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OUT OF THE COCOON

William Leisner



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New York London Toronto Sydney

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An Original Publication of POCKET BOOKS

Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY
10020

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ISBN: 0-7434-9692-2

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For Mom and Dad

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I must thank Melinda M. Snodgrass, for penning the TNG episode “Up the Long Ladder,” without which this story would have been a lot shorter.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to Rosalyn Landor and Jon de Vries, for bringing to life the characters of Brenna Odell and the Ministers Granger, respectively. And while Danilo Odell may be gone, I can’t forget to credit Barrie Ingham for his portrayal of the archetypal Bringloidi. A special acknowledgment as well to the episode’s “atmosphere” actors who, despite being given neither dialogue, names, nor on-screen credit for their work, provided much inspiration for this story’s original characters.

Thanks to fellow Strange New Worlds graduates Lynda Foley, Kevin Killiany, and Dayton Ward, for their advice and encouragement during the gestation of this project.

The S.C.E. Guide at David Henderson’s Psi Phi website (www.psiphi.org) served as an invaluable reference to the series’ history. (It seems like just the other day John J. Ordovery first announced this new original eBook-only series, and now it’s got a history.)

And of course, thanks to S.C.E. co-developer and editor Keith R.A. DeCandido who, in addition to letting me play in this sandbox and just generally being a cool guy, also taught me valuable lessons about the importance of patience in the writing business.

Chapter

1

For the forty-seventh time in the past eight days, Elizabeth Lense ran her medical tricorder up and down her abdomen and checked the scan results.

Yep. Still pregnant, all right.

She stared at the readout on the small instrument screen, head slightly shaking, still somehow unable to believe what she was seeing. She was already beginning to feel the first physical changes to her body—no nausea, though, thank God; Domenica Corsi would definitely notice her getting up to retch in their shared bathroom every morning. But even with the fatigue, the sensitivity in her breasts, all that, some part of her insisted that it was someone else in this condition. Someone else. Not her.

Which, at least figuratively speaking, was somewhat accurate. After all, she hadn't been in a serious romantic relationship since Starfleet Medical Academy, with a man she now fondly referred to as "that jackass." Their long engagement and blink-and-you-missed-it marriage went a long way toward convincing her to focus on her medical career and forget about any hopes of finding love. Then, she found herself stranded on an unknown primitive planet in an alternate universe, with no hope of being rescued and resuming her previous life, where she found herself drawn to the handsome alien rebel leader who had taken her in, and she finally let down her emotional walls and gave in to...

God, it sounds like something out of a bad romance holonovel, she thought, wincing. All the more reason to consider what had naturally followed from their shared passion as being fictional as well.

Except of course it wasn't. The two subjective months she'd spent with the Jabari were real, even if they did happen in only two objective weeks. The emotional bond she had formed with Saad was real.

She looked again at the image displayed on her tricorder. At the tiny, ball-shaped life growing inside...

"Gold to Lense."

The doctor nearly jumped out of her skin, and immediately snapped her tricorder shut, as if the captain had just snuck up over her shoulder. After an extra couple of seconds to compose herself, and to check that there was no one else in sickbay who might have seen anything, she tapped her combadge. "Lense here, Captain."

"Captain Scott just handed us a new assignment. Staff meeting in ten minutes in the observation lounge."

An eyebrow lifted in curiosity. If this new mission had come from the S.C.E. liaison, it probably wasn't medical in nature. But hopefully, it would still be something to keep her mind occupied. "Aye, sir," she answered.

Once the comlink was closed, she reopened her tricorder, and considered the display once more. She keyed in a sequence confirming her authority as ship's chief medical officer, and for the forty-seventh time, deleted all record of her self-examination from her medical file.

* * *

"Work, damn you," Sonya Gomez growled as she gave her computer terminal a good hard smack. None of her S.C.E. colleagues were here to witness this unauthorized technique, though most of them would probably have approved of the notion. Stevens, certainly. Tev, not so much.

“A valid access code is required,” the computer repeated, completely unfazed by the commander’s use of physical violence.

Gomez growled back. After the debacle at Hildago Station, where her personal logs and files had been hacked and her identity hijacked by a cybernetics-savvy con man, she asked Soloman and Bart Faulwell to create a new protection protocol for her. The team’s computer and encryption experts had come through brilliantly, crafting for her a complex system requiring a sequence of passwords and access codes that, layered on top of standard Starfleet encryption, would make access by anyone other than her nigh impossible.

Provided, of course, that she remembered those access codes. Bart told her to find a code phrase that wasn’t just a random alphanumeric string, but would not be easily connected to her—no lines from a favorite book or names of childhood pets. She’d picked a lyric from a Lurian folk song Carol Abramowitz had fallen in love with and played for her not long ago. At the time, Gomez couldn’t get the insipid song out of her head. Now that she had to remember it, though, to retrieve some personal logs that related to this assignment, the exact line escaped her. There were mountains that were as high as something, but not the sky. Or maybe it was the sky that was as high as the mountains... And to add insult to injury, she now had the stupid wordless melody stuck in her head.

She heaved a sigh and, resigned to relying solely on Starfleet’s official reports, headed for the briefing. Sure enough, everyone was already seated around the table, waiting on her. “Sorry,” she said, as she slipped into the chair to Captain Gold’s immediate right and across from Lieutenant Commander Morglasch Tev. Tev watched her with a neutral expression, giving no outward indication of the disdain with which she knew he considered her tardiness. This she considered a sign of the Tellarite’s progress.

“All right, now that we’re all here,…” Captain Gold said once she was settled. “Six hours ago, Starfleet Command received a priority-one message from a human colony in the Ficus Sector. It was sharp, short, and did not allow for the option of any response or request for elaboration.”

Gold pressed a tab embedded in the tabletop in front of him, and the lounge filled with a staticky hiss, followed by the voice of a woman, with a Gaelic lilt: “This is Mariposa to the Federation: We want you to come and rid us of this infernal machinery, every last bloody scrap of it!”

The initial reaction, as the message abruptly ended, was to stare around the table at one another in confusion. Tev was the first to form a response. “That’s it?” He wobbled his head in disbelief. “What in Phinda’s name does that mean? What ‘infernal machinery’? A weapons system gone amok? An artificial intelligence gone insane?”

“And ‘every bloody scrap’?” P8 Blue interjected. The low-pitched clacking sound she made as she spoke indicated she felt much the same as Tev about the amount of detail contained in the message. “Without knowing the scope of what they’re asking—or any specifics at all, for that matter—how can they expect the kind of thoroughness they’re apparently asking for?”

“Clearly, for whatever reason, the woman was panicked,” Carol Abramowitz said. While the cultural expert was no less bewildered by the message, there was a milder undertone to her reaction. “We could sit here and pick the message apart word by word for whatever limited information we can glean, but what it’s all going to boil down to is, something has gone very wrong on Mariposa.”

“Though, if you’re not going to pick it apart word by word, I may as well leave,” Bart Faulwell said, feigning a move for the lounge door.

“Stick around, Faulwell,” the captain said with a genial smile. “We’ll try to find something to occupy you.”

“What do we know of these Mariposans,” Tev asked, “if anything?”

Gold cued the rest of the room by turning his attention to Gomez. She nodded, took a brief glance down at her padd, then began: “In 2123, the S.S. Mariposa, a DY-500-class spaceship, launched from Earth bound for the Ficus Sector, carrying two parties of colonists. The main group, composed of molecular biologists, geneticists, neurologists, and other specialists, eventually settled on the planet that now bears the name of the ship. The second group were members of a ‘back-to-nature’ movement who disavowed all modern technology—most older technologies, too—and adopted a preindustrial, agrarian way of life. That group settled another planet in the Ficus Sector, which they called Bringloid. Unfortunately, almost all records of this expedition were lost, and the two colonies were forgotten until—”

“Lost? Forgotten? All record of hundreds of humans?” Soloman’s dark deep-set eyes bulged outward. “This was only two hundred and fifty-four years ago, during Earth’s Stage IV Computing Age, and well after your last world war. How would such a thing be possible?” If the Bynar didn’t already have such a pale complexion, Gomez thought he would have blanched. Given his culture’s heavy reliance on computerized data, he must have considered the matter-of-fact acceptance of this gap in the historical record scandalous.

It was Abramowitz who addressed the issue. “In many ways, the late twenty-first and early twenty-second centuries was one of the most unstable periods in Earth history. The reestablishment of civil society and rule of law after World War III happened in fits and starts. More than a generation after the end of the war, there were still places where local warlords were employing drug warriors and kangaroo courts to maintain control over their citizens. Even after first contact with Vulcan in 2063, when humanity realized there was a larger universe to deal with, there was significant resistance to the idea of a united human race. That’s what led a lot of the early émigrés, like the Conestoga, Terra 10, and Katowa Expeditions to leave Earth in the first place; they were afraid their cultures would be subsumed by the coming ‘New World Order’.”

“Yes, well, as fascinating as the history lesson is,” Tev grumbled, “it doesn’t appear to bear any relevance to the present situation.”

Gomez shot Tev a pained look. “I’m afraid I need to fascinate you some more, Tev. The Bringloidi colony was rediscovered eleven years ago, after their sun went into a period of intense electromagnetic flaring. An old emergency distress beacon the Mariposa had left was triggered, and the Enterprise—the Enterprise-D, I should say—was sent to investigate, and then evacuate the planet.”

“Hold on,” Fabian Stevens interrupted, one eyebrow raised curiously. “The Enterprise, eleven years ago?”

Gomez deliberately avoided Stevens’s eyes as she answered, “Yes, this was during my tour aboard the Enterprise.” Not to mention, it was also during the late Kieran Duffy’s time on the Enterprise engineering staff as well. Please, don’t mention that, Fabe, she thought at him. As one of Duff’s closest friends, Stevens had made the connection immediately, but she didn’t think anyone else in the room would. She hoped not, anyhow; the last thing she wanted was a lot of questions about her emotional state through the course of this mission.

For once, Sonya was glad to have Tev interrupt. “Again, I must ask what these reminiscences have to

do with the current situation?"

Gold fixed Tev with a steely glare. "There's someplace more important you need to be, Tev?"

Tev hesitated a split second before saying, "No, sir. I apologize for the interruption."

Gomez accepted the apology with a nod. Maybe there's hope for him yet. "It was the Bringloidi who sent us searching for their sister colony," she continued. "We soon found Mariposa, and... to make a long story short, Captain Picard convinced the Mariposans to allow the Bringloidi to resettle on Mariposa, and to integrate them into their society."

"I'm sorry?" Abramowitz leaned forward in her seat, lines of concern creasing her forehead. "You relocated a technophobic society onto a world inhabited by a scientific colony, and expected the two to integrate themselves?"

"That might explain why now they want to be rid of their machinery," Pattie mused.

The rest of the team started nodding at the logic of this conclusion—except for Lense, who seemed lost in her own thoughts, much as she had since the end of her ordeal with Dr. Bashir on the Jabari planet. Gomez shook her head adamantly, though. "Their forebears were technophobes. The Bringloidi themselves, once we brought them aboard the Enterprise, were actually quite quick to accept the wonders of modern technology, and were eager to have their children receive advanced educations."

"I suppose cowering in a cave while the sun threatens to swallow up your planet would make most people reconsider the benevolence of Mother Nature," Faulwell said.

"But then, why Mariposa?" Pattie asked. "Why not bring them back to Earth? Or better yet, an agricultural world like Gault or Sherman's Planet, where they could ease into modernity at a more comfortable pace?"

"Well, because the Mariposans needed the Bringloidi... for... they weren't able..." Gomez paused. She hadn't really wanted to sidetrack the briefing with the big contentious issue, but... "The population of Mariposa was made up entirely of clones."

Eight sets of eyes locked on Gomez for a silent moment. Then Stevens shook his head and said, "See, it's these juicy parts that get lost when you make a long story short."

"Clones?" Lense asked, suddenly fully engaged in the conversation. "An entire colony?" Gomez could see her thoughts jump to warp behind her eyes. "Huh..."

"What does that have to do with the Bringloidi?" Tev asked. "And why would it have bearing on the request to remove all their technology?" He seemed annoyed that Lense understood something he didn't.

Lense looked back at Tev. "If they've been cloning themselves for all these years, and then cloning from clones of clones, the point will come where the replicative fading of their DNA is going to make any further cloning impossible. Their race would die out."

"And so they were hoping the Bringloidi would help them carry on their culture," Abramowitz said, frowning thoughtfully. "I suppose there's a certain amount of sense in that."

"Oh, yes," Tev grumbled, "it makes perfect sense... if Picard's primary goal was to rid himself of these

refugees as quickly as possible.”

Captain Gold raised a bushy eyebrow at Tev, but didn't say anything. Tev had been off ship the last time the Enterprise rendezvoused with the *Vinci*, during their business with Rod Portlyn. It was possible that he was unaware that Gold and Picard had been friends since their Starfleet Academy days. Though, it was just as possible that, to his mind, it made no difference.

“And now,” Tev continued, “it would seem the clash between the two cultures has effected some major, possibly deadly, crisis.”

“Let's not jump to conclusions,” Gold said. “We have a few facts and a lot of speculation only.” He paused then to tap at his combadge. “Gold to bridge. Any luck getting a response to our hails from Mariposa, Haznedl?”

“Negative, sir,” responded the operations officer.

Gold sighed. “Keep trying. Constant hails, all frequencies.”

“All right,” Gomez said. “Pattie, Carol, Domenica: I'll give you what we have on the Mariposans and Bringloidi. Let's get a picture of where these people stand in terms of their technological infrastructure, what sort of society is likely to have developed since their joining, and how we're going to deal with that society if it is, in fact, on the verge of falling apart.”

With that, the briefing was adjourned. As everyone stood to leave, Gomez moved around the table to intercept Faulwell. “Bart, I'm sorry, you probably are going to be a little bored during this assignment.”

He shrugged. “That's how it goes. I suppose you already know *mariposa* is the Spanish word for butterfly?”

“Yeah.” Gomez smirked. “But actually, there is something you can do. Something that could mean the difference between success or failure this mission.”

Faulwell gave her a slow, knowing nod. “I knew you were never going to remember that song lyric.”

“Oh, shut up...”

Chapter 2

Gold tapped the disconnect tab on his desktop monitor, and Jean-Luc Picard's face disappeared, replaced by the Federation seal. He tapped his fingers on the desktop some more, staring blankly and thinking about the information his old friend had given him.

He had no idea how long he sat like that, or what had sparked in his brain that brought him back to the present and refocused his stare. He'd apparently, for however long, been watching his left hand, his fingers still beating a rhythmless beat on the desktop.

His hand. His fingers. He tended, whenever he thought about the biosynthetic replacement (which, many months since losing the original at Galvan VI, was less and less often, he was proud to say), to focus on

the “synthetic” aspect. But it had been synthesized from biological elements—specifically, his own skin, bone, muscle, and nerve cells.

His cloned cells.

In some respect, that made him think of this appendage as being more freakish than had it been made of plastic and metal. And that was an attitude he had to put behind him before he had to deal with the Mariposans.

After Gold had asked Picard a few questions about the Enterprise-D’s visit to the Ficus Sector over a decade ago, their conversation drifted to the topic of cloning in general. While the long war against the cloned warriors of the Dominion certainly colored their attitudes, the fact was that humanity had long been wary of the concept. Even before the discovery of DNA and genetic science, there were cautionary tales of evil twins, doppelgängers, automatons, and other soulless monsters created by those who dared to play God. Even with all the advances in human knowledge over the millennia, all the superstitious taboos shattered by science, there was still, for whatever reason, this almost instinctive aversion to this particular type of manipulation of nature.

The chime of his ready room door snapped Gold out of his musings. He sighed, dropped his hand in his lap, and called, “Come.”

“Pardon me, Captain,” Abramowitz said as she entered. “I hope I’m not disturbing you.”

Gold shook his head and gestured to one of his guest chairs (with his right hand, hiding the left; put it out of your mind, David). “Not at all. Any luck in your research?”

The dark-haired woman gave a slight shrug of her shoulders. “I’ve been reviewing the reports from the Tubman, what little there is.”

Gold nodded. About a year after the Enterprise’s departure, Starfleet had sent a second ship to do a sociological follow-up. The citizens of Mariposa, having previously gone over two hundred years without outside contact, were less receptive to the visitors than they had been when they were facing extinction. The Tubman cut their mission to Mariposa short, and three weeks later, after the Borg massacre at Wolf 359, the isolationist world had fallen to the bottom of Starfleet’s list of priorities.

Abramowitz continued, asking, “Have you spoken yet with Captain Picard?”

Of course that’s what she was going to ask. “Yes, I have.”

Abramowitz nodded, expecting him to expand on his answer. After several quiet seconds, she added, “I was hoping he would have offered some insight as to his decision-making process at the time.”

“All the pertinent information was included in his logs and reports, as the regulations require.”

The cultural specialist looked far from assured. “With all respect, sir,” she said, speaking with deliberate care, “as I read those reports, I see Captain Picard making decisions based in large part on what was most convenient for him and his crew. The tone of his recordings suggest he had little tolerance for the refugees disrupting his ship, and he resettled them on the next M-class planet they found, citing ‘poetic justice’ as a factor.”

“That is a gross simplification of the record,” Gold replied, although he had to admit it was not an

unreasonable interpretation. Picard's discomfort with the Bringloidi came through clearly in his reports, while the details of their interactions with the Mariposans were couched in more careful language.

"I'm sorry, sir, but... Picard's decision makes little sense to me. I need to have a better understanding of why this hybrid culture was created in the first place in order to formulate my own recommendations for this mission."

"I've always been most impressed by your ability to give sound advice in those cases where we know almost nothing about the cultures in question," said Gold.

The attempt at flattery did nothing to lighten the woman's countenance. "Captain, I know you and Picard are old friends, but—"

"All right, stop right there," Gold snapped, and instantly regretted the sharpness of his tone. He paused to gather himself before continuing, "Yes, Picard is a longtime friend. And as a fellow captain, who knows what it's like to sit in the center chair and make quick decisions that are guaranteed to be examined in minute detail by people who weren't there through the lens of twenty-twenty hindsight, I do hesitate to voice any criticisms I may have of his actions. That said, I strongly resent the implication that I would put my personal relationships above my responsibilities to this ship, this crew, and its mission."

"I apologize for offending—"

Gold waved her off. "The fact is, sometimes starship captains do things they don't think all the way through. They make contact with pre-warp civilizations or leave history books behind on away-team missions. Even I've made some stupid mistakes in my career," Gold added, forcing a grin. "Captain Picard recognizes that the episode with the Bringloidi was not the most admirable in his career. He could have looked for other options for dealing with the Bringloidi, and then still more options for dealing with the Mariposans. He chose the option that looked most able to help both at the same time. It could have been a mistake in judgment, sure. But making those judgment calls is what captains are expected to do. There is no more explanation than that."

"Yes, sir." Abramowitz nodded. She clearly wasn't completely appeased, but she was satisfied that there were no secrets being withheld from her. "I'll dig a little harder, and try to have some recommendations before we reach the planet."

"Thank you," Gold nodded.

Abramowitz stood and headed for the ready room door, then stopped and turned back to the captain. "You've made mistakes, sir?" she asked, flashing a tiny grin.

Gold cocked an eyebrow at her. "Let's let that be our little secret, Abramowitz."

* * *

"Ensign Gomez."

Sonya jumped like a cat, and spun around to face the superior officer who had moved up unnoticed behind her. "Commander Riker, sir."

A sliver of a smile showed through the XO's beard. He was obviously amused by her nervous reaction... and probably grateful she didn't have any sort of beverage in her hand at the moment. The

smile didn't last long, though. "Ensign, I need to discuss something with you. We can talk in Lieutenant La Forge's office."

Sonya nodded, though the commander hadn't waited for an answer before turning and heading for the chief engineer's office. She turned back to where her current work partner still stood, gathering up her tool kit.

"Ooohhh, you're in trouuuble," Lieutenant Kieran Duffy teased, looking and sounding like a demented five-year-old.

Sonya gave him a mortified look. She woke up every morning worrying that someone would realize that they had erred, assigning her to the Federation flagship, when she didn't reach the standards required for such an honor. And here was Duffy, not only showing zero concern that they'd been caught flirting with each other while on duty (and they were clearly flirting; people didn't smile the way they were at each other while discussing datastream compression rates), but cracking jokes about it. Sonya wished she could decide whether she was shocked by Duffy's carefree demeanor, or envious of it.

She trotted around the warp core and turned the corner into La Forge's office. Riker was leaning on a corner of the desk waiting and, to Sonya's surprise, so was Dr. Pulaski, wearing a look of deep consternation. "Ensign Gomez," the doctor said. "Please, have a seat."

Sonya looked from one senior officer to the other, at a complete loss to understand why Pulaski would be down in the engineering section to talk with her. "Is something wrong?"

Neither answered immediately, hesitating for some reason. "Doctor...?" she prompted, her stomach starting to flutter. "Commander...?"

* * *

"Commander?"

Gomez's head jerked up, and she saw Stevens standing on the opposite side of the mess hall table where she was seated. "Sorry, Fabe," she apologized. "I was somewhere else."

Stevens nodded, indicating the padd she held in front of her. "OldEnterprise logs?"

"Yep." Bart had gotten her back into her personal logs in no time at all. She almost wished he hadn't. "A real trip down memory lane."

Stevens took a seat across from her, studying her for a moment. "You okay?"

Gomez sighed. It occurred to her that forgetting her password could have been her subconscious's way to spare her both from reliving these old memories, and from having to deal with all her friends asking "are you okay?" "I'm fine," she said. And it was true; not long ago, during the Dancing Star recovery, she also had to review logs of a previous encounter where Kieran had been involved. At that time, she had been reduced to tears. Now... "I feel fine," she repeated. "Though, I'm not sure how I feel about feeling fine." Stevens gave her a sympathetic smile, and reached across the table to give her forearm a gentle squeeze.

They sat quietly like that for a moment longer before Gomez blurted, "They tried to clone us."

Stevens's eyes looked as if they might drop out of his head. "What?"

"Kieran and I were on the repair crew the Mariposans asked for when we first got there. It was one of the first times we were assigned to work together." She paused briefly at that memory, smiling in spite of herself. "I was an ensign, he was a j.g. The two of us were paired off, and we did some work on their main biosynthesizing systems. Nothing seemed suspicious; we had no idea that they had done anything at all to us. But later, after the captain had the Mariposans' cloning equipment confiscated and inspected, they found that they had stolen tissue samples from us, and almost all the human crew members who'd been down on the planet."

"My God," Stevens whispered. Then he asked, "And the stolen samples?"

"All destroyed as soon as they were identified."

Stevens pondered that silently for a second too long. Sonya could tell that he was wondering what if that hadn't been the case, and that his friend might, in some way, have been preserved.

"Good," Stevens finally said. "Destroyed. That's good."

Gomez made herself nod in concurrence.

* * *

"Now entering the Mariposa system, Captain."

"Bring us into standard orbit, Wong," Captain Gold ordered, then tapped his combadge. "Gomez and Tev, report to the bridge." He leaned forward in his seat, watching the salmon-colored world surrounded by a system of gossamer rings grow larger and larger on the forward viewscreen. "Any response to hails yet?"

"Negative, sir," said Haznedl.

"Switch from subspace to RF," Gold said, "and be sure they know we're now in orbit." From what he'd gathered about the inhabitants of this world, Gold suspected that once they knew the Federation was now on their home turf, whatever communications failures that had plagued them up until now would be magically resolved.

After a few more moments without a response, during which the engineers arrived on the bridge, Anthony Shabalala reported from tactical, "Sir, I'm detecting a dampening field of some sort being generated on the planet. It's blocking our hails and all active scans."

Or not, Gold thought.

"Why would these people so urgently call for our assistance," Tev wondered aloud as he stepped across the bridge, "only to turn a deaf ear when we arrive?"

"This is a very good question," Gold said. "Can we punch a signal through, Shabalala?"

The tactical officer frowned at his console readouts. "Sir, it's a modulated tetryon field."

"A tetryon field? To block communications?" Tev shook his head. "That's absurd! That would be akin

to hunting the proverbial insect with a phaser rifle.”

Gold nodded. Naturally occurring tetryon particle fields had the capability not only to disrupt a starship’s warp field, but also to rend gaps in the very fabric of space. “You’re right, Tev. This is for more than just blocking us.”

“They’re using it to disrupt their power distribution system,” Gomez said. “The Klingons did this a lot during the war: they’d use their ships’ deflectors to flood a planet’s surface with tetryon radiation, to neutralize all directed energy weapons and force the Jem’Hadar to face them in hand-to-hand combat. This field would render any kind of energy-dependent technologies useless.”

Tev grunted softly. “It seems they’ve found the answer to whatever problem they had on their own.”

“And traded themselves a new one,” Gold said. Assuming the dampening field went up sometime after their distress message was broadcast, it had been active for not quite twelve hours. In another twelve, the people inside that field would start to exhibit symptoms of tetryon radiation poisoning. “Options, people.”

“There is a weak point of the field, sir,” Shabalala said. “The field is being generated by a central transmission point. It’s projecting its field three hundred and sixty degrees on the horizontal plane, but vertically, the highest angle of transmission is point one-four degrees off the zenith.”

“Like a huge umbrella of energy covering the planet,” Gomez said, “with just a very narrow cone extending straight up from its center.”

Gold rubbed his chin as he visualized what Gomez described. “So, we could position ourselves directly above their transmitter?” They could then direct a signal through the “cone,” like the old-style speaking tubes they’d used on ships before wire voice transmission.

“We’d still need to boost the signal enough to cut through the bleed-through radiation,” Shabalala noted, “and we’d need to keep an extremely precise geosynchronous orbit.”

“How precise?”

“We’d have to position the ship within a fifteen-hundred-meter diameter window, and hold it there as the planet rotates below us. It would also help if we could be inside the ionosphere.”

Gold turned to the young lieutenant at conn. “Wong?”

“With one hand tied behind my back, sir.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Gold settled back into his command chair. “Just keep us in the sweet spot.”

Wong nodded, then turned his full attention to his board. Despite his mock boasting a moment earlier, both of his hands were in constant motion across his board. Planetary orbit was normally a very automatic procedure. But then, normally it didn’t require more than line-of-sight alignment with a surface station. Keeping the ship in such precise alignment with a single point rotating at a relative five hundred meters per second, while at the same time fighting the drag of the upper atmosphere, was enough to keep Wong’s attention focused.

“You’ve got it, Songmin. Now steady...” Shabalala said as he adjusted his equipment. “I think we’re getting through the interference now, just barely.” Then, looking up with a smile, he said, “Response is

coming in now, Captain.”

“Good job,” Gold told the young man, then ordered, “On-screen.”

The image of the ringed planet on the viewscreen disappeared, replaced by the slightly staticky face of a man who looked like he hadn’t slept in a month. His skin was dark, and so was his mood; his eyebrows were drawn down sharply, and the corners of his mouth curled into a frown. “Oh, good,” he said without enthusiasm. “The Federation is here.”

Gold paused briefly before deciding to disregard the sarcastic nongreeting. “This is David Gold, captain of the U.S.S. da Vinci. We’re here in response to a distress message from the leadership of the Mariposan colony.”

“That message came from the former, illegitimate leadership,” the man on the screen replied. “Power has now been restored to the true, rightful leaders of Mariposa.”

Klaxons wailed inside Gold’s brain. “And you would be one of those rightful leaders, Mister...?”

“James Hammond, and yes, I am,” he said, baring his teeth in a triumphant if weary grin. “So, thank you for your offer, Captain, but the Mariposan people have no need of your assistance.”

No, Gold thought, with a sourness climbing up from his stomach. But what about the Bringloidi?

Chapter 3

James Hammond considered the tableau of the Federation starship bridge on his comscreen with a mixture of fascination and revulsion. Beside the elderly Starfleet captain stood some disgusting alien that might have been the result of recombinant DNA experiments with human and pig genes. Behind those two loomed a gigantic blue antennae insect, staring at him with blank pale eyes, towering above a small and impossibly frail-looking little man with a computer circuit imbedded in the side of his hairless, oversized head. There were several other human-looking individuals scattered about, but who could guess how much actual human blood flowed in any of their veins? He felt his stomach clenching at the very thought that all the creatures in this menagerie could freely interact with one another.

But of course, he had to contain his reactions. He didn’t know much about the Federation—he was just out of Incubation and had barely begun Imprinting when they first visited Mariposa—but he knew they were not a force to be trifled with. Eleven years ago, without a single shot being fired, they had bent his world to their will, destroying what his people had spent nearly three centuries creating.

Which made dealing with them now almost a greater challenge than what he had faced in the past forty-eight hours. Calling upon the interpersonal skills that the Progenitors had passed down to him through their genes and their engrams, James leaned back away from the screen and lowered his shoulders, projecting a friendlier demeanor. “You seem concerned still, Captain.”

“You have to admit, this is a rather sudden change.”

James couldn’t help but grin at that. “From our perspective, this change has been over ten years in the making.”

“And there’s the small matter of the energy-dampening field...”

“A temporary safety measure,” James said. “Once the Alliance for Mariposan Primacy has stabilized its power, we’ll be able to allow normal energy usage.”

“This field of yours is also blocking out our scans, and severely restricting our communication with the planet.”

James had no trouble catching the unspoken meaning behind Gold’s words. “You distrust us, Captain,” he said, carefully masking any sign of resentment. “You think we’re hiding something from you.”

“The possibility did occur to me.”

Well, of course it did, James realized. Earth history was a long pattern of horrors and atrocities by charismatic leaders, almost inevitably followed by cover-ups and historical revision. The Progenitors had struck out for the stars in order to escape the cycle of self-destruction the rest of humanity had seemed caught in. Captain Gold was clearly considering him through that warped cultural filter.

“Captain, I understand your suspicion, but before you form any opinions about us, you need to take into consideration the nature of the Mariposan people. The Progenitors’ ship spent months in uncharted space, searching for an inhabitable world they had no guarantee of finding. Then, once they did, they were nearly all killed by a series of breaches ripped in the ship’s skin upon landing. Nearly three hundred perished, while only five survived.

“Think about that. Five out of hundreds, on a strange planet light-years from anything they’d ever known in their lives. Many people in their situation would probably envy the dead. But those people refused to yield to fate. They not only managed to overcome this crippling blow, but managed also to create a new society, a unique culture capable of incredible scientific breakthroughs and cultural accomplishments. Surely, you have to agree that the fact that we are here, talking to you today, verges on the miraculous.”

“It is undeniably amazing,” the Starfleet captain admitted. James could see that Gold’s appreciation was real; even the pig-man seemed to be moved by his words. James repressed another shiver of revulsion as he refocused his attention on the human.

“Then you must also allow that the Mariposan society that accomplished all this deserves to be preserved,” James continued, leaning forward now to drive his argument home. “This society was created solely from the genes of these five extraordinary individuals. No mixing, no diluting, no polluting. What we’ve done, we did with pure genetic lines.” James thumped the fingertips of his right hand on his desktop, punctuating those last three words. “That is why, Captain Gold, we had to liberate this world from the rule of outsiders, and the traitors who tolerated them, so that we could reestablish that which made us the exceptional people that we are.” Then he flashed the old man his most charming, confidence-inducing smile. “I’m certain you recognize the merit of this.”

Gold stared back silently, his face blank and unreadable. Then he looked to a dark-haired humanoid at a console behind him, and with a subtle hand gesture, the Starfleet ship ceased transmitting.

James Hammond allowed himself a brief moment of self-congratulation. All his life, he’d had his abilities questioned. Not only was he a 15—developed from a fifteenth-generation cell line, the furthest removed line from John Hammond’s original DNA that could still develop into a viable clone—but he was also of the group of clones that, because the Federation had confiscated all their cloning equipment, was not

subjected to the same rigorous screenings for hidden genetic faults.

No one could ever question him again. Not only had he orchestrated the overthrow of Wilson Granger's farcical excuse for a government, but he had also made the arrogant Federation, who had brought this Bringloidi plague on them in the first place, abandon their seemingly instinctive need to interfere in other societies.

By the time he allowed himself to consider that this sense of victory might have been premature, it was too late.

He'd dismissed the distant explosion—what he would eventually understand was the dampening field being overloaded—as just another distant skirmish between his supporters and die-hard Wilson Granger loyalists. The next three, coming in rapid succession and shaking the Security Ministry emergency control center he'd captured at the beginning of their offensive, caused the first cracks in his self-assuredness.

The ones that followed caused cracks in the walls. Despite the defensive shielding around the underground facility, the lights began to flicker wildly. He heard the distinctive whine of phase pistols firing just beyond the door to the room's single access tunnel.

Once the shock of the realization of his own vulnerability faded, James jabbed a shaking finger at the comscreen on the desk, hailing the Federation ship. Several more explosions shook the room as he jabbed at the still-darkened console, spewing a stream of curses at the filthy spawn of random sexual reproduction. When the old captain finally did appear on his screen, he didn't even bother to feign civility. "What have you done?" he screamed.

"I should think that would be obvious by now, Mr. Hammond." Gold's voice was hard and unapologetic. Had he misread the old man's reaction to his logic so badly?

The explosions were getting closer, but James did not hear them. There was little he could do, at any rate. This was in the most secure area in the Capital Complex, with only one way in, or out. If the traitors were able to fight their way through the A.M.P.'s defenses—which without the dampening field was a near certainty—he was dead. Even worse, so was Mariposa; there would be no second opportunities here. "Tell me, Captain Gold," James said, "do Earth-bred humans still believe in gods?"

James couldn't read the old troublemaker's expression through the distortions, but his voice was crystal clear. "Some of us, yes. I do."

"Then may they all damn you," James growled, even as he heard the blows against the door behind him, and the squeal of the locking bolts being torn from the frame. The acrid smell of scorched metal and burnt circuits followed them in from the corridor, testament to how much they had wantonly destroyed. He stood stock-still, unable to face the traitors to the Mariposan people as they burst into the room.

"Move away from the console!" a deep voice boomed. James did not move a muscle, glowering at the screen. A part of him wanted to laugh at the comic looks that had come across the Vinci crew's faces as they witnessed the scene playing out for them. Then he was grabbed by the shoulder and spun around, forcing him to face the six-man assault team. . .

. . .all of whom shared with him the hard, dark face of their common Progenitor.

Knowing that the Mariposans were clones did nothing to dull the surprise of witnessing a man being attacked by an army of his exact duplicates. Gold watched in fascination as one of the counterinsurgents grabbed James Hammond by his collar and yanked him out of his chair. He lifted the would-be revolutionary so they were nose to nose, and growled something no one on the bridge caught. He then threw the prisoner across the room, into the waiting arms of two other clones, who nearly twisted James's shoulders loose as they bound his wrists behind his back. Once James was secured and led from the room, the clone leader turned his attention to the audience watching from the comscreen. "Do we have you to thank for destroying the dampening field generator?"

"That was our doing, yes," Gold answered, hoping his eyes weren't bulging too far out of their sockets.

"You have our gratitude," the clone said, somewhat breathless after their paramilitary operation. He ran a sleeve across his sweat-soaked brow and said, "I am Kevin Hammond, Security Minister of the United Ficus Colony."

The captain nodded. "I'm David Gold, captain of the Federation starship *da Vinci*. What in blazes is going on down there?"

The Mariposan gave Gold a tired, humorless smile. "That's the same question that's been haunting us for the past forty-eight hours." Gold suspected the man was speaking literally; he looked ready to collapse from exhaustion at any moment. "The prime ministers have asked that, once our situation down here is stabilized, you would come meet —" A coughing fit suddenly seized him, his whole body shaking as if the room temperature had suddenly dropped thirty degrees. His remaining colleagues, who had been securing stations around the room's perimeter, suddenly froze and whipped their heads toward their leader. Gold thought he heard one of them mutter a profanity under his breath, and all three simultaneously bolted for the door.

The clone's coughing jag continued for close to a minute, during which Gold could only watch with growing concern. He heard Gomez quietly instructing Shabalala to pipe the interchange down to Lense in sickbay, and he gave her a nod acknowledging the move. The security minister finally stopped, and looked directly into the screen again. His eyes were watering, and a shiny layer of red-tinged phlegm coated his lower face from nose to chin. "Well, so much for stabilizing the situation," he said hoarsely.

"Minister Hammond? This is Dr. Elizabeth Lense, ship's medical officer." A small box appeared in the lower corner of the viewscreen with the doctor's image; Gold assumed Hammond was seeing a similar inset on his end. "Are you all right?"

"I don't seem to be, do I?" he answered. "Dammit, and I was so sure I'd licked it. Bastards."

"What is it?" Lense pressed.

Hammond shook his head slightly, and then grabbed on to the console in front of him to keep from toppling over in dizziness. "We don't know. It hit our hospital first. Took out two-thirds of the medical staff before they even knew what was happening. At least two hundred are already dead." He lowered his head to take a couple of difficult breaths, then looked up again. "At the risk of overstepping my authority, Doctor, we could really use whatever help you can give us."

Even before he had finished his sentence, Lense was asking, "Captain, permission to beam down immediately."

"Lense..." Gold started, then hesitated. He had just witnessed the effects of a coup, a countercoup, and

some sort of highly virulent disease that he gathered had been used by Hammond's "bastards" as a biological weapon. It wasn't a situation he wanted to let any one of his people waltz into. But then, it wasn't about what he wanted. "Granted," Gold said, "but I want one of Corsi's people with you, and I want you both to take every medical precaution."

"That shouldn't be necessary, Captain," Kevin Hammond said. He was growing more and more breathless, and yet he managed an ironic grin. "This bug is very particular about who it bites."

"How particular?" Lense asked.

"Docs say it was designed to infect only five specific genetic profiles." Hammond coughed once, then added, "Unfortunately, that makes it lethal to half the planet."

Chapter 4

The transporter effect faded, and once again, Dr. Lense found herself in the middle of a war zone.

The Mariposan Life Science Center was a far cry from the Jabari's subterranean hideouts, of course. For one, it was quiet—the eerie calm that follows a storm. Also, the reception area where she and her security guard, Rennan Konya, found themselves was clean, bright, and commodious. The smell of disinfectant, while not quite enough to obliterate that of sickness and death—it never was—was at least the dominant scent. But still...the air of shock, fear, and horror was all too familiar to her. It was almost like a physical presence, wrapping itself around everything and everyone here.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Konya's shoulders go tense, as if bracing himself. "Something wrong?" Lense asked.

The young Betazoid turned to her, and the doctor saw it wasn't alert concern for their security that was affecting him. "No, Doctor. Nothing," he said, trying to quickly hide the empathic pain in his eyes. Konya, she remembered, was part of the first wave of post-Dominion War enlistees. He and his family had been lucky enough to be off-world when Betazed fell, so he probably never had to face this kind of tragic emotional onslaught before.

She wondered how badly insulted the guard would be if she offered to let him return to the ship, when she saw his expression suddenly shift. Lense followed his gaze, which was suddenly and intently focused on a tall, haggard-looking man making a beeline for them. "Dr. Lense?" he asked, frowning deeply. Lense nodded in acknowledgment. "Welcome. I am Dr. Victor Granger, Minister of Health."

"Minister. This is Rennan Konya." Turning as she introduced him, she was pleased to note that Konya was now the very picture of stoic professionalism. He's one of Corsi's, all right.

In contrast, Granger was brimming with emotion, and not pleasure at her arrival. "I have to tell you, Doctor, I don't know what you think you can contribute here."

Lense was taken slightly aback. "I was given to understand you had lost much of your medical staff in the initial attack—"

"That's right, we did," he said, crossing his arms over his chest. "Has Federation medicine found a way

to bring them back?”

Lense clenched and unclenched her jaw several times before she felt it safe to respond. “I’m here, Minister Granger, to help you in any way I can. If you’re ready to turn away a willing volunteer in a crisis situation...”

For a moment, Lense thought he might do just that. Then he sighed, and turned to lead her back the way he had come. “If you wish to actually help us, Dr. Lense, that will be appreciated.”

Lense wondered about Granger’s tone and attitude. Some degree of xenophobic distrust was to be expected in a society that had been so long isolated, particularly in the wake of this kind of catastrophe. But Lense couldn’t help but feel there was something more to Granger’s instant dislike for her.

Granger led them through the hospital’s busy main ward, weaving around people either rushing to get someplace else, or in need of help to rush anywhere. He stopped at a door marked AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY and pulled it open for Lense and Konya. They entered a medical supply room, not quite big enough for three people to move around in freely. The third person, a dark-haired teenaged girl, looked up from a clipboard as Granger said, “Doctor, this is Kara McClay. Kara, Dr. Elizabeth Lense.”

“Hello,” Kara smiled, flashing a small gap between her front teeth. Lense only stared back. This young woman clearly was in perfect health; what help Lense was being asked to give her was not medical.

She turned to Granger, blinking in disbelief. “You’re asking me to do your inventory?”

Granger pretended to be surprised by Lense’s less than enthusiastic reaction. “You just told me you were here to assist us in any way you could. Keeping an accurate accounting of—”

“I understand the importance of a physical inventory.” Lense tried to keep her tone steady. She in fact did appreciate how vital accurate supply counts were and how the mundane task tended to fall by the wayside—a lesson she learned the hard way during a search-and-rescue mission her first year as Lexington CMO. “However, I would think you would want to put my talents to a better use.”

“You’re saying that the task I’ve asked you to do is beneath you?” Granger smirked at her. “That’s rather an elitist attitude.”

“Starfleet doctors are the elite, though, aren’t they?”

Both Granger and Lense turned, more than a little surprised that the teenaged girl was speaking up in Lense’s defense. “They’re the ones sent off to deal with the diseases found on all the new worlds the Federation discovers,” she elaborated. “Ninety-five of the last one hundred winners of the Nobel Prize for Medicine were Starfleet doctors. Ninety-seven percent of the papers published in the Federation Journal of Medicine are by Starfleet—”

Granger’s face darkened like a summer thunderstorm. “If I had wanted your opinion, Miss McClay—”

“I was only stating facts,” McClay said, showing no sign whatsoever of being intimidated by the minister. “I couldn’t give an opinion of Starfleet doctors if I wanted, since I’ve only ever met the one. And it would be unfair to judge all of them based on my opinion of Dr. Pulaski.”

Granger simply glared at his young subordinate. He was, however, spared the need to formulate any

dignity-saving response by the sound of an alarm blaring through the corridors. Granger started, with a look Lense recognized as one of horrified disbelief. He spared Lense a quick glance, then turned and headed for the source of trouble at a run. Lense and Konya did not hesitate to follow.

They burst through several sets of swinging doors, down hallways lined with ashen-faced hospital staffers, frozen by fear into inactivity. All of this was new to them; they had never known the unpredictability and randomness of war or epidemic outbreak.

“Victor!”

A woman popped out of a doorway two-thirds of the way down the corridor as they turned a corner, dressed in dark gray surgical garb. She motioned to Granger to hurry, and the older man put on an extra burst of energy and threw himself into the room. Lense, running two steps behind him, nearly smacked into his back where he had stopped just inside the doorway, keeping his distance from the occupant on the far end of the room.

Lense tilted her head, and saw in the bed a woman with the same face as the doctor who had frantically directed them here. This face, however, was covered with open sores, and twisted grotesquely as she thrashed in pain. The shimmer of a sterile force field enveloped her bed, and two Bringloidi orderlies held on to her arms through the energy screen, trying to keep her from throwing herself to the floor. A cacophony of beeping and bleating and buzzing came from the bank of monitors clustered around the woman’s bed.

“Sue—Dr. DiCamino—what happened?” Granger asked, not making any move to get closer to the patient.

Sue DiCamino, clearly shaken, stammered out her answer: “I...she...one minute she was fine, then she started complaining about the temperature, then all of a sudden...”

As Lense listened distractedly, she watched the woman’s convulsions lessen in intensity, though not because her condition was improving. Without thinking, Lense wove around Granger and DiCamino, snapping the tricorder out of the pouch on her hip and flipping it open in a single fluid movement. She set her medkit at her feet as she pressed herself past the orderlies and swept the tricorder’s remote scanner over the convulsing woman’s chest and abdomen.

“What are you—Get away from her!” Lense heard Victor Granger bark behind her, but she wouldn’t have obeyed him even without the shocking report she was getting from her tricorder. The convulsions were being triggered by a fist-sized tumor attached to the woman’s pituitary gland...and growing at a visible rate.

“My God...stasizine, fifty cc’s,” she called out of habit, though aware she had no nurse to hand her a hypospray loaded with the drug. She set the tricorder on the edge of the bed and turned to retrieve her medkit.

She was momentarily surprised to find Kara McClay standing at her side. She held her arms outstretched, presenting Lense with her medkit, fully opened flat, with the contents arranged in their padded recesses like a standard sickbay instrument tray. Lense met her eyes for a split second, before grabbing the hypospray (set, as per standard, at the edge closest to her; either by intuition or chance, the young woman had gotten the orientation correct), adjusting its settings, and pressing the nozzle to the patient’s neck. The gauges above her head, which displayed the patient’s name as Lana DiCamino, fell from their extreme positions down to more moderate levels. Her convulsing muscles went slack in relief;

only her chest continued to rise and fall in a normal respiration rhythm.

“Will she be okay now?” McClay asked softly.

Lense retrieved her tricorder and took a new reading. “For the moment,” Lense answered, making special note that the question had not come from Granger or Sue DiCamino. “The tumor has stopped growing...and it looks like it may be receding a bit.”

“Tumor?” said DiCamino, looking utterly stunned.

Given the rate of growth she’d just witnessed, Lense suspected there hadn’t been any sign of a malignancy more than five minutes ago. But with DiCamino still frozen halfway across the room from her patient, and Granger glowering at her as if she were still nothing but a nuisance, Lense didn’t feel like cutting them any slack. “Yes, a tumor. And not just in her brain; there are abnormal growths all through her endocrine system. What sort of treatment have you been giving her? Or have you even gotten close enough to treat her at all?”

“You are out of line, Doctor!” Victor Granger shouted, eyes flaring dangerously.

“So what if I am?” Lense shot back, matching Granger’s heated tone. “In case you didn’t notice, I just had to save this woman’s life for you!”

“And where were you two days ago when this started? Who do you suppose held these people back from the brink of death long enough for you to ‘save’ them now?” Granger’s nostrils were flaring. “We’ve been fighting this thing around the clock, fighting for our survival. And you dare to come down here with your Starfleet arrogance and scold us for how we’re dealing with a disease that you’re not even susceptible to?” His lips curled back into a feral snarl. “Get out of my hospital. Get off my planet, and don’t come back!” He spun toward the doorway, where Konya had been silently watching the entire drama unfold. He quickly jumped out of the way and let the health minister storm out.

As the hospital room returned to its normal ambient volume level (the patient, Lense was relieved to note, continued her sedated sleep undisturbed by the shouting match), Sue DiCamino took a step closer to Lense. “He’s tired. He didn’t mean that.”

“Yes, he did,” the Betazoid security officer muttered under his breath. Lense caught Kara McClay nodding in agreement out of the corner of her eye.

“Yes, he did,” DiCamino admitted with a sigh. Then she lifted her head and looked Lense in the eye. “But for mercy’s sake, please ignore what he just said. We’ve never faced anything like this before, not in fifteen generations. We don’t know...none of this makes...she was fine, she was...” DiCamino was gesturing toward the woman in the bed, and Lense noticed the way her fingers were shaking. The woman was clearly exhausted—physically, mentally, and emotionally. “I’ve never frozen like that...Lana could’ve died, and I would have just stood here...”

Lense stepped directly in front of the Mariposan doctor, grasped her now shaking shoulders firmly and gave what she hoped would be a reassuring squeeze. “I’m not going to walk away from this. It’s going to be all right,” Lense told her in her most authoritative voice.

She only wished she could be as sure about the second part as she was determined about the first.

Chapter

5

For a moment, Tev wondered if they had beamed down to the wrong planet. He and the rest of the *Vinci* team—Gomez, Abramowitz, Corsi, and two additional security officers, Krotine and Robins—found themselves at the crossroads of two wheel-rutted dirt paths cutting through a wide expanse of farmland. The air smelled of fresh green growth, and from somewhere in the near distance, hidden by wide fields of quadrottricale, came the sounds of children laughing, running, and playing without a care in the world. One would have never suspected a war had just been waged here, particularly not one fought with anything more advanced than rocks and pointed sticks.

Gomez had her tricorder out, scanning the surrounding area. The furrowing of her brow inspired Tev to pull out his own device. “I’m picking up an incredible variety of exotic bacterial and viral microorganisms in the atmosphere.”

“Trace remainders from the attacks?” Corsi asked.

Tev snuffled dismissively. While he appreciated the security chief’s mindfulness of all potential threats, he found the attitude with which she approached this mission as overly paranoid. Even the most finely milled and aerosolized pathogenic agent would quickly disperse in an open rural area such as this, proving practically ineffectual. “These are just minor variants on common bacteria found in almost any M-class biosphere. Nothing we would even take note of under any other circumstances.”

“But we are taking note of them now,” Gomez said, completely unnecessarily; they wouldn’t be having this interchange if they weren’t taking note. “They do, by and large, seem to indicate a significant degree of gen-engineering.”

Tev decided it best to humor his superior officer, and adjusted his tricorder for finer detail. “Modifications would appear designed for more efficient nitrogen fixation, chemosynthesis, and biore-mediation in these crops—also not a remarkable find on any world with significantly advanced agricultural technology, *Tellar* and *Earth* included.” He snapped his tricorder shut to punctuate his point. “At any rate, these readings have now been transmitted to the *Vinci*. Should, by some infinitesimal chance, any of these organisms prove detrimental to our health, the patterns are now available and accessible to the transporter biofilters.”

As soon as he had put to rest any trepidation about microscopic attackers, however, they were surprised by a slightly larger assailant.

“Aaaaah-boogala-booga-booga!!”

If the small human boy was at all disappointed he had not evoked any fearful responses with his leap out of the tall grain stalks and his fierce cry, he didn’t show it. Instead, he simply stepped up right before Tev, craned his neck to meet the pair of black eyes nearly a meter and a half over his head, and said, “Hi! Are you a spaceman?”

Tev considered the youngster for a moment, with his unruly thatch of red-orange hair, and a heavily-freckled face split nearly in half by a gap-toothed grin. His snout twitched in amusement as he replied, “And what would lead you to such a conclusion, young one?”

“You look diff’rint. An’ your clothes.”

Tev nodded thoughtfully, and squatted down on his haunches to bring himself closer to eye level with the boy. “Keen observations, sufficient for a preliminary hypothesis. But what about them?” he asked, gesturing to the rest of the team. “They do not look as different as I, but they wear the same clothes. Do you suspect they are from space as well?”

The boy gave that a moment’s serious thought before nodding an affirmative response.

“And why is that?” Tev prompted.

“My mom said spacemen are comin’,” the boy answered. “I’m s’posed to bring ’em to her if I see ’em.”

“Is your mother Prime Minister Odell?” Gomez interrupted, also crouching down beside him.

“Uh-huh,” he answered, then added with great seriousness, “an’ she gets mad if you don’t come fast when she wants you to.”

Tev straightened himself. “Well, then, we’d best avoid incurring her wrath.” The boy nodded in complete agreement, then spun and started running up the dusty trail. Without further prompting, the away team followed after him.

Gomez fell in step at Tev’s left, smiling up at him in obvious amusement. “I had no idea you were so good with kids, Tev.”

“Nor would you be expected to, Commander, as you’ve never had opportunity to witness me in the proximity of any children. As a point of fact, I always found it most rewarding, interacting with and helping to develop young, unformed minds.” After all, had things been different at Kharzh’ulla University, he would likely still be there teaching today...perhaps with several young ones of his own....

“As opposed to the older, yet perpetually immature, minds you encounter on a day-to-day basis, right?” Gomez asked with what was apparently meant as a self-mocking grin.

“Precisely,” Tev answered with a flat sigh.

The boy rounded a corner that led them into a wide yard, populated by scores of fat poultry birds scratching and pecking at the dirt, as well as a dozen pygmy-sized black goats. A narrow path, marked by rows of stones on either side, split the yard in half and led up to a plain, low-built structure of some prefabricated building material. There were more young humans here, plus a few adults, performing a variety of chores: tossing seed to the birds, hanging wet clothing over a cable that stretched from one corner of the building to a pole in a far corner of the property, working strange wooden apparatuses the purpose of which Tev couldn’t even begin to guess.

As he took all this in, their young guide had run up behind one of the women hanging clothing, and tugged vigorously on her skirts to gain her attention. She turned in the direction the youngster pointed, and set her face in a scowl.

“Sweet mercy, what is this?” she demanded, loose strands of red-brown hair poking out from under her sun hat, flying behind her as she crossed the yard. “We haven’t had enough troubles with swaggering egoists and their private armies; y’ got t’ bring one of your own?”

Tev could practically feel Corsi stiffening behind him in reaction to the woman's aggressive welcome. Gomez, though, simply opened her hands out in a placating gesture as she took an extra step forward. "Apologies, Madam Prime Minister," she said, "I assure you that we are only here to help, not to add to your difficulties."

"No, of course not," she said with a deep frown. Judging from the lines at the corners of her mouth and eyes, the frown was her default facial expression. "Heaven forbid that Starfleet visit any troubles upon me and mine, Lord, no!"

"For pity's sake, Brenna," called a voice from the farmhouse structure. Tev looked to see a gray man—plain, colorless clothing, receding white-gray hair, ashen skin, and a gray facial expression that betrayed utter weariness—standing in the doorway. "You called these people here; the least you could do is to hold your bile in check until after they've agreed to help us."

Odell answered him with a baleful glare, but said nothing. The gray man then turned to the away team, and flashed a practiced politician's smile that came nowhere close to his eyes. "Welcome to the United Ficus Colony," he said, raising his left arm in some sort of stiff ceremonial gesture. "I am Wilson Granger, Mariposan Prime Minister, and you've already met my Bringloidi counterpart and primary wife, Brenna Odell. Please, come inside."

They were ushered into the structure, which turned out to be a family residence, dominated by a large common room populated by even more children, from infancy to adolescence, along with their adult caregivers. Granger introduced them all, some as "secondary" or "tertiary" spouses of his or Odell's, the rest only by name. Tev assumed the majority had gathered here for safety and comfort in the wake of the recent hostilities, and played no role in the United Ficus government. As the series of introductions and obligatory small talk continued, he abandoned even the pretense of attention and turned to survey the rest of the structure.

Beyond the common room was a kitchen/dining area, a long faux-wood table surrounded by a dozen chairs at its center. The far wall of the room was dominated by a stone hearth, a small fire burning beneath a large black metal pot. Tev recognized the scent of Terran chicken broth, a favorite dish of the captain's. Against another wall was a tall iron pipe standing up through the floorboards and arching over the edge of a counter surface into a tin basin—a manual water pump, he determined with a glance.

And in the near corner, in contrast to these archaic items, stood a gleaming apparatus of highly polished metallic cylinders, vats and pipes, reaching all the way to the roof beams. Tev gaped, surprised by the presence of this device, whatever it was, in these surroundings. He stepped closer, conducting an intense visual examination. A row of green lights blinked at him from a status screen, and the whole thing hummed benignly, like a well-fed grishnar cat.

That benign impression was damaged, though, as Corsi entered the room behind him with her still-activated tricorder. Tev had never counted how many distinct sounds a Starfleet-issue tricorder was programmed to make, but he was willing to believe Corsi's device emitted all of them at once. "My God," she said, referring to the device, "that thing is a virtual cesspool!"

Tev pulled out his own tricorder, and saw Corsi was again overreacting—there was no sign of waste material in the vessels. There was, however, an incredible plethora of microbial cultures being grown in each tank, multiplying at an accelerated rate, and excreting a variety of substances into the lower half of the cylinders. "Remarkable," he said as he studied the readouts on the device's operation. "Is this one of their biosynthesizing units you mentioned, Commander Gomez?"

Gomez stepped between Tev and Gomez to consider the device. “Yes, it is,” she confirmed, an odd tone to her voice. “A smaller version of the ones I saw here eleven years ago, though.”

Tev stroked the hair at his chin pensively as he continued to study the device, as did Corsi and Gomez. Though nowhere near as sophisticated or versatile as the Federation’s transporter-based replicators, the Mariposans’ adaptation of biotechnology to widespread practical usage was impressive nonetheless. The biosynthesizer gen-engineered a variety of simple microorganisms from a template microbe, which in turn produced such products as high-tensile plastics, medicines, and simple high-nutrient paste. Tev was surprised, as Gomez apparently also had been, to find such a complex piece of equipment in a rural residential structure.

“God help us; we’re in the hands of engineers.” Tev turned toward Brenna Odell, standing by the kitchen table, her large brown eyes flashing in annoyance. “Could y’ tear yourselves away long enough to join the rest of us?”

Tev grunted, and moved along with Gomez and Corsi to take their seats at the opposite side of the table, along with Abramowitz and the security guards. Granger sat at the far end away from Odell, with two other colonists between them. Granger gestured to them in turn, saying, “May I present our chief of staff, Elizabeth Vallis, and our acting security minister, Reade Latta.”

Vallis, a pinched-faced woman with short, jet-black hair, nodded silently, while Latta, a short, elderly man in a pea-green jacket that had seen better days (those being the days around the solstice, at a latitude where the sun never rose) grinned and tipped his round felt hat. The last introductions finally out of the way, Granger flashed his practiced smile and said, “First of all, our thanks once again to you for your quick response to our communication.”

“Of course,” said Gomez.

“Although, ‘communication’ is something of a misnomer,” Tev added, “as your message did not actually communicate anything.”

Granger cocked his head to one side. “What wasn’t clear about our message?”

“The reference to ‘infernal machines’...?” Tev stared across the table at Granger, who stared right back at him.

“Starfleet officers aren’t much for subtlety,” Odell said, with a hint of a smirk. “They need for things to be spelled out and pushed right in their faces.”

“You must admit, your message was somewhat vague,” Gomez said. “What machinery, specifically, is the problem?”

Odell tossed her head in an all-encompassing gesture. “Well, all of it.”

Tev ground his teeth. “All of it,” he echoed flatly.

“That sounds rather extreme,” Abramowitz said. “Why would you want to do that? From what little I’ve seen here, it seems you’ve had some real success integrating Mariposan technology into the Bringloidi way of life.”

“Yes, we have,” Latta said. “We, who understand that the choice is to adapt or to die. Some others—”

He looked as if he were about to spit at the mention of “others,” but thankfully refrained. “—they prefer the latter option.”

Granger leaned forward, arms on the table. “You have to understand...our predecessors left Earth because they wanted to live life by their own terms. Some of them were old enough to remember the incompetence of the New United Nations that led to the Atomic Horrors, so when the European Hegemony and the other regional confederacies started talking world government, they wanted no part of it. They were willing to cut all ties with the rest of humanity rather than go down that route again. So you see...we come from long lines of independent-thinking people.”

Abramowitz listened to this speech as if enraptured. “And when the two colonies were brought together, forced to make compromises and to deviate from that independent mind-set, that brought a backlash, and gave rise to extremists like the Alliance for Mariposan Primacy.”

“And others, like the Dieghanists,” said Vallis, with what sounded to Tev like a defensive tone.

““Dieghanists’?”

“Malcontents,” Latta said, again looking ready to expectorate. “Group of Mariposans who split off on their own about nine years ago.”

“Separatists from separatists,” Abramowitz muttered, apparently to herself.

“They style themselves as the last defenders of Neo-Transcendentalism,” Vallis added, “but instead of preaching about life in harmony with Nature, their talk is all of how Nature will take vengeance on the rest of us—storms, floods, quakes...”

“Plagues.” Gomez exchanged a quick, haunted look with Corsi.

Tev frowned. “But what realistic threat could an anti technology extremist group pose?”

Corsi was the one who answered that question: “Never underestimate extremists, Commander, no matter their philosophy.”

Tev shrugged. “But none of this explains why you would have us strip the technology from this world.”

Tev had been looking at Odell, but it was the Mariposan Prime Minister who shot back, “We’ve just had over two hundred of our people slaughtered by this technology! That’s not explanation enough?”

Tev considered the gray man silently for a long moment. His already long face sagged even lower, and his sad eyes stared back, tired and haunted. Tev understood that it was only natural, following a catastrophic event, to automatically lash out against the most direct cause—in this case, Mariposa’s biotechnology. It now fell to the S.C.E. to help these people work past their instincts, to understand the foolishness of what they were asking.

He leaned forward and looked deep into the clone’s eyes. “Mr. Granger, your very existence is a product of your technology. If not for your science, you would be nothing but a few scraps of organic molecules in a centuries-old, unmarked grave.”

“Tev!” Gomez shouted, for some unfathomable reason. But he kept eye contact with the clone, intent on making him understand the scope of what he was telling him.

“Yes, Commander Tev, that’s absolutely correct,” Granger said softly, his voice carrying a tone of regret. “The Mariposan people do owe our existence to our technology. But that same technology has also sealed our fate. Further cloning is no longer a viable option. In fifty or so years, we’ll be gone, and all that will be left is what we are able to pass on to...our children.” He paused, his eyes flicking to his primary wife, who pointedly did not look back. “But I will be damned if what we leave them is the tools of their destruction.”

“That’s a rather sweeping condemnation,” said Gomez. “Look at all the positive things you’ve created and accomplished. And the Bringloidi, too, have benefited from Mariposa’s technology in the eleven years you’ve shared this world.”

Odell fixed the commander with a withering look. “Commander Gomez, my people spent our last five years on Bringloid living in caves. The sun had grown so hot that our crops were literally catching fire in the fields. We slept in dirt, collected water from a trickle of an underground stream, and rationed out what little food we had so thinly that—” She stopped herself, fighting back some clearly painful memories, but offered a composed face when she was ready to speak again. “It was a hellish life, and every day I give thanks that Captain Picard found us when he did. But in all that time, with all that hardship, we were never moved to murder.” She paused, looked to each of the away team members in turn, then said, “Now, you tell me how much we’ve truly benefited from this technology.”

Gomez had no answer for that, and a thoughtful silence fell over the entire room.

It was a silence that Tev felt obligated to breach. “You have a biosynthesizer in your home! A home built of temperature-resistant plastiform, with climate control and electrical lighting! You’re growing crops genetically modified to this world, and wearing clothing made of synthetic materials—”

“Creature comforts cannot compare to human lives,” Odell shot back.

“And the recent deaths are tragic,” Tev allowed. “But, your population has increased threefold since coming here, and your children have a much higher life expectancy. Are you truly willing to bring the kind of suffering you knew on Bringloid down on them due to your rash decisions?”

Odell’s mouth drew tight. “Are you quite finished, Mr. Tev?”

“I believe I’ve made my point of view clear.”

“And am I to take it you’re not going to help us?” Odell said icily.

“We’ll have to discuss the matter,” Gomez said, standing and staring hard at Tev. “We’ll take your request under advisement.”

“Of course,” Tev said, again to humor the commander. “Though I would not anticipate receiving any help in destroying yourselves from Starfleet.”

“Tev...”

He had no idea why Gomez was acting so annoyed toward him. He was, after all, only telling these people the truth. “If you are intent on doing so, the Androssi are, perhaps, the ones you should talk to.”

Gold fixed Tev with a hard glare. “Tell me that you’re joking.”

The lieutenant commander shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Jokes would not be appropriate here, sir,” he muttered softly.

“It’s good to know you still have some concept of what’s appropriate,” Gold barked back at him. Tev had pulled more than his share of boneheaded moves over the past several months, but suggesting to the insulated, unknowing colony that they openly invite in the dangerous, mendacious, technology scavengers took the cake.

Not that he much liked anything else he’d heard in this debriefing. He moved his glare from Tev to Gomez on one side of the conference table, then to Corsi and Abramowitz on the other. “So, in summary,” he sighed, “you met with these people, sat in their home, listened to their plea for help, and then told them to go to hell.”

“Sir, not that this excuses the way we handled matters,” Gomez said, dipping her head to indicate that by “we,” she was accepting equal responsibility for the actions of the individuals under her command, “but the Ficus leaders were not very receptive to us or the concerns we raised. It seems to me they came to a very vague decision in an emergency situation, with no practical understanding of what that decision involves, and now are unwilling to step back and think through the implications of that decision.”

“Commander,” Corsi said as she leaned forward in her seat, “they’ve just been subjected to a genocidal attack. You can hardly blame them if they’re not ready to step back just yet.”

“No, I understand,” Gomez replied, her dark eyes conveying genuine empathy. “But when they insist that we need to remove all their modern technology, how are we supposed to respond to that?”

“By doing it.”

Tev looked at Carol Abramowitz, who up until now had not said a single word, with his mouth agape. “What? Are you honestly suggesting... That’s absurd!”

“Why?” she shot back, her large dark eyes challenging him. “What reason do you have to overrule a decision by the legitimate leaders of this colony?”

Tev, to his credit (as well as to everyone else’s surprise) had no immediate response. Gold couldn’t help but let a corner of his mouth twitch upward. For all his self-aggrandizing arrogance, Mor glasch Tev was still a Starfleet officer, and as such, he recognized his obligation to respect other cultures and their right to self-determination. After a moment’s reflection, he said, “I concur with Commander Gomez—these people have not thought matters through properly. We would do this colony more harm than good by simply acquiescing to Odell and Granger’s request.”

“And on what do you base that determination? A few decade-old reports, and a ten-minute meeting where you were dismissing Odell’s position before she’d even gotten a chance to explain it?” Carol Abramowitz shook her head adamantly. “The Bringloldi managed for over two centuries without advanced technology, while the Mariposans were slowly killing themselves with theirs. Now, how can you sit there and say the Bringloldi philosophy would be more harmful?”

Tev narrowed his black eyes at the cultural specialist, getting ready to rise to her bait, before Gold put up both hands. “All right, Abramowitz, your point is well taken.” Tev snorted at that, but it only took a

sideways glance from Gomez to remind him of how much trouble his mouth had already gotten him into. Gold then focused on his security chief. “What’s your take, Corsi?”

Corsi furrowed her brow and pressed her lips into a flat line. “These people are scared, Captain. They’ve just been through a catastrophic event, with hundreds killed in the span of a few hours. And scared people tend to do stupid and dangerous things. That’s what we have to address.”

“What do you suggest?” Gomez asked.

Corsi looked across the table, meeting the eyes of both S.C.E. officers. “These biosynthesizers they have all over the place are what concern me. I know I’d feel better if I didn’t have to worry if the guy next door was brewing up a big tank of Telurian Plague.”

Tev snorted derisively. “Those units are programmed to produce only a small catalogue of beneficial microorganisms, requiring only relatively minimal gene splices. It would be impossible to create such an exotic pathogen.”

“Then some nonexotic pathogen.” Corsi’s cool blue eyes flared in irritation at Tev’s dismissive tone. “Some souped-up version of dysentery or streptococcus, or something to infect their crops and bring on a famine. You can’t tell me, with the wealth of gen-engineering expertise on this world, that someone couldn’t find a very simple and very dangerous way to reprogram these machines and cause no small amount of chaos.”

Tev hesitated before admitting, “There is that potential, yes. But,” he quickly added, “there is the greater potential for harm in disrupting these people’s way of life.”

“Oh, and we can’t have that, can we?” Abramowitz’s tone dripped with sarcasm. “This society has known nothing but disruption and change for the past decade. It’ll take at least another full generation of further integration and adaptation before there will be any kind of stability in need of preserving.”

No one said a word, or seemingly even drew a breath for several long seconds. When Carol Abramowitz had first joined the *Vinci*, she had been extremely soft-spoken and emotionally reserved, to the point where Gold sometimes worried she was bottling up too much inside her. There’d been a gradual change over the last few months, particularly following her brush with death on *Teneb*. Now perhaps, Gold considered, she had swung a bit too far to the other end of the scale.

Finally, he broke the silence. “Corsi, you’ll come up with a plan for how to best deal with this situation. I suggest, too, you coordinate everything through Acting Minister Latta. And Tev...” He paused, forcing the Tellarite to take a good, long look into his eyes. “We’ll talk later.”

With that, the meeting was over. All five stood up, but as the staff turned for the door, Gold put an arm out, catching Abramowitz by the elbow. She hung back until the rest had exited and she and the captain were alone. “Is there something more on your mind, Abramowitz?”

Abramowitz pressed her dark eyes shut for a moment. “I’m sorry, Captain. It’s just...this is very nearly a textbook case of why Starfleet should have a Prime Directive.”

“I get the strange feeling we’ve had this conversation before,” Gold cracked. It was only a few weeks ago—in this same room, in fact—that the two of them debated Starfleet’s noninterference policies in advance of Abramowitz’s mission on *Coroticus III*. “Though, this isn’t a Prime Directive issue. These are humans who came here from Earth in warp-powered ships.”

“With all due respect, sir, that’s a ridiculous distinction. Why should human cultures be fair game when it comes to being destroyed? Especially when they left Earth specifically to avoid that very fate?”

The captain frowned. “You’re exaggerating, Abramowitz.” The sense of déjà vu struck him again.

Abramowitz met the captain’s eyes with her own, her expression one of absolute earnestness. “No, sir, I’m afraid I’m not. Both cultures have been splintered, apparently to the point where neither a Bringloldi nor a Mariposan culture can be expected to survive. And there’s no guarantee that any hybridized culture has any better chance of survival, either.”

Gold didn’t say anything for a long time, reflecting on how far and how long the effects of a captain’s decision, no matter how well considered, could reverberate. “The situation on the planet...it’s that grave?”

Abramowitz took a deep breath. “Like I said, it’ll be at least a full generation before we can tell how things on this joint colony will take shape. And those will be the roughest couple of decades these people ever see—hopefully not as bad as what’s happened here in the past two days, but it’ll only take a small spark to set off this tinderbox again.” She sighed and slowly shook her head. “Needless to say, this is not a job for the S.C.E.”

“No,” Gold agreed. “What do you suggest?”

“First, we have to understand exactly what happened down there, so we can address the root cause. Who all these political players are, who launched that biological attack, who was targeted, and why. It bothers me, too, that we have a weapon that targeted only Mariposans, which presumably would have been developed by a Mariposan scientist.”

That counterintuitive fact had been bothering Gold as well. “Lense’s research, I’m certain, will help point us to some of those answers. What else?”

“Well, I know Starfleet is still spread thin, and that after the way these people welcomed the Tubman —”

Gold held up a hand to stop her. “I will tell Captain Scott in the strongest possible terms that Mariposa has to come up on the priorities list.” While much of Starfleet’s resources were indeed committed to the seemingly unending postwar recovery, news of the hostilities on Mariposa would bring in the experts of the Diplomatic Corps. He’d just have to remember to specifically ask that Gabriel Marshall not be given the assignment.

“And,” Abramowitz continued, “if we do nothing else for these people...”

“What?” Gold asked.

“Please, do not let Tev go back down there.”

Chapter 6

One of Elizabeth Lense’s favorite pastimes as a young girl was solving hidden picture puzzles. The

earliest ones were simple line drawings, usually of some natural setting, a field or a forest, and among the outlines of leaves and grass blades were incongruous objects like fish or seahorses. As she grew older, the puzzles grew more complex, yet she would master each new collection her father brought her in short order. Naturally, that had led her to her interest in real world puzzles, in general sciences, and then eventually in medicine.

And now here she sat, staring at the viral DNA she had isolated from the Mariposan bioattack victims, certain she was failing to see the fish for the trees. There was a pattern in these base-pair sequences, she knew, one she should have recognized. And yet, the answer eluded her.

She leaned back in her chair, rocked her head back and forth to loosen her tight neck muscles, and glanced out the open lab door into the small isolated ward beyond. Victor Granger, facing open revolt from the rest of the hospital staff led by Sue DiCamino, had grudgingly allowed her to set up down here. Ten victims of the bioattack had been moved here and given to her care. All had had their conditions stabilized, at least temporarily, and were sleeping peacefully for the moment. This in itself was a major step forward.

Lense reached for the coffee cup at her right elbow, and was disappointed to find it empty. (Well, maybe not too disappointed; what the Mariposans called coffee was actually a “biosynthesized” liquid produced by splicing arabica bean genes into a common bacterium; it was best not to think about it.) She thought about getting a refill, about just stepping away from this lab equipment and clearing her head for a minute, maybe getting some food to soak up the bacteria juice already sitting in her stomach. After all, she did have to start taking better care of...

She put the cup off to the side and leaned in closer to her display screen. Her patients came first, before any concerns about herself. What would have happened at Sherman’s Planet if she spent all her time getting all touchy-feely with Captain Gold? What would have happened at Pike City if she’d spent her off-duty time obsessing over what had just happened at Galvan VI? Or at Setlik if all she did was lick the wounds Commander Selden gave her at Starbase 314?

A small part of her brain tried to tell her that she couldn’t simply ignore her pregnancy the same way she ignored other emotional traumas. Not that she should be keeping those bottled up and festering inside her the way she did, either, but at some point she would have to tell people, to—

“Excuse me, Doctor?”

Lense turned to see Konya standing in the lab’s open doorway, with Kara McClay hovering at his elbow. Oh God, how long has he been there? How much did he hear? Oh God, no, this is no how I want people to find out —

“I didn’t hear anything, Doctor.”

All thought processes ceased. Konya gave her what must have been meant as a reassuring smile. “My telepathic skills aren’t that sharp, even when I’m trying to listen. Normally, it’s just so much white noise.”

“But...you did just hear me worrying that...”

“Well, you were pretty much yelling at me there.”

Lense allowed herself to relax and give the Betazoid guard a weak smile in return. “Was there something you needed, Rennan?”

“Commander Corsi just paged,” he said. “She wants me to report back to the ship. That is, if you don’t need me here anymore.”

Lense cocked her head and loosed a small laugh. “No offense, but I didn’t really need you in the first place.”

“If only that were always the case,” he answered, far from offended. He then turned to Kara and offered his hand. “It was very nice to meet you, Kara. Thank you for helping the doctor where I couldn’t.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” she said, smiling politely. Lense found herself again impressed by the young woman’s poise. When she was her age, had she been paid such a compliment by a handsome older man, she would have blushed bright red and stammered like an idiot.

“Good luck, Doctor,” he said as he turned for the exit. “One of your patients is starting to come around,” he called over his shoulder just before leaving.

Lense jumped out of her seat and brushed past McClay into the adjoining ward. Sure enough, one of the biobed monitors was just starting to pick up the accelerating brainwave activity Konya had already sensed. Her ten patients represented what, by Mariposan standards, was a broad cross-section of their society. She had two individuals from each of the five Progenitors’ genetic lines: DiCamino, Granger, Hammond, Vallis, and Wheelock. They ranged in age from twelve to sixty (to which Lense had to mentally add eighteen years, to account for the Mariposans’ inscrutable ability to bring their nascent clones to full physical maturity in the lab), and from ninth-through fifteenth-generation cell lines.

Lense moved to the side of her awakening patient, Cory Wheelock—age 18 (36), generation line 12—and ran her tricorder above his abdomen. At the same time, Kara had moved to the opposite side of the bed, using one hand to brush Wheelock’s dark hair from his pale, sweat-dampened forehead. The other she wrapped around the patient’s hand, giving it an encouraging squeeze. “His vital signs have fallen to the exact same level as before,” she said, looking up at the display mounted above Wheelock’s head.

Lense nodded as she read the same from her tricorder. Stasizine therapy had become less effective in all the infected Mariposans after an hour’s time. She’d switched to an equizine-3 solution, which initially improved matters, but the virus had seemingly adapted again. “Let’s see if switching back to stasizine helps any,” Lense said, as she reached for her hypospray.

“Alternating therapies,” Kara replied, smiling with understanding. “Kinda like keeping the virus off balance.”

“In a sense,” Lense smiled back as she pressed the hypo to Wheelock’s neck. When Granger begrudgingly allowed her this space to do her work, he also assigned McClay as her only assistant. Lense got the impression that the health minister intended this as some sort of snub, but she could not have been more pleased with the young woman’s dedicated work and professionalism.

“It’s working!” Kara said, watching the monitor readings start to rise. Lense noticed Wheelock’s grip around Kara’s hand tighten, as if grasping at a lifeline, and then his eyelids cracked open, slowly adjusting to the light until he could see the faces of his caretakers.

“What...?” he asked groggily, and then, as the sleep melted away from him, his look of confusion dissolved to something darker. “Breeders!” he snarled, causing Lense to involuntarily flinch. “Whuh’ve y’ done t’ me?”

“Mr. Wheelock, you’re going to be all right,” Lense said in her most soothing doctor’s voice.

“Tried to kill us!” he answered, turning to look directly at Kara. “Murderers! ’Gloidi trash!” Lense cut off what would almost certainly have been an uninterrupted string of pejoratives with another touch of her hypospray, sending the Mariposan back into slumber.

“Well, that raised his vitals, all right,” Kara said, giving no sign of any offense as she gave Wheelock’s hand one last squeeze before laying it gently by his side.

Lense shook her head slowly. “I have to tell you, Kara... your bedside manner would put a lot of the doctors I’ve known to shame.” Lense was more than a little disturbed by the pervasive human-against-human racism she’d been witness to since arriving on the surface. And though she meant what she had just said to Kara, she found her unflinching acceptance of the hatred directed at her almost equally disturbing.

Kara beamed at the compliment nonetheless. “Thank you, Dr. Elizabeth. That means a lot to me, since it was a Starfleet doctor who made me want to get into medicine in the first place.”

“Kate Pulaski, right,” Lense nodded, as she reloaded her hypo with stasizine and made her way around the ward administering it to the rest of her charges. “She did a couple of guest lectures at Starfleet Medical when I was there. She can be very inspirational.” She could also be very acerbic when addressing a hall full of insecure med students, but Lense didn’t say that to McClay. A girl needed her role models, after all. “But you didn’t pick all this up in a couple days on the Enterprise .”

“Well, no. I do a lot of reading on my own off the subspace link to the Federation infonet, and Dr. Sandra was always very good to me.”

Lense thought she heard something in her tone. “‘Was’?”

Kara lowered her eyes to the biobed in front of her, but looking through it. “She was one of the ones who didn’t make it.”

Lense hesitated, knowing that it would be little help to say she was sorry. Then, her chance to say anything was gone, as an alarm sounded from Cory Wheelock’s monitor.

Lense was across the room in an instant, checking both the overhead readouts and her own tricorder. “Dammit,” she muttered, as she watched the virus continue its rampage through his body. “It’s built up a resistance already!”

“Dr. Elizabeth,” Kara called from behind her. Lense turned to see her studying all the rest of the monitors, in the order in which she had dispensed the latest round of injections. “They’re all slipping back.”

Lense cursed the tenacious little bug as she reloaded her hypo once again, this time with equizine-1. She had hesitated in employing this therapy up until now, because if the damned bug was to develop a resistance to this, there weren’t any other options. She injected Wheelock once more, and once more the treatment seemed to work. Lense couldn’t muster up much optimism, though.

“How did the virus build a resistance so fast?” Kara asked.

Lense shook her head. “It couldn’t have. Or, it did the first time we used the therapy.” She ran her fingers through her short curly hair, as if trying to stimulate the brain cells through her scalp. “The immunity was there, and this tenacious little bastard just... faked remission.” Lense realized how ridiculous that sounded the moment the words were out of her mouth, but she couldn’t help but see this damned virus as some kind of fighter, playing with his opponent, lulling her into a false sense of confidence, then suddenly switching his sword to his stronger hand and launching a more powerful offensive...

“Oh, my God.”

Kara shot Lense a wide-eyed, worried look. “What?”

Lense beamed at Kara, and slapped the hypospray into the young woman’s palm, first ramping down the dosage. “Administer this to all the rest of the patients, and then get the message over to Sue DiCamino: ten cc’s of equizine-1, no more than that per hour. If I’m right, the war shouldn’t last any longer than that.”

Kara looked at the hypo in her hand, and then up into Lense’s eyes as if overwhelmed. The doctor would have added a few words of confidence, but she was just too excited, and instead turned directly into the lab and pulled the genetic map of the virus back up.

This time, she saw the fish plain as day.

Chapter

7

After the way the meeting at the Prime Ministers’ residence had ended, Reade Latta feared Starfleet would be abandoning them for another decade, if not longer. So when he learned that a Starfleet team was to come calling to discuss security matters, he resolved to show them how much he welcomed their presence.

“Ten-year-old whiskey,” he announced, holding up the bottle and beaming at his guests. “Distilled from the finest Bringloidi-raised quadrottricale; none of that biosynthesized swill for you good folk.” The Starfleeters—Corsi, the tall blond security chief he’d met earlier, and Soloman, whose large skull clearly identified him as some manner of technological genius—were clearly overwhelmed by his graciousness, and they could only smile silently as he filled their glasses. “To fallen comrades,” he said as he lifted his glass, “and absent friends.”

Corsi nodded solemnly, raised her glass in kind, and added, “And to new friends.”

The Starfleeters both brought the drink to their lips, but Latta hesitated. He stared into the amber liquid for a long guilty moment, as if only then remembering his promises and his responsibilities. But you only promised Brenna you would stay sober for the duration of the crisis, the demon in the back of his head reminded him. Well, now Starfleet is here to put things right, aren’t they? Besides, you were the one who proposed that toast; it would be an insult to Kevin Hammond and all the rest not to—

Latta slammed the untouched drink down on the desk, sloshing a good share of it onto his hand. Stupid weak old man, he cursed himself. Pulling out a handkerchief to wipe his hand, he put on a smile to meet the questioning gazes from across the desk. “Well then, friends, shall we get to business?”

Corsi set her still half-full glass aside. “Theda Vinci stands ready to offer our assistance in securing the safety of this colony. Soloman and I are here to determine how to best organize those efforts.”

“Ah, yes, yes. Very wise, very forward thinking.”

“Thank you,” Soloman said. His glass was also sitting forgotten in front of him, the level barely a centimeter lower than what he had poured. “To this end, we hoped you would grant us access to your computer systems.”

“Oh, well, certainly,” said Latta, gesturing to the fancy chrome and glass panels set into the wall to his right.

The Starfleeters looked at the device, and then back to Latta, as if they had expected something else. After a moment of awkward silence, Mr. Soloman spoke. “Minister, we would require an authorization code in order to fully access your systems.”

“Um...” Latta replied. “Yes. An authorization code. Of course.” Kevin Hammond had mentioned something to him about codes, maybe, when he set off on his counterstrike against those A.M.P. madmen. But all power was out then, so Latta hadn’t bothered remembering any of it. Hell, in his younger days, back on the Old World with Danilo Odell (God rest his sweet soul), you didn’t need computers or any of the rest of this machinery to keep order. Danilo lay down the law, and Reade needed nothing but his own two fists to enforce it. Now, that was how you maintained security....

Soloman and Corsi were still staring at him expectantly. “Well, the thing is, you see... these contraptions are very temperamental. They have to be dealt with in just such a way—”

“Minister,” Corsi interrupted, frowning at him suspiciously, “I understand that you would be hesitant to give outsiders access to restricted data at any level—”

“Oh, no, it’s not that,” Latta insisted. He still needed help from these people—over half the Public Safety Force was dead, another quarter were gravely ill, at least eight of those remaining had revealed themselves as A.M.P. sympathizers. But to admit his ignorance, to appear weak to them...

“Perhaps I could attempt to circumvent the encryption protocols myself,” Mr. Soloman suggested. “With your permission, of course, Minister.”

“Yes, of course, permission granted,” Latta said magnanimously. Soloman rose from his chair and went straight to work on the machine. In the back of his mind, he wondered, what with all this to-do about access authorization and restricted files, whether he was too readily giving away the store.

That worry was shoved aside when Corsi said, “I’d also like to hear from you a narrative of what, exactly, happened here. What was the trigger event, the chain of events that followed, the parties involved?”

“Ah, that I can tell you,” Latta said. “’Twas an explosion and fire, dead center of the Life Science Center, in the cloning labs.”

Corsi’s entire body snapped taut at that. “Cloning labs? But I thought—”

“Oh, they’re not used for cloning anymore, of course. They’re just regular science labs now. One

woman working down there was killed in the blast—Sandra Vallis, a fine lass, deserved much better. Then when the emergency responders answered the call, they started dropping dead on the floor. Just the clones, of course. By the time anyone realized what was happening, it was all up in the air ducts, and everything went straight to hell.”

“Any way of tracking who’d been in and out of there?” Corsi asked. “Any security restrictions? Visual recordings?”

“No, not that I know of. And like I said, it’s the middle of medical center; everyone goes through or around there. Would have been too simple.” His hand went to his whiskey glass again, and he had to fight the urge to wrap his fingers around and pick it up. “It would have taken less solution than this to do the damage, I’m told. Could’ve been snuck in in a small pocket flask, and no one’d be the wiser.”

“You would think there would be more protection around what used to be their clone labs,” Corsi said. “So you have no idea who could’ve done this.”

Latta sighed and shrugged. “The A.M.P., the Dieghanists, the Wilmut Party, the Sons of Bringloid...any group of bloody splitters who think they can run this world better than it is now.”

Corsi showed deep concern hearing that. “Is there really that much discord in this colony, that any of these groups is as likely a suspect as the next?”

Latta shook his head. “As you said yerself, miss, we cannot discount anyone.”

Corsi looked ready to say something more, but then Soloman announced, “I’ve gained access.”

“Good. Let’s start by pulling together all the professional and educational information on the colony inhabitants we can, ranked by level of expertise.”

“What are you looking for?” Latta asked.

“We need to find individuals who would have the knowledge and ability to have created this bioweapon—not just the actual work of gene splicing, but the design of complex new genomes.”

After several seconds, the chrome contraption beeped. “I have the list of geneticists’ names,” Soloman said.

Corsi rose from her seat, and went to look over Soloman’s shoulder at the display. Latta joined her to look at the fifty-one names, all with the surnames of the Mariposan Progenitors, listed on the screen. Poor Sandra Vallis’s name immediately jumped out at him from the list. “You should know, Commander Corsi,” he said in a somber voice, “if you’re looking for a guilty party to charge, that a goodly number of these people have already gone on to their Final Judgment in recent days.”

He saw a twinge of sadness pass behind Corsi’s eyes as she said, “Cross-check this list against hospital records over the past three days.”

With another beep from the wall panel, the list of fifty-one shrank to fourteen. Both Latta and Corsi drew in a short hiss.

“Transmit this list and the associated files up to Hawkins,” Corsi told Soloman. “Let him know these are our ‘A’ level investigative targets.” She then looked to Latta. “Do any of the rest of these names stand

out for you, Mr. Latta?"

Latta squinted at the list, though he didn't expect to see anything. He'd only noticed Sandra Vallis because he'd just been talking about her; the rest of the names all blurred together just like the clones themselves. DiCamino, Angela. DiCamino, Frances. DiCamino, Martha. How was he supposed to—

"Wait a tic," Latta said, his eyes flicking back up the column of names, then stabbing one with a forefinger. "Frances DiCamino? Why is she still on yer list?"

"She holds advanced degrees in microbiology, with secondary degrees in—"

"No, no," Latta said, beginning to wonder whether it was the contraption or the Starfleeter making such an outrageous mistake. "That's not the problem."

"What is the problem?" Corsi asked.

"Frances DiCamino is more'n ten years dead," he said. "That's the problem."

* * *

The Bringloidi prime minister crouched on her hands and knees in the dirt, digging the weeds out from around her beets. It was almost as if they understood she had greater matters to deal with, and decided to take full advantage of her absence. With a soft grunt and a tug, she pulled another long invading weed out by its roots. She smiled in small satisfaction as she tossed it on the pile behind her with its mates.

If only everything could be so simple, she thought as she attacked the next offending stalk with a small hand trowel. Leave the good plants, get rid of the bad ones. Her mother had taught her how to tell the difference between the two when she was barely out of nappies. The Bringloidi lived an idyllic life then. Oh, it was a hard one, certainly, working dawn to dusk, helping Mother and the other womenfolk cook and clean and a hundred more chores, then practicing her letters and numbers by oil lamp until bedtime. But by the time the family did turn in, there was a great sense of pride in all that had been accomplished.

Then one morning, Mother didn't wake up, and the whole world seemed to fall apart. Now that she was suddenly the woman of the Odell household, she was entrusted with the knowledge that the sun had been growing measurably hotter for years. When her da was a boy, he would tell her, the entire valley had been lush green, not just the narrow strips along the riverbanks. But of late, the droughts had been worsening, and the adults—including Mother—had been letting themselves go hungry most nights to keep the young ones fed, and to save enough for the truly bad times to come.

And they did come.

It fell to young Brenna to take up all the responsibilities that were inherent to the wife of the colony's leader, from organizing the work groups, to caring for and teaching the younger children, to making sure the men's thirst for poteen was kept under some semblance of control.

Once the Enterprise had found them, and Starfleet and the Mariposans introduced them to the technical advances of their worlds, she thought life might possibly become simple again. But she only traded one set of hardships for another: her "courtship" (if one could call it that without laughing) with Wilson, the Dieghanist emigration, and of course, poor Danielle. . . .

"Madam Prime Minister?"

Suddenly jerked back to the present, Brenna spun inelegantly on her knees to face the white-haired man in the Starfleet uniform who had appeared behind her. “Sweet mercy, what do you mean, sneaking up on a person like that?” she snapped, hoping that her broad-brimmed sun hat kept the tears that had been welling in her eyes in shadow.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you, Minister Odell. I’m David Gold, captain of the Theda Vinci.”

“Oh, ho. So you’re the man who gives that gasbag Tev his orders.”

Gold gave her a pained smile. “In theory, I suppose. Actually, I came to offer my personal apology to you for Lieutenant Commander Tev’s impolitic behavior, and for any offense he may have given you and yours.”

Brenna studied Gold’s kindly eyes and grandfatherly face, and found she couldn’t doubt his sincerity. “Thank you, Captain. Although my delicate sensibilities are hardly the issue.”

Gold lowered himself on his haunches, matching their eye levels. “No, obviously, you have greater concerns—the future of your world, and your people.”

Brenna nodded. “Yes. And whether we will even have a future.”

“Let me ask you, Minister,” Gold said, taking a stalk from her pile of weeds and absently twirling it between his fingers. “As I understand it, this world has actually been quite peaceful in the years since the Bringloidi and Mariposans were reunited. Despite the vast differences, you have made considerable progress integrating yourselves. You’ve raised a generation of children together.” He paused, and looked her in the eye. “After more than a decade of this, how is it the two cultures are now incompatible?”

Gold had such a mild manner that she almost missed the criticism beneath his words. But Brenna resolved to maintain the civil tone of their conversation as she answered. “Our cultures were never compatible, Captain. Good heavens, they’re complete opposites! All that we’ve ever had was our mutual dependence on each other for survival. And as recent events show, survival isn’t a concern for some.”

“Some. A small minority.”

“A small minority who can kill hundreds of innocents at a single blow, because of this clone technology!”

“Yes. And it’s terrible,” Gold said with a grimace. “But don’t you need to look first at why those few would want to do such things—”

“‘Why?’ When has ‘why’ ever mattered? Since Cain and Abel, killing is just what men do.”

Gold said nothing in response to that, but just stared at her, trying to read her. Brenna set her face as she stared back, willing herself not to betray any emotion, any deeper thoughts or insecurities.

“You do understand the scope of what you are suggesting here,” he said. “The logistics of dismantling so much technology, so integrated with the existing infrastructure, are daunting to say the least. Theda Vinci is a small ship; our engineers wouldn’t be able to do it all on their own.”

“Well, there’re more ships in the Starfleet, aren’t there?”

“Of course...and there are also a lot of places across Federation space for those ships to be. It would probably be weeks before a ship suitable to the task could be dispatched, if not months, or years.” Brenna waited for Gold to drop the other shoe. “However, it would only be a matter of a day to bring in a negotiator from the Federation’s Diplomatic Corps.”

“To talk me out of it. Ho, I should have known better than to think your grand Federation would willingly lift a finger to help us!”

Gold took a long breath before saying, with not a little heat in his tone, “My people are right now looking for whatever gen-engineering equipment and bioweapon stocks are out there. My chief medical officer is in your hospital taking care of your sick. And I am here right now to try to help you understand how a rash, ill-considered decision impacts—”

“Oh, you’re one to talk about rash, ill-considered decisions, Mr. Starfleet Captain! For over ten years I’ve been trying to make the best of an ill-considered decision one of yours made for us. But the decisions on how we live our lives are now ours to make. And if you’re not willing to respect that, then you can go straight to the devil.”

Gold said nothing for the longest time, but simply stared at her. She couldn’t quite read his expression, but there seemed to be more sadness in his eyes than anything else. He pushed himself off the ground, back onto his feet. “You remind me of my oldest daughter, Eden,” he told her as he brushed the dirt from his knees. “Being in Starfleet, I missed a lot of her childhood, and that caused a lot of tension and animosity between us, all the way through her adulthood. I can’t go back now and be the father she wanted me to be. The best I can do is say I’m sorry for my mistakes, and let her know that even though I realize she’s an adult—a grandmother, no less!—I still care, and I only want what’s best for her.”

“That paternalistic attitude is a bit arrogant, isn’t it?” Brenna asked, surprised to hear how mild her voice sounded as she posed that question.

He shrugged. “So be it.” With that, he turned and walked off toward the road to the Capital Complex. Brenna watched him until he disappeared behind a row of quadrotriticale stalks. Then with a loud sigh, she turned back to the simplicity of her weeding.

Chapter 8

Sonya Gomez sat in the captain’s chair at the center of the Vinci bridge, her crew around her, standing ready to fill any orders she might issue...and silently felt sorry for herself.

Rarely was she given command of the ship—despite her position as first officer, the separate structures of the ship and S.C.E. crews dictated that one of the bridge officers take the conn when the captain was off duty, leaving her and her engineers free to concentrate on their specialized duties.

Right now, though, David Gold’s skills as a veteran starship captain were in greater demand than any engineering contributions. And, as she had so spectacularly demonstrated earlier, her own diplomatic and people skills didn’t amount to jack.

You can’t blame yourself for Tev’s inability to carry himself like a proper Starfleet officer, she tried to tell herself. That was Tev being Tev. He had shown some improvement of late, though it had taken one of

the harshest ass-chewings Sonya had ever had to give to get him there. She really had believed they had turned a corner, and now this...

Gomez stopped, and reexamined the last thought that had just flashed through her mind: believed they had turned a corner. Maybe she was putting too much on Tev, when she should've been examining her own shortcomings. After all, Tev had been in Starfleet for close to twenty years. He'd earned his promotions from ensign up to lieutenant commander, and while his record did include more than a few marks, there was nothing that indicated the kind of regular interpersonal conflicts that had marked his tour on the *Vinci*. Maybe it was her command style, or her lack of understanding of Tellarite psychology, or something she said when they first met that pissed him off.

Her reverie was interrupted by the arrival of Domenica Corsi on the bridge. "Commander," she said, frowning. "The captain hasn't beamed back yet?"

"He's only been down there half an hour or so," Gomez said, standing up from the center seat.

"Only half an hour," the security chief grumbled. "Like nothing can go wrong in so short a time as thirty minutes." She and the captain had a nice, loud shouting match when he announced that he was going down to meet with the prime ministers, that he was going alone, so as not to create the same negative first impression they had earlier, and that Corsi was not going to stop him.

"He is a grown man, Domenica," Gomez reminded her. She understood that there were regulations about when a captain should or shouldn't leave his ship, and that Corsi took those regulations seriously, but there was such a thing as overkill.

Corsi shut her eyes and took a short deep breath. When she opened her eyes again, she looked significantly more composed. "Could I talk to you in the captain's ready room, then?"

Gomez nodded, and the two stepped off the bridge into the small office. They both took seats in front of Gold's desk. "Soloman and I met with Minister Latta, and together we compiled a list of fourteen members of the Mariposan scientific community who we determined could pose a future risk to this colony by advanced biological attack. Of those fourteen potential risks, five are dead."

Gomez dipped her head. "In the bioattack."

"No," Corsi said, causing Gomez's head to snap back up. "That list of fourteen excluded anyone confirmed dead in recent days. These other five deaths all happened nine or more years ago."

"And their deaths were never officially recorded?"

Corsi shook her head. "They were also, all five, still on file as still being on their jobs. Now, a death certificate doesn't get filed, that's an oversight. Five don't get filed, that's incompetence. All other official records pointing to them still being alive? That's a cover-up."

Gomez's jaw fell slack. "How could they cover it up for ten years?"

"There was a huge influx of people here eleven years ago. They start up these rural settlements, and the population starts spreading out from the enclosed complex the Mariposans have concentrated themselves in for two hundred and some years. Not to mention," Corsi added, with a half grin that conveyed no amusement, "there are dozens of duplicates of these dead women walking around all over the place; how hard is it going to be to miss any specific one?"

Gomez furrowed her brow. “All five were women? That can’t be random chance.”

“No,” Corsi agreed. “It wouldn’t be.”

Gomez studied the security chief’s expression. “You have a theory.”

Corsi nodded slowly. “We managed to track down the families of two of the women. We’re looking for the other three. I don’t want to jump to conclusions before I have more facts...”

“But?”

“But...I’m afraid this colony’s problems could run far deeper than any of us imagined.”

* * *

The first thing Gold noticed entering the special ward in the Life Science Center was its peacefulness. The ten patients slept steadily, their faces marred by scabbed-over sores, but nonetheless serene. He’d been in enough sickbays and infirmaries in crisis situations, and he was comfortable saying that the crisis here was passed.

Lense approached from the opposite end of the long room, a young woman he guessed for a medtech tagging along beside her. “It looks like congratulations are in order here, Doctor.”

Allowing herself only a slight smile as she rubbed a finger at the corner of her tired-looking eyes, Lense said, “The battle has been won.”

Gold cocked his head to one side. “But the war?”

Lense took a deep breath, then turned to the Bringloidi woman at her elbow. “Kara, would you run a series ‘A’ blood test from all the patients, and a series ‘B’ from the thirteens, fourteens, and fifteens.” Kara nodded and went to carry out her orders, as Lense turned and led Gold into the small office.

Once they’d both been seated, Lense said, “I’ve isolated and identified the viral agent used against the Mariposans, Captain. It’s rop’ngor .”

Gold’s eyes widened slightly. He recognized the language, of course, but was surprised to hear it spoken in this context. “This is a Klingon bug, you’re telling me?”

“Yes. Or it was. It’s been significantly altered, to the point where it was almost unidentifiable.”

“How would these people get their hands on such an exotic...” The answer dawned on him before he had even finished asking the question. “Ambassador Worf. Of course; he was a lieutenant on the Enterprise at the time.”

But Lense shook her head. “Rop’ngoris is a childhood disease; it would’ve been quickly diagnosed and treated in an adult Klingon. But humans can be carriers, and never know. I believe that’s the reason for the violent relapses I’ve been seeing here.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Rop’ngorgot its name—it roughly translates as ‘the cheating disease’—because it will attack the body, and then go into a dormant state before antibody production can get up to full strength. That ‘tricks’ the immune system into thinking it’s beaten the thing back. Then, when the white blood cells start dying off, the virus comes out of dormancy, and hits hard, fast, and often.”

“A disease that fights with no honor,” Gold noted. Little wonder the Klingons had given it such a pejorative name.

Lense nodded. “Now, in humans, when they’re first infected, there’s the same trigger for antibody production, just like with any foreign microorganism. But when the virus launches its secondary attack, there are no Klingon proteins for it to feed on. That gives the human autoimmune system plenty of time to counterattack. Except for a mild fever, you’d never even know you were sick.”

“So how does that account for the relapses?” Gold asked.

“Those people who had previously contractedrop’ngor, in its unaltered form, had already built up a resistance to the disease. That let them ‘recover’ from the initial infection by the modified virus.”

“Which was in fact just the virus’s dormant phase,” Gold nodded in understanding. “But now that you know what it is, you have it under control?”

“Not quite,” Lense said through gritted teeth. “I can trigger its dormant stage, but its taking more time to kill it off. The thing is, it’s notrop’ngor anymore. It’s been gen-engineered to target different cell types, mutate their DNA, tie the entire endocrine system in knots....” She sighed and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyelids. “Whoever created this damned thing was one sadisticpetaQ .”

Gold considered the top of the doctor’s head in silence for a long moment. “Why don’t you take a break, Lense, now that things are under control?”

The doctor’s head snapped back up immediately. “No. There’s too much more. Too much I don’t know yet.”

Gold sighed softly. “You’re not doing yourself any favors by—”

“Captain,” she cut him off sharply. “I can do this. I have to.”

Since her rescue from the Jabari’s homeworld, Gold had sensed that the doctor had been affected by the ordeal in ways that went beyond what she reported in her debriefing. But she had refused to take any recovery time, and now Gold was worried she was pushing herself too hard, too soon. Yet, he knew from past experience that nothing, short of the ship’s tractor beams at full power, was going to pull this woman away from a medical puzzle she had set her mind to solving.

“All right,” he said, standing up from his side of the desk. “Good work, Doctor.” Maybe once they wrapped things up here, he would “suggest” they resume their informal weekly counseling sessions. He could only pray she didn’t push herself past the breaking point before then.

* * *

Wilson Granger stood in the middle of the small one-room structure that had, long ago, been the first shelter built on Mariposa. His hands were solemnly folded in front of him as he read the names etched on the two hundred and eighty-nine individual gold-plate plaques bolted to the four walls, honoring the men

and women who had not survived the landing of the S.S. Mariposa. He'd visited this memorial many times before, but his eyes had always just skimmed over the names. The reality of such a mass tragedy had been inconceivable to him. Until now.

What kind of hell must Walter Granger have gone through, he wondered. On what should have been the triumphant end of a months-long journey, he was faced with the task of burying all but four of his ship's complement, including his own wife and their son. Wilson Granger felt a twinge, the genetic memory, perhaps, of his Progenitor's anguish. He wondered if the courage Walter had found in the face of tragedy had also been carried down in his genes.

"Mr. Prime Minister?"

Granger turned toward the man standing in the entryway that connected the memorial to the rest of the Capital Complex. "Captain Gold, I presume," he said, extending his hand.

Gold took it with a firm, dry grasp. "Thank you for agreeing to talk with me."

"Not at all," said Granger. "I'm glad for the opportunity to discuss matters in a more...tranquil setting."

"Meaning, without your Bringloidi counterpart."

Granger smiled in appreciation of the Starfleet captain's directness. "Brenna is...well, she's a force of nature. Sometimes, everything and everyone around her just ends up getting swept up and away."

Gold nodded in understanding. "Well, given the nature of your situation, we absolutely want to make sure all voices are clearly heard and considered."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Captain," said Granger. "Because I want you to hear me say this, without any other voices coloring your understanding: as Mariposan Prime Minister, and on behalf of the Mariposan citizens of the United Ficus Colony, I request that the Federation help eliminate all advanced technologies from this world."

Gold tried to hold his expression, and failed. "I have to say, I'm more than a little surprised to hear you say that."

"I don't doubt it. Honestly, it surprises me as well." Granger started to pace slowly around the perimeter of the small memorial. "When our scientists discovered our DNA had degraded to the point where our future was threatened, we became obsessed with the need to preserve our society. We were willing to forget everything, even our most basic sense of morality, in order to survive."

"You wouldn't be the first people to do so," said Gold, not without some sympathy. "The survival instinct is a powerful—"

"That's not my point, Captain," said Granger, shaking his head. "My point is, before the Bringloidi came, we never paused to consider what, exactly, we were trying to preserve. When I was confronted a decade ago with the idea of taking a wife...several wives...and of having conjugal relations with them, my first reaction was not a positive one. Nor, for that matter, were my second or third reactions."

"However, I had to adapt to our new reality, for my own self and as an example to the rest. So, like some medieval warlord forging a political alliance, I agreed to be married to the Bringloidi leader's daughter. In the years since we've been together, however, sharing our lives, working in tandem toward

our common goals, I've come to discover something.”

A tiny grin cracked Gold's lips. “That you loved her.”

Granger shook his head slightly, even as he smiled back. “That I am even capable of love. That I can hold another person in that kind of regard. That had been leached out of us, along with our individuality, and our need to live life rather than just propagate it.” Granger swept his arm in a circle around him, indicating the names on the walls. “These people left Earth centuries ago because they wanted to better humanity. But with all their genetic expertise, they forgot the part of being human that isn't in our DNA.”

Granger sighed, and turned to look Gold in the eye again. “Cloning saved Mariposa two hundred and fifty years ago, but it became a crutch. When Captain Picard forced us to put an end to it, we were saved again. All we're asking you now is to continue what Captain Picard began.”

Gold's expression was unreadable. “This decision, for you, isn't about the attacks then, is it?”

“No,” said Granger, “I've given this considerable thought for several years now.”

“And it took these hostilities for the Bringloidi prime minister to come around to this way of thinking.”

Granger smiled. “Ironic, isn't it?”

Before Gold could agree, he was interrupted by a chiming sound, and then a woman's voice. “Lense to Gold.”

He tapped the badge on his chest and replied, “Gold here.”

“Are you still with Prime Minister Granger?”

“Yes, he's right here.”

“Good. I need to speak with him, and Ms. Odell, too.”

“What is it?” Gold asked. “You've discovered something about this bioweapon?” Gold frowned when his question was answered with silence. “Lense?”

“Yes and no,” the woman responded.

Gold exchanged a confused look with Granger. “What does that mean?”

“Yes, I've discovered something about the virus,” Lense's voice answered. “And no, it's not a weapon.”

Chapter 9

“Viruses are, by their nature, highly lethal agents, and have been used militarily for centuries.” Lense sat on one long side of the observation lounge table, with Captain Gold at his spot at the head, and the two prime ministers, along with their health minister, sitting opposite her. Lense made eye contact with each of them as she spoke, except Odell. “Genetic engineering can make viruses that propagate faster, that

spread more easily or are more resistant to treatment. . . . but the reason there are biological weapons in the first place is because these start out as dangerous biological organisms.”

“Except this Klingon bug, you said, would only cause a slight fever,” said Gold. “That’s why all the gen-engineering you saw, no?”

“That was what I assumed. The thing is, someone with a mind to do so would only need to splice one short gene sequence from, say, a common rhinovirus into therop’ngor genome to translate its effects from Klingons to humans. The virus that was loosed in the Life Science Center has over three hundred such splices, and still counting.”

That seemed to surprise the Mariposans, but they were content to listen and allow Gold to continue asking the questions. “Would that be so it only affected Mariposans, and left Bringloidi immune?”

Lense shook her head. “Even though the alterations are designed to target and mutate specific DNA patterns, it still would be a case of overthinking the issue. The Mariposans and Bringloidi lived in two completely different ecosystems for close to three hundred years. There are physiological differences between the two—trace elements in the blood, mineral buildups and deficiencies—relatively minor distinctions, but pronounced enough on a physiochemical level that, again, a fraction of the gen-engineering done here would have sufficed. No, the person who reprogrammed this bug had a purpose other than killing this certain group of people.”

“Begging your pardon, Doctor, but it does kill!” Odell said, her eyes flashing with exasperation. “By the hundreds, it kills! How do any of these discoveries say that it wasn’t a weapon?”

It took some effort for Lense to meet Brenna Odell’s eyes. “I haven’t yet catalogued all the recombinant sequences in the virus, let alone figured out why those specific alterations were made. But they were less directed at who the virus can infect than how it affects them.” Lense took a deep breath before continuing. “While rop’ngor, in its natural state, spreads itself indiscriminately throughout the host’s endocrine system, this altered virus appears designed to target its mutagenic effects on the hosts’ reproductive glands and organs.”

Wilson Granger’s entire face seemed to fall in slow motion. “Oh my God. . .” he whispered, as Odell’s hand went to her mouth and her eyes went wide, and Victor Granger frowned with great consternation.

Gold displayed a different kind of shock. “Their reproductive systems? So someone wanted to cause fertility problems in the Mariposans?”

“No, Captain,” Granger said quietly. “They wanted to solve those problems.”

A long uncomfortable silence settled over the room. Both Wilson Granger and Brenna Odell made pointed efforts not to look at each other.

“It was Corsi who discovered the discrepancies in the colony records. Deaths had been covered up, all Mariposan women, all pregnant at the time of death.”

“It was during the first years after reunion,” Wilson Granger said, not defensively, but simply matter-of-fact. “It was already a challenge to convince my people to perform the procreative act. We tried to contain those stories that would have discouraged them.” Odell said nothing, her eyes downcast, trying to hide the pain in them.

“Based on Corsi’s tip, I did my own investigating,” Lense continued, now directing her report to Gold. “The record of miscarriages, stillbirths, and other genetic birth defects. . .” Lense trailed off, fighting with all her willpower from betraying the fears and emotions that had been pressing on her chest in recent days.

“But, there are children all over the place down there,” Gold said, his tone one of disbelief.

Victor Granger stepped in when Lense couldn’t bring herself to answer immediately. “All products of Bringloidi-Bringloidi pairing. Mariposan-Bringloidi couples. . .” he said, giving a brief sideways glance to his duplicate and his partner. “Well. It seems that, where cloning technology was able to compensate for some degree of genetic degradation, the natural procreation process is infinitely more particular about how much damage it will tolerate.”

“Can’t have kids.” Mara glared at her, pitiless eyes set in a grotesquely deformed face. “Kornaks, us. Oh, we get a couple. But usually something’s wrong with them. Most of them die.”

Lense clenched her jaw and willed the memory of the Jabari woman’s words back down. She had to stay in the here and now, concentrate on the many instead of the one.

“However,” the shift in Victor Granger’s tone helped to pull Lense back, “nobody in my hospital was working on any such research, not that I know of. And, regardless of whatever discoveries Dr. Lense has come up with, the fact remains that it was released in an explosion in the middle of the Life Sciences Center, and that it killed two hundred people.”

Lense bit back her annoyance at Dr. Granger’s arrogance, and as calmly as she could, told him, “Commander Corsi learned that Dr. Sandra Vallis, one of the experts she identified as capable of designing and engineering this mutagen, was also in the former cloning labs at the time of the initial explosion. I think it’s reasonable to believe she was using those facilities to carry out this research surreptitiously.”

“And why would she do that behind my back?” Granger demanded.

“To avoid raising hopes prematurely,” the other Granger answered, “among other reasons. From the first, Sandra was one of the strongest supporters for a united colony and a united people.” He gave the health minister a pointed look, and got a scowl back in return. “How tragic that her work would’ve ended this way.”

“So then. . . this whole horrible business came of some. . . accident?” Brenna Odell looked at the others around the table for someone to dispute that conclusion. She closed her eyes briefly, and muttered something incomprehensible just under her breath. Opening her eyes again, she then turned to Gold with an accusatory glare. “Now? Now do you understand why we need to be rid of these blasted machines?”

The captain gaped back at her, stunned. “Minister Odell, your argument before was that your technology was being misused for destructive means. Now that we’ve learned that there was no intention of doing harm. . .”

“There’s an old, old saying about good intentions, Captain. Over two hundred people were killed. How am I supposed to feel better about that, knowing those deaths were accidental?”

“Madam Prime Minister,” Lense interrupted. “Before you make this decision, you should know that Dr. Vallis, I believe, was getting close to a working treatment.”

That stopped her short. “Say that again?”

Actually, Lense reflected, I shouldn't have said it the once. The most she could honestly say for Sandra Vallis's mutagen, based on the limited amount of time she'd spent studying the altered virus—most of that trying to determine what it was and how to kill it—was that it was slightly closer to a working treatment than naturalrop'ngor would be. But, if it meant an end to the tragedies that had been haunting these people all these years... “Sandra Vallis's work shows great promise, and I believe it should be further pursued. If it were possible to recover anything from the damaged lab—notes, samples, equipment—I could re-create—”

“Re-create?!” Odell blurted. “Are you mad? After the hell we've been through, you want to start this all over?”

Lense assured her, “It would be under the most stringent safeties and controls, of course.”

“Oh, of course.” Odell sneered. “More grand promises from the bloody Federation!”

“Brenna!” Her husband put a hand on her shoulder and turned her in her swivel chair to face him. “Are you even listening to what the woman is saying? She thinks she can cure us!”

“That's not what she said, Wilson; that's what you wanted to hear. ‘Technology will save us again!’ It's like the Sirens' song for you!”

“Madam Prime Minister, with all respect,” Lense interrupted, “this really is your best hope for saving this colony. Unless you want to subject more women like Frances DiCamino to their fates, or more children like Danielle to theirs.”

“What? How...?” Brenna Odell's eyes turned as hard and cold as winter's frozen ground, and Lense found it impossible to look away from them. She had found, in the course of her investigation into Corsi's tip, the birth record for Danielle Willa Odell-Granger, dated some forty weeks after the Enterprise's departure from Mariposa. The infant's death certificate had been issued the following day. “How dare you try to play my emotions like that?” the Bringloidi woman demanded, the heat of her outrage still not melting the cold of her glare. “You have no right! You have no idea, with your lofty position on your grand spaceship, what I carry in my heart every day!”

Lense felt as if she were pinned to the back of her chair, the air squeezed out of her. No, she didn't know; she didn't want to know, couldn't even bring herself to imagine...to eventhink...

“All right,” Gold said, the sound of his voice pulling Lense back into the moment. “You want us to relieve you of the technology that set off this tragedy. Fine. I assume, then, that what we decide to do with it once we have it, you have no objections?” The captain gave Lense a look, making sure she understood and accepted this proposal. She somehow managed a slight nod for him.

“There was extensive damage to that lab,” Victor Granger told them, frowning. “I wouldn't count on there being anything of worth left to recover.”

“That sounds like just the sort of impossible challenge the rest of this ship's complement has been waiting for,” Gold told him, flashing a broad grin. “So, if there's nothing else...” he said as he rose, effectively preempting whatever “else” might have been brought up.

They all rose and started to file out of the observation lounge. The new security guard, Tomo Kim, stood just outside the door to escort the colony officials back to the transporter room. Victor Granger, however, fell back beside Lense. "Doctor, may I have a word, please?" he asked in what Lense considered an uncharacteristically civil tone. She hesitated for a moment, then nodded to Kim, who took the cue and moved off with the two other colonists in tow.

Once alone, the health minister said, "Dr. Lense, I want to formally thank you for the work you did to bring our epidemic under control. I also want to apologize for my prejudiced and distrustful initial attitude."

Lense understood this was more of a political nicety than a genuine admission of fault. But the fact that he had said the words at all, whatever the motive, was more than she would have expected. "Thank you, Doctor. I appreciate your saying so."

"I see you now as a dedicated physician concerned for the well-being of others," he continued, perhaps a bit more sincerely now, "which is why I ask you now...please, just walk away from this."

Lense blinked as she took a second to register that request. "Excuse me?"

"The last time the Federation 'helped' us with problems related to the propagation of the Mariposan people, they stripped us of our most highly advanced technologies, and placed the burden of four hundred backward bumpkins upon us. This time, we prefer to take care of our problems by ourselves."

Lense clenched her teeth to hold back a few choice words about Granger's "backward bumpkins" comment. "It is going to be a long, hard time before your medical community recovers from this incident," she said when she finally trusted herself to open her mouth, "and I've already spent more time studying this gen-eng virus than anyone else alive. What possible reason could you have for cavalierly dismissing my help?"

"Because it comes under Brenna Odell's technophobic terms," Victor Granger sighed. "And that's too high a price to pay. If I stand back and allow you to take this over, in a nonemergency situation, then I am tacitly agreeing with her that we cannot be trusted with our own technology."

Lense shook her head. "No, that wouldn't be the case at all. These are singular circumstances."

"Dr. Lense, do not patronize me," Granger snapped. "I've been dealing with the woman since she and her people arrived here. She was an arrogant, pigheaded authoritarian when she was operating from out of her father's shadow, and she's only gotten worse since he died. Believe me, she won't rest until she has things her way."

Lense fumed. "I will concede that you grasp the finer details of the local political situation better than I do. However, I really don't give a good hot damn; all I'm concerned about is the continued health of this colony."

"I am talking about the continued health of this colony, dammit!" Veins were now pulsing visibly at Granger's temples. "Odell will use this as precedent to have everything else taken away. Before long, we'll be reduced to treating patients with leeches and prayers. If this were your sickbay, and your captain was asking the Romulans to take charge of your work, you would be just as adamant in defending it as I am."

Lense glowered at Granger. "I don't quite see the parallel between Starfleet and the Romulans," she said

hotly. “Although, if they had any expertise in the health concerns of cloned humans, I wouldn’t refuse their help.”

“This isn’t help you’re offering! This is enfeeblement!”

Lense sighed, and tapped her combadge. “Lense to Kim. Please return to the observation lounge. Dr. Granger is ready to leave.”

“So, that’s your answer?” Granger asked, the contempt not so much dripping from his voice as it was overflowing.

Lense met his haughty expression with a hard-eyed stare of her own. “Doctor, I’m very sorry you feel this way. But I am not going to simply walk away from a major health-care crisis, particularly not when said crisis would then be overseen by such a shortsighted, self-important ass as yourself. Now if you’ll excuse me,” she said, as the lounge doors slid open and Kim reappeared, “I have work to do.” She turned her back on both men and stormed out of the room.

Chapter 10

Domenica Corsi’s hands glided easily over her console, guiding the shuttle Shirley planetward through the dark of a thick cloud cover. Her jaw was hard-set, though not out of any concerns about flying blind on instruments only; the fact that she was on a shuttle in the first place was reason enough for concern. “Why can’t we just beam into the cloning lab, grab what we need to, and beam right back out?” she had asked, not unreasonably, during the pre-mission briefing.

“If there are any identifiable traces of viral DNA that survived the explosion and fire,” Lense had explained, “they’re going to be extremely damaged and fragile. The risk of damaging them further by subjecting them to the matter–energy conversion process of the transporter is too great.”

And of course, risks to random molecules trump the risks to people, Corsi thought ruefully. To make matters worse, they would need to put down at a large, highly trafficked gateway into the Capital Complex in order to get in and out of the cloning labs. Even on the friendliest of worlds, drawing the attention of spontaneous crowds was more risk than was wise to take.

The shuttle broke through the cloud ceiling into only slightly less darkness. It was about an hour before sunrise, and the overcast skies dulled the light beyond the eastern horizon. Yet there were already a number of people milling around the circular brick courtyard that was the convergence point of several rural roads leading into the complex. Vendors were setting up kiosks and carts with merchandise and food, anticipating the early morning influx of foot traffic. Also from their altitude, Corsi could see local farmers out and about taking care of their early morning chores...now distracted by the descending spacecraft, and starting to drift in the direction of their landing site. “Aw, crap,” she muttered.

Gomez reached over from her spot in the copilot’s seat to give her forearm a quick squeeze. She gave the commander a quick sideways glance, and saw her reassuring smile. After the fiasco at the prime ministers’ residence, the commander had just been glad that she and her people were getting a second chance to prove themselves, no matter how odious the engineer in her found their mission. Well, if she can grin and bear it, Corsi thought, so can I.

“All right, people,” Gomez swiveled in her seat to face the rest of the mission team seated astern. “We’ve already started attracting attention, so the faster we get in and out, the better. Are we all clear on our objectives?”

“Crystal,” Makk Vinx answered, while Soloman and Andrew Angelopoulos simply nodded.

The fourth team member, though, seemed lost in thought. “Doctor?”

“Identify and recover forensic biological samples, while you assess the state of the equipment, Soloman searches for research files, and Corsi’s team investigates the cause of the initial explosion.”

A quiet warning bell went off in the back of Corsi’s mind as she listened to the doctor’s dull recitation. Something, she knew, had been bothering Lense since her return to the *Vinci*, something that happened on that transdimensional planet she’d been stranded on. She refused to talk about it, though. Lense had always, as long as they’d served together, been a very private person, slow to open up to others, holding everything close to the chest. Probably why we manage to deal with each other in close quarters so well...

She put it out of her mind when Gomez seemed satisfied with the doctor’s response, and concentrated instead on landing. She switched from thrusters to antigravs, and guided the *Shirley* down onto the brick surface of the courtyard with only the quietest of thumps. “Okay,” she said, standing out of her seat and moving to the shuttle hatch. “Let’s get this done.”

A group of thirty or so onlookers had gathered around the edge of the courtyard, ignoring the merchants and the scent of cooking breakfast foods from one of the vendor carts. “Good morning,” Corsi greeted them as she led the rest of the team toward the complex entrance. “Please, just go about your business. We have a few matters inside that—”

“What are you doing, landing that thing there?” A bearded Bringloidi man moved to intercept Corsi, causing her and the rest of the team to stop short. “You can’t just park that thing in the middle of the plaza!”

“I’m sorry for the inconvenience. We won’t be long, I promise.”

“What sort of business do you have here?” shouted another man, stepping out ahead of the rest of the crowd. This one was a Mariposan of the Hammond line, with the same dark skin and muscular build they’d seen on Kevin Hammond and his security force. “You here to steal more of our machines?”

Corsi did not care for the tone behind that challenge, nor for the supportive murmur that arose from the crowd in response. “We’re not here to steal anything,” she answered, as she brought her right hand behind her back and made a subtle gesture. Vinx and Angelopoulos shifted position so that they and Corsi formed a loose semicircle around the rest of the team.

“Oh, no?” Another Mariposan, a woman with shoulder-length auburn hair, stepped forward now, approaching Vinx. “This one was at my house yesterday, practically accusing me of being behind the attack two days ago, saying my name was on some list and threatening to take my biosynthesizer away.”

Vinx’s eyes narrowed, but he held himself motionless. “Hey, I was just doin’ my job. We got no beef with you no more, so why don’cha just step back, sister?”

“Who do you think you are, pushing us around like this?” she demanded, taking another step forward,

chin thrust out.

“I axed you nice already, lady. Now petrify, or I’ll—”

“Vinx,” Corsi barked, though she kept her eyes on the crowd, which seemed to have grown quite a bit in just the past few seconds. “People, we are here to do a job, at the request of Prime Ministers Granger and Odell. Now, please—”

“Now, don’t you be lying to these good people, Miss Corsi.”

The crowd rippled before her, people stepping aside for Reade Latta to make his way up to the front of the group. The acting security minister tipped his hat cordially to his Starfleet counterpart. “Word travels quickly, lass: Dr. Victor has already told us what really transpired up on that ship of yours.”

“And what did he tell you?” Corsi asked, even though it didn’t really matter; whatever it was had inflamed the populace, turning whatever degree of goodwill they may have had up until now against them.

“That you think we’re some child race. That we can’t be trusted to take care of ourselves.”

“That son of a bitch,” Lense said from behind her, in a louder voice than she probably intended.

“No, he’s not that,” said the bearded Bringloidi man. “He may be a navelless freak, but he ain’t nobody’s son.”

Most of the crowd laughed, with the exception of the several Mariposans. “Watch your mouth, ’Gloidi...”

“Why don’t y’ make me, y’ overgrown Lysserian larva?”

“Put it aside, both of you,” Latta snapped, and to Corsi’s mild surprise, they obeyed him. Obviously, she realized darkly, Starfleet was considered enough a common enemy that whatever other civil conflicts existed here paled in comparison.

This isn’t a good thing.

“Dr. Lense?” Corsi said out of the corner of her mouth, and took a couple small steps backward. Her eyes stayed on the crowd before them, just as their defiant eyes stayed warily on her.

She heard a pair of familiar footsteps move close behind her. “Commander?” Lense’s voice asked.

“I’m not liking the way this situation is shaping up.” She spoke in a low, neutral tone, and kept her face, still turned to the mob, an unreadable mask.

“Could have been better,” Lense agreed.

Corsi allowed herself a slight nod. “They really don’t have navels?”

“Why would a clone need one?”

“None of them look like they’re armed. We pull our phasers, they’re likely to disperse.”

Lense frowned. "Are you asking my opinion on tactics?"

"I'm asking if this is important enough that we go down that road," said Corsi. She understood Lense's determination to follow through on what she had started, and to do what she could to save the future of these people. However, even the threat of using weapons against a nonviolent, unarmed gathering was a drastic act, one that Corsi was not eager to take. "If this clone doctor is this dead-set against us getting access, it might not be a bad idea to rethink our strategy."

Lense sighed behind her. Corsi understood how she felt. The idea of backing down from bullies, even as a strategic retreat, stuck in her craw as well.

Then it occurred to Corsi that what she had heard from the doctor wasn't a sigh, but a deep bracing breath. This did not occur to her, however, until after she saw what Lense was bracing herself to do. She stepped right up past Corsi, up directly in front of Reade Latta. "Sir, I'm Elizabeth Lense, chief medical officer of the *Vinci*."

Latta nodded. "I've heard of you."

"Yes, I'm sure Victor Granger had plenty to say about me," said Lense with a sardonic smile. "But, sir, you have some firsthand experience with Starfleet officers, don't you? While you were aboard the *Enterprise*?"

Latta didn't answer, but Corsi could see that Lense had struck a chord. "You've seen for yourself the kind of people we are," the doctor continued, also sounding confident that she was reaching the man. "The kind of people who would take you in, feed you, take care of your sick. We've helped you in the past; all we're asking now is that you let us h—"

"Incoming!"

Instinctively, Corsi grabbed Lense by the shoulder and pulled her back, even as she spun in Vinx's direction, then toward a low grassy knoll to the north of the plaza where he was looking. The Iotian guard had likewise grabbed Commander Gomez and forced her to the ground, just a second before an arc of orange flame flew over their heads and struck the hull of the shuttle. There was the sound of shattering glass, then the whoosh of an expanding sphere of fire.

"Down! Get down!" Corsi shouted as her phaser came out and she swept their surroundings with her eyes. Sounds of screams and general panic and fleeing erupted at Corsi's back as the entire starboard side of the shuttle lit up ablaze from the Molotov cocktail that had exploded on impact with the hull. The shuttle itself, designed to withstand the heat of atmospheric descent, would not be damaged by such a low-tech weapon.

Its level of sophistication, though, meant nothing to the team of six trapped out in the open, now easy targets.

Well, guess all that worry about biosynthesizers was for nothing, Corsi thought ruefully.

"Another one!" shouted Angelopoulos, this time looking in the opposite direction from which the first missile had come. He fired his phaser at the incoming firebomb, scoring a direct hit in midair. The blast obliterated the container and most of its contents, but resulted in enough of a fireball to set off another wave of frightened screams from the civilians. Meanwhile, Corsi motioned for her guards to tighten their formation around the rest of the away team, and went to help Lense up and into the cluster.

But the doctor was gone.

She spat out an Italian obscenity that was a favorite of her uncle's, then called out, "Lense!" She spared a second of watching for additional firebombs to scan the now largely abandoned courtyard. She almost missed it, but Corsi caught a brief glance of a blue-trimmed Starfleet jumpsuit. Its wearer was apparently being led by another dark-haired figure, down the southeast road and out of sight around a thick copse of trees.

She uttered another colorful metaphor as a full volley of firebombs came arcing toward them.

* * *

The rough bricks of the courtyard scraped away the skin of Lense's palms, as well as ripping through the knees of her uniform. She looked up from where Corsi had forced her onto the ground, and then blinked at the bright explosion that erupted against the shuttle hull. She winced as blossoms of color floated before her eyes, and almost failed to notice Corsi's feet, as the security chief paced in a tight arc while scanning the near horizon. Lense scrambled out of the way just quickly enough to avoid being tripped over.

"Another one!" Lense looked up in time to see the second firebomb explode in midair, raining debris and sparks on the people below. Without thinking, Lense pushed herself onto her feet, and ran against the scattering crowd to check on any potentially injured parties. A few scorched shards of glass littered the ground when she reached the spot, but no bodies or blood, thank God.

She stopped to take in the courtyard as a whole. Vendor carts had been tipped over, fruits and other goods spilled across the ground. One of the hot food carts was now ablaze and billowing dark smoke. The majority of the former crowd had pushed their way into the safety of the Capital Complex, guided by Reade Latta and his makeshift security team in between breaking up minor scuffles between individual Bringloidi and Mariposans. Witnessing this scene, Lense almost wondered whether this wasn't all for the best, to just walk away, wash her hands of these people...

"Dr. Elizabeth!"

Lense turned to see Kara McClay rushing toward her from behind one of the abandoned merchant stands. Lense started toward her, meeting her halfway. "Kara, are you all right? Are you hurt?"

The young woman didn't answer, but instead took the doctor's left hand and, gesturing with the free hand to follow, led Lense away from the courtyard, following one of the unpaved roads leading from the complex. Lense went without hesitation, trusting the urgency of McClay's demeanor, and so was confused when they veered off the path and into the shade of a small grove of trees and stopped. She looked around for an injured colonist or something else to explain why she'd been led here, and noticed that they were out of sight of the courtyard and Complex. "Kara? What is this about?"

"I needed to talk to you, before you left," she said. "You came back to try and find Dr. Sandra's research?"

Lense nodded, wondering what all this drama was leading up to. That question was answered when, after casting a quick look around them for other prying eyes, Kara reached into a large pocket in the front of her skirt and pulled out an antique wooden box. Smiling, she held it up for Lense and removed the lid.

“Oh...” The doctor’s breath caught as she saw inside the box a collection of plastic disks, six centimeters in diameter and strawberry red in color—Yoshimitsu Systems data disks.

* * *

After weighing her options, Corsi turned, aimed her phaser, and fired on the shuttle.

The alcohol residue from the Molotov cocktail disintegrated in the low-power energy beam, the sudden molecular phase change robbing the flame of its fuel while leaving the hull unmarred. “All right, go! Go!” she shouted at the S.C.E. team members, then to Vinx and Angelopoulos, without a pause for breath, “Keep them covered!”

She couldn’t help but catch the insolent look Angelopoulos shot her way before turning his focus on Soloman. Only a couple of weeks earlier, she had given him a harsh dressing-down for failing to stick with Tev during the mission to Artemis IX. Now, she had essentially repeated the same mistake. She couldn’t worry about that now, though. They needed to get out of the fire zone, then find Lense, which was going to be easier from the air than on foot.

Soloman ran the ten meters to the cover of the shuttle, bent over double to present as low a profile as possible. Gomez adopted the same posture, placing her hands at the small of the Bynar’s back as she brought up the rear. The two guards kept pace beside them, while the commander took up the rear position, visually scanning for further assaults. The plaza had been almost completely deserted by this point, the frightened screams replaced now with chants of “Our Mariposa! Our Mariposa!” from the surrounding hillocks.

“And you’re welcome to it,” Corsi muttered through clenched teeth. Her eyes flicked briefly to the spot where she saw Lense disappear. There better be an injured colonist out there you just saved, she thought. If not, dear roommate, you’re going to have hell to pay.

Her thoughts were interrupted then by the far-off sound of a throaty battle cry. This was soon blended with what sounded like a hundred more such cries echoing in a long tunnel, followed by the rapidly approaching pounding of stampeding feet. “Get them inside, now!” Corsi shouted as her eyes fixed on the Capital Complex entryway, watching a small army charge for the outside.

Vinx all but threw the diminutive Soloman in as he reached the hatch, and Gomez leapt in after, moving quickly for the cockpit. The engines came to life just as Corsi saw the leading edge of the mob clear the arch of the portal, with Reade Latta leading the charge.

Both Vinx and Angelopoulos hesitated before following the others into the shuttle, neither wanting to be the first to leave their colleagues to face the approaching mob. Corsi was about to bark at them for holding up...but stopped when she saw that the approaching mob was not, in fact, approaching them.

Instead, they had split into two groups, each moving for either side of the plaza, where the bomb throwers were hidden. Corsi watched as a squad of Bringloidi rushed the hillock to the north, weapons blazing, while another squad of cloned gunmen climbed the grassy knoll at the other end of the plaza. The chants were replaced by screams, and an orange glow blossomed from behind the rise, apparently from a lit firebomb either dropped or shot apart while still in the assailant’s hand.

Meanwhile, Reade Latta marched up to Corsi, a swaggering spring to his step. Clearly, this entire episode had invigorated him. “Are you and yours all right?”

Corsi nodded, watching as flames and smoke lifted above the hill to the south. The Mariposan crew roughly dragged a pair of teenage Bringloldi boys up over the rise back toward the plaza, one crying out and holding his burnt and bloody hands out in front of him. “Who are they? Dieghanists?”

Latta snapped his head around, eyes blazing. “You haven’t caused enough trouble, you gotta be looking to stir up s’more?” he practically growled at her.

“What?”

“You want to know who they are? They’re nobody. They’re a bunch of hoodlums you got all riled up with yer pokin’ and yer proddin’—”

“That we got riled up?”

“Well, who were they attackin’, now?”

Corsi caught herself before she could be dragged any further into this purposeless conversation. She took a deep breath, turned, and ushered Vinx and Angelopoulos into the shuttle ahead of her. She climbed up front as Vinx shut the hatch, and folded herself into the pilot’s seat beside Gomez. “Let’s find Lense and get the hell away from this damned planet.”

* * *

Lense looked up from the box to the young woman’s face, and knew these disks held Sandra Vallis’s research notes. “Kara...how did you...?”

“She always wanted to be sure she had backup copies of her work in a safe place. She trusted me...”

Lense was overwhelmed by the sudden transition from hopelessness to wide-eyed optimism. My God, she thought. This is too good to be—

And, as if in karmic punishment for that thought, Kara snapped the lid back on the box and pulled it to her chest, clutching her long fingers tightly around the edges. She looked up into Lense’s eyes, her expression showing a graveness that seemed beyond her years.

“Take me with you.”

Lense’s eyebrows arched. “What?”

“I need to get away from here,” she said plainly. “I know I haven’t had a lot of formal education, but I’m always reading stuff off the subspace, and I’m a hard worker, and if I were only given a chance to do more—”

“Kara...” Lense said, searching for the softest way of dissuading her, one that would not lose her the disks. “If it were up to me...this isn’t the kind of thing where you can just make a snap decision.”

“Dr. Elizabeth, please,” she said, in a tone that sounded not so much like a plea as simple, weary despair. “I can’t stay here. I can’t. You’ve seen how Dr. Victor treats me. Like being Bringloldi makes me less of a person. Even Dr. Sandra, when she was mentoring me—she wasn’t so bad, but she still...” She stopped herself, uneasy speaking ill of the dead. “I’ll never be anything more than what I am if I stay

here.”

Lense bit her lower lip as she considered the young woman. As she did, her combadge came to life. “Corsi to Lense.”

She tapped her badge. “Lense here.”

“We’re airborne and headed for your location, Doctor.” Even as Corsi related this news, Lense could already hear the humming engines of the small craft growing close. “What’s your situation? Everything okay?”

“Yeah, fine,” she frowned, then looked back to Kara, wearing a hope-against-hope look on her face. Lense sighed and her shoulders dropped. There was no guarantee, even with Sandra Vallis’s files, that she would be able to save the Mariposan gene pool. But if she could save just one person...

“We are going to be taking on a passenger, though, Commander,” she said, which drew a wide grin as a response.

Chapter 11

David Gold tabbed open the door to the guest cabin. He saw the young woman who’d been sitting on the single bunk, staring at the stars out the portal, immediately jump to her feet at the soft hydraulic hiss and turn to face him. “Kara McClay. I’m David Gold, captain of the *Vinci*.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied, putting her hand out for him to take. “I saw you earlier in the lab with Dr. Elizabeth.” Her palm was dry and she made strong eye contact, but Gold could clearly tell that she was as nervous as hell having to talk with him.

Gold resisted his natural urge to put her at ease. He folded his hands behind his back instead, and slowly paced the cabin. It had the same layout as his own captain’s quarters—a single bunk, desk and chair, set of shelves, computer, replicator, and small ‘fresher. Otherwise, it was completely Spartan, with none of the homey touches his or any of the other crew quarters had. Perhaps that would make a subconscious impression on the girl.

After about a minute of silence, Gold turned to face McClay again. “Have a seat.” She settled back onto the edge of the bunk, while Gold leaned on the edge of the desk. “Ms. McClay, I want to tell you that I appreciate your help in recovering Dr. Vallis’s research.”

“You’re welcome, Captain,” she said with a shy smile.

Gold did not return the smile. “What I don’t particularly appreciate, however, is the fact that you used this material, which Prime Ministers Granger and Odell had already granted us unconditionally, to extort a commitment from one of my officers.”

It took a moment for McClay to find her tongue and respond. “I know that what I did wasn’t very fair to Dr. Elizabeth...or to you, sir. If you wanted to, you could put me into your transporter and send me right back and I couldn’t do anything about it. All I can do is...ask for your mercy.”

Gold couldn't help but snort at that. "I'm sorry, I wasn't laughing at you. It's just that, even as a captain, I'm not used to quite that degree of deference, not on this ship, anyhow." He paused, turning more serious. "I want to make sure you understand exactly what it is you're getting yourself into here, Ms. McClay. You've lived a very isolated life here, and on Bringloid before. It's a very different universe out there. Reading about it is a very different thing from living it. And, you're going to be living it largely on your own, with no one to rely on but yourself. Are you ready for that?"

McClay lifted her chin and looked the captain straight in the eye, all hint of her earlier nervousness dissolved away. "Yes," she answered. "More than I can tell you."

* * *

Lense was waiting in the corridor when Gold emerged from the ship's guest quarters. "Well?" she asked expectantly.

Gold gave her a crooked smile. "This is something they teach at Starfleet Medical? How to identify smart, promising young people on backwater planets?"

Lense looked nonplussed. "I'm sorry, sir?"

"Private joke. Forget it," he replied as he started toward the turbolift, the doctor falling in step beside him. He had been quite surprised by Kara McClay. He'd seen her at work in Lense's ward earlier, and had listened in bemusement as the doctor, en route back to the ship on the Shirley, rambled enthusiastically about the potential she saw in the young Bringloidi. But when he'd gone into his chat with McClay, it was not with a good feeling about her.

"As you said," the captain told Lense as they entered the lift, "given all the circumstances, she is quite an impressive young woman."

Seconds later they entered sickbay, and headed for the diagnostic lab. Gomez and Soloman were already absorbed in their work. The Bynar was hunched over a bulky piece of auxiliary equipment sitting on top of the table console, with a long coil of opticable running between it and the panel interface. Gomez, meanwhile, was studying readouts on the large wall-sized monitors, tracking the progress of their download. And curiously, the EMH had been activated, and was standing immobile in the corner, a strangely pensive look on its face. Gomez looked up as they entered, pushing a lock of dark hair away from her face. "Captain."

Gold nodded back. "Gomez. How are we doing?"

Gomez simply sighed, while Soloman turned from his console and said, "We've so far downloaded the data from fifteen of sixty-seven disks." The machine in front of him beeped, and a small door popped open. Soloman extracted a red disk and replaced it with another from a small wooden box sitting at his left elbow. "Unfortunately, we are restrained by the physical limitations of this technology, in regard to the speed of data retrieval."

"How long until we have all the data in?" Gold asked.

"Approximately one hour, thirty-eight minutes."

"Which is why we brought the EMH on line," Gomez said.

“Yes, I was wondering,” said Lense, looking over to the holographic doctor.

Noting the shift of focus toward him, the hologram straightened to attention. “Dr. Vallis’s notes on her rop’ngor research and experimentation are being loaded directly into my program matrix, where I am able to organize each new file into a more dynamic systematization. This will allow for more immediate analysis of the work as a whole, and quicker identification of the most promising avenues for further research.”

Gold nodded, impressed. Though the EMH program had lost the equivalent of several years of practical experience due to the damage done at Galvan VI, the refurbished version seemed somewhat more capable of adapting and learning than “Emmett” had been.

No matter how impressive everyone’s efforts, however, Gold knew they were likely to fall short.

“Good work, people. Carry on.” He then turned to Lense and, with a tilt of his head, indicated her office. Once the door slid shut behind them, he said, “Lense, assuming Vallis had been working on this problem for the last ten or so years with...let’s say mixed results, how likely do you think that, even with all this, the cure is going to immediately reveal itself to you?”

“Honestly? Not great, Captain. But that’s not reason—”

“—not reason not to try, no, of course not,” Gold said. “Here’s the thing, Lense. Mariposa has been handed off from the S.C.E. to the Diplomatic Corps. They have a ship, theHammarkjold, en route right now.”

“I thought the prime ministers were still dead-set against any negotiation; they want what they want, period.”

Gold frowned. “Yes, but that’s for Captain Conley and Ambassador Crane to deal with now. We get to deal, instead, with a failing seawater desalinization plant on Drovoer II. Once you’ve briefed the Hammarkjold’s CMO on whatever you find in these files—”

“No.”

Gold stopped, and simply stared at Lense with both eyebrows raised.

“Sir, I have an obligation—”

Gold cut her off. “Your first obligation is to this ship and her crew. I know that you want to see this thing through, but as long as there is no immediate medical threat, I can’t justify delaying—”

“Then I request a transfer.”

Again, Lense stunned him into silence. “Say that again?”

“I will not walk away from this, Captain. You will not make me walk away from this.”

Gold studied her, searching for whatever it was she wasn’t saying. “What is this all about, Lense?”

“What is this about?” she echoed, sounding incredulous.

“That’s what I said.”

Lense blinked at him, her head shaking like a miscalibrated warp coil. “It’s about...about miscarriages, and stillbirths, and...and...fatal birth defects and women...women dying...”

“No, Lense. What is this really about?”

Lense lowered her brow and all but sneered at him. “I don’t know, Captain, why don’t you tell me? If you don’t believe me, you tell me what it’s about!”

“All right. It has something to do with what happened on the Jabari world.”

Her face turned to stone. “Oh, really?”

“Really. Because whatever it is, it’s been eating at you since well before we got to Mariposa.”

Lense snorted in disdain. “Excuse me, Captain. I have work to do.”

She tried to slip around him to the door, but Gold grabbed on to her upper arm and restrained her. “You painted a hellish picture of life on that planet, Lense. War, death, filth, disease, hopelessness. But you didn’t tell everything in your debriefing, did you?”

Lense stood stock-still, saying nothing and keeping her eyes forward, avoiding Gold’s.

“You’re doing yourself no good keeping this bottled up, Elizabeth. You know that.”

She turned to the captain, her eyes deep and filled with barely contained emotion...

...and with a hard yank, pulled her arm free from his grasp. She glared at him with unreadable eyes for a long extra moment, then without a word walked out of her office. Gold remained where he stood, replaying the entire exchange in his mind and hoping to convince himself he had not, by reaching out to her, pushed her away past the point of retrieval.

* * *

Carol Abramowitz watched as Kara McClay poked unenthusiastically at the plate of gesar in front of her. The young woman had purposely selected an alien, exotic-sounding dish from the replicator menu, and appeared now to regret it. “Vulcan food is something of an acquired taste,” Abramowitz said, as she scraped the last bits of icoberry torte off her plate. “If you want something else, go ahead. It’s no problem.”

“No,” McClay answered, laying down her fork and picking up a teacup. “Just not as hungry as I thought I was.”

The two of them had the mess hall to themselves, after having completed the grand tour of the ship. The cultural specialist was usually not the first crew-person chosen to show visitors around a starship, especially not on a ship full of tech-heads who could actually tell you why access tunnels were called “Jeffries tubes.” But Captain Gold had asked Abramowitz to do the honors, in part, she suspected, so she could see that the joined Mariposan-Bringloidi colony had managed to produce at least one nice, bright, well-adjusted young person.

She might have been more encouraged if this same young woman wasn't now leaving said colony.

"Nerves?" Abramowitz asked, grabbing both their dishes and returning them to the replicator for recycling.

"You could say that," she said. "It's like seeing all the different futures that might happen, and knowing you have almost no control over which one."

"All you can do is make the best decision you can, and hope everything else pans out."

McClay nodded. "Dr. Elizabeth, she's a good doctor, isn't she?"

"One of the best," Abramowitz said as she sat back down across from the Bringloidi woman. "Top of her class at Starfleet Medical. Completely dedicated to her patients. I'm sure, if there's any way to help your people, she'll find it."

Something odd flickered across McClay's face then, in reaction, Abramowitz thought, to the term "your people." She had overheard Lense making the case for taking McClay aboard to the captain, describing the animosity of some of her Mariposan patients toward McClay, and the young woman's poise in its face. As well adjusted as she may have seemed on the surface, she had probably accumulated her share of emotional scars over the last decade of childhood.

Whatever unpleasant thought had passed through McClay's mind just then, it was gone now, and she simply nodded. "But you think they need more than just medical help, don't you?"

Abramowitz sighed. "It's a difficult process. People have to adjust—"

"Why?" McClay interrupted.

Abramowitz cocked her head. "Why?"

"Why do people have to adjust to the new culture? Why doesn't the culture adjust to the people?"

"Well, it does. Living cultures are affected by all kinds of different influences, external and internal..."

"But people still... I mean, you don't choose your culture. I was born on Bringloid, so I'm Bringloidi. Then we were brought to Mariposa, where everyone was Mariposan. And we were told, 'now you must all live this new United Ficus culture.' But why do I have to be any of them? Why are these cultures more important than the people in them?"

It was a good question, and one Abramowitz would have enjoyed discussing. Just then, though, they were interrupted. "Lense to Abramowitz."

"Yes, Doctor?"

"Is Kara McClay still with you?"

"Yes, right here."

"I need to see her in the diagnostics lab."

There was something in Lense's tone that Abramowitz felt did not bode well. "It's not good news, is it?" Abramowitz asked.

"I need to speak with her here,now."

Taken aback by the vehemence of the doctor's directive, Abramowitz turned her head back to consider McClay's reaction. The nervousness in her eyes was now, to her surprise, replaced by a kind of calm resignation. "On my way," she said to the comm, and then to her tour guide as she stood up, "Thank you, Dr. Carol."

"Kara?" Abramowitz called as the young woman turned toward the mess hall doors. She didn't stop or turn back; whatever she thought Lense had to tell her, she was clearly set to face it.

Abramowitz remained seated in the empty hall, trying to sort through the new impressions of the United Ficus colony she'd picked up in the past hour. Somehow, her view of the matter was more muddied than ever.

* * *

Lense stared at the long tableau of computer readouts displayed across one wall of the lab, and pressed her hands to either side of her skull, as if trying to squeeze the inevitable conclusion out of her brain. The original text of Sandra Vallis's meticulously detailed notes appeared in tandem with the Vinci computer's representation of the corresponding genomes, as well as the genome of the actual pathogen that had gotten loose in the Capital Complex. Presented this way, there was no question: the rop'ngor strain that had infected the Mariposans was not one Sandra Vallis had created.

"Are you unwell, Doctor?" the EMH asked, standing just off to the side behind her. "Shall I bring you an analgesic?"

"No, thanks," Lense growled. "You've done plenty already." The EMH had caught the contradictory data as soon as the file hit its matrix. Lense only wished she could feel better about the breakthrough.

"Are you certain?" the EMH persisted.

Lense whipped her head around to glower at the EMH as it ran its empathy subroutine. Like all the later-generation medical holograms, this one had been programmed to simulate actual concern for its patients. Seeing it offering her its faux-friendly sympathy was almost enough to make her miss the arrogant Mark I version that had originally been in use on the Lexington. "Yes, I am certain, dammit."

"Then is there anything else I can do?"

"Yeah. You can go and...deactivate yourself."

The EMH nodded and did just that. Once it disappeared, Lense saw Kara through the transparency of the lab walls, waiting in sickbay. Lense got to her feet and waved the young woman in. Kara obeyed wordlessly, and stood just inside the door as Lense slid it shut. The two just stared silently at each other, Lense calling on every bit of strength within her to keep herself composed. After a long moment, Lense finally asked, in a low, pained voice, "What did you do, Kara?"

"What do you—"

Lense slammed the palm of her hand down on the console before she could get any further than that. “Don’t! You were Sandra Vallis’s assistant. You were one of the only people who knew about her secret work. You were the one she trusted with her backup files. She trusted you!”

And she wasn’t the only one.

Kara did her best to hold herself steady, although her eyes started to blur behind a layer of incipient tears. “I didn’t mean—”

“Didn’t mean what?” Lense demanded. “The virus that got loose? It was a mutated strain, Kara. A cross-mutation between two different strains.” She jabbed her right index finger toward the displays on the wall. “Strain number 543, and strain number 467. Four-sixty-seven was the last from what Vallis called ‘a dead-end line of experimentation.’ It propagated too quickly and too uncontrollably, so she wrote it off, and confined the strain to cold storage.” Lense fixed Kara with a hard glare. “This was three years ago! How could those two strains have come in contact with each other?”

“I didn’t mean for anyone to be hurt,” Kara said, through slow, controlled breaths. “I only wanted to stop her work.”

Lense put a hand over her mouth and said nothing. Even though she already knew, she’d hoped she would have denied it, that she would have pointed the finger at some other unknown confidant of Vallis’s. Hearing her admit to the act so plainly, with more emotional restraint than Lense felt herself capable of at the moment, was more than she was ready for.

She turned away from the young woman, tabbing the comm on the lab table behind her. “Lense to Gold. Please come to the diagnostic lab right away.”

“Acknowledged,” came the captain’s response.

Lense tabbed the line closed, and remained with her back to Kara, hands on the edge of the console supporting her entire weight. “Did you think I wasn’t going to be able to figure it out?” she asked.

“I figured you would,” Kara answered. “Better you than Dr. Victor.”

“Why?” Lense turned back around to challenge her. “Did you think Starfleet would go easier on you? Or that you could run away without having to face the consequences from the people who were affected by what you did?”

Kara’s only reply was to look down at the deck and hitch her shoulders a couple of centimeters. Before she knew what she was doing, Lense’s hands were on those shoulders, her long fingers pressing into the flesh under the thin yellow sundress. “Did you?!” she demanded. “Over two hundred people dead! Half the population sterile! And here you are, ready to run off into the big universe, with dreams of being a doctor yourself?”

“I swear, if I knew what would’ve happened—”

“But you knew what you wanted to happen! You didn’t know you were killing Sandra Vallis, but you knew you were killing her chance to ever...and for all the Mariposans!”

Kara wrenched herself out of Lense’s grasp, and backed away toward the opposite side of the lab. “But that’s why I had to stop her!” Kara shouted, tears now rolling down her cheeks. “They already see me

as a lesser person. If their infertility was cured, what would I be to them then? The only reason they let the Bringloidi come was because they needed someone to have their babies. All I would be to them is a uterus—”

“And what about the women who want to have babies? What right do you have to make that decision for them?” Lense was full-out shouting now, feeling the restraints of her well-honed emotional self-control snapping loose. “That’s their choice, isn’t it? To bring a new life into the universe, to commit to raising a child—that’s a personal choice, one that we have to make for ourselves! How dare you...”

Suddenly, she felt like a balloon with all its air let out. She panted and blinked at the Bringloidi woman standing in front of her, almost in a state of disorientation. As she mentally flailed about, trying to find her center, she felt a hand fall on her back, between her shoulder blades. “Doctor?” a gentle voice close to her ear said.

Lense straightened, instantly finding herself before turning to face David Gold. “Captain.” She had absolutely no clue he had been in the room, or for how long. The lab door had closed behind him, which was some small comfort. “Captain, in the course of my analysis of—”

“Yes, yes,” he said, his hand still on her back. “Good work, Lense. Ms. McClay,” he then said, the gentle voice gone, “step out into sickbay, and wait for me.”

Kara did as ordered, leaving Lense and Gold alone in sad silence.

“She sabotaged Vallis’s work?”

Lense stared out through the transparency, where she stood with her back to the lab. “Yeah.”

“Positive?”

“She admitted it.”

Gold sighed. “All right. I’ll see how we have to play this out. Again, good work, Lense.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“And,” he added in a whisper, “mazel tov.”

Lense turned to face the captain, eyes wide, perfectly aware that he was not congratulating her on any of what had just transpired. “Excuse me?”

“Six times a father, nineteen times a grandfather, you’d think I’d have recognized the signs by now.” He shrugged, and walked out into sickbay to join Kara. Lense watched them walk out into the corridor. Once she was sure she was alone, she collapsed into a chair, completely limp, feeling for the first time in months the sweet release from tension.

Chapter 12

Breeding stock.

Gold cringed as those words echoed in his mind. They had been there in the Enterprise's mission recordings all along, but being familiar as he was with Kate Pulaski and her blunt, plainspoken personality, he'd let the phrase roll right over him. But taken by itself, and disregarding the rationalizations and justifications that had surrounded it, the ugliness of the phrase struck hard.

"Are you telling me that you think this girl's actions were justified?" Wilson Granger asked, his jaw slack in disbelief. Brenna Odell, sitting to his left on one side of their kitchen table, made a valiant attempt to shoot phasers out her eyes at both Gold and Abramowitz.

"I absolutely am not arguing that her actions were justified, and she will, of course, have to face justice for her actions." How such justice could be carried out, Gold wished he knew. "But, I am telling you that the fears that drove her to her actions are real."

"Captain, I may not be a young girl anymore," said Brenna Odell, "but I daresay I'm more familiar with their feelings than you. I wasn't all that keen back then on the idea of taking three husbands and bearing them all children. But that was what we needed to do."

"Actually, it really wasn't," Abramowitz said, frowning. As unhappy as she was about the Enterprise's interference here before, now her disdain for the legacy Picard had left on this world was completely undisguised. "The establishment of the three-spouse arrangement served only one purpose: to allow for the proliferation of Mariposan genes in this new society. The Bringloidi genome was—and is—broad and healthy; there was no reason they couldn't continue monogamous relationships. But a united colony requires a uniform set of rules, morals, and mores, so polygamy was demanded across the board. With the inability of Mariposan genes to propagate, however, there is no justification for this social arrangement."

"But," said Granger, "you can give us that ability. You said Sandra's research could still hold promise."

"That's right, I did," Gold said. That was one of the few questions he'd bothered Lense with before beaming down here. "The question is, should we?"

"What?" Granger slammed his hands on the table and launched himself up out of his chair. "You can't be serious! You would bring us right back to where we were eleven years ago? You would let us all just die?"

Gold stayed seated, and in a calm voice said, "You told me earlier that you regretted what you'd done to the Enterprise officers in the name of preserving yourselves. That with your wife and her children, you'd found an aspect of your humanity more important than what was encoded in your DNA."

Brenna Odell raised an eyebrow at that, while her husband answered, "Yes, Captain, but—"

"Then think about what you're passing on here, Mr. Granger," Gold said. "You'd be passing on the idea that Mariposan genes are superior to Bringloidi genes. That a Bringloidi woman's most important function is to help propagate the Mariposan race, no matter her wants, talents, or abilities."

As Granger mulled that over, Abramowitz leaned in, eyes on Odell. "And you—"

"What, me?"

"The one thing the Mariposans have been able to pass on to your children is their knowledge. You strip

that from this world, what have these young people left? The gang that attacked our people did so because they were afraid of what they were going to lose.” Odell looked unmoved, though she did give her husband a quick glance out of the corner of her eye. “You’d be putting the same kind of limits on these young people’s potential, where the best they can hope to do is scratch out the same hard simple life your people were so eager to put behind you over a decade ago. Do you really want to leave them with that kind of hopelessness?”

And in Odell’s eyes, Gold saw the first cracks in the hard shell of her resolve. It was a look he was all too familiar with—the look of realization that everything you thought or believed up until that moment was mistaken. She found herself with nothing to say, her eyes moving around the room as if searching for her fading certitude.

Gold relaxed his facial expression, and waited for Odell to glance back his way. “I know you only want to do what’s best for your people,” he said, addressing Odell and Granger both. “That’s what we all want. Let us help you figure out how to do that. The Federation owes you at least that much, after getting you to this point.”

“How did Da make this look so easy?” Odell whispered to herself, just barely audible. Then she lifted her head, and looked from Granger to Gold. “What if they say we should split the two colonies up again?” she asked.

Gold reacted to that with surprise, but not quite as much as Granger did.

“They couldn’t force you to be isolated from each other, not if you didn’t want to be,” Abramowitz answered, registering no small amount of surprise herself.

Odell looked to Granger again. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to hear these diplomats out?” she said, then offered him a wisp of a smile.

Granger returned her smile. “I can’t see how it would,” he said, placing his left hand on her right.

For the first time since their arrival at Mariposa, Gold felt hope that the union would be preserved.

* * *

“Captain, this has been an emotionally trying day for me; maybe we could put this off another day or two?” Lense laughed at herself, the sound echoing off the narrow walls of the extendable gangway tunnel linking the *theda Vinci* to Starbase 73. “Yeah, that’ll work.”

The airlock hissed, and she reboarded the *theda Vinci*. She took the left corridor, heading for the captain’s quarters, even though she felt she would have been perfectly justified in begging off their appointment, given the task she’d just performed.

Between Gold and the prime ministers, it was decided any kind of trial or criminal proceedings against Kara McClay would only incite more ethnic conflict. So the decision was that she would be exiled, forbidden to return to Mariposa for at least twenty years, such travel restriction to be enforced by the Federation.

It was really the best Kara could have possibly hoped for—and Lense, too. Despite all that had happened, despite all her conflicting emotions, Lense genuinely did hope the young woman would be able to fulfill her potential, and somehow find a way to atone for what she had done.

Kara had been quick to accept all the terms of her exile, but the reality of her sentence didn't truly dawn on her until they'd reached the heart of the starbase. Suddenly finding herself in the middle of a surging ocean of aliens and other strangers, Kara realized how totally alone she now was, and that there was no going backward. Lense sympathized.

She reached the captain's door, and hesitated before pressing the door chime. A second later, the door slid open, and she entered Gold's quarters. "Good afternoon, Captain."

"Good afternoon, Lense. Come, sit." Lense took a seat as the captain stepped to the replicator. "Get you anything?"

"Tangerine juice?"

He keyed his requests into the pad, and a moment later handed her a chilled glass while he held a steaming mug of green tea. Sitting, he raised the mug in a toast. "To the mother-to-be."

Lense hesitated, then touched her glass to the captain's mug. "You know, Captain, I was planning to tell you..."

"Sometime before the kinder's high school graduation, I'm certain. The question I have: Who have you told? Your mother, at least, I hope."

Lense shook her head, and the captain "tsked." "So far it's just you, and Julian Bashir."

"Well, you didn't tell me so much as I found out in spite of you."

"Yeah, that's actually pretty much how Julian found out, too," she said with a small laugh. "I just... first there was just this shock, and disbelief. Then reality slowly seeps in and you realize you have to face it—"

"And you do all you can to avoid thinking about it. Rachel, she would cook. You never saw such meals." Gold smiled as he revealed this memory, but then shifted to a more serious mien. "With you, though, Elizabeth, you do the same to avoid any personal grief. It took a direct order for you to open up, after two years, about Commander Selden. To this day, I don't know what happened with you right after Galvan VI. And I find it disconcerting that, after all the time you put in on that Shmoam-ag ship, you've talked so little about the boy."

"Sir? I did an entire paper on Dobrah and the Pocheeny virus," she reminded him. It was that paper that earned her the nomination for the Bentman Prize, and set this whole thing in motion.

"Yes, a paper," Gold said. "A cold, professional paper with big, impressive, award-worthy doctor words. But you don't talk about the boy."

He was right, of course. The time she spent with that lonely little boy (two hundred years old, yes, but still very much a child) had touched her like nothing in her life ever had. Her third day there, she'd had to wake him to run some tests, and in his half-sleep, he'd looked up at her and said "Mama?" That had hit her right in the heart.

Now reflecting on Gold's words, reflecting on an entire lifetime of pushing her own emotions away and doing everything she could not to deal with them, she felt a new pain growing there.

As if he were reading her thoughts, Gold reached over and put a hand on her forearm. “Elizabeth... I know it’s your nature to be concerned about everyone except yourself. That’s what makes you a good doctor, and part of what is going to make you a wonderful mother.” He leaned back into his chair and picked up his tea again. “That’s also what will make you meshuggah ahf toit . You’re not alone. You’re part of a family here. You just have to decide not to be alone, hiding in that shell of yours.”

Lense smiled a tiny smile, even though she’d always taken a bit of a jaundiced view of calling any group of nonrelated people a “family.” Friends, maybe. People she’d put her life on the line for, definitely. But the *Vinci* was not a Galaxy-class ship or a starbase. It was not designed for families. When the time came, she knew, Starfleet would have her somewhere else, and this “family”...

“So,” the captain said, switching to a lighter tone, “when do you plan on sharing the good news with everyone?”

“I don’t know,” she sighed. “I haven’t even thought...”

She trailed off, and Gold shrugged slightly. “This hasn’t been a very happy mission for anyone. The engineers stuck most of the time sitting on their hands, Abramowitz all bent out of shape, and now having to turn the whole megillah over to another ship without having resolved any of the big issues... we could all use something to get together and celebrate.”

Lense couldn’t help but laugh at the captain’s transparent psychological ploy. If Lense won’t come out of her shell for her own sake, maybe she will for the crew.

Then she laughed again, this time a little more genuinely, because—well, hell, the old momzer was dead right. “Yeah, sure, why not?” she said with a grin. Besides, if she did in fact only have a limited time before having to leave the *Vinci*, then she should make the very most of the time she had left with these people. “Let’s celebrate.”

About the Author

WILLIAM LEISNER began writing at age six, scripting and drawing comic strips that featured his younger siblings, their animate stuffed animals, and lots of potty humor. Mercifully, none of these works have survived to the present. More recently, he had three stories published in Pocket Books’ *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* series: “Gods, Fate, and Fractals” in Volume II, “Black Hats” in Volume IV, and “The Trouble with Borg Tribbles,” the third-place winner in Volume V. Other writing accomplishments include a pair of award-winning teleplays for the student-run TV station at his alma mater, Ithaca College, and a story concept sale to *Star Trek: Voyager*. A native of Rochester, New York, he now lives in the Twin Cities.

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