the five persons before him would not have been at the top.

“Commander Tev, I understand the need for self-defense,” he said, sizing up his second officer, “but knocking down a Rhaaxan, and a drunk one at that, is unnecessary in the least.”

Returning his gaze, the Tellarite said, “It seemed to be a civil conversation to me, sir. I will not make that mistake again.”

“I’m sure that you won’t.” Turning to Corsi he said, “Commander Gomez was right to bail you all out of that place before someone saw a Starfleet officer with a phaser draw down on some drunks. I’m sure there were alternatives, Commander. Let’s explore them next time.”

As Corsi offered no answer, he continued, trying hard not to sound like a lecturing parent. “People, we need to be sensitive to the situation on Rhaax III. The assembly, as I see it, is having second thoughts about inviting us here, and we aren’t leaving until we can straighten out a mess that we as the Federation had a hand in creating. Those folks on the planet, the ones we deal with as inspectors or chance upon as civilians, have all sorts of conceptions about our presence here. The accuracy of those conceptions is not something we should debate in public—not among ourselves, and especially not with the Rhaaxans. Am I clear?”

A round of affirmative answers came from the crewmen as the door to the briefing room slid open and Ambassador Marshall entered. Gold deliberately did not look in the man’s direction, intent on continuing his talk with the crew. “Now, regarding future contact with the Rhaaxans, our best—”

“Captain, if I might interrupt,” Marshall said, drawing a quiet sigh from Gold. “I think it would be best for us to discuss how we should handle contact with the Rhaaxans before giving new orders to the crew.”

Us?

“Ambassador, I am very certain about how we ought to proceed,” Gold said. “How I direct the crew won’t affect your mission or your discussions with the Rhaaxans.” “Why, of course it will, Captain, if riots break out every time someone on the planet is spotted in a Starfleet uniform.”

“What happened down there can hardly be described as a riot, Ambassador.”

“Nevertheless, Captain,” Marshall replied, “I just think you and your crew would be more effective on this mission by staying on task and being more sensitive to our hosts.”

Drawing a breath to keep from snapping a retort at the ambassador, Gold instead turned to his officers. “We will continue this later. You are dismissed.”

“Not Commander Gomez, please,” Marshall said. “I have need of her right away.”

Gold watched as the other four left, with Abramowitz flashing him a sympathetic look that helped take some of the edge off the slow burn he was feeling toward Marshall. Once the door slid closed behind her, he turned to the ambassador. “I had hoped that even you would show me some respect in front of my own crew.”

Marshall stepped closer, and the move fired up a surge of defensiveness that the captain himself wished had not come so quickly. “For this mission, the crew is in essence as much mine as it is yours, Captain.”

“Only the S.C.E. detail is under your authority,” Gold said, reminding himself of that nuance as much as Marshall. “I still run this ship.”

“Then please tend to it,” Marshall said. “I need Commander Gomez to review these reports with me before my meeting with Prefect Randa.”

“I wasn’t done debriefing the commander.”

“Yes, but my meeting is in less than an hour, so I must take precedence,” Marshall said as he took a seat, Gold’s own seat, at the briefing table. “I’m sure you understand. It might be easier if you allowed me to speak with the commander in private, please.”

Gold squelched an urge to say anything more to Marshall once he saw the expression on Gomez’s face. He could tell from her pained look that she hardly relished the idea of working with the ambassador but was bound by orders from Starfleet Command, and was equally certain she would come to him for guidance if she felt conflicted by her duties or responsibilities.

Realizing that his scuffles with Marshall were not making things easier on her or the rest of the crew, Gold decided at that moment to rein himself in. He felt sure that, should the situation deteriorate to the extreme, he could count on Gomez and the others to follow his lead and not be second-guessed by the ambassador.

He had intended to leave wordlessly, but Marshall spoke just as Gold stepped into the corridor. “One more thing, Captain: Please restrict the crew’s off-duty activities to the ship, given the circumstances.”

The captain closed his eyes for a moment to ensure his bearing remained in place, then turned back to the ambassador. “My crew is working hard on this assignment, Mr. Marshall, and I believe they merit a little down time when they can find it.”

“Given the current climate in the capital city,” Marshall replied, “it might be wise to remove the potential for repeats of tonight’s incident. It would also help if you went down and apologized in person to that bar’s proprietor. Pay for the broken glasses or whatever.”

Not even bothering to respond to the request, Gold turned and left the room. As the door slid shut to block his view of the seemingly smug Marshall, he wished he could just as easily block the man from his ship, and his mind.

## CHAPTER

6

As he walked the corridors of the massive Rhaaxan orbital platform with P8 Blue and Soloman, Tev made a conscious effort to keep from touching anything. Having brushed up against a bulkhead and pulling back a hand covered in grime, it was a mistake he was determined not to repeat. It seemed that everything, from the walls to the surfaces of control consoles to storage containers and tool lockers scattered throughout the station, was filthy. If he could have used anti-gravity boots to avoid making contact with the deck plating, he would have done that, too.

“If there is an afterlife and a place of damnation,” he said, “then this could very well be its lobby.” He grimaced as he tried once more to clean his still-soiled fingers on a small towel from his tool kit. Once again, his attempt failed.

Walking beside the da Vinci’s second officer, P8 Blue said, “As an engineer, surely this is not the first time your hands have gotten dirty?”

Tev snorted derisively as he regarded her. “On rare occasions, of course, when no other alternatives presented themselves. Thankfully I have a structural systems specialist like yourself to help with such demands today. Who better to go traipsing through the innards of this overgrown boil on the buttocks of the universe?”

“That is just the lieutenant commander’s way of saying he appreciates your skills, Pattie,” said Soloman, using the affectionate nickname many members of the da Vinci’s crew employed for the Nasat. Indicating Tev with the wave of a hand, the Bynar added, “He expressed similar admiration for me just yesterday, when it became apparent that a thorough scan of the station’s computer systems would require crawling through a service conduit to reach the primary computer core.”

Tev said nothing, allowing his two companions their moment of levity. In the time since his posting to the da Vinci’s S.C.E. contingent, it had taken him a while to grow accustomed to the peculiarities of the team. Now that he had worked with the crew for several months, he had a better sense of their growing respect for him and his accomplishments, as he had for theirs.

Fabian Stevens in particular had taken quite a bit of time to warm to him, especially considering that Tev had replaced the man’s best friend who had been killed during a previous mission. That was not to say

that he and Stevens were close friends, but a mutual respect for one another's position and abilities had been formed. Despite this, Stevens still seemed to enjoy the verbal jousts in which the two of them engaged, though Tev knew the repartee was no longer as ill-humored as it had been in the beginning. It was indulged in by many of the team and often triggered by his own behavior, and though he would never publicly admit it, he rather enjoyed the banter.

Besides, when it came down to it, the Vinci's S.C.E. team was an impressive collection of talented specialists, and the missions they had gone on over the past few months had engendered happiness in Tev for being a part of it. If maintaining the team's high standard of performance meant striking a balance between his forthright approach and the rest of the group's jocularity, then so be it.

That did not mean that they should be privy to his methods, however. I do have a reputation to protect, after all, he mused.

The humor also helped to make their current assignment bearable. Tramping through the mammoth freight transfer station, one of four positioned in high orbit above the surface of Rhaax III, had proven to be an even more strenuous task than Tev had predicted. Nearly three times the size of the smaller, modular-type R1 orbital stations used as star-bases throughout Federation space for more than a century, the platform boasted three dozen cargo bays, each harboring its own docking port and ship maintenance services. There was also a central control room, engineering and computer sections, as well as barracks and support facilities for personnel assigned to the platform along with temporary berthing for the crews of visiting ships.

So far as Tev was concerned, this entire affair had amounted to one gigantic waste of time. In all the weeks they had spent scouring Rhaax III and its array of orbiting transfer stations, they had yet to identify anything even resembling a large-scale weapon, biogenic or otherwise.

What was that human expression? Chasing a wild goose? Tev had heard it used many times in the past by human engineers who believed they were working toward an unattainable goal, though he himself never had understood the analogy. While he was happy that the Rhaaxans seemed to have nothing hidden away that could cause the already troubled colonists even more strife, he almost wished they could discover something, anything, simply to provide a welcome break in their monotonous routine. In the months since he signed on, they had undertaken missions that were worthy of Tev's considerable talents—and that of the rest of the team, of course. But even the mission to Kharzh'ulla, difficult as it was for Tev personally, was preferable to this tedium.

He was at least thankful that the Rhaaxans working on the station seemed civil enough, particularly in light of the incident at the bar, as well as a few other skirmishes between Vinci personnel and the locals in other locations. Captain Gold had seen fit to restrict the crew's shore leave activities to those areas and establishments where proprietors already had welcomed the Starfleet visitors, a move that seemed to satisfy many Rhaaxan dissenters. While there still had been the occasional verbal dispute, the violence appeared to be contained, for the moment at least, with the uneasy truce extending up to the transfer stations. The workers on all of the platforms were cooperating with the various inspection teams, and no negative incidents had been reported of which Tev was aware.

None of which meant that he was happy to be here, however.

"So," he said as they turned a corner in the corridor, "where do we stand on the inspection?"

Reviewing the tricorder she carried, Pattie replied, "We are nearly finished, Commander. There are two more docking areas to examine as well as one computer subprocessing center."

Pattie's eight extremities made her the perfect candidate for moving about the variable gravity areas of the docking and cargo areas as well as the engineering sections, while Soloman's own diminutive stature was ideally suited to navigating the narrow crawlways connecting the complex's twelve computer subprocessing centers. That left Tev to take care of the command center, along with less glamorous areas of the station. He had not believed he would find an area of the orbital platform dirtier than some of the engineering sections, at least until he had seen the berthing spaces.

"Marvelous," Tev said as the Nasat completed her report. "With any luck, we can condemn this orbiting cesspool and get permission to maneuver it into the sun."

Soloman regarded him with confusion etching his pale features. "Unfortunately, the Rhaaxan Assembly is not likely to give us the authority to carry out such an action, Commander."

"Thank you for clarifying that," the Tellarite replied dryly, pleased that he and Soloman were able to engage in the sarcastic banter that was so characteristic of the Vinci crew.

The deafening wail that pierced the air the next instant nearly made him jump out of his skin, the alarm echoing off the narrow walls of the passageway. The lighting panels set into the metal plates forming the corridor's ceiling changed from their normal white illumination to a warm, glowing orange.

"Alert," a lifeless, mechanical voice called out above the din, "life support system fault, Beli Section. Dispatch damage control team." The message continued to repeat.

"Where is that?" Tev shouted, trying to hear himself over the noise.

Checking her tricorder again, Pattie pointed down the corridor. "It is the next section, Commander."

"Let's go!" the Tellarite said, taking off at a trot down the hallway. "Maybe there's something we can do to help."

With Tev leading the way, the three engineers turned another corner and scrambled through a large pressure hatch, entering what he recognized as one of the station's two main thoroughfares. Running symmetrically down both sides of the platform's long axis, the passageways accessed nearly the entire complex.

The first thing Tev saw was a group of five Rhaaxans, all dressed in the dark gray coverall typically worn by workers assigned to the station. They were moving frantically around a large, oval-shaped storage tank. Measuring more than twenty meters in diameter, he knew that this was one of thirty-six such reservoirs containing oxygen and other inert gases. Combined in the proper amounts by the platform environmental control systems, the gases served the Rhaaxans' life support requirements on the station.

"Shut down the flow, now!" Tev heard one of the workers shout as the three Starfleet officers approached the scene, and there was no mistaking the trail of gas jetting from the tank. A pale green vapor, it was escaping into the air and beginning to fill the corridor.

"What happened?" he asked as he drew abreast of one of the workers, a supervisor that he recognized from an earlier meeting named Tamaryst.

The Rhaaxan turned to him, the illumination from the alert signals giving his orange skin an ashen pallor and accentuating the anger clouding his features. Tev saw that Tamaryst's expression appeared to be

inflamed when the two made eye contact.

“What does it look like?” he replied. “One of my people accidentally punctured the storage tank with his torch.” Looking away from the commander, Tamaryst pointed to one of his companions. “Get an emergency patch kit. We need to seal this thing before the whole tank bleeds out.”

Stepping forward, Tev said, “We can help.” Unslinging the tool kit from his shoulder, the Tellarite opened it and reached inside, extracting a laser welder. “I can seal that breach in no time.”

“We can handle our own problems,” Tamaryst responded, no longer even looking at Tev and instead watching the efforts of his four companions. “The best thing you can do is stay back and let us work.”

Put off by the abrupt dismissal, Tev pressed on. “Now see here, there’s no need to be rude or to panic. There are thirty-six of these storage tanks on the station. Surely the loss of one cannot be cause for such alarm, but if it is, then we can help get it sealed in a matter of moments.”

“Commander,” Pattie said from behind him. “I’m picking up some strange readings from that tank.”

“Not now,” Tev snapped. “Can’t you see I’m trying to foster a little goodwill with our hosts?”

Moving closer, Pattie held her tricorder up for Tev to see. “Commander, the gas coming from that tank is not one of those used to sustain the station’s life support system. It is an inert compound.” Looking up to the Rhaaxan worker, she asked, “What is it supposed to be?”

“It is not your concern, Starfleet,” the Rhaaxan supervisor replied, his expression darkening with each word, and Tev suddenly felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Had they blundered into something more serious than a simple storage tank leak?

“Very well,” he said, perhaps too quickly. “We will get out of your way. You’re certainly more qualified to handle this than we are, after all. Let’s leave these gentlemen to work,” he said to the two specialists. As he took a step backward, however, he bumped into something. Much to his regret, it was not just another dirty bulkhead.

“I am afraid it is too late for that,” the second Rhaaxan said from behind him. Tev started to reach for his phaser but the worker was faster, his hand darting out and snatching the weapon from its holster and leveling it at the Tellarite. “All of you stay where you are and keep your hands where we can see them.”

His ire rising as the five Rhaaxans quickly relieved him and the rest of the away team of their phasers, combadges, and other equipment, Tev leveled a scathing glare at the leader of the group. “What is the meaning of this?”

“We cannot allow you to leave now,” Tamaryst said. “You might report what you have seen, and we are not yet ready for anyone to know what we are doing here.”

The twinge of alarm Tev had felt moments before had now formed a knot in his stomach. After all this time and despite the numerous inspections the *Vinci* crew had carried out, had the Rhaaxans still succeeded in hiding some kind of weapon, right here under their noses?

“That gas can’t be lethal,” he said. “Specialist Blue scanned it and determined the chemicals in that tank to be harmless.”



Tamaryst nodded. "By itself, that is correct. However, when mixed with another such 'harmless' chemical, the result will be a compound that we have named jurolon."

"A biological agent, I take it," Tev said.

"That is correct," Tamaryst said. "It is designed to break down the components of the planet's atmosphere. It will be quite deadly to anyone living there, but the effects are temporary and after a time the planet will heal itself and be available to us once again."

Shaking his head in disbelief, Tev said, "You would actually kill everyone in the colony? That is insane."

"Correct again," the Rhaaxan leader replied. "Such an action would be insane. It is my home, after all."

The horrific revelation made Tev's jaw drop open in shock. "You mean... are you saying that you're a colonist?" For that to be true, it would mean that insurgents from the colony would have taken control of the orbital platform, which normally operated under the auspices of Rhaax III.

"We have been planning this action for quite a long time, Commander," Tamaryst said, "ever since the government of our homeworld directed an ultimatum at us. We did not know if they were lying at the time, but we could not afford to take that chance."

"But they were bluffing," Tev countered. "There's no need for you to attack. You'll be killing millions of innocent people for no reason at all."

"Do not mistake our intentions," the Rhaaxan said. "We do not wish to harm anyone, but existing under the constant threat of our homeland is not living. We want our freedom, to decide for ourselves whether we will join your Federation."

Tev knew that when it came to diplomacy, particularly when it involved the internal machinations of a planet's own society, he was very much out of his depth. "Listen, telling all of this to me is a waste of time. Let's take your grievances to Ambassador Marshall on my ship. I'm sure he can—"

"The time for talk is over," Tamaryst snapped, cutting him off. "We require a decision, today, once and for all." Indicating his companions, he added, "It is our job to see that the impetus for that decision is provided."

Frowning, Tev considered his options. He might be able to incapacitate Tamaryst if he moved fast enough, but he would not get much farther before one of the other Rhaaxans gunned him and his team down with their own phasers. Still, he could not stand by idly as these rebels turned this space station into a giant weapon.

An instant later, he learned he was not the only one who felt that way.

From the corner of his eye Tev saw a blur of gray movement a heartbeat before Soloman slammed into the Rhaaxan closest to him. The diminutive Bynar continued moving, snatching the phaser from the worker's hand even as his opponent crashed backward into the nearby bulkhead.

"Look out!" someone shouted, and Tev ducked to his right as the Rhaaxan behind him opened fire. The howl of phaser energy erupted in the corridor, and Tev spun to face another of the attackers just in time for something to strike him in the face. Stars exploded before his eyes, the pain of the assault so intense that he dropped to his knees. He reached for his nose and forehead with both hands as a wave of

dizziness swept over him.

Around him he heard the sounds of scuffling feet and bodies crashing into bulkheads and one another, all of it punctuated by occasional bursts of phaser fire. Through blurred vision he saw Pattie skittering up one wall to latch onto an overhead pipe, kicking out with another of her legs as she fought to stay out of reach. Then another phaser strike echoed in the hallway and Tev saw Pattie hit by the beam, its orange energy washing over her. Her body went limp as she dropped unconscious to the deck.

At least, Tev hoped she was just unconscious. The phasers had been set on stun, but what if the Rhaaxan had accidentally altered the weapon's power setting?

"Get the other one!" someone cried, and Tev saw that farther down the corridor, Soloman was ducking behind some kind of maintenance locker and shooting at the Rhaaxans, one of which was firing back in response. The worker wielding the other captured phaser was maneuvering for a shot while his partner kept the Bynar pinned down.

"Soloman!" Tev shouted. "Run!" With that, he heaved himself to his feet and lunged forward, wrapping the Rhaaxan in a fierce bear hug and driving him to the deck with such force that the worker dropped his weapon. The Tellarite pushed himself to his knees, intending to swing at his opponent once more when his vision was abruptly filled with the business end of another phaser.

"Enough," Tamaryst said, his voice seething with rage. Gesturing for Tev to get to his feet, he looked to one of his companions. "Well?"

The other Rhaaxan shook his head. "The little one disappeared into one of the maintenance conduits."

"Then go after him," the leader said, biting off every word.

"You'll never catch him." Tev hoped his boast was correct. With his slighter build, Soloman would be much better suited to navigating the crawl spaces. "At least, not before he finds a way to contact our ship."

"Quiet," Tamaryst snapped, aiming his phaser at the Tellarite's head again. To the others he said, "Contact the rest of our group. Get everyone out searching for him, except for those involved in the next phase. We're starting the process now."

"Now?" one of the other workers repeated. "But we're not supposed to start mixing until we get clearance."

"If we wait, that little Starfleet rodent might be able to call for help. Then where will we be?"

Nodding, the subordinate turned and ran off, presumably to carry out his orders and leaving Tamaryst to turn and glare at Tev.

"Do you realize what you have done?" the Rhaaxan asked. "Thanks to you, we now have no choice but to proceed."

You're welcome, Tev thought, sighing in resignation.

## CHAPTER

Ignoring the pain in his elbows and knees, to say nothing of the bare skin of his hands being rubbed raw by his frantic scrambling through the access conduit, Soloman kept moving. The Rhaaxans did not have any type of internal sensor technology, so their only means of pursuit was trying to keep up with him. His smaller size provided his only advantage in these narrow crawl spaces, allowing him to move with greater speed and agility than anyone who might be chasing after him.

Without his tricorder, he was forced to rely on his memory of the access conduits, which he and Pattie had traversed several times during their inspection of the orbital platform's computer systems. For a moment Soloman considered heading for the station's central computer core, but he quickly abandoned that idea. If his pursuers somehow managed to figure out where he was going, they could coordinate their search and surround him.

What he needed to do was find some way to contact the *Vinci*. Lieutenant Commander Tev would want him to warn Captain Gold of what the away team had discovered here, and the Rhaaxan government needed to be apprised of the threat to them as well. With their plans revealed, the colonists might be compelled to act earlier than originally intended, which meant that for Soloman, time was of the essence.

Since he had been unable to retrieve one of the away team's confiscated combadges from their captors when he launched his escape attempt, the Bynar reasoned that his best option was to find one of the computer terminals situated throughout the station's maze of service conduits. Used by workers when performing maintenance on the platform's various onboard systems, the terminals allowed direct interface to the main computer and its vast library of diagnostic software. It was an efficient setup, Soloman conceded, considering the limits of Rhaaxan technology. Though it possessed none of the sophistication of the global computer network on his home planet, it was enough for his purposes here.

If he could get to one of the terminals, of course.

Ahead of him in the conduit, something rubbed against metal. Soloman froze, even holding his breath as he looked and listened. It was hard to discern any sounds over the steady background hum generated by the station's power systems, and after several moments the Bynar neither saw nor heard anything. He was ready to move again when the sound repeated itself. A four-way intersection lay perhaps ten meters ahead of him, and Soloman's ears told him that the source of the noise was around the corner to his right.

He was sure it was one of the workers sent to comb the conduits for him, no doubt having heard his own hurried movements as he fled through the crawl space, but was that person alone? Soloman heard no indications of additional pursuers, though without his tricorder there was no way to be sure.

Not that it mattered, anyway. He could not afford to sit here, idle, and wait for this situation to play out. The longer he stayed in one place, the greater the chances of someone else finding him. That left only one option.

As quietly as he could, Soloman removed his right boot and held it in his left hand. Aiming his phaser down the conduit, he tossed the boot so that it landed on the deck plating just before the intersection.

He received just the reaction he wanted as a tall lanky figure lunged forward, loosing a fierce howl of anger as he fired his own weapon. A green ball of energy spat forth and slammed into the wall, scorching

the bulkhead plating. His movement was too quick and disjointed, however, the action pulling the man off balance. He fell forward, reaching out with his free hand to keep from tumbling face-first into the deck.

It was a wasted effort, as he ended up doing just that as Soloman fired his phaser and the orange beam struck the man, stunning him into unconsciousness. Once the worker's body settled to the floor of the passageway, the Bynar remained in place for an additional several seconds, listening for any signs that the momentary skirmish had been heard.

Once satisfied that he was alone in the conduit once more, Soloman took a moment to search the prone colonist but found nothing that might prove useful. Next, he checked the sign on the bulkhead at the intersection to get his bearings, smiling to himself as he read the markings. If his memory was accurate, he was not all that far from a junction point that would lead him to one of the maintenance computer terminals.

Then he felt it.

First it was a minor vibration in the deck plating beneath his feet. It grew in intensity with each passing second, moving into the bulkheads and pipes surrounding him. Now it was accompanied by a deep rumbling sound from the depths of the space station, overpowering even the power plants' omnipresent hum. What could be causing all of this? So far as Soloman knew, only one system aboard the orbital platform could cause this type of commotion.

The engines.

We are moving.

## CHAPTER

8

Alarm klaxons wailed across the bridge of the *Vinci*, echoing off the bulkheads and driving directly into Gold's skull.

"Captain!" Shabalala shouted from the tactical station. "Orbital Station 4 is moving out of position and beginning a descent toward the planet!"

"Kill the alarm and go to yellow alert." Gold rose from his command chair. "Shabalala, put the station on screen."

The image on the main viewer shifted and he recognized the stout, utilitarian lines of one of Rhaax III's four orbital cargo transfer platforms. It was his

first time viewing one of the stations this closely.

More than half the size of Spacedock, the Rhaaxan platform possessed none of the more artistic blending of form and function that characterized Earth's primary starship maintenance facility. Even from this distance, Gold could make out the numerous docking ports and cargo storage bay hatches adorning the station's outer hull.

“Hail them,” he said, silently counting as contact with Orbital Station 4 was attempted and his anxiety level increasing with each second the link was not established. It only got worse when Shabalala shook his head.

“No response, sir.”

“Tev and the away team are on that station,” Gomez said. “Have you tried contacting them?”

Nodding, Shabalala replied, “None of the team is answering, Commander.”

Sitting at one of the bridge’s rear science stations, Stevens turned in his chair. “Captain, the station isn’t just falling from its orbit. It’s a controlled maneuver, descending toward the planet at a constant speed and moving under its own power.”

“Where the hell is it going?” Gold asked. “It’ll burn up if it enters the atmosphere.” What was happening over there? Already on board as part of his assigned inspection duties, Tev would have called in the moment anything unexpected occurred. Was he hurt?

What about the rest of the away team?

Oh no.

It was so simple, he realized. Even though the station likely would break up as it passed through the atmosphere, killing everyone aboard, the facility’s size and mass would still be enough to cause widespread damage when it impacted on Rhaax III’s surface. And if some lunatic was currently maneuvering the station so that it would fall on or near a populated area...

“How much time until they enter the atmosphere?” he asked.

Shabalala checked his console before replying. “At their present course and speed, about twelve minutes, sir.”

“Something else, Captain,” Stevens called out. “Sensors are detecting a massive chemical reaction underway inside some of the modules storing oxygen and other compounds for their life support systems.”

“Is it a threat to the people on board?” Gold asked.

Stevens shook his head. “I can’t say just yet, sir.”

“Well, find out,” the captain snapped.

Though Marshall had been standing silently at the back of the bridge to this point, Gold knew that he would not be able to hold his tongue much longer. The captain’s suspicions were confirmed when the ambassador stepped forward.

“How many people are aboard the station?” he asked.

“Sensors show two hundred and five life signs,” Shabalala reported.

“You have to do something, Captain,” Marshall said, his face a mask of anguish.

“I am doing something, Ambassador,” the captain replied. Despite being irritated at the diplomat’s observation of the obvious, Gold chose to ignore it and channel that energy elsewhere. Turning back to the viewscreen, he ordered, “Wong, move us into transporter range.”

“Captain,” Shabalala called out, “I am receiving an incoming hail from the station.”

“On-screen,” Gold said.

The viewer changed images again, this time to show a Rhaaxan male, muscled and wearing dark gray worker’s coveralls. His orange features were clouded in apparent anger.

“Federation ship,” the Rhaaxan said, “our quarrel is not with you, but rather the government of our home planet. Do not attempt to interfere with us in any way. You are directed to keep your vessel out of range of your weapons and matter transfer systems. We have your officers in custody here and though I do not wish to harm them, I will kill them if necessary.”

“What do you want?” the captain asked.

“Our freedom, once and for all. Either that is granted today, or everyone on Rhaax will die.”

The transmission ended, leaving the Vinci bridge crew with the viewer’s image of Orbital Station 4.

“Someone sure has issues with authority,” Stevens said.

“Stow that,” Gold snapped as he turned from the viewer. This was no time for the tactical specialist’s unique flavor of jocular. “Gomez, please tell me they’re bluffing over there.”

Gomez already was moving to Stevens’s station on the upper bridge deck. “Working on it, sir.” To Stevens she said, “Let me see the sensor data on that chemical reaction.”

Letting his people tend to that, Gold used the delay to make his way across the bridge to where Marshall stood and tried not to take too much satisfaction in the diplomat’s ashen expression.

“We’ve been looking for weapons the Rhaaxans might be developing,” he said, “and all this time the colonists have been planning their own attack? How the hell did they manage that?”

Blinking rapidly as realization sank in, Marshall shook his head. “The colonists never even hinted at any such action, Captain, not once. This is completely out of the blue.”

“Or just very well guarded,” Gold countered. The idea that they might have been so completely deceived despite the work Gomez and her team had done, and after suffering through all of Ambassador Marshall’s supercilious nonsense, galled him, but it was nothing compared to the sense of dread he felt at what the colonists might be capable of doing.

“Captain,” he heard Gomez say. “I think we might have something.” He moved to the science station, where Gomez was leaning over Stevens’s shoulder and studying the information scrolling across the display monitors above the workstation.

“What is it?” Gold asked.

Stevens tapped a command string and the image on his station's center monitor shifted to show an array of chemical formulas and mathematical computations derived by the ship's scanners. "This is the new compound being created," he said as he froze one image and pointed to it. "I've got the computer chewing on it, but without a sample to analyze it's going to take time." Suddenly the tactical specialist snapped his fingers. "Computer, show me the design specs for the orbital stations. I want to see the environmental subsystems."

A moment later the request was answered and Stevens nodded. "Look," he said, indicating what Gold took to be design diagrams for a massive storage tank. "This is one of the areas where the chemical is being mixed. Now, see these valves positioned on the exterior of the tanks and connected to hatches on the station's outer hull? This is part of the system used to purge the storage tanks for maintenance. Ordinarily the contents of the tanks would be vented to space."

"That's it," Gold said. "The chemical must be something they can release into the atmosphere, and the station itself is the delivery vehicle." He nodded as he started to fit the pieces of the puzzle together. "With all the ship traffic coming in and out of those stations, it would be a simple matter to move that material into position over a long period of time. For all we know, they've been planning this for months, or longer."

From behind him, Shabalala said, "Captain, I'm picking up an incoming transmission from Rhaax V. It appears to be a recorded message intended for Prefect Randa and the rest of the assembly."

"This should be joyous news," Gold said, more to himself than anyone else. He found it interesting that the colony leaders would choose to send a recording rather than use the subspace communications equipment furnished to each planet's governing body by the Federation Diplomatic Corps. The intent had been for the leaders to interact with one another and with the Federation mediators in real time, despite the vast distances separating their two worlds and the delays experienced when using their conventional communications equipment. To Gold, the colonists' intentions were clear: they had something to say, and they did not want any interruptions.

"Put it on the viewer," he said.

A moment later the image of the orbital platform was replaced by that of a regal-looking Rhaaxan. He was dressed in robes similar to ones Gold had seen Prefect Randa and members of her assembly wearing, though his garment looked to be simpler in design and made from rougher-hewn material than the lavish clothing worn by his counterparts on Rhaax III. To the captain, the robes appeared to be an attempt at marrying Rhaaxan heritage with the unique identity the colony had tried to establish.

"People of Rhaax, this is Prefect Erokan, representing the Colonial Assembly and the people of Numai. For many months we have faced an impasse with the government of our homeworld, who have forgotten the basic tenets of the original agreement that established the Numai colony. Rather than allow us to continue on as an independent entity until such time as the agreement calls for us to become a province of Rhaax, your government seeks to abandon that contract in favor of allying themselves with the United Federation of Planets. The Federation has made it known that it values our planet, perhaps more so than Rhaax and, by extension, all of you. Worried that they might somehow be left out of any deals made with the Federation, Prefect Randa and the Assembly have seen fit to threaten us with extinction."

"I see he's pulling his punches and taking the nice approach," Stevens muttered.

Though he glared at the tactical specialist, Gold said nothing. Instead, he wondered what Prefect Randa and her people might be doing at this moment. Without the ability to counter anything the colony leader

might say, were they trying to prevent the message from reaching the Rhaaxan people?

“Despite repeated debates and discussions,” Erokan continued, “all our efforts to reach a compromise have failed. Therefore, we have decided that the time for discussion is over, and that we will no longer settle for simple compromise. The fate of both our worlds will be decided here, today, and in the presence of our Federation mediators. Either the colony of Numai will be granted its permanent freedom from Rhaaxan rule, or every living thing on your planet will perish.”

He paused, as if knowing that his words would be more effective if allowed to sink in for several seconds before saying anything else.

“Oh my God,” Marshall said. “He’ll incite a global panic down there.”

“While Prefect Randa and her advisers may have been bluffing when they threatened us, rest assured that the threat I bring today is quite real. As you receive this message, Orbital Station 4 is being maneuvered into position so that it can release a chemical compound we call jurolon, which will result in the total breakdown of all the life-giving elements of your planet’s atmosphere. Simply put, all of you will suffocate.”

Pausing again, Erokan stepped forward and opened his arms, and Gold was nearly infuriated as the colony leader actually smiled warmly.

“Of course, such tragedy can be avoided. It simply requires the Rhaaxan Assembly to guarantee us our freedom, now and forever. We await your response, Prefect Randa, but only until the sun sets on the capital city.” Then the message abruptly ended, and the viewer returned to its image of the orbital platform.

Gold turned to Gomez and Stevens. “Find me a way to disable that damn thing, now.”

“Aye, sir,” Gomez said.

Moving around the bridge toward the tactical station, the captain asked, “Shabalala, how long until sunset hits Longon?”

The lieutenant checked his sensor displays before replying, “Approximately two hours, Captain.”

“Fine,” Gold replied. “Hail the Rhaaxan Assembly. Get me Prefect Randa.”

A moment later the image of the Rhaaxan leader filled the main viewscreen. There was no mistaking the harried expression clouding her pale orange features.

“Captain,” she said, “I trust you observed the message from Erokan on Rhaax V?”

Gold nodded. “We did, Prefect. My people are examining the situation right now and looking for ways to deal with it.”

“Ways to deal with it?” Randa replied, her expression one of shock. “They threatened to destroy all life on my planet, Captain. What do you suggest we do in the face of that?”

Holding his hand up, Gold said, “Please, Prefect. This is not the time to react emotionally. We haven’t had time to examine all the options yet.”



Stepping forward until her face nearly filled the viewscreen, Randa glowered at him. “There can be only one response to such menace. That station must be destroyed, but we no longer possess the means to do so ourselves. I therefore implore you to take on that responsibility.”

Gold shook his head. “Out of the question. We have no way of knowing how many innocent people are aboard, not to mention I have an away team over there right now.”

“Captain,” he heard Ambassador Marshall say from behind him, “we may reach the point where choosing between a small number of people on that station and billions on the planet is our only option.”

Ignoring the diplomat, Gold turned to the science station. “Gomez, Stevens. What have you got?”

“If we can get close enough,” Stevens replied, “we might be able to target the exhaust ports for the purge system with phasers, but it’ll require pinpoint precision.”

“What about disabling the station itself?” the captain asked. “Targeting its engines or locking on with a tractor beam and pulling it away from the planet?”

Gomez stepped away from the science station. “It’s too big for our tractor beam, sir, and even if we knocked out its engines, its momentum would still carry it into the atmosphere.”

“And if we disable the exhaust ports,” Stevens added, “they could still release the tanks manually, and there’s no way to be sure they’d burn up during reentry without releasing their contents.”

From the viewscreen, Randa said, “Captain, if you do not try, the colonists are certain to unleash that poison upon us.”

“Prefect,” Gold said, trying very hard to keep his emotions in check, “unless we have a solution with a reasonable chance of success, all we’ll do is help them put their plan into motion sooner. Sunset doesn’t fall on the capital city for two more hours. Let my people have that time to find another option.”

Randa shook her head. “If you are unable to act, then you leave me with no other alternative.” The prefect then turned to someone offscreen. “Send the signal.”

“What are you doing, Prefect?” Gold asked.

Returning her attention to him, Randa replied, “I have dispatched orders to one of my military vessels, which has been maintaining a concealed position on the far side of the moon orbiting Rhaax V. It carries twenty-four ballistic missiles, which have been armed with a biological weapon of our own devising.”

“You’re lying,” Gold countered. “All conventional weapons were accounted for weeks ago.”

“Please, Captain, give my military advisers credit. They are long practiced in concealing information and matériel from the prying eyes of inspectors and accountants. Removing the missiles from the inventory databases was child’s play, though arming them with the biogenic agent was a bit more difficult.” Pausing, she smiled grimly. “Actually, I have you and your crew to thank for that. If not for the revelation provided by Commander Gomez, we would never have been able to complete our weapons research, to say nothing of employing it with such speed.”

The Rhaaxans had been monitoring communications between the da Vinci and the inspection teams. It

was the only logical explanation for the prefect's comments. They had taken what Gomez and Stevens had found and run with it, developing some perverted weapon that would allow them to make good on the bluff that had started this entire mess in the first place.

David Gold did not like being used, by anyone, and it was only with a physical effort that he forced his features to remain fixed. "Prefect," he began, but got no farther before Randa interrupted him.

"I have also sent my own message to Prefect Erokan," she said. "The rebels on the space station must immediately surrender themselves and allow the platform to be boarded, or else the missiles will be launched. If they follow through with their attack, the missiles will still be launched."

"You can't be serious," Marshall said. "Prefect, surely you realize what you're proposing?"

"Indeed I do, Ambassador," Randa replied. "I cannot stand by and allow my people to be threatened. Either we will all live through the day, or none of us will."

Silence engulfed the bridge as the communication was severed, with only the background sounds of the various consoles and the omnipresent hum of the Vinci's engines to fill the void.

"Mutually assured destruction," Gold said after a few seconds, "otherwise known as an interplanetary game of chicken. I never thought I'd live long enough to see anyone engage in such insanity."

The question now was: Which side would flinch first?

## CHAPTER

9

"That lying witch!"

Standing next to Pattie in one of the orbital platform's cargo bays along with nearly fifty Rhaaxan workers and covered by a squad of at least twenty armed colonists, Tev watched as Tamaryst nearly lost control of his temper. The muscular Rhaaxan's fists clenched so hard that they shook visibly, and the commander was sure he might lash out at one of his subordinates at any moment.

Tamaryst turned to glare at Tev with unfettered rage. "This is the result of your Federation's interference," he said, pointing to the viewscreen mounted to the bulkhead of the cargo bay, where, only seconds before Prefect Randa had issued her response to the colony leader's ultimatum. "All this time, they were looking for a way to crush us, and you provided them with the answer. None of this would be happening if you had simply left us alone."

Snorting in derision, Tev replied, "Are you saying we drove you to create whatever hellish brew you have stored in those tanks? Was it the Federation who put a weapon to your head and forced you to take up arms against your own people?"

"Commander," Pattie said, her voice low and her tone one of warning.

Tev ignored her, instead pointing to the now inactive viewscreen. "And we didn't give the Rhaaxans anything, either. If Randa and her people have a weapon to deploy against you, then it's one of their own

devising. They couldn't have come this far this fast without having done a lot of the research for themselves."

"Research they would not have conducted if their minds had not been poisoned with thoughts of joining the Federation." Clearly angry now, Tamaryst stepped closer. "Perhaps there is sufficient blame to share among all of us, Starfleet, but to deny that your presence here has been a disruption to our way of life is arrogant hypocrisy at best and criminal negligence at worst."

Suddenly he turned his attention to the rest of the people being held in the cargo bay, and Tev watched in admiration as the Rhaaxan's features molded from angered and scowling to warm and inviting, almost as if he had tripped some sort of emotional switch.

"I want to thank all of you for your cooperation," Tamaryst said, holding his arms wide in a display of entreaty. "Rest assured that if you continue to behave as you have, you will not be harmed."

"Then what?" Tev heard a voice call out from behind him. "What about those of us trapped up here on the space stations?"

"Yes," another voice said, "once you've destroyed our home, what's to prevent you from killing the rest of us?"

"Enough!" the Rhaaxan snapped, making a chopping gesture with his right hand as he continued to pace. To Tev, it seemed that Tamaryst was beginning to doubt the orders he presumably was following, but could he also be starting to question his conviction for carrying out this heinous act in the first place?

More to himself than anyone else, Tamaryst said, "It will do no good to order the Starfleet ship to destroy Randa's missiles. The captain will refuse, and I cannot keep threatening to use the jurolon in order to command obedience. Sooner or later, they will force us to act or retreat." He shook his head. "Why does Prefect Erokan not advise us?"

As Tamaryst stopped his pacing and gazed thoughtfully at the deck plating for several seconds, Tev could see the rebel leader struggling with his own emotions and thoughts as he fought to reach a decision. The longer the Rhaaxan stayed in one place and said nothing, the larger the knot of anxiety in Tev's stomach grew.

"If we surrender now," Tamaryst said after a few moments, "there will be nothing to stop Randa and the Assembly from ordering our destruction. Therefore, our only choice is to attack now, while we have the advantage."

"Don't be a fool!" Tev shouted, his voice laced with such fury that the Rhaaxan and even a few of the guards moved back a step. "Aren't you forgetting something? Prefect Randa has already dispatched weapons of her own to destroy Numai, and her orders are to launch those missiles if you don't surrender this station. If you attack, so will she, and everyone will lose everything. What's the point of that?"

Beginning to pace the open area in front of the prisoners, Tamaryst said, "It is better to die free than to live as slaves."

"How very dramatic of you," Tev replied, making no attempt to hide his disdain, "and that's fine if you're making the decision for yourself. However, you don't have the right to make that choice for billions of others. A good many people down on Rhaax support Numai's position in all of this. Are you planning to kill them, too? Does that chemical of yours distinguish between friend and foe?"

Seeing the momentary doubt on the Rhaaxan's face, Tev pressed forward. "Tell me something, Tamaryst. Let's say that everything works out today and you get to go home, with your freedom and whatever else you manage to coax out of the Rhaaxan people. What will you do then? Your supporters down on the planet won't appreciate being used as pawns by you and your leaders, and you'll have lost their backing for all time. From this point forward you'll have to rely on threats and fear to get anything from the Rhaaxans, because they'll never trust you enough to deal with you in good faith ever again."

For a fleeting moment, as Tamaryst said nothing, Tev thought he might be getting through to the rebel leader and imagined he saw the hesitation in the Rhaaxan's eyes.

Then, it was gone, replaced by a steely determination that made Tev's blood run cold.

"You are right," Tamaryst said. "Our relationship with the Rhaaxans has been damaged forever. There seems to be no compelling reason to continue it any longer."

The blunt statement was punctuated by the Rhaaxan's pivoting on his heel and walking away, leaving Tev, Pattie, and the rest of the prisoners to stare after him, many of them looking on with jaws slackened in horror.

On the bridge of the *Vinci*, David Gold was considering his options and not liking any of them.

"Captain, you can't just leave the Rhaaxans to face that monstrosity," Marshall said, pointing at the main viewer and the image of the orbital platform, which was still lumbering through space and descending toward the atmosphere of Rhaax III.

Sighing in mounting frustration, Gold nodded. "I'm aware of that, Ambassador." Looking to Shabalala, he asked, "How long until those missiles reach Rhaax V?"

"Six point three minutes, sir," the lieutenant replied.

"Can you locate the away team on the station?"

After a moment, the tactical officer said, "I've located one Tellarite and one Nasat life sign in a cargo bay with forty-six Rhaaxans. Neither Tev nor Pattie are wearing their combadges."

"No Bynar readings?" Gomez asked. "Where's Soloman?"

Shabalala paused as he checked his sensor readings. "I found him, but he's in what looks to be a service crawl space in another part of the station."

"It's a safe bet Tev and Pattie are being held hostage in that cargo bay with the rest of the station workers," Gold said. "Can you get a transporter lock on them?"

"Once we get in range, sir," Shabalala said. "Get me there and I can transport everyone out of that bay." He looked to Gomez and smiled. "And Soloman, too."

Stepping down to the command well from where he had been standing at the rear of the bridge, Marshall asked, "What are you doing, Captain?"

“I’m putting an end to this nonsense, Ambassador.” Gold knew that, despite the risk of engaging warp drive while still within the boundaries of the solar system, the *Vinci* could easily beat the missiles to the colony planet. The rule against such practices had been broken more times than Gold could count, and though disaster had resulted on a few occasions when the maneuver was attempted by others, he trusted his people to handle the navigational demands should he give the order.

The problem with such a rash action was that it left *Rhaax III* vulnerable to the threat still facing them. Unless he factored that into his plan, of course.

“Stevens,” he said, “enter your targeting data to the computer. I want to do this in one pass.” Then he moved forward until he stood directly behind the conn and ops positions and placed his hand on the shoulder of the young lieutenant at conn. “Wong, lay in an intercept course to the station and stand by for my command. Coordinate with Stevens based on his target selections. Once we hit those marks, I want to be at *Rhaax V* thirty seconds after that.”

“Aye, sir,” Wong acknowledged as he set to work.

As he waited for his people to finish their preparations, Gold felt Marshall standing just behind him. Folding his arms across his chest and without turning around, the captain prompted, “Yes, Ambassador?”

“Your plan would seem to hinge on disabling the space station’s ability to disperse that chemical, Captain.”

Gold nodded. “Yes.”

“But you said yourself that if we proceeded without a guarantee of success,” Marshall said, “it would only cause the *Rhaaxans* to jump the gun.”

“What I said was that we’d need a reasonable chance of success,” Gold corrected. He turned to face the ambassador. “Under the circumstances, this is probably as good a chance as we’re going to get.”

Shock washed over Marshall’s face. “What if you’re wrong?”

“It’s the same result whether we fail or do nothing.” Gold looked over to the science station. “Stevens?”

The tactical specialist turned from his console. “Ready to go, sir.”

“Captain!” Shabalala called out. “Something’s happening over on the station.”

All eyes on the bridge turned to the viewer, and at first Gold noted nothing different than what they had been seeing for the past several minutes. Then he saw it.

The station was slowing down, and beginning to tilt on its axis.

“It hasn’t entered the atmosphere yet, has it?” he asked.

“No, sir,” Shabalala replied. “It was still descending when it started to slow down. The station’s braking thrusters are firing and its lateral movement indicates a possible direction change.”

“Maybe Tev or somebody on board incited a takeover,” Gomez offered, “a counteraction to take back the station.”

Behind her, Stevens said, “No. Sensors show Tev and the others still locked in the cargo bay.”

What the hell was happening over there? Gold stared at the image of the orbital platform, now quite definitely moving in a direction away from the planet, apparently accelerating as it went. Had the rebels responsible for the hijacking gotten second thoughts?

“Incoming hail, Captain,” Shabalala said. “It’s the station.”

Gold nodded for him to put the hail through and once more the connection with the renegade Rhaaxan was established. The captain had no chance to say anything before the rebel leader exploded.

“What have you done?” the Rhaaxan said, his face a mask of rage.

Shrugging, Gold replied, “Nothing. I’ve been sitting here like you asked me to do.” He smiled warmly. “Is there a problem?”

“We have lost control of the station! My people are reporting that they are trapped, unable to open any hatches or move out of whatever section they are in now. We have been locked out of the main computer and the navigational systems and we are hurtling into space!”

“Can we confirm any of that?” Gold asked.

Studying his sensor displays, Shabalala nodded. “All interior hatches have been sealed. Main computer access has been routed away from all interface terminals, except one.”

“You don’t think...” Gomez began, and even without looking Gold could almost hear the grin wrapped around her words.

A moment later, the image of the Rhaaxan disappeared from the viewer, replaced by that of Soloman.

To Gold, the Bynar appeared to be hunched over a computer terminal jutting from the side of a maintenance vent.

“Captain Gold,” he said, “I have taken control of all onboard systems and redirected the station away from the planet. Lieutenant Commander Tev reports that they have seized control of the cargo bay where they were confined, and that everyone is safe. Awaiting your orders, sir.”

Cheers and applause erupted on the bridge before a bark from Gold quieted everyone down. “Outstanding work, Soloman. First, jettison that sludge from the environmental systems. Next, coordinate with Tev and security to round up the rebels and detain them until Rhaaxan authorities arrive.”

“Aye, sir,” the Bynar replied, nodding formally.

To Shabalala, Gold said, “Notify Corsi to mobilize her security teams for transport. Alert sickbay, too, in case there are any injuries among the prisoners. Then get me Prefect Randa.”

The bridge crew set about their various tasks as Gold turned back to Marshall. “Looks like we caught a break, Ambassador.”

“It seems that way,” Marshall replied.

A moment later, the leader of the Rhaaxan Assembly once again graced the main viewer, and Gold noted that she did not appear happy.

“I have good news, Prefect,” Gold said. “My people have neutralized the threat on the orbiting station. Even as we speak, my security teams are preparing to transport over and secure it until you can send your own people up.”

“We are most grateful for your quick resolution, Captain. I cannot thank you enough.” Her expression, though, remained unchanged.

“Actually, you can,” Gold replied, not liking the sudden tingle at the back of his neck. He unleashed his most charming diplomatic smile, the one reserved for official Starfleet functions attended by high-ranking flag officers, members of the Federation Council, and other people he normally did his best to avoid. “You can recall the missiles launched against Rhaax V.”

“No,” the prefect replied, her expression one of apology. “I do not think so.”

## CHAPTER

10

Gold was sure he was hearing things. “I beg your pardon?” he asked.

“I have no intention of recalling the missiles,” Randa said. “You may have solved the immediate problem, but we cannot tolerate terrorist actions against our planet. I have no choice but to do everything in my power to ensure that such threats are not repeated.”

Feeling his ire beginning to rise yet again, the captain stepped closer to the viewer. “Prefect, you know I can’t allow that to happen.” To Wong he asked, “Is that course to Rhaax V ready?”

“Plotted and laid in, sir,” the lieutenant replied.

“How much time before the missiles enter the atmosphere?”

At tactical, Shabalala said, “Less than three minutes, sir.”

“Even with your ship’s speed, Captain,” Randa said, “you cannot destroy all the missiles. Some will still get through, and even if it is only a few, they will be sufficient to send a message to the colonists never to attempt such a foolhardy strategy ever again.”

Turning from the viewer and moving to his chair, Gold said, “Get her off my screen. Wong, engage.” Two minutes. Was that enough time to intercept and destroy all of the missiles? Logic said no, emotion said yes, and Gold felt the pull from both as they went to war against one another.

Even with the ship’s inertial damping field, he still felt the subtle change in the omnipresent vibration of the *Vinci*’s engines as the vessel leapt into warp. On the viewer, stars elongated and stretched beyond

the boundaries of the screen as the ship hurtled through subspace on its abbreviated journey through the Rhaaxan solar system.

Please don't plow us into a planet, Gold pleaded silently, but need not have worried. As fast as the trip had begun, it was over, with the stars reverting to distant pinpoints and the image on the viewer now dominated by the lush blue and green world that was Rhaax V.

"I'm tracking twenty-four missiles, all on course for the planet, Captain," Shabalala reported.

"Plot an intercept course," Gold said to Wong. "Coordinate with Shabalala for automated targeting and fire control. We're only going to get one chance at this."

How much of whatever deadly biogenic agent created by the Rhaaxans did each missile contain? What kind of damage could each weapon inflict? By failing to intercept them all before they reached their target destinations, how many people was he leaving to die?

"Captain," Gomez said, stepping down into the command well and stopping alongside his chair, "you—"

"Commander Gomez," Marshall snapped, cutting her off.

When the diplomat said nothing else, Gold frowned and turned in his seat. What the hell is this about?

"I don't have time for this sort of nonsense, Ambassador," he said, irritation lacing every word. "We're beyond diplomatic solutions now, and you're interfering with my people in the performance of their duties." Looking to Gomez, he said, "What is it, Commander?"

Before she could even open her mouth to reply, Marshall said, "Commander Gomez and her S.C.E. detachment are still under my authority, Captain, and subject to my orders."

Why that might possibly matter at this critical juncture was a mystery to Gold. He could feel the eyes of everyone on the bridge turning to watch the rapidly escalating confrontation.

"We'll discuss your authority when I'm finished here, Mr. Marshall," the captain said. He could not afford this kind of lapse, not now. Returning his attention to the task at hand, he asked, "Wong, where are we?"

"Course computed, sir," the ensign replied.

"Phasers ready?"

Shabalala nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Fire at will."

Gold watched multiple beams of orange energy streak away from the ship on the viewer as the computer locked on to the first targets and fired. There was only an instant for him to note tiny distant explosions as the phaser strikes found their marks before the ship altered its course for the next battery of fire, and the sequence repeated again.

"Seventeen missiles destroyed," Shabalala reported after the third volley of fire. "Moving to target the



next group.” He looked up from his console a moment later, his expression filled with dread. “Sensors are picking up the first missile entering the atmosphere, sir.”

Damn it!

Gold slammed his fist on the arm of his command chair. One more pass and they would have had them all!

“The other six are following,” the tactical officer said, shaking his head in defeat. “I’m picking up detonations within the atmosphere.”

“Move us to standard orbit, Wong,” Gold said, his voice subdued. “Shabalala, get me Starfleet Command. We’re going to need planetary disaster teams to be sent here as soon as possible.” He felt the bile rising in his throat as he spoke the words. How long would it take for the biogenic weapon carried by the missiles to begin its work of poisoning the planet’s atmosphere, and how fast would that reaction spread? As he rose from his chair, a sudden weakness coursed through his body as he envisioned the thousands of colonists, all gasping for one final tortured breath.

“Captain,” Stevens called out, drawing the captain’s attention from the viewscreen. “I think you should see this.”

Gold looked to the science station and saw the very confused expression on the younger man’s face. “What is it?” he asked.

“I’m not detecting any chemical reaction in the atmosphere,” Stevens replied.

His own brow creasing in confusion, Gold moved until he was leaning over the bridge railing that separated him from the upper deck. “Were the warheads on those missiles empty? Did they malfunction?”

Stevens shook his head. “Each missile released a chemical compound, sir, but according to my scans, it’s inert.”

“Are you sure?” Gold asked.

“Absolutely. The compound is breaking down as it disperses through the atmosphere. I’m picking up residual traces, but it’s having no destructive effect that I can find.”

Pausing a moment to offer a silent thanks to whichever deities or omnipotent superbeings had seen fit to smile on them, Gold breathed a sigh of relief. The Rhaaxans had obviously made some error when manufacturing the biological weapon, taking the research information Gomez had uncovered and failing to capitalize on it in whatever manner the commander had originally feared.

“Most gracious are the heavens,” he mused, “and the small favors they offer.”

“Sir, I’m sorry, but the heavens didn’t have anything to do with it,” Gomez said from behind him. Turning from the railing, Gold saw Marshall and Gomez standing side by side. The ambassador was giving Gomez a look of angered annoyance, while the commander had an expression of relief and, if he was not mistaken, guilt.

“What are you talking about?” the captain asked.

Pointing to the viewscreen, Gomez said, "The missiles were designed to fail."

The utter absurdity of the statement kept it from fully registering with Gold at first. "What do you mean?" he asked after several seconds.

"The data they found was bait," Gomez said, "which I planted on Ambassador Marshall's orders to see if the Rhaaxans would use the information to act against the colonists."

"You deliberately furnished them with the information to create a superweapon?" he asked, his voice nearly strangled by the astonishment he felt.

"No, sir," Gomez said quickly. "Like I said, it was intended to fail. The information they obtained from us was designed to create an inert chemical. Originally, yes, the compound their scientists devised was lethal, but that was in order to satisfy test conditions. The formulae devised for the agent were sufficiently complex that it was easy to mask the elements necessary to render the entire mixture harmless as soon as it came into contact with the atmosphere of Rhaax V."

"That's impossible," Stevens said as he rose from the science station. "You showed us all the—" He cut himself off.

Gold shook his head. "You set it up in such a manner that you even fooled your own people. You did it that way so you'd be the only one involved."

Gomez's response was simply to nod.

"That's right, Captain," Marshall said, "I ordered Commander Gomez to put this plan in motion. After the Rhaaxan's bluffed threat, we had to find out if they were willing to carry out a true aggressive action of this magnitude if given the opportunity." Shaking his head, the ambassador's expression was one of grim regret. "As we have just seen, they appear to be quite willing."

Though he understood how difficult it must have been for Gomez to be torn between her loyalty to him and her duty to obey Marshall's orders, Gold still felt the sting of betrayal from his first officer. On the other hand, she did speak up, finally. Based on the look of anger on Marshall's face, Gold had to wonder if the truth would ever have come out if she had kept quiet.

"You had the authority to give that order?" Gold could not imagine the Starfleet Diplomatic Corps or even the Federation Council advocating such an outrageous venture.

Marshall stiffened in response to the question. "The Federation wants these people as members, Captain, and I've been sent here to resolve the dispute between the Rhaaxans and their colonists. Once it became obvious that all conventional diplomatic measures were proving ineffective here, more drastic action was called for. I've been given a great deal of latitude to accomplish my mission here, and I'm confident that once the facts of the matter are presented to the Federation, they will agree with the decisions I made."

Shaking his head in disgust, Gold said, "There'll be plenty of time to sort out this idiocy later." He turned his back on Marshall, unable to keep the disappointment from his face as he regarded Gomez for an extra few seconds. The captain took no satisfaction when she failed to meet his gaze, but then he pushed the issue away, tabling it until a more appropriate time.

“Shabalala, open a channel to both prefects,” he ordered as he returned to his chair. A moment later, the image on the main viewer was split in the middle, with both Randa and Erokan looking out at him.

“Prefect Erokan, I’m sure you’ll be pleased to know that the missiles launched against your planet were ineffective. The chemicals they carried proved to be harmless to your atmosphere.”

“That is impossible!” Randa exclaimed, her voice nearly a shriek.

Gold shrugged. “Believe it, Prefect. Sorry to ruin your plans. Feel free to file a report with Starfleet Command at your earliest convenience.”

“Thank you for your assistance, Captain,” Erokan offered, but Gold waved it away.

“Don’t thank me. I wasn’t able to stop all of the missiles. You got lucky, that’s all.” To both prefects, he said, “We have a problem here, one that I intend to resolve very quickly, after which I’m taking my ship the hell out of here. What you do after that is up to you, because I’m certainly not planning on giving a damn one way or another.”

“Now see here,” Randa said. “We would not be in this situation were it not for Federation interference. You cannot walk away from the damage you have caused here.”

Rising from his chair, Gold began to advance on the viewer. “Pardon my faulty memory, but was it not you who petitioned us for Federation membership?” To Erokan he said, “As for Numai, you called on us to mediate your dispute with Rhaax, and you applied for Federation membership as a separate body, did you not?”

“That’s true, ” Erokan said, “but—”

Gold cut him off. “I don’t deny that we might have botched some things with regard to your situation, but let’s not forget the simple truth upon which this entire sordid affair has been erected: We’re only here because you wanted us here and because you couldn’t settle your own disputes yourselves. Now that you’ve amply demonstrated that you’re not mature enough to handle your responsibilities within a larger inter-stellar community, you want us to clean up your mess for you. What do you want us to do? Assuming we can even put a stop to this insanity you’ve created, what’s to prevent you from trying again tomorrow? Why should we bother? Why are you worth saving?”

For what Gold believed might just be the first time since being elected to their current positions, the prefects were speechless.

“Good,” he said. “I see I’ve given you a lot to think about. You do that and get back to me.” With that, the captain made the motion of drawing his finger across his throat, and Shabalala immediately severed the connection.

No one said anything for several seconds, and Gold himself merely stared at the image of Rhaax V’s surface slowly rolling past as the *Vinci* continued its orbit. Finally he shook his head, the events of the past hour having nearly sickened him.

“Captain,” Marshall said, “I remind you that I am still in charge of this mission. If any resolutions are to be offered, they will be offered by me.”

Turning from the viewer, Gold leveled a withering stare at the diplomat. “Your mission is over,

Ambassador. I just completed it for you. The only thing left is the cleanup, and for us to iron out a few nagging details.” He indicated the door to his ready room. “I’d like to talk with you and Commander Gomez in private, please. Now.”

## CHAPTER

11

David Gold had never considered himself a violent man. Of course, he had been involved in various forms of conflict throughout his career, from individual fights to space battles, most especially during the brutal two years of the Dominion War. He took pride in his ability and willingness to go to any length in order to find nonviolent solutions to problems no matter their size or scope. Even on those unfortunate occasions where he had been forced to take life, he had resorted to such action only after every other option had been exhausted, and spent much time afterward reflecting on whether or not there had been another alternative he might have overlooked. He was comforted by the thought that subjecting himself and his decisions to such intense scrutiny played a key part in ensuring that he never wavered from his convictions.

It was precisely that level of restraint, nurtured and refined over a lifetime, which prevented Gold from knocking Ambassador Gabriel Marshall through the bulkhead of his ready room.

“Mr. Marshall,” he said, “with all due respect, have you lost your mind?”

The diplomat’s jaw dropped open in response to the blunt query. He said nothing for several moments, for which Gold was actually thankful. When he finally did begin to recover, his trademark overbearing demeanor returned in force.

“I might ask you the same question, Captain,” he replied. “You forget your place.”

“Let’s get something straight,” Gold snapped. “Your authority on this ship ended the moment those two planets started shooting at each other. Your authority over me ended the moment you elected to keep information from me that resulted in members of my crew being placed in danger.”

Marshall snorted. “If I’d informed you of my plans, would you have cooperated?”

“Absolutely not,” the captain replied, “and you knew that, which is why you made an end run around me to Starfleet Command and shanghaied my people.” He glanced at Gomez, who stood silent near the door, before continuing. “I know that your mission parameters placed the ship’s S.C.E. team under your direct command, but I’m pretty damned certain that order wasn’t intended to let you tamper with the relationship between Rhaax and her colony. Something tells me that somebody’s eyebrows are going to rise more than a bit when they read the report I’m submitting about all of this.”

Shaking his head, Marshall frowned. “Captain, given the current challenges facing the Federation, we are in need of new allies now more than ever. We must continue to expand if we are to remain healthy and vibrant. The Rhaaxans represent a valuable asset to us if they can be helped to overcome the obstacles they face. That is why we are here.”

To Gold it sounded like so much public relations doublespeak. “I realize we’ve had our share of problems in the last few years, Ambassador,” he said, working very hard to keep the distaste from his

voice, “but it would seem helpful to remember that the Rhaaxans’ state of affairs is one that the Federation must take responsibility for creating. While it might have been an honest error or a massive lapse in judgment, I don’t think it justifies continuing to manipulate an entire civilization in order to create a solution that reflects our best interests. I’m pretty sure the Federation will believe that, too. After all, I’d hope we learned something after that mess with the Ba’ku.”

During the Dominion War, that peaceful civilization had become the focal point of one of the most embarrassing incidents in Federation history, to Gold at least. High-ranking officials and Starfleet officers had conspired to drive the people from their world in order to harness for their own ends the life-prolonging effects of metaphasic radiation surrounding the Ba’ku planet.

After the crew of the U.S.S. Enterprise thwarted the plot, the details of the conspiracy were made public during a lengthy series of trials and courts-martial for those involved. Explanations and excuses were offered, citing the need to maintain the health and security of the Federation and the hardship in doing so during a climate of war and its aftermath. Promises were made and commitments pledged anew to the principles upon which the Federation had been founded, including the highest standard of all, the Prime Directive.

“I think that incident is still fresh enough in a lot of people’s minds,” Gold continued, “that it’ll invite all sorts of unwanted and unpopular comparisons to what’s happened here. I just don’t see how your actions can possibly be justified or accepted.”

Marshall replied, “My intention was to draw the Rhaaxans out and see if they would develop the biogenic agents if given the opportunity. As it happens, we also learned that the colonists were harboring their own weapon.”

“And it was a stroke of luck that they didn’t get to use that weapon,” Gold countered. “If you thought they might do something like this and still went ahead with your plan, then you’re even more dangerous than the people who built the damned things.”

“It was a calculated risk,” Marshall said, “but I was confident that Commander Gomez and her people would be able to stay on top of things. There may have been a few bumps, but ultimately that’s what happened.”

Shaking his head in disbelief, Gold stepped from behind his desk. “How many times does this sort of nonsense have to happen before we finally learn that taking sides in these types of disputes is disastrous for everyone involved? Have we forgotten the forty-year civil war on Mordan IV that was caused by a Starfleet captain? And what about Kirk on Neural or Talin? Those are required reading at Starfleet Academy, and still perfect examples of what happens when you muck with a planet’s culture. Isn’t any of this on the Diplomatic Corps’ reading list?”

Marshall drew himself up to his full height, his chest puffing out and his brow knit in irritation. “I’ve listened to as much abuse from you as I’m going to, Captain. Rest assured that your conduct will factor prominently in my report to your superiors.” He said nothing else as he turned and exited the ready room, leaving Gold alone with his first officer.

“I have to say I’m disappointed, Gomez.”

Nodding, Gomez replied. “I know, Captain, and I’m sorry. Marshall ordered me not to discuss the matter with anyone, including you. Even before I knew what he had in mind, I went to Captain Scott for help, but he’d been given similar orders about the mission. I knew what we were doing was crazy, but

when the orders came from Starfleet I had no choice, sir. I can't tell you how hard this has been for me."

Gold sighed in frustration. He had never been tolerant of "just following orders" as an excuse, but Gomez had raised a valid point. If the orders given to her came from the highest levels of Starfleet Command to cooperate with the Diplomatic Corps, was she not supposed to infer that the orders were lawful and issued in such a manner that those obliged to follow them would not find themselves in a moral or ethical quandary?

He moved back behind his desk and dropped into his chair, indicating for Gomez to take one of the two seats before him. Sighing, he said, "When I first accepted command of the *Vinci*, I thought I was comfortable with the notion that part of my crew could be accountable to someone else without going through me if the situation called for it." Salek, a Vulcan and the ship's previous S.C.E. team commander until his death during the Dominion War, had also served as Gold's first officer and aided him in adjusting to the ship's unorthodox rank and personnel structure.

"But after what's happened here," he added, "it's obvious that this is a policy vulnerable to abuse. You should never have been put in the position of having to keep secrets from me. There has to be some form of redress to ensure that officers caught up in these types of situations can't be forced to withhold important information, particularly from ship commanders." Leaning forward in his chair, he added, "Not to mention, I don't think I'm content with my and the rest of the crew's being a bunch of chauffeurs that people like Marshall can just drag into any mess they decide to create."

Gomez grimaced at that. "For what it's worth, Captain, I've never viewed you or the crew in that way. I think after this much time we've proven we work better together than separated, which is why I hated Marshall's putting me in that position. I just didn't know what to do, so I concentrated on making sure the Rhaaxans developed an ineffective biogen." She shook her head as disbelief and anger clouded her features. "And as for the colonists, we never saw that coming. We should have anticipated that they might do something themselves, but they'd never even hinted at anything like that. I can't believe how easily we were suckered." Looking up to meet Gold's gaze, she asked. "What do you think the Federation Council is going to say about this?"

"If they have any sense," Gold replied, "they'll deny the Rhaaxans' and Numai's application for membership, at least for the foreseeable future. Beyond that, the prefects were right. We did cause some of this, and we have a responsibility to fix it. I expect that Marshall or someone else will be here for a quite a while, working with the Rhaaxans and the colonists to find some kind of permanent, peaceful solution."

"I wonder how the citizens of both planets will react when the actions of their governments are made public?" Gomez asked.

The captain shrugged. "They'll have plenty of explaining to do, I suspect. Maybe now they'll stop and see just where all this insanity has left them. I'd be very surprised if there weren't calls for resignations and elections to select new leaders." Nodding more to himself than anyone else, he added, "All things considered, that might not be such a bad thing."

No matter the outcome, Gold knew it was a dispute that would be a long time in resolving. Regardless, the captain was sure that this would be recorded as yet another dark chapter in the annals of Federation diplomatic history, but would it be the one to provide some bit of wisdom and perhaps prevent another such incident from happening in the future? Gold doubted it.

More important, to him at least, was his concern that what had happened here would have lasting effects

on him and his relationship with his crew. This mission had highlighted not only the myriad problems that plagued the Rhaaxans' grand aspirations to become Federation members, but also exposed a glaring flaw in what many had believed to be an effective organizational design that supported the unique demands of S.C.E. detachments being ferried by Starfleet ships.

Looks like I'm going to have a long talk with Captain Scott one of these days.

It was an issue David Gold wanted addressed, quickly, before it caused more damage to the bond between a ship's captain and its crew.

## About the Authors

DAYTON WARD has been a fan of Star Trek 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. He got his start in professional writing by having stories selected for each of Pocket Books' first three Star Trek: Strange New Worlds writing contests. In addition to his various writing projects with Kevin Dilmore (see Kevin's bio below), Dayton is the author of the Star Trek novel *In the Name of Honor*, the science fiction novel *The Last World War*, and the short story "Loose Ends" in *Star Trek: New Frontier: No Limits*. Though he currently lives in Kansas City with his wife, Michi, Dayton is a Florida native and still maintains a torrid long-distance romance with his beloved Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Readers interested in contacting Dayton or learning more about his writing are encouraged to venture to his Internet cobweb collection at <http://www.daytonward.com>.

After fifteen years as a newspaper reporter and editor, KEVIN DILMORE turned his full attention to his freelance writing career in 2003. Since 1997, he has been a contributing writer to *Star Trek Communicator*, writing news stories and personality profiles for the bimonthly publication of the Official Star Trek Fan Club. Look for Kevin's interviews with some of Star Trek's most popular authors in volumes of the *Star Trek Signature Editions*. On the fictional side of things, his story "The Road to Edos" was published last year in the *Star Trek: New Frontier* anthology *No Limits*. With Dayton Ward, he has written the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* novels *A Time to Sow* and *A Time to Harvest Field Expediency*, a story featuring the S.C.E. in the anthology *Star Trek: Tales of the Dominion War* and six other *Star Trek: S.C.E.* eBooks, with more to come. A graduate of the University of Kansas, Kevin lives in Prairie Village, Kansas, with his wife, Michelle, and their three daughters.

## COMING NEXT MONTH: **Star Trek™:** **S.C.E. #40**

### **FAILSAFE by David Mack**

When a cultural observation probe malfunctions and crash-lands on a pre-warp world, the S.C.E. is sent in to destroy it before the technology falls into the hands of a civilization not prepared for it. Unfortunately, when Commander Gomez and her team arrive, they find that the device has already been captured by terrorist forces who intend to reverse-engineer the technology into a weapon that will change

the balance of power on their world to deadly effect!

Now it's a race against time for the S.C.E. to find and destroy the probe before it's too late!

COMING IN MAY FROM POCKET BOOKS!