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# STAR TREK™

## S.C.E.

#61

### PROGRESS (*What's Past Book 1*)

Terri Osborne



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This story is dedicated to the people of  
Springhill, Nova Scotia  
and Sago, West Virginia.

May all those lost souls rest in peace.

## Acknowledgments

The ships of the S.C.E. are traditionally named after scientists and engineers who've helped change our view of the world as we know it. TheU.S.S. Trosper is no different. It's named for Jennifer Trosper, who, as this is being written, has been tapped by the United States to begin work on the Moon/Mars initiative after her work as mission manager for theSpirit rover on the Mars Exploration Rover mission is completed.

TheU.S.S. Landry is named in honor of Bridget Landry, Deputy Uplink Systems Engineer, Mars Pathfinder.

The ShuttlecraftReeves is named in honor of Glenn Reeves, flight software architect for MER, whose foresight helped saveSpirit from the brink.

These are folks who may not have made the front pages of your local newspaper like their superiors, but their contributions to the pursuit of knowledge are no less worthy of note. To acknowledge their contributions here is the least I can do. Thank you all for helping us learn a little more about the planet next door.

My gratitude for the consultation on Jewish culture goes to Michael and Nomi Burstein, Lesley McBain, and Todd Kogutt. My thanks to Siona for the memory jog on tricorders. And thanks to Carolyn Clowes, who gave us the Belandrid species in her novelThe Pandora Principle, and to Hannah Louise Shearer and Melinda M. Snodgrass, who wrote "Pen Pals," the episode that gave us Drema IV and Sarjenka.

Thanks, as always, to my excellent writer's group for all of their assistance in bringing this story to you.

## Prologue

May 2377

U.S.S. da Vinci

The comm unit in Captain David Gold's ready room chirped. "Sir," Ensign Susan Haznedl began, "there's a message coming in for you. It's from Starfleet Command. Marked private."

The curious tone in Haznedl's voice piqued Gold's interest. The U.S.S. da Vinci and her S.C.E. contingent were between missions, and Gold found he was actually beginning to enjoy the nice respite of general peace and quiet. His mind worked through every possible candidate without a solution. Raising one gray eyebrow, he said, "I'll take it in here."

Before he could turn to face the small viewscreen on his desk, it had already shifted to a display of the Federation logo. The logo disappeared, and was replaced by a small text message:

Friend David Gold,

I would like to invite you and your wife to join us in celebrating the occasion of the first of the Dreman people to graduate from your Starfleet Medical Academy. Details will follow if you are so inclined to join us. This would not have been possible without your gracious assistance.

Your friend,

Liankataka

Gold stared at the screen, blinking in surprise. Had it been eight years since Drema IV already?

The memory of a ready room long behind him, one filled with more than pictures in frames, flashed into his mind. Thank-you gifts from starbase commanders, pictures his then-young grandchildren had drawn, dreadful statues that his children had made in their art classes to give as heartfelt Father's Day and Grandfather's Day presents, had all been out on display. After he'd lost so many of those things over the years—mostly thanks to the da Vinci's near destruction at Galvan VI—he'd thought better of having such treasures with him. Boxing up quite a few of the items that had survived, he'd sent them back to Rachel for safe keeping. He'd only kept a few things around after that to remind him of what had come before the da Vinci.

The ready room he now occupied seemed far more spartan than the one on the U.S.S. Progress. Oddly, he had never really paid that much attention to how this room had smelled before. It was the sterile, austere, almost hospital smell of a room that had known life, but hadn't truly been lived in. It served its purpose, and that was all he needed. He missed the old, dusty smell of the aging clay statues mixed with the intense aromas of the dried dill from his wife's herb garden and the mustiness of the books that had unfortunately become more decorative than practical as the years passed. Yet, they were all smells that he hated having grown accustomed to not having around. Still, when push came to shove, they were all just things.

Tsotchkes are replaceable; people aren't.

That was the moment the idea occurred to him. Those eight years might have just given him the answer to what he should do about his recalcitrant chief medical officer and her incessant denial over her need for an assistant. Flipping the comm switch on his desk, he said, "Gold to Gomez. I think I've got a solution to our little problem."

# Chapter 1

Late 2369

Beneath Latik Kerjna, Drema IV

Day 1

Somewhere in the near darkness of the mine level, an all too familiar voice was cursing. Sinterka's head perked at the sound. Not once in five years—including fighting a war—had he ever heard that kind of vulgarity leave anyone's mouth, let alone that of his old friend.

When Sinterka thought that his boss had finished taking the names of every Exile ancestor in vain and calling down the gods upon them back to the dawn of time, he ventured closer. The occasional lamp-covered head bobbed up to see what was going on as he passed, only to return its attention within a few seconds to the greenish-orange stone it was mining. The sharp smell of sweat soaked the air as Sinterka made his way over to where his old friend and shift supervisor, Eliatriel, a normally staid and reserved man, had his hands over something that had been buried deep within the dilithium. On his face was a look of panic unlike anything Sinterka had seen since the Uprisings. "El," Sinterka began, his voice a rasp from the dust in the air, "what did you find?"

His boss raised a long-fingered hand to silence him. "Don't start a riot, Sin. I need your help. We need to clear this shaft as quickly as possible."

Covering something with both hands...needing to clear the shaft...cursing the Exiles. Slowly, the pieces came together, and Sinterka realized what his boss was hiding. "Axurta?"

Eliatriel nodded, brushing a lock of garnet hair out of his eyes. "Axurta. And if there's one, there are more."

Sinterka's stomach chose that point to begin making him regret the sandwich he'd had on his meal break. "More?"

Eliatriel practically kicked him in the behind. "Yes, now go. Get people up to the surface. I'm going to see if I can get this thing out of here without killing us all."

"Out of the dilithium? El, have you lost your mind? What if it goes off?"

Shaking his head, the supervisor said, "What do you want me to do? We need one of these things intact. When was the last time you saw a functioning Exile transporter?" When Sinterka could offer no answer, Eliatriel continued, "We never did figure out how to disarm these bombs during the Uprisings. If we can get this one out, maybe we'll finally be able to find a way to get rid of these things so we can keep mining."

Sinterka gaped at his friend. Finally recovering his wits, he said, "And get yourself killed in the process. El, what about Sarjenka and Rakan? What do I tell them? If that goes off, what will it do to the dilithium? We don't need the tremors to start again."



“You don’t think I know that? Sinterka, stop talking to me and get up the shaft. That’s an order. I need to concentrate.”

Against his better judgment, Sinterka slowly walked back toward the shaft. “Shift’s over, guys!” he yelled into the lamplit, oily green darkness. “We need to get to the surface! Nice and steady.” To the occasional shouts wondering what was wrong, he said, “Nothing to worry about! Early day today, that’s all. A gift from the supervisors for a job well done.”

Deep in the back of his mind, however, Sinterka tried not to worry about what he would tell Eliatriel’s family if everything went wrong. Of course, there was always the possibility that all the bombs would explode. Then there was the possibility that the dilithium would focus those energies back into the planet, causing it to begin tearing itself apart once again. If that happened—provided he even survived—Sinterka was fairly certain telling Eliatriel’s family how he had died would be the least of his concerns.

Please, old friend, take care. Traiakakeep him safe. Traiakakeep us all safe.

\* \* \*

For his part, Eliatriel tried his best to be as safe as possible. The small, cylindrical device had surfaced as he’d been clearing out the beginnings of a new dilithium vein. Thank the deities for whatever stopped the tremors, he thought. If this had been talrod, I would not be here.

He scanned the edges of the device, running his long fingertips over the exposed face once he realized there were no obvious triggers, almost as though he could sense what might set it off. If we only had one of the Exile transporters remaining.

After brushing a drop of perspiration off his brow, he reached down and grabbed the smallest pick in his tool kit. Eliatriel adjusted his headlamp, making sure it illuminated his workspace at just the right angle so as to avoid any heat buildup on either the dilithium or the bomb. When he had it where he wanted it, Eliatriel measured out a hand’s width from the edge of the cylinder and began to slowly carve around the device. Some of the exurta s he’d seen over the course of the Uprising had been connected to heat-sensitive detonators, others to pressure-sensitive ones. He could see no way to determine which of the two was in use in this case. If it was as long as the others he’d seen during the resistance movement, it would be about half the length of his forearm, and pressure-sensitive detonators could have been placed anywhere in that length.

He gently worked at the stone with the tiny pickax for what felt like an eternity, slowly scraping bits out and allowing them to drop to the level’s stone floor. If he only stopped once for food, he figured there was a good chance of getting the thing unearthed before the end of his shift.

And if he were truly fortunate, it wouldn’t explode as he brought it to the surface.

## Chapter 2

FEDERATION COUNCIL

Report on application of fourth planet in the Selcundi Drema System for Federation Protectorate status.

Commander Jan Siok, filing

Stardate 45998.3

On Stardate 45624.2, a low-band audio-only transmission was received by the U.S.S. Landry, Admiral Jameson Tucker commanding, from the Selcundi Drema system. Enhanced audio on the transmission indicated that it was a specific request intended for the United Federation of Planets. The transmission was determined to have originated from the fourth planet in the system. Admiral Tucker notified Starfleet Command, and it was determined that—in consideration of the past observation by the U.S.S. Enterprise, Captain Jean-Luc Picard commanding [Mission report, Jean-Luc Picard, Captain, U.S.S. Enterprise, NCC-1701-D, Stardate 42865.6, [linked here](#) ]—Prime Directive protection was no longer to be afforded the Dremans, and the initiation of official first contact protocols should begin.

Federation Ambassador Lanara Diol was dispatched to the system to begin talks. Her report on the first meetings indicates that the people of Drema IV had already been in contact with outsiders, people they referred to as the Exiles. According to Ambassador Diol, the Exiles descended upon Latik Kerjna [Drema IV's capital city] en masse and, using superior technology and weaponry, were able to force the otherwise passive Dremans into servitude. The first dilithium mines had been excavated less than a decade prior, and the Exiles forced the natives to work in the mines to provide dilithium for Exile ships. After approximately ten months, the Dremen people worked up the courage to rebel, and with superior numbers, were able to deal the Exiles a solid defeat. According to the current Guardian of the Dremen people, no Exile survived what they refer to as the Uprising. [Report of Guardian Shalkara, filed with Federation Council on Stardate 45954.4, [linked here](#).]

It was at this point in the planet's history that excavation of a new dilithium mine uncovered remnants of probes carrying the insignia of Starfleet and the Federation. The Dremans chose to attempt to contact the Federation. Their technology is not at the stage where they are able to protect themselves from invasion before the incoming force lands on the surface. They fear Exile reprisals.

Their culture remained prewarp, but Ambassador Diol likened their situation to the planet Bajor after the Cardassian withdrawal, an opinion with which the Federation Council agrees.

The Dremans have offered their considerable resources of dilithium in exchange for consideration of protectorate status. They desire nothing more than protection from another outside invasion, protection which they are not capable of mounting themselves at this time.

A sample of Dremen dilithium was returned to Starfleet Headquarters for examination, where it was discovered that the focal energies produced by one four centimeter by four centimeter crystal were roughly three times the energies produced by a standard dilithium crystal of the same size, with a recrystallization rate twice the norm. It has been determined that the addition of Dremen dilithium to the Federation supply line would increase the lifespan of Federation dilithium at least twofold, possibly more. Dr. Leah Brahms, speaking for the Theoretical Propulsion Group at Utopia Planitia, stated that the group believes that adjustments to standard warp drive technology will be required to allow for optimal use of the new resource.

Ambassador Diol, speaking before the Council, argued that while the offer of the dilithium is quite generous—and she cannot deny that we should consider such resources and their potential contribution to the Federation in making our decision—she cautioned the Council against greed. The Dremen people have already shaken off one oppressive regime. They do not need to trade the Exiles for another oppressor. The Federation should take cautious steps toward the use of the dilithium resources of Drema IV, and we should consider enlisting the assistance of the native workers in that endeavor. Such a move would help benefit the Dremen economy, and it is Ambassador Diol's position that they should benefit

from the presence of such a resource, not work themselves to death because of it.

Application is currently being considered with a favorable status.

\* \* \*

Record Update—Stardate 46147.9

By a vote of 122 to 29, the Federation Council has approved Drema IV for protectorate status. In a good-faith show of support, the Council has also commissioned the construction of a starbase to orbit just outside the asteroid belt that is believed to be the remains of the fifth planet in the system.

It is the Council's considered opinion that Federation presence should be felt, but not be oppressive. A starbase constructed in the system, but not in orbit around Drema IV itself, should provide the recommended level of presence.

## Chapter 3

Late 2369

Latik Kerjna, Drema IV

Capital Square

Day 1

For a planet that was chock full of dilithium—and volcanic on top of that—David Gold couldn't get over how Earth-like Drema IV was. He'd seen the reports about what it had been like during the tremors five years before. The idea that, within his lifetime, a place that had free-flowing liquid magma covering half its surface now held lush, verdant greenery, reminding him of his last trip to the Hawaiian Islands, was nothing short of amazing.

Just as she'd done on that vacation, Gold could hear his wife citing it as proof that perhaps humans weren't ready to know everything about their universe. Rachel had always taken a tremendous amount of comfort in the idea that no matter how much the sciences tried to explain things, there were still subjects that eluded even the most brilliant of intellects. "Sometimes," she would say, "the answer for the scientists is simply 'not yet'."

Dragging himself back to reality, Gold briefly wished he'd brought Pulaski down to the surface with him, instead of leaving her on the *Progress* to finish packing. For reasons unknown to him, his chief medical officer had leapt at the chance to take over these same duties on the new space station built as a result of the protectorate treaty.

Still, in the years he'd known Dr. Katherine Pulaski, she had never been one to stand on ceremony. It wasn't her job to play the diplomat. Taking care of patients was her responsibility; figuring out whether the Federation and Dreman governments would play well together was someone else's. Leaving her to her work had been the best option that Gold could see.

That left him stuck there, on the dais in the middle of the small park—it was more like a vacant clearing,

but if the Dremans wanted to refer to it as a park, Gold wasn't about to correct them—in the forest outside the capital that the government had decided to use for this little gathering. They'd managed to set up a small dais, and a few lanterns lined the stonework path, but it was hardly the ceremonial grounds at the Plâce de la Concorde on Earth.

What do you expect from a race that just fought off an oppressor? He could hear Rachel's voice in his head. They've grown to appreciate the simple things, David. Bear with them.

A quick survey of the crowd that had formed suggested that "little" was a gross understatement. He estimated that there were at least two or three hundred people amassed in the park, their numbers extending back beyond the tree line and into areas where he simply could not see to accurately gauge their numbers.

Gold wasn't keen on the idea of representing the Federation at what was, essentially, Admiral Tucker's shindig, but they'd been planning this event for weeks. The admiral had originally been chosen to fill the political role, as he would also be taking over command of Drema Station when it came online, but an ion storm had delayed the U.S.S. Landry from bringing him on time. This had left Gold the ranking officer in the area and stuck with the job when the Dreman government declined to delay the proceedings.

"We would like to formally welcome the Federation to our planet," the leader of the Dreman government said, extending his arms out as though he were trying to encompass the entire crowd, "both as our friend and our protector. May the Lights of Traiaka shine upon us all."

The captain watched the procession of Dreman government representatives as each one walked along the lantern-lined path—though each lantern was now lit to a point of ridiculous brightness—over to him and held out their long-fingered, cinnamon-red hands palms-down and over his shoulders. According to the file on their species, this hand motion was considered a gesture of friendship, but the fact that their palms never touched him as they then each ran their hands down over his arms was more than a little off-putting.

When the head of the Dreman government, a tall man with far more gold than garnet in his hair—something Pulaski had informed him was a sign of age in their species—and an enlarged forehead that was only getting larger from the receding hairline, finally walked over to him with a congenial smile; Gold returned it. "Guardian Liankataka," he said, hoping he'd pronounced it correctly. About three-quarters of the people he'd met to that point had names that were so full of J's, K's, and L's that he was beginning to feel as though he were back in his Hebrew classes. When the man didn't seem offended by Gold's use of his name, the captain continued: "Thank you. It's a pleasure to help bring your people to their rightful place in the galaxy."

A quick glance to Commander Gom suggested that he'd said precisely what he was supposed to have said. The Bolian may have been one of the more laid-back members of his crew, but Gold knew him well enough to be confident that Gom wouldn't give bad direction when it came to matters of protocol. Gom was an aficionado of governmental etiquette, far more than he thought would ever have been encompassed by his normal responsibilities as first officer.

Liankataka nodded. "And without Federation assistance, we may never have known peace again," he said. "The Exiles made certain of that."

Gold had briefed himself on Liankataka before beaming down for the ceremony. "It must have been difficult," Gold said. "The reports filed with the Federation indicated—"

“With respect, Captain, your reports can’t possibly reflect what happened here,” Liankataka said, his expression obviously haunted by the pain of memory. “We lost many good people. People whose only crime was being in the way.”

Why do people who’ve been attacked always seem to think nobody else could understand their pain? Shaking off the idle thought, he said, “I’m sure the Federation would appreciate any corrections to our record you might be able to offer.”

Liankataka shook his head. “Living in the past gains us nothing, Captain. We are a small, close-knit people. If someone wasn’t touched by death during the Occupation or the Uprising, they have lost someone working the mines. However, we must take the lessons learned and move forward if we are to succeed in our new role.”

Gold’s brow furrowed. “But, you said...”

The elder Dreman’s cheeks turned a dark crimson. “I apologize, Captain. I am aware that my people must move forward, but our scars run deep. My eldest son has only been in his grave for a year. My resolve may not always be as consistent as I might like. It is difficult to push that memory to the back of the mind, but I would be willing to look at your records and correct them as necessary.”

He tried to imagine losing his own eldest son, Nathan: having only the memories of his first steps, his first bicycle ride, his first trip to the Statue of Liberty, the publication of his first book. There had been so many moments over the years, and there were still so many more for Nathan in the future.

The guardian saved him more thoughts on the subject by walking over to a small pile of greenish-brown rocks in one corner of the dais. He picked up one that was about the size of a clenched human fist and brought it back over. “Captain, are you aware of what we have to offer your people?”

Gold held out his hands, palms up.

“To use your frame of reference, Captain, this is approximately one kilogram of our dilithium,” Liankataka said, placing the rock in Gold’s hands. The weight certainly felt right for a kilo. “From what your scientists tell me, the nugget you hold could help power a Galaxy -class starship for well over one of your years at warp nine, with very little waste.”

Well, Gold thought, that wasn’t in the official file. Suddenly, the urgency of securing Drema IV made more sense. He fleetingly wondered what else he hadn’t been told.

Until the thunderous boom of an explosion sounded a little too close for comfort—at which point Gold dropped the dilithium to the ground and simply began running toward the noise.

## Chapter 4

Latik Kerjna, Drema IV

Day 1

Sarjenka wadded up the piece of drafting paper and threw it at the overstuffed waste bin, wanting

nothing more at that moment than to do the same with the entire concept when the chime at her sleep chamber's entrafied sounded.

"Mealtime."

Sarjenka absently tugged at a strand of shoulder-length, reddish-gold hair. There were times when she would have sworn that her father had programmed the entrafied's acoustic dampener specifically to allow her mother's shrill voice to penetrate.

Pulling herself out of the straight-back chair, she slowly walked the few steps across the small, sparsely decorated bedroom, placed one long-fingered red palm against the entrafied, and triggered it. No sooner did it wink open than the smell of fresh-baked keena bread hit her nose, and Sarjenka's stomach reminded her of how long it had been since she'd last eaten.

Her mother looked down on her with a concerned expression in her golden eyes. "How is your project for med-design class coming?" she asked, her voice an attempt at consolation that didn't quite succeed.

Sparing a glance at the overflowing waste bin, she replied, "I don't know. I see these devices, and I know they aren't real, but I have no idea what it would take to make them. None of the master healers can help."

Her mother gently laughed, but this time Sarjenka noticed a very slight edge of sadness about it. "There are times when you are so much like your father. Remember, young one. You are their apprentice, not their teacher. Come. Perhaps your father can help you figure out the solution when he returns from his shift."

Almost on cue, she heard the mewling of her petreeka work its way up the stairs. "Jenkara! You will eat when we do! Do not bother him!" It was the one behavior of thereeka's that had always driven her mother to distraction, and nothing they could do would train the creature to stop. The animal had a horrible habit of playfully attacking Sarjenka's father at the entrafied, when his clothes were still caked with dilithium dust and he still had the greenish-red tinge to his face that all of the miners she had ever known in her short life seemed to share. Fortunately for all of them, Jenkara was far too small to do anything beyond being playful. The long, thin, well-scaled tail of a full-grown reeka could have easily broken bones in one swat. Jenkara, thanks to an injury when he was very young, would never grow to full size.

No sooner did the mewling stop than the field winked open and a booming voice sounded. "Rakan? Rakan? Where are you?"

Sarjenka and her mother shared a look. That wasn't her father. It sounded more like one of his friends from the mine.

Her mother hurried down the stairs. "Sinterka? What is it?"

Sarjenka followed her mother down the stairs, stopping and sitting two steps from the bottom. Sinterka was coated in the greenish dust from the mines, his normally orange coveralls a color Sarjenka had tried several times over the last five years to figure out a way to describe, but failed with each attempt. He smelled as the miners always did—of perspiration, stale vituwater, and dilithium dust.

Of course, everything had smelled of dilithium dust in the time since the Exiles had arrived. Not even the Dreman's alliance with the people who called themselves the Federation could change that.

However, Sarjenka had only ever heard that tone of voice from Sinterka once, when her father had been trapped after a newly excavated section of the primary mine had collapsed. A flutter in the back of her mind suggested that whatever disturbed him now was related. “What happened?”

Sinterka held a slender, comforting hand over her mother’s shoulder. “El found axurta in the mine today. It was buried inside one of the walls of the first level.”

That got Sarjenka’s interest. “Father? Is he safe?”

Sinterka’s eyes found hers, and she saw a fear in them she’d never seen before. “That’s the problem, young one. I don’t know.”

Ignoring the rumbling that was still emanating from her stomach, Sarjenka stood and took the final two steps of the staircase in one stride. Reaching for her overcoat, she said, “Then I should inform the master healers. If there is a chance that our assistance will be required—”

“No,” Sinterka said. His arms fell to his side, and a man Sarjenka had always considered larger than life, despite his slender build, suddenly seemed as small as Jenkara. “Your father was still working on digging the bomb out when he ordered us to leave. The mine was shut down until the area could be secured, and they could determine if there are any more bombs. I only was able to get out to tell you now.”

Before he could say another word, something exploded in the distance.

Sinterka’s eyes made the journey from surprise to shock to tears in a matter of seconds.

Almost as fast as Rakan’s and—Sarjenka was sure—her own.

Wordlessly grabbing her pack, Sarjenka ran out the front entrance and toward the mine.

## Chapter 5

Latik Kerjna, Drema IV

Pithead, Dilithium Mine Alpha

Day 1

The first thing David Gold saw when he arrived at the battered, broken structures that surrounded the pithead was the burnt-out shape of something that looked as though it could have been a wagon in its recently ended life. One other Dreman remained, trying desperately to put out the fire that had begun in the ramshackle, old shed that covered the top of the mine, the hiss of the water mixing in a disturbing harmony with the flickering of the flames. The dark gray smoke was getting thicker and more acrid by the second.

Beside the wagon was the burnt, crumpled figure of a man in what looked to have once been orange coveralls. He was flat on his back on a white drop cloth. His right arm was to his side, but there was no sign of a left arm to be found. Whoever this poor schlemiel was, that was one hell of a way to die.

That was when he saw the right arm move. He'd seen the last twitches of death in muscles far too often before, the last gasp before letting go. The sight of conscious motion in that arm was all he needed.

Pulling the neckline of his uniform tunic up over his mouth to act as a filter against the smoke, Gold ran toward the motion. Liankataka was on his heels. The burned man's skin ranged from a sickly burgundy-black to patches of a more normal terracotta red, and the smell of the charred flesh brought back more than a few memories of the Cardassian War. He'd seen people die from far less injury back then. How was this man still alive?

Quickly slapping the combadge on his chest, Gold hoped the modified long-range circuits would get his voice where it needed to go. "Gold toProgress ."

There was no answer.

"Gold toProgress . Come in. Gold to Drema Station."

Again, there was no answer. He looked to Liankataka and shook his head. "Damn it! I can't reach my people. The explosion must be interfering somehow."

The Dreman leader already had a small communications unit in his own hand. "Emergency services are on the way. I've asked them to use the tie-line to the station to get through to your ship, Captain."

Gold wiped a hand across his brow. His eyes felt as though a thousand tiny grains of sand had found his corneas at once. "Tell them to get Pulaski down here. She's got the best knowledge of how to help your people of anyone we've got. If there are any more people down there, you'll need her."

Liankataka nodded, dialing his communications unit once again. Giving the requested instruction, he finished the call just in time for the first battery of gawkers to arrive. "ByTraiaka, what happened?" came from several voices in the crowd.

A rasp sounded from the man at Gold's feet. Kneeling down, he got as close as he comfortably could. All he could hear from the man was something that sounded like, "Shurtah."

"Rest," Gold said. "Help is coming."

"What did he say?" Liankataka asked in a voice filled with disbelief.

Raising his eyes to the guardian, Gold said, "It sounded like 'shurtah.'"

The Dreman's skin flushed to near-pink. "No." Liankataka turned and walked away from the scene. He ran one long-fingered hand over his face. "We thought we had found everyxurta left behind."

Gold began to put the pieces together. "I take it that's a bomb?"

Liankataka nodded. "The Exiles used to bury them around any installation they considered important. They can be wired to be pressure-sensitive or even heat-sensitive."

"And they obviously must have considered the mine important."

"Yes," the guardian said. "I am sorry, Captain, but this may change our ability to fulfill our bargain with



your government. It may take us years to get the bombs out of the mine. There may not even be a mine left.”

“With all due respect, Guardian, we need to prove there are more in there first. Have your people developed a way to scan for them?”

A strand of garnet hair slipped out of place as he shook his head. “Not without setting them off.”

A short, robustly built Dreman in a white tunic and pants ran over to where they stood, a long, brown box that looked to Gold almost like a toolkit in his hands. “What happened?” he asked.

“Xurta,” Liankataka simply replied. Judging by the shock on the younger Dreman’s features, it was enough.

Fighting the urge to cough that the thickening smoke from the fire triggered in his throat, Gold backed away and allowed the young doctor to kneel by his patient.

Pulling a black and silver stethoscope out of his bag, the doctor quickly stuck the ends in his ears and pressed the plate to one of the less-burned places on the poor man’s chest. “His breathing is shallow, but steady. I don’t see any active bleeders. It looks like the heat from the explosion cauterized the arteries. Eliatriel, can you hear me?”

Gold took a good look at the man’s bloodied and burned features and quickly wished that he hadn’t. The Dreman was lucky to be alive. The idea that the young doctor could have recognized who had once been behind the burned skin, missing nose, and forcibly closed eyes was, to Gold, a mystery. Then again, when he considered the average population of the city, not to mention the recent battles, the overall friendliness of the people he’d encountered thus far, and the general close-knit feeling of community that he’d gotten from the moment he’d beamed to the surface, perhaps it wasn’t that much of a mystery after all.

Another rasp sounded from Eliatriel’s mouth. This one was completely unintelligible from where Gold stood.

“Good. I know it hurts,” the doctor said, still checking over the man’s injuries and unwrapping what looked like clean white cheesecloth to cover the more severe burns. He checked over the hole that had once been Eliatriel’s nose and then draped another cloth bandage over it as well, making sure not to cover the man’s mouth or eyes. “I don’t think cold water’s going to help you here, my friend. We’re going to get you to the hospital very soon, okay? I’ll let the burn healers know you’re coming. They’ll take good care of you, I promise.”

The roar of fire bellowed from the mineshaft opening. The two Dremans who’d been working on putting out the fire backed away, allowing the flames to lick at the remainder of the shed like a child with an ice cream cone. The fire wasn’t going to die until it had consumed it all. Gold jerked his head toward the sight. “Come on,” he said to Liankataka, “they need help.”

The Dreman female stood with her eyes as wide as saucers as she watched the fire blaze. Admittedly, Gold didn’t understand precisely how the dilithium worked, but he knew one thing: dilithium focused energy. Fires gave off energy. If the dilithium did its job, there was no telling what would happen, but he had the distinct feeling it wouldn’t be good. Visions of free-flowing lava picked that moment to take up residence in his mind. They needed to get that fire out sooner rather than later.

His boots began to make a disturbing squelching sound in the mud as he approached. Far more water was staying where they stood than making it to the fire. Gold grabbed the empty bucket from the woman's hand, trying to usher her attentions to the nearby feeding hose. "Fill this up and then give me the hose," he said. "Let me help."

He could see the panic in her eyes as she turned from the fire to him and back several times before it finally registered that he was there to help. She finally grabbed the hose and filled the bucket, handing the hose to him when she was done. It wasn't an optimal fire hose, but Gold tried his best to make do with it. In between filling the water buckets, he trained the spray on the closest support beam.

The fire was burning white-hot, and Gold thought he felt his eyebrows singe on a couple of occasions, but he kept at it. The spray from the hose was barely powerful enough to reach the fire from where he stood, but he didn't dare inch forward.

"Is there another bucket?"

"What?" Liankataka was on the left side of the support beam infrastructure, bucket in hand, and the fire roaring between them was loud enough to drown out any creature who wasn't screaming.

"Another bucket!" Gold yelled. He managed to suppress a cough as the smoke tried to fill his lungs. "This hose isn't going to last much longer. We need something with more force!"

Almost on cue, a siren sounded in the distance.

"What's that?" Gold asked, once again raising his voice over the sound of the flames.

"Something with more force!" A panicky, but also somehow prideful smile filled Liankataka's face.

The ground shifted slightly under Gold's feet. Forcing the momentary urge to back away from the conflagration into a corner of his mind, he managed to overcome the strong need to be somewhere else and continued trying to fight the fire.

The fire truck—or what passed for it, for when Gold spared a glance at it, he realized he'd seen more advanced firefighting transports in the museums back on Earth—pulled into the small clearing near the pithead and somehow worked around the Dreman doctor who, from what Gold could see, was still trying to stabilize his patient.

Three men disembarked from the transport, all wearing heavier coveralls. Two wore a bright, easily recognizable orange, while the third wore red. The writing across the backs of each man's uniform suggested their names, but Gold hadn't had the chance to study the written Dreman language, so he couldn't be certain. However, he assumed the writing was there for reasons similar to human firefighters back on Earth—identification in the event of catastrophe.

It only took a few seconds for the three men to get the truck set and unroll the water hoses. The man in the red coveralls appeared to be the one in charge. Gold briefly took his eyes off the fire to see where they were, but it was long enough to see him instructing the other two. "Kleera! Take left. Laraka, take right. We need to approach this from both sides, or it's going to take the mine down."

Take the mine down? I don't like the sound of that. Still, he kept to the improvised bucket brigade in an attempt to help the firemen put the fire out. Within seconds, two of the firemen had the hoses pumping water at full-bore against the mine opening. It was helping, but the supports were still being stubborn.

The ground rumbled beneath his feet.

Gold tried desperately to ignore it, but the fire insisted upon keeping him close to the mine entrance. Every now and again, he got a face full of hot spray bouncing back from the streams that the fire hoses were projecting.

Suddenly, the rumbling that he'd been trying to ignore turned into a roar. Gold tried to back away, keeping his hose trained on the fire, but he could only go so far and still be any help.

In the middle of it all, he heard a woman scream and another woman yelling something about a collapse.

Then the ground beneath his feet ceased to exist, and everything turned very, very black.

# Chapter

## 6

U.S.S. Progress—Drema Station

Day 1

Katherine Pulaski checked the records download one last time before disconnecting the portable drive from the Progress's systems. She'd taken her general library over to the station in the massive data dump from the ship's systems, but these were her private, personal files. The first records ever in Federation hands involving Dreman physiology were in there. She'd documented her method of erasing memories from those files—a technique that she'd heard Picard had put to use a second time after she transferred off the Enterprise—but beyond that, she hadn't allowed anyone access, not in five years.

Looking around the now-empty office that had been her base of operations these last three years, she wondered what the rest of the crew would do for new assignments. Stocking Drema Station was the last extra-system mission for the Progress. The lightly-armed Mediterranean-class ship was scheduled to be reassigned to supply runs between Earth and Io, something that hardly required a full crew complement. The last she'd spoken to Captain Gold about the reassignments, he'd mentioned that he hadn't decided yet between the several opportunities for a new captaincy he'd been offered.

Her decision had been, she thought, rather obvious. Where Gold had everything from an admittedly tempting consultant's position at Utopia Planitia to the center seat of that new Intrepid-class ship that was supposed to be testing those new bioneural gel packs appearing on his list of opportunities, Pulaski had considered and rejected every opportunity on her list, twice. All generic positions, nothing truly as tempting as her brief tenure on the U.S.S. Enterprise. Chief medical officer was a difficult posting to come by these days, and she really didn't want to take a step backward in her career.

Still, there had been that teaching job at Starfleet Medical. She'd been seriously considering that option when the search for a CMO for Drema Station had gotten her in its sights.

Drema IV. There was a planet that brought back some difficult memories. She still felt as though, overall, they had done the right thing by interfering. An entire planet, an entire species, had been on the verge of extinction before it really had a chance to blossom into a starfaring civilization. It had gone against everything she had ever believed as a doctor to allow the people to die when they had been in a position

to help, no matter how much some Starfleet officers had wanted to hide behind the Prime Directive. She could still remember how hard she'd fought Captain Picard to make the point. She'd always thought the Prime Directive was something that was far too easy to use to shirk humanitarian responsibilities in times of natural disaster. The idea of not helping the Dremans had been nothing short of anathema.

In retrospect, she'd admired Lieutenant Commander Data's strategy of isolating the frequency his little friend Sarjenka had been using for her messages before they'd left that meeting in Picard's quarters. No matter how stridently Pulaski may have argued her case, it had been the fear and desperation in that little girl's voice that had finally moved Picard to action.

Jean-Luc Picard may have had a reputation for not tolerating the presence of children very well, but he was hardly a heartless bastard. She fleetingly wondered if that was why he hadn't made admiral yet.

A part of her was occasionally curious about what might have happened to the Dremans if Sarjenka hadn't made that radio communication. The curiosity of one child saves an entire world, Pulaski thought. I wonder how she's doing. She should be old enough for a university now, provided the procedure didn't take away too many of her memories.

She could still remember Captain Picard ordering her to do that as well, after Data had, in a fit of cybernetic overprotectiveness bordering on human, brought the child on board the Enterprise. The captain had ordered her to erase the child's short-term memory, effectively removing any knowledge she had of the Enterprise, her communications with Data, or the fact that she'd seen things she was never, ever meant to see. She would be returned to her family to grow up as she'd been meant to.

The procedure Pulaski had used was experimental at the time, but—fortunately for the little girl—that experiment had been a success. She didn't want to consider what might have happened if the girl had remembered anything. For all they knew at that time, the Dremans were the type of culture who'd believe it when a child said they'd done something utterly fantastical like walk in a spaceship. Then again, for all they knew at the time, the Dreman culture could have held a large green glob of silicone as a supreme deity and worshipped it with offerings of bodily fluids.

She'd seen stranger things over the years.

Pulaski reached for a padd to make a note to check up on Sarjenka when she got to the station. Perhaps a quick visit to the surface would be in order, get to know the government officials, make a more in-depth evaluation of their level of medical technology, and see how she may be able to work with them to get them ready to eventually join the Federation. There may even be a way—provided she could find the child, of course—to make some kind of amends to Sarjenka for what they had to do to her so many years before.

Finding one child on a planet of millions? Talk about your needle in a haystack.

Her combadge chirped, and the relentlessly cheerful voice of the ship's second officer, Lieutenant Commander Crisp filled the air. "Bridge to Dr. Pulaski. We've got another ship coming in headed for Drema IV—the Trosper. It's an S.C.E. ship—they say they're responding to a distress call from the station about bombs found in the mine?"

Pulaski raised one gray eyebrow. To the best of her knowledge, she was the first of the permanent personnel to arrive, which was the only reason she could think of to explain how the message had been routed to her. Still, how'd a distress call get through the station and trigger a ship responding so quickly?

“Can you put it through here, Commander? And send down Lieutenant Klesaris. I need help getting these trauma kits together for transfer to the station.”

“Aye, ma’am.”

Pulaski slid into her chair just in time for the viewscreen on her desk to flicker to life, showing the Federation logo before switching over to the image of an older man, perhaps her own age, with short, graying hair; a slightly receding hairline; and a round, generally jovial face. She got the impression that this man normally smiled a lot, even though the expression that greeted her from the viewscreen held a wary look. “You don’t look like Admiral Tucker,” the man’s rough voice said.

“No, sir. Katherine Pulaski, chief medical officer. Admiral Tucker’s ship has been delayed. Captain...?”

“Don Walsh, Doctor. U.S.S. Trosper. I assume you received the signal from Drema IV as well?”

Pulaski tried not to look as lost as she felt. “Nothing that would indicate the need for another ship to come in.”

The man on the screen’s brow furrowed. “Lolo was right. It must have routed through the starbase automatically to subspace. It doesn’t matter. The distress call was about some possible sabotage to the main dilithium mine on the planet.”

“Sabotage?” Pulaski asked, leaning forward in her seat.

Walsh’s lips pursed. “All we know right now is that one of the shift supervisors for the largest dilithium mine on the planet found a bomb embedded in one of the mine shafts. He was working on trying to get it out without it detonating, but according to the guardian’s office, the people who left it are virtually assured to have left more.”

“The people they called the Exiles?” Pulaski asked. She’d tried to keep up with the Dremans since they’d made contact with the Federation. The reports were sketchy, but suggested that about two years before, a small band of aliens referring to themselves only as Exiles had landed in the planet’s capital, and they’d come itching for battle. How a small band of aliens had managed to take over an entire planet, she wasn’t entirely certain, but when she considered how calm and quiet Sarjenka had been during her time on the *Enterprise*, she figured the Dremans exhibited a certain level of pacifism that probably had something to do with it. If there were no urge toward violence, how could there be an urge to resist? The Exiles couldn’t have been more wrong.

“Yes,” Walsh replied. “From what I can tell, their arrival didn’t exactly do these folks any good. I get the feeling if they hadn’t come looking for us, we’d still be waiting to make official first contact.”

Pulaski reluctantly had to agree. “Captain Walsh, how’s your medical staff? I can arrange to have triage units on-hand if you want. I was chief medical officer on the *Enterprise* when it first came to Drema IV, and I’ve studied their physiology. I’m drafting notes for the members of my staff who are coming over to Drema Station.”

Walsh gave a curt nod. “Thank you, Doctor; we’d appreciate a copy of those notes, if you don’t mind. Right now, though, nobody’s been reported injured, and we don’t know if there’s a legitimate threat. With the differences in focal energies of Dremans dilithium, my people are still running the simulations on what any explosion in the mines might do. If it’s what I suspect, there may not be anyone left for your people to treat.”

“I’ll have my staff on standby in case you need us, Captain. We’re close enough that it would take less than an hour to get to you.”

“Hopefully, they’re wrong, and we won’t need you. I’ll keep you apprised. Trosperout.”

No sooner had the Federation logo cleared from her viewscreen than the comm chirped for her attention once again. “Bridge to Dr. Pulaski,” Crisp’s voice sounded. “There’s a message coming in for you from the planet, ma’am. Audio only. It’s Second Guardian Karjella. She says she’s relaying a priority message from Captain Gold.”

Pulaski briefly wondered why the captain hadn’t been able to contact the ship directly, but said, “Route it in here, please, Commander.”

A hiss over her office’s speaker system later, the message began playing, “This is Second Guardian Karjella to Drema Station or U.S.S. Progress. Priority message to Dr. Katherine Pulaski from Captain David Gold. There has been an explosion at the dilithium mining facility on the surface. At least one known casualty at this time. Please send teams for immediate assistance.” Another hiss of static, and the message ended.

Pulaski slowly lowered her head into her hands. Explosions and dilithium were usually a messy combination, one best left to the engineers to figure out how to control. The real problem was going to be doing triage near an area where the energies of that explosion were still being focused and amplified through the ground beneath her feet. She’d already seen this planet try to tear itself apart once. The last thing any of them needed was for it to start trying again while she was in the middle of a delicate treatment.

Grabbing a padd from the desk as she stood, she began to put together a basic triage unit. The ship could spare a couple of nurses, and they’d just resupplied the medical stores in addition to the stockpile for Drema Station, so burn treatments, dermal regenerators and bone knitters were at peak capacity. Grabbing an empty medkit, she began filling it with hypospray canisters of sterilite and asinolyathin. On a whim, she even threw in some canisters of dylovene. She had a feeling they were going to need those just as much as the bone knitters.

And where the hell was Klesaris?

## Chapter

# 7

Latik Kerjna, Drema IV

Somewhere in Dilithium Mine Alpha

Day 1

David Gold was falling head-over-heels down a very steep incline. He wasn’t sure where or when it was going to end, but he knew that it had to end eventually.

If nothing else, the mine shaft had to have a bottom.

No sooner did that thought enter his mind than he landed—thankfully, feet-first—in an enormous pit of what he assumed was water from the firefighting effort up above. When he finally was able to get his bearings, he realized that the fluid was, in fact, only about one meter deep and had the clean, crisp smell that he'd long grown to associate with cold water. He took a deep breath, only to discover that there was enough dust still floating in the air from the collapse to make breathing unpleasant. He pulled the neck of his tunic back over his mouth. Above him, a blinking pinpoint of light was the only indication he could find of the surface. How far had he fallen?

And why did the air feel so stuffy and cold?

Pulling himself up to his full height, he tried to squint into the darkness to take inventory of his situation. Physically, his ankles hurt like hell from the landing, and he half-expected one—if not both—to be swelling up as he stood there. His arms were a dissonant mass of over-tensed and pulled muscles from involuntarily bracing himself for the impact as he'd fallen. He felt as though he were covered in bruises, and he wondered if the water weren't covering up some bleeding in his lower extremities.

The portion of his body that wasn't submerged in water was chilled to the bone, but that was when he noticed that the portion of him that was in the water was beginning to warm. As far as he was aware, he was the only living thing in the small pond, so it couldn't have been body heat or any other fluids, unless he was bleeding a far cry more than he felt he could have been. So, what was it? Thermal energy from the dilithium? If that's the case, I do not want to be down in this water for long. The last thing I need is to test the old story about slowly boiling alive.

A frightened whimper told him there was a person nearby, but the envelope of pitch black that had sealed him up so tightly made him wonder if he hadn't lost his eyesight in the fall. "Hello?"

"You're alive?"

Even though he couldn't see it, he involuntarily looked down at his waterlogged uniform and tried not to laugh about the whole thing. "Either that or Rachel has really been lying to me about the afterlife."

That elicited what sounded like a nervous chuckle out of the woman. He immediately began worrying about her mental state because nothing he said should have made sense to her. The poor woman was probably in shock.

"Good, keep laughing. It'll help me find you."

It amazed him how utterly black the cavern was. He held out a hand, thinking it felt as though it was in front of his face, but he had no visual data to prove it to himself. Gold got two more steps toward her when another rumble preceded the sound of another scream in the distance. This one was distinctly male. Gold scrambled to get out of the pit before whoever was about to join them arrived.

He got out of the way just in time. One enormous splash later, a spluttering Liankataka surfaced. He was quiet for a moment, but then began shouting.

"Guardian, what's wrong?" the woman asked, sounding a little less frightened now that another of her kind was involved.

"My leg," he said. Gold could hear the repressed pain in his voice. "It won't bear weight."

“Do you know how to swim?” Gold asked.

“What?”

“Floating?”

“I’m sorry, Captain. I don’t know.”

The increasing level of pain he heard in the guardian’s voice worried him. It wasn’t as though he hadn’t dealt with broken bones before. His son Daniel’s first adventures in skiing had taught him a lot about that. However, they’d been near a med station there. A bone knitter had been less than an hour away. If the others were still fighting the fire on the surface, there was no way of knowing how long it would be before they were rescued.

“All right,” Gold began, stretching his arms out before him and slowly beginning to work his way back toward what he thought was the center of the small pond. “Can you follow the sound of my voice?”

A series of stumbling splashes in the darkness ensued, while Gold tried to direct him with his voice. The slight echo to the splashes gave Gold more than a few moments of confusion as he tried to localize the guardian. Finally, Liankataka’s arms flailed against him. It took some convincing, but Gold was able to get the Dreman to hold still and allow the captain to take his floating body in tow.

“Miss?” Gold asked into the darkness.

“Yes?” was the weak reply.

“Please, keep talking. I need to find you. Are you out of the water?”

A moment’s pause and then, “Yes.”

“Feel the area around you. Do you think it’s safe? Does it feel like there’s enough room for the three of us?”

The sound of something fleshy patting something wet made it to his ears. After a few seconds, she said, “Yes.”

Gold reached down to his waist for his tricorder, thinking perhaps it would have something that might be of use to them. It wasn’t a medical tricorder, so trying to use it to diagnose their injuries wouldn’t get them very far. Dreman circuitry operated on different frequencies from Starfleet, making it of little more use in connecting them to the surface than his combadge in the mine’s depths. Still, it might have some worth beyond its designed intent. Flipping the tricorder open with his free hand, he was comforted as the faint light from the display gave the cavern a slight glow.

It was certainly better than flailing around in the dark.

He forced thoughts of using the frequency modulation to try to contact the surface into the same corner of his mind where the pain resided. Right now, he needed the light more than anything.

Just on the edge of the field of light, he could see a thin, white-sleeved arm reaching toward him. A face leaned into the light, concern on her features.



“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Kajana.”

Gold was thankful for the faint light from the tricorder, as he’d have had a bear of a time finding her in the dark. “Can you take this?” he asked, holding the tricorder out in front of him. “I can’t carry it and the guardian at the same time.”

Kajana nodded. He assumed she found a way to brace herself, as the extent to which she reached out over the water wasn’t one he would have considered safe. Gold extended the hand with the tricorder as far as he could, even scooting the tricorder across his palm to a point where he was only holding on with his fingertips. That bracing she had found was short-lived, however. Just as her fingers reached the tricorder, she lost her balance, reflexively her putting hand down, but finding only water instead. Her flailing arm hit the tricorder, knocking it out of Gold’s grasp.

The light flickered as it tumbled into the water, darkening as it finally came to rest at the bottom with its display facing down. “I’m sorry,” Kajana said, her voice not much more than a whisper. “I’m sorry.”

Gold tried to secure his own balance, even though he felt as though his calves had become malformed sheaths for the swords that had replaced his feet. “Keep talking. Please try to stay calm. As soon as the guardian is on the ledge with you, I’ll get the tricorder.”

He was fairly sure he knew how to get Liankataka over to the ledge, but without the light, having her voice to guide him would help the process.

“All right,” she said. “I’m not sure how I’m supposed to stay calm, though.”

Closing his eyes, Gold focused on the sound, willing himself to sort through the bouncing waves and localize the source, wishing for the dilithium to have had more anechoic properties.

“We’re stuck down here for Traiaka knows how long.”

Tugging Liankataka behind him, Gold gingerly took a step in the direction where he remembered Kajana was waiting, then another. His back shivered as he tried to restrain his reaction to the pain.

“The fire is only going to radiate heat down here.”

Kajana left a gap of about a second in between her sentences to allow the sound of her voice to dissipate. It was just enough to keep Gold focused on where he was walking.

Out of nowhere, his left foot slammed into an outcrop. Uncrossing his eyes, he leaned forward to discover that there was a stone ledge about five centimeters above the water line. Keeping his right arm around Liankataka, he reached forward with his left hand and was greeted by what felt like a clothed leg. The limb was still warm, and it was accompanied by a decidedly feminine gasp. “Kajana?” he asked.

“Who else would it be?”

Gold allowed himself a long exhale. Finally, he reached back and got a good grip on Liankataka. “I’m going to need your help. I can’t get him onto the ledge alone.”

A hand came out of the darkness and fell onto his arm. “Where is he?”

Gold grabbed her hand and guided it to Liankataka's shoulder. Part of him wanted to get on the ledge with her and drag the guardian onto the stone floor from there, but Gold knew that would be harder on any back injury the Dreman might have sustained. Forcing himself to ignore the pain for a few moments more, he placed a hand on Liankataka's arm, using it to guide him as he took careful steps out to where the guardian's feet floated.

With a gentle push, Gold allowed Kajana to guide their patient toward where she was holed up. When she said that she had him, Gold moved alongside the guardian, running his hands up the man's spine to see if there was any obvious sign of damage. Damn it, Pulaski, why didn't I let you brief me before I came down to the surface?

"Because it hadn't seemed important at the time," he bitterly answered himself.

"What, Captain?" the guardian asked.

Gold shook his head and then remembered that the Dreman couldn't see him. "Nothing. Just wishing that I'd sat through one more briefing before coming down, that's all. How does your back feel?"

A moment's pause, and then Liankataka said, "Stiff, but no pain."

"Is that normal?"

"For me?" the guardian asked, backing it with a chuckle. "Yes and no. You might say it comes and goes."

While Gold's knowledge of Dreman physiology was virtually nonexistent, one thing he knew very well was that a stiff back wasn't always a sign of spinal damage. Sometimes, it just meant that the muscles had been overtaxed. As Gold didn't feel any obvious signs of damage in the vertebrae, he hoped that was what it meant. Nice, uncomplicated injuries meant that they'd all be able to help themselves out of this predicament.

The way he saw it, this gave him a choice. He could trust that the stiffness meant there really was no significant damage to Liankataka's spine, and with Kajana's assistance he could slide the guardian onto the ledge she occupied, or he could take every precaution imaginable to protect the Dreman's anatomy, but possibly at the cost of his own mobility.

"Captain, you're seriously injured. You are our guest. It is we who should be helping you. Come. Float beside me."

Gold had to admit that did sound nice, but it didn't change his options. Finally, he decided that Pulaski may be able to repair any significant damage to both of them, and they needed to get out of the pool of water. Slowly, he and Kajana managed to get Liankataka to the ledge.

When that was complete, he allowed himself to float on the water's surface, trying to spot the tricorder's faint glow in the water. It took a few moments, but he finally found and recovered the unit. That accomplished, he then slid up alongside Kajana and Liankataka and collapsed in a heap. The pain felt as though it were trying to take over his body. A deep aching scattered through his arms suggested bone-deep bruising that was still forming. His neck was even stiff. There wasn't a part of his body that didn't hurt. Gold leaned his head back against something that had the cold, worked-flat feel of a stone outcrop, but he was too tired and too achy to really care. There was no way he could see to prop up his

ankles to avoid swelling. Perhaps if he kept his boots on for as long as he could tolerate them, it might mitigate the damage.

With the immediate danger past, Gold reached a hand toward where he usually wore his combadge. It was gone.

Probably fell off in the fall. The realization was a blow to the hope he'd been trying to foment. If they tried to locate him by the combadge signal, it could have been anywhere in the pile of dirt closing the tunnel shaft to the bottom of the pool of water he'd landed in. And that was provided they could even find the signal through however much dilithium and dirt was above his head.

Sighing, he flipped the tricorder closed to save power. They all needed to rest for a few moments. The tricorder would be there to help them cope with the darkness, and maybe it would even help them contact the surface.

Until the power supply ran out.

Gold had no idea how long that would be and tried not to consider that they'd be down there long enough for it to happen.

## Chapter 8

Pithead, Dilithium Mine Alpha

Day 1

Sarjenka ran up to the entrance of the pithead just as a small medical transport was pulling away, sirens wailing. What she saw beyond that, however, felt as though someone had pummeled her in the abdomen and refused to stop. The shed that had covered the top of the mine was on fire, a thick gray smoke billowing into the air. Three firefighters were doing their best to put the thing out. The assistant staffing coordinator, a woman Sarjenka had only met once a year or so before and whose name she could not remember to save her life, was standing there gaping at the flames. An older human male in a red and black Starfleet uniform—she assumed it was Admiral Tucker, but she'd never seen a picture of the man to be certain—stood holding a small hose aimed at the shed. The stream of water was barely reaching the flames, but the fact that he was willing to trade his personal safety for the safety of her world was an interesting revelation.

For the moment, the fire looked on the verge of being under control, but she didn't want to think about what was resonating through the dilithium and what it was doing to her father.

The smoke tickled the back of her throat, just enough to make her think that getting the growing crowd of gawkers to back away may be beneficial to everyone's health.

“Sarjenka!”

She turned toward the voice and found Eklia, Sinterka's mate, standing a few feet away. His arms were wrapped tightly around his midsection, his face had flushed pink, and she couldn't help but note that he looked both nauseated and terrified. A sheen of moisture had formed on his slightly undersized brow,

reinforcing the sharp smell of sweat that hit her nostrils. How long had the fire been going?

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Eklian nodded, but his expression never changed. When he briefly released his grip on his midsection, Sarjenka noticed that his sleeves were soaked. It looked almost as though he’d been sticking his hands up to the elbows in water. Had he been trying to fight the fire?

“Sinterka came to warn us,” she said, trying to calm him. “He’s not down there. He said my father found the bomb.” Frantically looking around, she added, “He ran over from the house with us.”

At that, his eyes widened. “You mean—”

“He’s here somewhere. Have you seen my father?” she asked. A knot of fear began tightening in her stomach as his face ran a gamut of emotions from frightened to a horrified realization to abject sympathy. “Eklian,” she began, “is he—?”

His eyes darted back to the fire. “Sarjenka...”

“Please. Where is he?” She grabbed Eklian’s upper arm a little more tightly than she had intended, but it got her point across.

“He was on the transport that just left for the hospital. I couldn’t get a good look at him, but what I saw was burned. Badly.”

The knot in her stomach turned into a tightening noose. Turning her back on the firefighting effort, she began to work her way through the expanding crowd at the pithead, trying to get out to the hospital. The nearest burn healers were only a kilometer away, but it felt as though they might as well have been on another planet.

She was five steps into the crowd when a booming, reverberant roar sounded from behind her. A woman’s scream grabbed Sarjenka and brought her away from thoughts of her father. When she turned back around, the top of the mine shaft had partially collapsed, and the staffing assistant had vanished—presumably down into the mine shaft, but Sarjenka couldn’t be sure.

The woman may have survived, provided she remembered to curl up and allow herself to roll down the shaft. A straight drop would have killed any of them automatically, but the angle of the shaft was just enough to allow a quick descent for the miners and somehow still kept the roof from caving in.

Normally.

Then again, her father had always commented that if they really thought about how the thing had been constructed, nobody in their proper mind would have gone down there.

Sarjenka’s eyes darted back through the mass of people. Eklian had disappeared back into whatever crevasse in the crowd had given rise to him in the first place. She saw familiar face after familiar face, but not one of them was a healer. If the healers were following the procedures from the last drill, she figured them to be at the hospitals awaiting casualties. She had railed against the idea of not setting up first aid as part of the emergency protocols, but thanks to her youth, no one had listened.

Whatever happened, they were going to need a healer on the site.

You're only an apprentice, she told herself. What can you do? Go to the hospital. Be with Father.

But what could she do there beyond console her mother? Could she, should she, bring her to the hospital? Would seeing how badly he was injured really help?

Wringing her hands before her, she frantically tried to call upon all of her training to help decide where she could do the most good.

The planet made the decision for her. A rumble began rising from somewhere under her feet. "Everyone back away!" Raising her hands over her head, she began frantically gesturing away from the pithead. Sarjenka briefly regretted not inheriting her father's booming voice. Forcing all of the volume she could muster behind her voice in an effort to be heard over the growing rumble, she yelled, "Move away from the mine! It's collapsing!"

A man screamed from somewhere behind her, then another, but the ground was still growling like a hungry beast. Afraid to turn around, she looked down, thankful to see the blue-green blades of grass beneath her, even though she'd fully expected an expanding chasm.

The crowd that had formed around the fire finally began backing off, much to her surprise. She'd always thought her people to be sane, rational creatures, but apparently that was not the case when true morbid curiosity was added to the mixture.

Sarjenka finally turned around. The shed that had been at the top of the mine for the last four years was gone. An area of ground ringing the mineshaft for about a kilometer in each direction had gone with it. She could smell the embers of the burning supports, but they were down there at the bottom of the hole somewhere. Sarjenka edged closer to the hole, not sure where the danger zone for further collapse actually ended.

There were people down there, in what condition, only they knew. If Admiral Tucker was dead, she didn't want to think of what the Federation would do.

She tried not to think of that as she looked around for jakerga men to go down and pull them out. These men had numbered fewer than fifty during the last collapse, but they were strong, familiar with the mines, and willing to don a gas mask to protect them from the toxic fumes that occasionally accompanied collapses. It had been the jakerga who'd saved her own father's life back during the small cave-in years ago, and she hoped it would be the jakerga who saved those people now.

No matter what condition they were in, it would take some time before anyone would be brought back to the surface. Father said that even the best time on the emergency drills had been almost a day.

Sarjenka slowly edged her way through the crowd and began walking toward home. First, to her mother, then to the hospital. Before she allowed herself to become a useless lump of worrying flesh over her father, she might as well check on the one person she may still be able to help.

## Chapter 9

Somewhere over Latik Kerjna, Drema IV

Day 1

Katherine Pulaski made a mental note to have the inertial dampeners triple-checked if Lieutenant Xavier was ever scheduled to fly a shuttlecraft for her again.

As Xavier banked the Shuttlecraft Reeves into a turn fast enough for her stomach to threaten a response, she tried to keep in mind that they were not unlike an ambulance rushing to the scene of an accident. Fast was good. Fast and safe was better. The last thing they needed was for the doctors to be included among the injured.

A fiery red glow began forming around the shuttlecraft's nose as they entered Drema IV's atmosphere. She knew that somewhere behind them, the Trosper was finding a parking orbit and would send down crew of her own when it could.

She also knew that it would have been much easier for her to travel to the planet on the Trosper with Klesaris and beam down to the surface with the away team full of S.C.E. tech-heads that Captain Walsh was assembling, but to say she didn't care for the transporter would be an understatement.

Of course, she could have always learned about the inertial dampeners herself, learned about flying shuttles, and made her own way through her transporter phobia, but that wasn't her job. She'd thought about taking the training courses, but her medical duties won the day. It wasn't her responsibility to make sure the inorganic systems worked properly.

What was her responsibility, however, was to make sure the triage units were set up and ready for incoming wounded. Contrary to earlier reports, as of the last word from the second guardian, six people were missing, including Captain Gold and Guardian Liankataka.

Five injured Dremans, probably seriously, stood to tax their knowledge base. Pulaski planned to get the local doctors involved as quickly as possible, if for no other reason than to have able-bodied, trained medics handy. The more, the merrier.

The deep whoosh of the air rushing past the shuttle's nacelles as they entered the atmosphere slowly began to subside, and Pulaski looked out the forward window to see a wide, lush forest coming up ahead of them. She'd heard that the floes of liquid magma that had surfaced during her first visit to the planet had resulted in a rich, verdant plant life, but she hadn't expected such dense greenery. All of this in five years? I know a few botanists who would love to get their hands on plants that take over so quickly. What we couldn't do with those on a damaged world.

They didn't run across many planets that were as damaged as Drema IV had been—at least not any that had survived. The odds of that being in the future of any Federation world, well, she didn't want to think about that at that moment.

The shuttle took an abrupt bounce, nearly knocking Pulaski out of her seat.

“Sorry, Doc,” Xavier said, quickly turning and giving her an appraising glance. There was a near panic in the young lieutenant's hazel eyes. “The thermals around here are severe, but small. By the time the computer picks them up, I have to take evasive maneuvers.”

Pulaski gave him a curt nod. She wanted to tell him it was okay and that she understood, but another thermal chose that moment to make its presence known. She was thrown hard against the restraint on the

shuttle's seat. Wincing, she leaned back against the backrest. Maybe I should reconsider the transporters, she thought.

Before another thought could form, Xavier said, "Hold on to your stomach, Doc. I'm going to try something."

That was when it felt as though the floor cut out beneath her. Suddenly, she lurched forward. She was quite thankful for the restraint, though she could already feel the bruise forming. Clouds flew past the viewport in just the direction they shouldn't, namely, moving straight up. Whether he had cut the shuttle's engines or intentionally put them into a dive, her inner ear had stopped trying to determine, but she knew they were moving far more quickly in a downward direction than she liked. "Lieutenant," she began, trying not to sound as though she were questioning his sanity too much.

That was as far as she got, however, as Xavier picked that point to bring them out of it. When Pulaski finally got her stomach back in order from the descent, she made the mistake of looking out the viewport again. The treetops were disconcertingly close. "Lieutenant," she said, "please don't ever do that again. One more second..."

Xavier audibly exhaled. "Yeah. Sorry, Doc. The sensors misread the bottom edge of that thermal."

Before she could voice a word in protest, the shuttle banked to the right and set down with more stillness than she'd seen the entire ride. I definitely need to ask the admiral to order regular inertial dampener checks.

As she and Xavier were the only passengers on the shuttlecraft, it only took a few seconds for her to gather herself and disembark. When she did, she discovered that they'd landed in the middle of a small field, one that looked as though it had very recently been in use for some gathering. However, it also looked as though it had been quickly abandoned, presumably when the explosion occurred. The clearing was edged by trees with lush, blue-green leaves, and there was an overwhelming smell of food mixed in with something that reminded her far too much of her last trip to the arboretum on the Enterprise. There were so many different floral aromas floating around, she almost wanted to send a message describing them to the last botanist she'd known—wherever Keiko Ishikawa was these days—and see what she thought.

But that was for later. Now, there were patients for her to treat. Pulaski was just wondering when the team on the Trosper would beam down when the familiar high-pitched whine of a transporter beam beginning its work sounded. Three men, two women, and one tiny Belandrid appeared in the first transport wave. As Klesaris's team numbered over a dozen, Pulaski knew there would be more people coming.

The cherubic smile of the Trosper's captain was precisely as she'd expected. That robust, friendly nature appeared to be reflective of the rest of him, as well. While Captain Walsh could easily have been one of the more physically fit members of his crew as he'd risen through the ranks, the mildly expanding midsection under that red-and-black uniform indicated to her that the center seat had apparently agreed with him about as well as replicated Guinness cake.

That did not, however, change the fact that the man immediately extended a hand toward her as soon as the transporter beam finished its work. "Dr. Pulaski," he said. "Nice to meet you in person. Where do you want us to set up?"

Pulaski scanned the field. Outside of the shuttlecraft and the dais, the place was still empty. "First we

need to find out how close to the mine we are. Xavier,” she said, gesturing toward the dark-skinned pilot, “take the shuttlecraft up and scout around. Make sure we’re close enough to be effective here. The last thing we need is to have it take so long to get here that the survivors die en route.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Something tells me you won’t have a problem finding the mine by sight, young man,” Walsh said. “But our sensors said it was about a half-kilometer north of here. Start there. Look for the crowd of people. I’ve seen a few of these mining communities before. When the mine’s in trouble, everyone shows up thinking they can help, and they end up just standing around waiting.”

Xavier nodded curtly. “Yes, sir.” Within seconds, he and the shuttlecraft were once again airborne.

Klesaris chose that moment to step forward. Gesturing toward her right, she said, “With your permission, if the site checks out, I’ll have the trauma units set up over near the dais.”

“Do it,” Pulaski said.

Klesaris turned around so quickly her long ponytail almost whipped her in the face. Tapping her combadge, she began speaking to the Trosper’s transporter chief about beam-in locations for the equipment.

While the young redhead would probably make some captain an excellent CMO one of these days, Pulaski was still a little concerned over how often she still seemed so . . . young. “And, Mary?”

Klesaris raised her head, “Yes?”

“We’re on emergency protocols here. You’ve got the trauma units. While we’re here, that’s your department—your decisions.”

The younger doctor gave a quick nod of understanding, and went back to her conversation.

The tiny Belandrid wandered over to Dr. Pulaski with what appeared to be a tool kit in his seven-fingered right hand. Even though he was standing at his full height, the humanoid little creature barely came up to her waist. Reports from the Federation contact team who had been sent to the ocean planet of Belandros roughly a century before had said that all Belandrid looked alike, yet not even Starfleet’s best geneticists had been able to determine how they managed it without cloning technology. Pulaski only knew of three of the species in Starfleet, and they had been allowed to apply after one of their kind had helped save Earth from a biological attack by the Romulans approximately ninety years before. Still, what they might not have had in physical strength, they more than made up for in resilience to injury.

He saluted his captain, and his tiny, circular mouth made a sound not unlike bubbling water before he spoke. “Ddoctor Pulaski?”

“Yes,” she said, quickly glancing down at the creature’s uniform collar, “what can I do for you, Lieutenant?” She couldn’t help but notice that on the creature’s translucent blue skin, the yellow and black uniform of a Starfleet engineer looked a little, well, odd.

“Lllolo, please.”



She recognized the name from Walsh's mention during their first conversation. "Of course, what is it, Lolo?"

The Belandrid's vertical eyelids opened wide, his neon-yellow eyes centering on her. He shifted his booted right foot on the ground in what Pulaski would, in a human, have considered a gesture of nervousness. Pulaski couldn't help but note that the boots weren't standard-issue, presumably to account for the creature's webbed, yet still seven-toed feet. "Cccaptain Walsh asked me tto mmmainttain equipment."

"Work with Lieutenant Klesaris. She'll have the most use for your skills."

"Yes, mmma'am. Nnno problem."

With that, Lolo walked off toward Pulaski's assistant. She thought briefly about a quiet comm with Klesaris to make sure she knew about the Belandrid's rather waterlogged manner of speaking—truth be told, he sounded like what Pulaski would have expected to hear if an old-fashioned water cooler had suddenly developed sentience—but realized that, from the meager bits she knew of how the Corps of Engineers worked, Lolo and Klesaris had probably been thrown together on the Trosper during the hour they'd had to get the equipment together. If half of what she'd heard about their latent engineering ability was true, she had no doubt of his qualifications when it came to keeping an eye on that equipment.

Pulaski's combadge chirped. "Xavier to Pulaski."

The young man's voice came through loud and clear. Tapping her own badge, she said, "Yes what is it, Lieutenant?"

"We should be good, ma'am. The mine is about a half-kilometer due north. Sensors read about seventy-five people at the head of the mine right now. No open area to set up there, so we're as close as we're going to get."

Pulaski gave a curt nod, even though she knew Xavier couldn't see her. "Understood. Get back here as soon as you can."

"Yes, ma'am. Xavier out."

Before she could give a thought to where to begin, one of the Trosper's engineers walked over, padd in hand. "Lieutenant Commander Barreto, ma'am," he said, backing it with a friendly smile. "We're working on a way to get a transporter lock through the interference. It's playing merry hell with the explorer drone. We can't send it down. I've got an idea or two that I think will work."

"Any luck improving the scanning accuracy through the interference?" Walsh asked.

Barreto raised a dark brown eyebrow, running a hand over his close-cropped brown hair. "Not much, sir, but we're still working on it. Ensign Borosh from the Progress even had a couple of ideas that we thought might help, but we've been trying to recalibrate the ship's sensors six ways till Sunday and can't get it to improve. We can tell that the area may not be one-hundred percent stable, but as for finding anyone specifically? No. There's something about the dilithium that's keeping us from being able to get a signal through it."

Walsh shook his head. "We do this the old-fashioned way, then. I'm sure the Dremans must have procedures in place for what to do when the mine collapses."

“You mean outside of praying for the souls of the dead?” Pulaski asked, only semi-rhetorically.

Walsh’s arms dropped from where they’d been folded over his chest. “I’ll go see if I can’t find Second Guardian Karjella and get the digging going.”

# Chapter 10

Latik Kerjna, Drema IV

Bottom of Dilithium Mine Alpha

Day 2

Gold fiddled with the tricorder’s settings for the fiftieth time.

Thus far, all he’d been able to do was take a basic set of sensor readings on himself, Liankataka, and Kajana. He tried adjusting every setting he could think of, even briefly considering a multiphase pulse in an attempt to let those on the surface know they were still alive, but he didn’t want to risk inadvertently doing any more damage.

When he finally decided to stop and admit that the tricorder was going to serve them best as a light source—that was when he heard it.

“Hello?”

They weren’t alone.

At first Gold thought he was hallucinating, that he’d banged his head in the fall and the damage was just now surfacing, but when he got a look at Liankataka and Kajana in the faint light from the tricorder’s display, their reactions suggested that he wasn’t imagining things.

“Hello?” Gold called into the darkness. “Who else is down here?”

For a moment, the blanket of darkness that rested just outside the tiny glow from the tricorder display seemed to grow a little more oppressive. A rock fell somewhere in the distance.

Or was it right beside him? Not even the Doppler Effect seemed to be working properly. It was either that or his ears had blown out in the fall. In his mind, one was just as likely as the other.

A faint voice called out from the darkness. “Guardian?”

Liankataka tried to prop himself up with his arms. “Yes? Who’s there?”

There was a faint rustle that sounded almost like paper, and then, “Name’s Eijeth, sir.”

“Eijeth?” the Guardian replied, recognition in his voice. “Didn’t you get the evacuation signal?”

A pause, and then, “We did sir, but Kajkob here, he fell going up the shaft. Hurt his ankle something awful. It was slow going, so Jakara and I stopped to let him rest, but something exploded up top.”

“It was a bomb, Eijeth,” Liankataka said, putting on the most consoling—no, Gold realized, it was actually placating—tone possible. “The last gasp of the Exiles.”

“Exiles?” That seemed to panic the voice more than calm it. “Guardian, they’ve come back?”

“No, Eijeth,” Liankataka said, still trying to comfort the man with his voice. “No, they haven’t come back. They merely left a few things behind.”

“Scorched earth,” Gold absently said.

“What, Captain?”

Gold shook his head, not quite sure he wanted to believe how universal some concepts truly were. “It’s an old battle tactic that was also used on Earth centuries ago. Destroy anything useful to an invading enemy while you’re retreating from them: food, buildings, arable land. The idea was to keep the invading force from being able to set up shop comfortably. If they can’t even grow food, how can they enjoy the spoils of conquest?”

Something that sounded like a snort of derision came from the Guardian’s direction. “It’s the behavior of children, Captain. ‘If I can’t have it, they can’t either.’ Very juvenile. Not at all surprising. The Exiles were a very childlike people in many ways.”

“Aren’t we all, Guardian?” Gold asked. Turning his attentions to the world outside their tiny sanctuary of light, he said, “Eijeth, do the three of you have food? If we’re down here for any length of time, we need to ration every bit of food we have.”

He heard muttering from above, then, “Not much. Jakara hasn’t eaten his lunch, but Kajkob and I did. We’ve got about four chunks of keena bread, some vituwater, and some dried teekir meat.”

“Sounds like a feast,” Liankataka said. “All that for one day?”

A deeper voice—Gold figured it was Jakara—said, “I work hard, sir. And my wife treats me well.”

“Sounds like you found a good woman,” the Guardian said. “You’ll be okay, Jakara. We’ll all be okay.”

Gold wished he could be so optimistic.

“Would you please be so kind as to share some of that food with us, Jakara?”

He heard a creaking like metallic hinges opening and closing, some rustling, and then, “Of course, Guardian. Do you need me to bring it down?”

Gold and Liankataka shared a glance, then they both looked toward Kajana, the only uninjured person in their small group. She was huddled in the corner, leaning against the wall with her legs folded up to her chest. When she briefly raised her eyes to them, Gold noticed that the panic was still there. She rapidly shook her head and then huddled back over her legs. There was a good chance that she wouldn’t be able to help even herself, let alone them.

“Yes, please,” Gold said. “But only if you’re able. The Guardian and I are injured, and Kajana isn’t able to move.”

Someone scuffled their way down the mineshaft, the sound ending in a series of splashes and the entrance of a very large, very muscle-bound Dreman into the circle of light. Suddenly, Liankataka’s use of the word ‘feast’ made much more sense. It would have taken a lot of food to keep a man like this going. What little Gold could see of the man beyond his size showed a face covered in dilithium dust. The whites of his eyes shone in the faint light. “Guardian?” the man asked.

“Jakara?”

The man smiled, “Yes, sir.” He held out a small packet toward Liankataka. “The food. I split what I had in half. You want some water?” Jakara glanced back at the pool of water he’d stumbled through and said, “Maybe not. Looks like enough for all of us here.”

Liankataka thanked Jakara profusely and then began divvying up the packet’s contents. He reached around and handed Gold a hunk about the size of his closed fist of what looked like a kind of whole wheat bread and two strips of dried meat the length of his hand.

Gold’s stomach chose that moment to remind him that, in addition to the pain, he’d managed to ignore how hungry he’d become. He was grateful that he was sitting because a mild wave of dizziness came over him at the sight of the food.

“Has anyone tried to get out yet?” Gold asked—his attempt to keep the dizziness at bay mentally complicated by the fact that doing so only made it more difficult to block out the pain.

Jakara shook his head. “No, sir. We were waiting until we were sure the mine was through collapsing before we tried.”

Gold couldn’t fault him that logic. Trying to dig them out with the tunnel collapsing around them was something of a self-defeating process. He checked the chronometer on the tricorder, just to see how long they’d been down there. Five hours.

Five hours that felt more like five days.

“Jakara,” Liankataka began, “we need your help. We need to begin working our way out of here, but Captain Gold and I are both injured. Kajana isn’t capable of helping right now. We’re going to have to rely on you and Eijeth.”

Jakara nodded. “I understand, Guardian. We’ll get us out of here.”

## Chapter 11

Latik Kerjna, Drema IV

Day 2

Sarjenka sat back in the overstuffed chair in the front room of her home and waited.

The hospital had threatened to sedate Rakan if she didn't leave, so Sarjenka took her mother home. There was nothing they could do for Eliatriel in either location, but at least at home, Rakan could go through the motions of life.

They'd been through this worry route once before, back when her father had been involved in a minor shift in the structure of the secondary mine. One level had collapsed, trapping a dozen miners for several hours until the rescuers could dig them out. Her father had sustained injuries that they were sure he would not survive, but he had.

As she was neither strong enough in build to be a rescuer nor far enough along with her studies as a healer to offer anything more than first aid for wounded who hadn't shown up yet, there was nothing she could do but wait. She pulled her small music stone from her pocket, holding it tightly in her right hand as it gave off the same lilting melody it had for all the years she'd had it.

She had no idea where the stone had come from. All she knew was that on the morning after the tremors had stopped, she'd awoken with it in her hand. A part of her felt there had to have been something special about it, as nobody she'd shown it to had ever seen a stone that gave off music before; yet no matter how many times she was interrogated on the subject, she had no recollection of how it had come to be in her possession.

The stone's melody had always been a source of comfort to her, though, reminding her that there were things in the universe that she didn't understand—yet. Perhaps her father's fate was one of those things. If the news were bad, she reminded herself, we'd have heard already.

Her mother, however, wasn't quite as patient. "This is a nightmare. They'll tell us if something happens?" she asked, an edge of hysteria in her voice.

Sarjenka knew the look on Rakan's face far too well. That tone of voice, the panicked look in her eyes, the otherwise placid expression, the wringing of the hands in the lap added up to one thing. Her mother was obsessing over every possible scenario that Eliatriel's life could have taken in the explosion, and the preeminent vision was, Sarjenka was relatively certain, the same one that had been appearing in her mother's mind far too often: Eliatriel's body, skin charred as though it had been ateekir steak cooking over an open flame for too long, bones broken from the impact of the explosion, pain like she could not imagine, suffering in ways that no living creature had ever been intended to suffer.

Traiaka, if it is your choosing, please make your embrace quick. Please don't allow father to suffer anymore.

"I don't know, Mother. I don't know." While Sarjenka could think of dozens of possible ways her father could still unavoidably die, even sitting in his hospital bed, and think of them in ways even a fully-trained healer couldn't treat, she didn't dare speak of them aloud. Her mother was distraught enough as it was without adding something like that to it. If there were only a way to talk the hospital into allowing her mother to sit with her father, but the burns were so severe they had to place him in a special isolation ward for treatment. Even the slightest risk of infection was more than they were willing to take.

Rakan grabbed a small square of fabric from her skirt pocket and proceeded to wipe her eyes. "What are we to do if he dies?"

"The same thing the other families will do if they lose someone, Mother," Sarjenka replied, her voice far more calm than she actually felt. "We will thank Traiaka for his life, and then we will move on."

Rakan sobbed inexorably, her tiny wails the only thing breaking the silence between mother and daughter. Sarjenka considered getting up from the chair and trying to console her mother, but it was becoming increasingly obvious to her that something needed to be done. For one thing, the condition of the house had gone downhill in a drastic manner. It had only been a day, but it felt like a week. Clutter was beginning to form in various locations. The morning news journal sat unread on her father's favorite chair, almost as though it was waiting on his return, too. The full basket sitting by the stairs indicated that her mother hadn't even bothered to put away the clean laundry from the previous morning.

If Rakan intended to be the one to break down, then the responsibility for remaining calm and rational would have to be Sarjenka's.

Pulling herself out of the chair, Sarjenka walked over to the front entrance. "I can't sit here doing nothing, Mother. I'm going to the hospital."

## Chapter 12

Latik Kerjna, Drema IV

Central Hospital

Day 2

Sarjenka arrived at the hospital more grateful to be away from her home than anything else.

However, that gratitude was short-lived when she saw Healer Drankla walking toward her. His iridescent white robes were covered in dark blood, and she thought she saw flecks of black on him as he drew closer. His face, which held more than a few well-earned lines of age, seemed suddenly so much older.

"Sarjenka," he said. "I was going to contact your mother."

Drankla had been master to her apprentice for the last two years. She'd grown to know that tone of voice in him far more than she'd have ever cared to admit. Between that and the single raised golden eyebrow, she knew he was trying to figure out how to break some bad news.

To her.

"My father?" she asked, feeling a tinge of guilt that she hoped it was someone else.

Drankla's hands fell to his sides briefly, but he then lifted them to sit just above her shoulders. His face, which she had begun to think would never age, seemed to take on ten years before her eyes. When he lifted his red eyes to her, she could see the exhaustion in them. "He took a turn for the worse after you left last night," he said. "The infection in his right arm began to spread. We were able to slow it down, but the medications are lowering his blood cell counts."

Sarjenka felt as though she'd been kicked in the stomach. While she'd been too young to actually study xurta wounds, she'd read enough to know what her next question was going to be. She wasn't sure she

wanted to know the answer to it, however. “The infection, is it dilithium poisoning? Did it get into his blood?”

The master healer shook his head, pulling the glimmering white cloth that covered his head and kept his golden hair in check during delicate operations. “Sarjenka. You know the kind of injuries axurta inflicts. Healer Nekara said there was a tremendous amount of dust in the air when he arrived. The best he could do was patch up the damage and get him here. However, I’m not certain how much more we can do. We are not Traiaka. We don’t have the power to reverse this kind of damage.”

Her eyes lowered to the floor between them. If anyone would know what she had and hadn’t learned, it would be the master who’d instructed her. In the time since the Uprising, there had been sporadic axurta incidents—enough for them to itemize the kind of damage the bomb was capable of inflicting, but not nearly enough to figure out precisely how to disarm them. Nobody could figure out whether they should be thankful for that fact. It was far easier to set the things off than it was to do anything else with them.

That was when a hope took hold in her mind, one she wasn’t sure she wanted to cling to, but did, anyway. “What about the Federation? They had the knowledge to stop the tremors before. What about them? Could they help? Maybe they could—I don’t know—make another arm for him?”

Drankla shook his head, confusion in his gold eyes. “I don’t know. We don’t know how much their healers know about us, Sarjenka. Right now, we need to concentrate on what we can do right here.”

She wasn’t settling for that. “But there’s a possibility they could do more?”

“There are always possibilities.”

Sarjenka smiled for the first time since the explosion, turned around, and sprinted out the door.

## Chapter 13

Latik Kerjna, Drema IV

Bottom of Dilithium Mine Alpha

Day 2

“The latkes were delicious,” Gold said as he pushed himself away from the dining room table. Rachel’s latkes were one of his favorite foods on the face of the earth. He’d even attempted to program the replicators on the Progress with the recipe. However, as was the norm with anything Rachel had ever cooked, it seemed, it didn’t quite taste the same. This batch, however, had felt as though the recipe were just a little different. “Did you use—”

“A little more scallion than usual,” Rachel replied, her delicate hand reaching for the empty plate. His sense of smell had noted the difference almost immediately, but after some of the things he’d been through recently, he wasn’t always sure that his senses still worked properly.

His wife smiled that knowing smile of hers. “If they still worked properly, David,” she said, “you’d be back on that starship of yours and not stuck in a hole.”

Gold's brow furrowed. Now, where did that come from?

Rachel walked the few steps from the dining room to the house's state-of-the-art kitchen. The matte-finished metal of the appliances stood out against the dark wood of the cabinets, almost like stars in the night with the wood-burning stove acting almost like their sun. Of course, that had been one of the things she'd insisted upon when they remodeled the kitchen. While she might have had her rabbinical work to help refine her soul, his wife needed a proper place to practice her art.

He leaned forward, fetching another empty ceramic serving plate from the table. This one was chartreuse, heavy, and cold. It looked almost like a flattened crystal of Dreman dilithium. "Rachel, where did we get this platter?"

All he heard from his wife was a small laugh, followed by the sound of running water.

No sooner did he stand from his chair than the entire universe around him shifted, and he was standing at attention in the captain's ready room on the U.S.S. Boudicca .

Captain Nechayev leaned back in her chair, sizing him up with a look. Her blond hair was pulled up into a tight bun, and the red of her uniform only served to make her usually austere expression hold more than a touch of anger. "Commander Gold," she said, her voice turning arch. "You do realize the problem we have here, don't you?"

"No, ma'am," he said, his back remaining stiff as a board. "I'm sorry, ma'am."

Nechayev let out a long-suffering sigh. Gold had been her first officer for only a few months, but it had been long enough to know that whatever Alynna Nechayev wanted, she usually got, and woe be to the person who stood between her and her goal.

She'd make a great admiral one of these days.

"Relax, David," she said, putting particular emphasis on the first word. "You're not going to get out of this if you overanalyze and outthink yourself. You want to command a ship of your own eventually, correct?"

Gold wanted to say that he already had a perfectly good ship and crew in the Progress, but something stopped him. Before he could formulate a proper reply, the scene shifted again.

This time, it was to the dais where he'd stood just a few minutes—or was it hours?—before. Only this time, he was alone. The sun was warm and bright in the sky. The air smelled of green, lush, dense, peaty life, with a little of the cool crispness of fresh water mixed in for good measure. He half expected to look past the trees and see a bright, sapphire-blue ocean beyond. A bird chirped in the distance. He couldn't recall the last time he'd known such peace when he hadn't been in space.

Probably the last time I was home. But New York City is never this peaceful. This would be a wonderful place to retire.

That was when Gold realized what was going on. He opened his eyes—at least, he thought he opened them, as the black of the mine tunnels was just as all-encompassing as the darkness behind his closed eyes. Dreaming, he thought, chastising himself. Gold felt around the flat stone outcrop that served as their resting place until he found the closed tricorder. He flipped it open, allowing its faint glow to illuminate



their small chamber. He was almost grateful for the damage to his ankles, as he doubted that he would have been able to stand in the tiny space. Kajana had said the level had only recently been dug, so it wasn't quite at full capacity yet. Not quite at full expanse, either .

Testing his ankles, Gold discovered that taking off his boots shortly before falling asleep had apparently resulted in his ankles being able to do the swelling they'd been trying to do since he'd first come tumbling down the mineshaft. It wasn't the smartest move from a first-aid perspective, but it was either take off the boots and cope with the aftermath or deal with feeling as though his circulation were being cut off. While the boots had hurt like hell to have on thanks to the compression of the swelling, the mere thought of movement now sent tremors of anticipatory pain up the sides of his legs.

Ignoring the pain, Gold followed the sound of snoring and slowly worked his way across the mine floor to where Liankataka lay. The lights from the three miners on the level above them had given out hours before, so Gold was stuck once again with using the faint glow of the tricorder's display as illumination. "Guardian," he whispered. "Are you awake?"

The Dreman continued to make a sound that was somewhere between a dull roar and a clogged, four-hundred-year-old sewage drain.

That would be, "No."

As Liankataka inhaled rather audibly, Gold made a mental note to see if Pulaski had discovered a cure for snoring among the Dremans five years before. If anything, the guardian's mate would probably be grateful.

It was at that point that his throat chose to remind him of its occasional need for such things as water. The merest thought of raising his voice above a whisper only brought on the urge to cough. The pain he could resist. The coughing, however. . . .

A coughing fit racked his body, only serving to leave his throat rawer than it had been before. Sounds of sleepers awakening reached his ears. He tried to apologize, but before he could get the words out, another cough hit. Damn the pain. I need a drink.

His entire body shuddered as he slowly moved onto his hands and knees and crawled the few inches to the pool of water. Cupping his hands, he dipped them into the lukewarm pool and lifted them to his lips. It was almost like drinking liquid sandpaper, the dust was so thick, but it was fluid, and that was all that mattered.

Handful after handful of water began to sate his thirst, but it reminded him that he still hadn't allowed himself to indulge in any of the food that Jakara had so graciously split with them. His stomach growled as he dragged himself back to where he'd been laying.

"Captain, are you all right?" Liankataka asked. The Dreman had propped himself up on his elbows, and Gold could see the concern in his features, even in the low light.

"Just thirsty," Gold said, cringing at how scratchy his voice must have sounded. "I'm sorry I woke you." Gold hesitated, then asked, "How can you remain so calm, Guardian?" Gold asked. "Does this happen that often here?"

The guardian smiled. "I have faith in my people, Captain. We run emergency response drills twice a year so we can be prepared for anything our mines wish to do. I trust that my people are prepared."

Finding his ration of food, Gold tore a small piece off of the bread, and a two fingers' width piece from the dried meat. It's probably not kosher, but I'll talk to Rachel when I get back about the kashrut laws in a situation like this. The bread was dry, but had a honey flavor to it. Mixed in with the honey was a surprising mild nutty flavor. It reminded him of some of the honey-wheat breads that Rachel made. The meat, on the other hand, was both salty and spicy at the same time. It tasted almost like turkey marinated in garlic. In any other instance, he would have found the taste quite welcome, but as soon as he swallowed the last morsel of meat he would allow himself for the time being, he was crawling back over to the water.

Gold checked the chronometer once again. Eighteen excruciating hours had passed since the collapse.

He glanced over at Kajana. The woman's arms were still wrapped tightly around her legs, but she looked as though she'd fallen asleep in that position. "Kajana?" he asked. "Kajana, can you hear me?"

Liankataka reached around and put a hand on her arm. That was enough to cause her to flinch.

She raised her head to them, and there was wildness in her eyes that Gold didn't like. "Be careful. She doesn't look herself."

Liankataka backed his hand away, apparently noticing the same thing. "Kajana," he whispered. "Kajana, I know you're frightened."

"I've seen this before," Gold said. "Kajana, are you afraid of closed spaces?"

The light from the tricorder hit her tear-stained face. She looked at him, but somehow seemed to be looking through him. The strained expression she'd worn since they first discovered the trapped miners' existence lessened just a bit. "Yes," she whispered.

"It's okay. So am I," Gold said. He'd seen panic attacks like this before during the Cardassian War. There were times when being able to identify with someone helped. "Have you eaten anything yet?"

She shook her head.

"Where is your ration?"

Kajana retrieved the small packet of food from under her bent knees. She raised her eyes back to him, and Gold could see the pleading in that gaze. She was frightened beyond her capacity to cope and wanted help getting through it.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "Let me help."

As he dragged himself back to his hands and knees, Gold was surprised to discover that the pain in his ankles wasn't quite as severe as it had been just a few minutes ago. It was probably a bad sign, but he was grateful for the temporary respite from the eye-crossing agony. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, David.

He slid into a sitting position beside Kajana, holding out a hand toward the bread. "Trust me."

With a trembling hand, she handed him the small chunk of bread. Gold broke off a small piece and handed it back to her. "Eat this," he said. As she slowly put it into her mouth and began chewing, he

reached over and took a slice of meat. He tore off a small portion and handed it to her. “Now this. Eat it slowly.”

Kajana was beginning to remind him of Eden when she’d gone through a bout of progressively nasty nightmares shortly before her thirteenth birthday. While Kajana chewed, Gold reached his arm around her shoulders and held her as she ate.

“Guardian?” Eijeth called out from the level above. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” Liankataka replied. “Our lovely companion is a bit frightened, however. Captain Gold is tending to her. How are our diggers?”

“Getting back to work, sir,” Jakara said.

While he had yet to actually meet the man behind Eijeth’s voice, Gold found that he liked Jakara. There was something old-fashioned about the man. From the way he’d been openly willing to share his only remaining food with them and the way he’d dove into the digging work, Gold didn’t think there was a selfish bone in Jakara’s rather sizeable body.

As the sound of pebbles falling into the water once again filled the cavern, something occurred to him. “Where is the air coming from?”

“What?” Liankataka asked.

“The air. We’ve been down here almost a day, and the air hasn’t gotten stale yet. Somehow, we’re getting air down here.”

“The tube,” Kajana whispered.

“What?”

Kajana raised her head from Gold’s shoulder, nervously licking her lips. “The tube. It runs down the mineshaft in a corner on the floor.”

Gold gently patted the side of Kajana’s head, urging her to place her head back on his shoulder. He made a mental note to ask Jakara to see if he could find the pipe when the burly Dreman took a break.

At least he had an answer to that question. The eight million more that were going through his head, however....

## Chapter 14

Latik Kerjna, Drema IV

Capital Square

Day 2

Sarjenka was still running when she reached Federation's triage site. Three small temporary shelters were set up in front of a raised platform. Off to her left, she could see another small structure with what looked to be a transport ship beside it. She'd never actually seen one in person before, but she thought she'd caught sight of something similar flying over the area the afternoon before.

She stepped closer, wondering if anyone was actually there. There was sufficient evidence that someone had been there at one point, but that was meaningless to her right then. She needed someone there now.

That was when she caught the aroma of something that smelled absolutely heavenly floating on the breeze. It was a little like jeeka sausage, but a little more sweet-smelling, and it was accompanied by an aroma not unlike toasted keena bread.

"Hello?" she asked, raising her voice in an attempt to be heard over the few meters between where she stood and the source of that magnificent aroma.

A quick, building whine greeted her, and before she knew it, she was staring at the business end of some kind of weapon. It was held in the hands of a large—very large—human wearing a uniform that was a wonderful shade of gold, with black sleeves and pants. She didn't know much about human physiology, but from what little she'd discovered, this one looked to be male. She'd never seen skin as dark as this human's on anyone before. For that matter, everything about him was dark, including his eyes, which had yet to waver from where she stood. "I-I-I am a friend." Holding up both hands to show she did not carry a weapon, she stared into that suspicious glare and said, "I'm looking for a healer."

The weapon lowered slightly. "Healer? I thought your people had doctors?"

"Yes," Sarjenka said, giving a quick nod. "But my people don't know how to treat injuries like this."

The suspicious look slowly faded from the human's face. "And you thought we would?"

"Yes. Please." She hoped she didn't sound too desperate as she said, "It's my father."

Moving the weapon to his right hand, he retrained it on her as his left hand touched a piece of jewelry on his uniform. "Xavier to Pulaski. I've got a native out here who's asking for a doctor. Says her father's injured."

"Tell them my father found the bomb."

That got a raised eyebrow out of Xavier. "Did you hear that, Doc?"

"I'll be right there."

"Got it. Xavier out."

No sooner did the words leave his mouth than a human woman stepped out from behind the shelter. She, too, wore the uniform of the Federation, but where Xavier's was gold, and Tucker's had been red, hers was blue. She had short, curly, gray hair; pale skin; and a friendly expression. Something tingled in the back of Sarjenka's mind. She knew the feeling too well. The woman—Pulaski, she assumed from the conversation—was familiar, but she couldn't place where or when they'd ever met.

"Yes?"

Under normal conditions, she would have greeted the human healer with the usual *leevka* fingertip greeting, but having a weapon pointed at her hardly made these normal conditions. Sarjenka decided propriety would have to wait. As she could see no sign of recognition from the woman, she tried to push the feeling of familiarity from her mind. Right now, she had more important things to deal with. “Please. We require your assistance. My father is seriously injured. Our healers don’t know how to help.”

“You said he found the bomb?”

Sarjenka nodded. “When it exploded, it amputated the hand and most of the arm he held it in. He has lost more blood than our healers can handle. The best we can do is patch up his wounds and hope for the best. Can you help him?”

\* \* \*

So much for that needle in the haystack.

Katherine Pulaski stared down at the young woman, trying desperately to keep the sense of recognition from seeping into her expression. The features had lengthened slightly as she’d gotten older, and the girl had grown about a half-meter in the last five years, but Pulaski was certain it was Sarjenka. It was an odd sensation, the thought of the child whose memories she’d taken now coming to her for help. But she needed help. Her father needed help. And that was what they were there to offer.

Still, the idea of treating a severely injured bomb victim without a full sickbay to work in wasn’t something that filled her with hope. From what Klesaris had told her of the *Trosper*, the sickbay of the Oberth-class ship might be sufficient for what she needed, but it would be a borderline scenario at best. Even the most up-to-date upgrades she’d seen on a ship of that class had been ten years out-of-date. If we could just get him to the station...

“I can’t be sure,” Pulaski said, knowing full well how evasive she sounded. “Nobody found his arm?”

Sarjenka shook her head, the girl’s shoulder-length, red hair showing only the slightest flecks of gold.

“How severe are the burns?”

Sarjenka’s expression sank. “Bad. Very bad. I’m only an apprentice healer, but I can tell they’re beyond our capacity to treat to recovery. It’s up to him. He’ll bear the scars for whatever time remains to him.”

Pulaski frowned. She hadn’t thought about trying to attach a synthetic limb to a Dreman yet, especially not one that had also endured severe burns. She wasn’t even sure it was possible, as their vascular system was just different enough from a human’s to make it difficult to be sure the connections would work properly.

The dermal regenerators would get a workout, but it might be worth the risk, if she could just examine the patient. “Where’s your father?”

Sarjenka smiled more broadly than Pulaski would have thought the girl capable. However, she’d seen smiles like that before. It was the look of someone grabbing onto hope for dear life, but not sure whether that lifeline was covered in thorns.

Pulaski also clung to a hope: the hope that she would be able to fulfill the girl’s wish.

# Chapter 15

Latik Kerjna, Drema IV

Central Hospital

Day 2

“These burns are bad, but if it’s any consolation, I’ve seen worse,” Katherine said as she gently peeled back a burn gauze from Sarjenka’s heavily-sedated father’s remaining arm and looked at the damage with a distasteful expression.

The woman reached into a small pouch she’d referred to as a medkit and pulled out a gadget. Sarjenka stared as she adjusted a few settings, then began running it over the surviving arm.

“You’re a healer?” the woman asked, sounding genuinely curious.

Sarjenka wanted to ask what that had to do with her father’s condition, but somehow managed to restrain her tongue. Instead, she said, “I’m studying to be one, yes...” Her voice trailed off as she tried to remember what the dark-skinned human had called the woman. It hadn’t been Healer. It had been something else. After a few seconds of fighting with her memory, it came back. “Yes, Doctor.”

The human woman smiled, kind and benevolent. “You may call me Katherine.”

“I’m Sarjenka.”

An odd sense of relief appeared in Katherine’s eyes. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Sarjenka.”

Katherine delicately removed one of the burn gauzes from Eliatriel’s remaining forearm. The skin was still heavily blistered, but it appeared that Healer Drankla had been successful in removing all of the bomb fragments from his skin. What if there are more under the surface?

Almost as if she had been reading Sarjenka’s mind, Katherine pulled out a small unit that had a visual display, extracted something from it, and began running the object over her father’s arm. “It appears that your surgeons got all of the shrapnel. I’m not sensing any inorganic objects under the skin.”

Sarjenka stared at the small unit Katherine held, trying to figure out why there was something so familiar about it.

Katherine moved from her father’s arm to the rest of his body. “Did you know there was a small fracture in his fifth cervical vertebra?”

Sarjenka shook her head. “No. What is that you’re holding?”

The woman opened her palm to reveal a small, cylindrical unit that barely fit in her hand. “This? It’s a medical scanner. It’s designed to run several kinds of medical tests and give diagnostic readings of almost any body process. I can have all the important test results I need in a matter of seconds.”

A seed of hope began to plant itself in Sarjenka's heart. She hadn't questioned the decision to find a Federation healer when Drankla hadn't been able to handle the level of damage, and now she was seeing proof that she'd been right. The corners of her lips turned up in a small smile. "Thank you."

"For what?" Katherine asked.

"Helping. I feel he will be safe in your hands."

At that, Katherine's expression turned serious. "I may need to take him back to the space station, Sarjenka. I can do the preliminary treatments here, but major dermal regeneration is something this field team just isn't equipped to handle."

She wasn't sure she liked the idea of her father going away to recover, but it was better than the alternative. "Do whatever you need to do, Doctor."

Before she could get another word of gratitude out, the door to Eliatriel's room opened. Sinterka leaned in, his expression somber. "Sarj? Do you have a minute?"

She didn't like the look on his face, not one bit. "What happened?"

"They need you at the pithead."

## Chapter 16

Latik Kerjna, Drema IV

Pithead, Dilithium Mine Alpha

Day 2

When Sarjenka arrived at the pithead, she was surprised to see that several healers had come, including Drankla. The senior healer's gold hair was matted with perspiration, his white robes soiled with the green dust of the mines. Healer Nekara looked the same, as did the others.

Federation officers were also milling about the scene, although she wasn't sure precisely what they were doing. A tall female with a blue uniform, long red hair pulled up on the back of her head, and a friendly face seemed to be telling them what to do. Still, Sarjenka was curious about every box, crate, and gadget she saw.

But she couldn't shake that nagging familiarity about some of the equipment.

"Sarjenka!"

Sinterka's voice brought her back to reality. She walked over to where he stood near the pithead itself, with Drankla and Nekara between him and the enormous funnel-shaped hole that had formed around the collapse.

“Tell her,” Sinterka said, his voice insistent. “Tell her why we need her.”

Drankla and Nekara exchanged a look, almost as though they were trying to figure out who would start. They pulled her from her father’s bedside for this?

“Would one of you please tell me?” she asked, growing impatient.

Finally, Drankla pulled himself up to his full height and said, “The Federation engineers aren’t sure how stable the area is. They’re trying to decide if they want to pack up and retreat to Capital Square now. Weight is an issue. We need someone small and light to go into the mine and check on the people down there.”

Sarjenka swallowed hard. They wanted her to go into the mine? She’d been pursuing a career as healer to avoid just such an event. “What about the Federation healers? Do they have any transportation devices like the Exiles had? What if they could transport into the mine shaft?”

Nekara shook his head. With the gold-and-red patterned surgical cap covering his fore lobes, his rounded skull almost looked like a moon trying to rotate.

“They’ve attempted it already,” Drankla said. “I didn’t understand what the exact difficulty was, but they said something about the interference having the same effect as a dampening field. Their computers can’t—what did he say? They can’t get a lock.”

“So, it’s up to the miners to go down and get them.” Sinterka said. She saw a resolution in his eyes that she couldn’t recall ever seeing before. “We need people who can fit into small spaces, and the first person I thought of when the subject of healers came around was you.”

She tried weighing the options. If she went down there, she could die in another collapse and never see her parents again.

The same could be said for just standing around on the surface. From the looks of it, the radius of the collapse had spread to at least two kilopars in every direction. It was just a visual estimate, but it certainly looked as though two of her could span the chasm.

And that expanse surrounded a five kilopar -deep hole. What was at the bottom of that hole? The top of another one—this time much deeper and much more dangerous. One that she’d have to crawl into and then try work on patients in Traiaka knew what condition, while the very real possibility of the roof collapsing on her literally hung over her head.

“No problem. We’ll find the people.”

In search of the source of the gurgling voice, Sarjenka looked down to see a small oddly shaped creature with a round head—the top being a little bit smaller than the bottom. Its yellow eyes opened sideways, the actual eyelids themselves vertical slits. It had—well, she wasn’t quite certain what it had for an internal support structure, but it looked far more adaptable to small spaces than anyone else in the area. She could see some of that skeleton through the creature’s pale, blue skin. If it wasn’t bone as in a Dreman anatomy, the creature’s weight would be very little, indeed.

Whatever it was, it was fascinating.

Its bright eyes looked up at her. Or, is it sideways for you, little creature?



“Wwwe go down ttto fix problem now?”

Its mouth never left an O-shape form as it spoke, and it sounded as though it were speaking underwater. It wore a black and yellow Federation uniform, and in one of its seven-fingered hands was a tool kit. On its back was a small pack. Sarjenka assumed it contained the tools the creature would need for the expedition.

A quick glance at Drankla and Nekara showed her something she didn't expect to see in the two men, revulsion.

“‘Harm not,’ Healers,” she said chidingly. “Did you expect members of the Federation all to be human?”

The opportunity to observe this little creature certainly appealed to her curiosity. Was the risk to her life worth such a thing though?

She dropped to her knees, which brought her to eye level with the creature. Holding her hands out, she gave it the standardleevka fingertip greeting. “I am Sarjenka. What should I call you?”

The creature tilted its head to its right. “Lllolo. Lllolo fix machines.”

“Lolo,” she said. “Why are they sending you?”

“Ppput up juranium sssupports,” it said, holding up a small, silver-black beam that was about the length and width of her arm. “Kkkeep mine safe.”

She felt a slight pang of gratitude, hoping her father lived long enough to thank the Federation for taking care of his planet in such a manner.

“And fffind and fffix bbbombs.”

They really think there may be more down there?Her stomach sank. “And what if there are no bombs?”

“Ttthen Lolo work on tttransppporter ppproblem.”

She looked at Lolo's bright yellow eyes and realized that she had been trying to do nothing more than come up with excuses for being a coward. If this little creature, with its strange speech and seven tiny webbed fingers on each hand could muster the courage to go into probable death, then how could she be so selfish?

Turning, Sarjenka found Sinterka still standing a short distance off. “All right,” she said. “Let's go.”

## Chapter 17

Latik Kerjna, Drema IV

Pithead, Dilithium Mine Alpha

## Day 2

Sarjenka wiped perspiration from her brow. Shifting her weight as little as possible, she turned to check on Lolo—who was still working behind her—fusing the new duranium supports which the Federation engineers had created for the mineshaft into place as they went. According to one of the officers, who had looked to be a human, but had pointed ears, hair as dark as the night's sky, and never smiled in the entire time he'd been helping Sinterka instruct them on what to do, the duranium supports also contained a small data pathway built in that would, as he put it, "Allow a targeting signal to get a firm lock through the dilithium's interference."

Sinterka had shown her the digging process, saying that this was what had been done since the collapse: One person dug, while another moved the dirt to a safer location. They needed to make sure that as little weight as possible was over the remnants of the shaft, as they couldn't be sure of the stability of the area around the pithead. Lolo had wanted to vaporize the dirt, eliminating it once it had been brought to the surface, but the creature was overruled by a very robust, good-natured Federation officer named Walsh. The human male had been unsure of how the weapon's energy would dissipate within the dilithium, and they wanted to mitigate the risk to the rest of the planet as much as they could. He'd seen the reports, and the last thing he wanted to do was chance that the planet would try to tear itself apart again.

Sarjenka couldn't help but agree. As destructive as the Exiles had been, they had nothing on the tremors. The risk of bringing the superior technology to bear on the problem was just too great.

So, with Sarjenka digging and Lolo working in the supports behind them, they grabbed work kits, water, and headlamps, then walked into the pit to start work.

After what felt like hours of digging in silence, Lolo said, "Sssswim."

Sarjenka thought she heard a touch of lost spirit in that one word. "Swim?" she asked.

"Yes. Dddust in my gggills. Swim wwwould help. Belandros an ooocean planet."

Watching her movement, she turned toward Lolo. "Gills? What are those?"

"Bbbreathe in water," Lolo said, pulling down the neckline on the uniform. She could see what looked like slits in its skin, slowly opening and closing in a rhythm she associated with breathing. Curious.

"Didn't your people pack water for you to drink?" she asked. "Do your peopleneed water to drink?"

Lolo cocked its head sideways, apparently thinking it over. Finally, it said, "Yes."

With that, the little creature dug through its pack, moving aside the ration bars the Federation people had given them both and digging out one of the five bottles of water they'd also packed. Lolo unscrewed the top, leaned back, and poured the bottle's content over its gills. While Sarjenka watched, the gills opened and closed several more times, and murky, dark green water flowed back down the front of its uniform.

The little creature's yellow eyes brightened, and it wiggled its fingers as if stretching them after a long rest.

"Eeeasy fix. Ttthank you. Tttoo tired to ttthink properly."

She fought the urge to smile. "Are all of the Federation officers as...different...as you are?"

It fixed her with a noticeably sharpened yellow gaze. “Hhhow different?”

Sarjenka pursed her lips, trying to figure out a way to rephrase the question. When one finally came to her, she said, “The other Federation officers that came with you—”

“SSStarfleet,” Lolo said. “Wwwe are Starfleet officers.”

“All right. The other Starfleet officers—they all look human. And there’s you. What’s Starfleet like?”

“One Vv Vulcan. Wwwhen we finish dddigging, I tell you. Oookay?”

Sarjenka’s curiosity was dragged back to reality by that. “Okay,” she said, turning back toward the pile of greenish-brown dirt that rested beneath her knees. They dug for a bit longer—she hadn’t thought to bring a time-teller, so she wasn’t really sure how long they’d worked—when her digging met with a bit of resistance. Her large brow furrowed. It didn’t feel like anything she would have expected to find in a collapse. Placing the shovel aside, she began to gently pull dirt away by hand. Pebble by pebble, she began to uncover it and realized that it was a tube-like object.

Her eyes widened as she realized what, in fact, the thing most likely was.

“Lolo,” she said, “we need to go back to the surface. Now.”

“Nnnow? Wwwhy?”

She quickly reached back and grabbed the portable light. “See that?” she said, shining it on the object. “That’s a bomb. Get to the surface.”

Lolo’s eyes widened. “Bbbomb?”

“Yes. I don’t know if I triggered it or not.”

“Nnnot eeexplode.”

Sarjenka shook her head. “My father got the one he found all the way to the surface before it exploded.”

“Nnno ppproblem,” the tiny creature said, seeming to muster its courage. “Eeeasy fix. Gggo to surface in cccase.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Fffix bomb.” It cocked its head to the side, eyes narrowing. “Sssurface. Gggo.”

“But—”

“Gggo!”

Sarjenka crawled back out of the series of supports Lolo had been erecting, stopping at the opening and turning back to see what it was doing. The little creature had closed its eyes, and was reaching its left hand down into the dirt. She could see the arm occasionally move, almost as if he somehow had muscles

under the skin.

Seconds passed until Lolo appeared to get frustrated with something, and then raised its other hand to tap the portable communicator on its uniform. “Lllolo toTttrosper . Llock on mmmmy signal with ttttransporter. Bbboost lock signal as mmmuch as possible. Hhhighly explosive. Bbbeam to ccclear sssspace. Wide dddisperse. Ttthree ssecond dddelay.”

A female voice said, “Explosive, aye. Boosting signal one-hundred twenty-five percent. Three second delay beam out to clear space, wide dispersal.”

What was it doing?

Before she could figure that out, Lolo removed the communicator from his uniform, attached it to what little of the bomb it had unearthed, and reached a hand around it. In one quick, smooth motion, it pulled the bomb the rest of the way out of the ground and threw it straight into the air. A flash of gold told her that the communicator had somehow remained attached. Just as the bomb reached the height of its flight, at least twokilopars over the surface proper, a silver shimmer formed around it, and it disappeared.

Sarjenka could do nothing more than stare. Was thattheir transporter? She shook her head, attempting to send the fog she felt with the bomb.

When she finally regained her wits, she looked down into the pit. Lolo was standing there, arms at his sides and...was that its toe tapping?

“Nnno problem. Eeeasy fix.”

“Are you insane?” she said, walking back into the pit far more gingerly than she had before. “You could have been killed!”

“Bbbut I was nnot,” it replied, sounding as though nothing at all dangerous had happened. “Lllolo fix bomb.”

Sarjenka’s eyes went to the blue sky over them and then back to Lolo. “Yes, you did. Would you show us how? We’ve never been able to keep them from detonating.”

The little creature’s head cocked to the side. “Nnno problem. Bbback to work?”

Sarjenka looked down at the mound of dirt that was still beneath them. Shovel in hand, she mustered all of her resolve and said, “Back to work.”

## Chapter 18

Latik Kerjna, Drema IV

Bottom of Dilithium Mine Alpha

Day 2

Gold checked the chronometer. Eight hours since her breakdown, and Kajana seemed to have recovered somewhat. She scooted a few inches away from the wall, but she was facing away from them, so what little light they did have from the tricorder's display didn't tell him much. She hadn't turned that panicked look on either of them for at least an hour, though.

He could hear Jakara and Eijeth working at the veritable mountain of dirt that had them trapped. They hadn't seen much of the two men since they began their work, apparently spurred on more after they realized Kajana's plight.

He reached down and grabbed another two fingers' worth of the dried meat. He finished off the bread an hour ago and was almost at the end of his first strip of meat. He'd been trying hard to stagger his nibbles, giving at least two hours between bites, but his arms were beginning to shake just moving to pick up the meat.

The sound of scraping at the dirt mound stopped for a moment, and then Jakara's voice said, "I think I hear more digging."

Liankataka pepped up at that. "Finally."

"I hear it, too," Eijeth said.

Kajana's head popped up from its resting place on her knees. "Thank you, Traiaka. How long have we been down here?"

"A little over a day," Gold replied.

Kajana feebly tried to raise her arm. "I feel weak."

"It's the lack of food," Gold began. "Eat a little bit more of the meat for now. We'll be okay once we can get to the surface and get a day or two of real food in us."

The sound of digging resumed. "Hello?" Jakara said, his distant voice raising. "Who's there?"

No sign of an answer. The digging doubled in intensity, presumably as Eijeth rejoined the effort, and Gold could hear the two men working faster than they had before.

That was when it happened.

A rumbling sounded in the ground around him. Pebbles began to fall loose from the cavern's ceiling, falling into the water until it almost sounded like a thunderstorm at work.

"What the—?" he started to ask, looking to Liankataka and Kajana to gauge their reactions. Rumbling below the surface of a planet is never a good thing.

Then the screaming began.

\* \* \*

Sarjenka stopped digging, her heart leaping into her throat as the rumbling began. The memory of the collapse months before came immediately to mind. It's over. We're too heavy.

Behind her, Lolo stopped midway through fusing another piece of reinforcement into place. “Wwwhat tthat?”

“If it’s—”

She wasn’t given a chance to finish that thought. No sooner did a shovel break through the dirt from the other side than everything underneath the spot she was kneeling gave way at once.

She tumbled down the mineshaft, somehow ending up going down the steep incline on her side. The stones felt like giant boulders, even though they were probably only a fingernail’s width in size. When she thought it was going to go on forever, it stopped in a pool of water and a pelting of pebbles that felt as though she were being pummeled by an ice storm.

She expected Lolo to have been sucked into the mine after her, but when she raised her eyes, she discovered that the little creature had grabbed the rung of the last support. Lolo was hanging by both arms from the duranium pipe, out over the now far more open chasm. “Lolo!”

“Ssarjenka, help!”

She tried to scramble back up the incline, but tripped over something. Flipping her small wrist light around, she discovered an arm floating on the water. Moving the light further in, she realized that arm was attached to a very large Dreman. His eyes were closed, and his mouth hung open just enough for her to see that he hadn’t gotten any water in there yet. “Lolo, hang on!”

\* \* \*

The first thing Gold saw in the dim light was a bulk roughly Jakara’s size hit the pool of water.

The second thing was something about half that size fall behind him, then try to crawl up the mineshaft, until they tripped. Judging by what little he could see of the young woman doing the yelling—Sarjenka, if what the voice he’d heard could be trusted—was barely big enough to be much help. However, even a little help was better than nothing.

He wasn’t sure who Lolo was, but the last thing they needed was their would-be rescuers getting stuck along with them. There was barely enough food left as it was.

He could see a body floating on the surface, but then the young woman stood up, Gold began to get worried. “Sarjenka?” he said.

The young woman jumped back as though she’d been touched by the dead. She had what looked like a Starfleet-issued palm beacon in her right hand and flashed it back toward them. To eyes that had been in relative darkness for a day, the bright light hurt for a moment and then became the most welcome sight he could have imagined. He tried to scoot toward the pool of water, only to discover that his feet felt like nothing more than dead weight at the end of his legs.

“Could you check on Jakara please?” He gestured toward the figure floating face-up—he could now tell—in the water. “He hit the rocks hard.”

Sarjenka leaned over the floating man, shining her light against his chest.

Gold saw what looked like breathing, but at that distance, it was difficult to be sure. “Does it look like

he's breathing to you?"

"Yes, sir," she said. She reached down into the top of Jakara's work shirt, feeling for something. "He's got a pulse, so it looks like the fall just knocked him unconscious. Can you help me get him over there with you?"

"Can't move. My legs took some damage in the fall." With a shake of his head, Gold added. "There's barely enough room for the three of us as it is."

"Ssarjenka!"

She pointed the palm beacon back up the shaft. "Lolo, can you get a footing on something?" Her head jerked back. "What's that? Who's up there?"

"Me, ma'am. Name's Eijeth. I can help."

Sarjenka seemed to take in the situation and said, "Okay. Lolo, let Eijeth help you. Then we need help down here."

Shining the light once again at Gold, she said, "Who's injured besides you, Admiral?"

"I'm not Admiral Tucker, young woman," Gold said. "I'm Captain David Gold. Guardian Liankataka has some damage to his back, and Kajana here is suffering from what we call claustrophobia. If Dr. Katherine Pulaski is on the surface, she'll be able to help you with that. Up on Eijeth's level is someone with a bum ankle. I never saw him, but his name's Kajkob."

"We'll get you out of here, Captain Gold," she said before turning her attentions back to the still-floating Jakara. "All of you."

## Chapter 19

Latik Kerjna, Drema IV

Uprising Memorial

Day 10

David Gold knelt beside Captain Don Walsh in the open field, both men bowing their heads in respect to the highly-polished terracotta red wall that was covered in inlaid dilithium-crystal glyphs and served as a memorial to those lost during the Dreman uprising.

Grabbing his knotted wood cane—a gift from Liankataka when Pulaski had insisted upon his not putting his full weight on his freshly-knit ankles—he pushed himself back to a standing position. The midday sun was warm, but after ten days either in a hole or in a hospital bed, it felt good to stand outside in the open air. A gentle breeze blew through the distant trees, carrying the verdant smell of the greenery with it.

"Well, Captain," Walsh said, extending a hand toward him. "I hear the Progress is due for reassignment. Same goes for the Trosper."

Resting his weight against the cane, Gold shook the man's hand. "Good people you have there, Captain. Pulaski and Gom both briefed me on how you all worked with my people to get this done. It's going to be a shame to see them reassigned. Any idea where you're going to be posted next?"

Walsh shook his balding head. "Not a one. Waiting on the brass to send me a list of options. I'm not even sure if they're going to let me stay with the S.C.E. There's talk about the S.C.E. getting some of the new Sabre-class ships, though. Might be interesting to command one of those. They've got a little more firepower than the old Oberth-class."

Gold had heard about the Sabre-class project, mostly from a chief engineer who followed the comings and goings on Utopia Planitia like some people followed sporting teams, and while it sounded interesting, what got him more was the idea of a ship filled with predominantly engineers. Sounds like it may be almost as boring as supply runs. But then, after today, I can't think of anyone else I'd want in a pinch. "They really think the Borg'll be back?"

Walsh gave a cynical laugh. "Captain, if the Borg come back, a Sabre is going to need a lot more firepower than it's supposed to carry."

"Then it'll be good they've got so many engineers on board, won't it?" he said, half-smiling.

"Ready to depart, Captain."

Gold and Walsh both watched the tiny Belandrid pull himself up to his full height as he walked up to them and saluted. Gold looked down at the little creature and saluted in return. "Lolo, thank you."

"For what, Captain?"

Gold raised an eyebrow. "Doing your job, I guess."

"You're welcome, sir," Lolo said, inclining his head toward him.

"And thank that chief engineer of yours for coming up with the idea of routing the signal through the duranium reinforcement, Captain. Smart man you have there."

Walsh patted him on the shoulder. "Will do, Captain. Barreto will be glad to hear it. For a bunch of engineers, they're a good crew."

"Captain Gold!"

David Gold turned to find Sarjenka walking toward them, her iridescent white tunic shimmering in the warm midday sun. She was accompanied by an older Dreman couple. The man was sitting in a wheelchair, had no hair, and his left arm was amputated. The woman was pushing the wheelchair. Her parents? My God, that was her father?

"Take care of yourself, Gold," Walsh said. "No matter where you end up, they're getting a good man."

"You, too, Captain. I hope our paths cross again."

Walsh smiled broadly before wandering off toward Barreto and the rest of his crew.



Gold hobbled forward, still not entirely used to using the cane. The ground in the field was more level than not, which helped the walking and, it seemed, piloting the wheelchair.

“Captain Gold,” Sarjenka said, holding her hands out a fingertip’s width over Gold’s shoulders, then running them down his arms. “It’s good to see you up and around after your ordeal.”

Gold looked down at the man in the wheelchair. The man’s face was covered in regenerated skin, which stood out in its slightly paler color than the typical cinnamon-red, especially when he tried to smile. His loose-fitting white trousers and shirt covered what he was sure was more regenerated skin. Pulaski had mentioned that she was going to try to attach a prosthetic arm, but it would take some time to perfect the process. “I could say the same about you. It’s Eliatriel, right?”

“Yes, Captain. My daughter, she—”

“I want to go with you,” Sarjenka said. “I watched Dr. Pulaski healing my father, and I want to learn your ways.”

Gold gave her an appraising look. “Are you sure? It’s not an easy place. You may not pass the entrance exam.”

Her gaze hardened into that same one he’d seen in the cave, when she’d turned from a girl frightened by the fall into a healer sent in to administer first aid. She was resolute in her decision, and Gold got the distinct impression that if he didn’t bring her, she’d badger Lieutenant Xavier to take her to the station and find alternate transport herself.

“All right,” he finally said. “If your parents agree, I’ll take you back to Earth with us. You can take the entrance exam at the facility there.”

The smile that lit her face was one he hadn’t seen since his daughter, Sarah, had been accepted into the conservatory.

He was already composing the letter of recommendation in his head, but he thought for sure he could get at least a couple of more letters out of people.

“Get your things, and meet me at Capital Square in three hours.”

Without even so much as a “good-bye,” she turned and sprinted off.

“Thank you, Captain,” Eliatriel said. “All she’s talked about for the last three days is Dr. Pulaski and your medical facilities. She loves to learn, that one.”

“Well, she’ll learn quite a bit,” Gold said. “There’s a big universe out there.”

## Epilogue

May 2377

Headquarters, Starfleet Medical

David Gold stood in one corner of the reception area, watching the internal broadcast of the ceremonies

with far more interest than he'd ever shown on Drema IV, a fact he found himself regretting more by the day since he found out she was graduating. Eight years is a long damned time. He absently flexed his mechanical left hand. A lot of things can change.

Thanks to what she'd already studied on her home planet when she decided to go to the Academy, she'd been able to test out of a few courses, allowing her to shave almost a year off of her overall stay. Having a recommendation for bravery in the face of credible threat couldn't have hurt, either.

Gold made a mental note to send Liankataka a note thanking him for that memo. Lense needed help. There were no two ways around it. She'd get used to the idea of having an organic assistant CMO eventually.

Sonya Gomez walked up beside him, a small, content smile on her face. He hadn't seen that look on her face for far, far too long. "Bringing back memories, Gomez?"

His first officer nodded. "And none of them good."

"Then why are you smiling?"

She let out a small, nervous laugh. "I think this is the first time we've brought new crew on board, and it wasn't to fill some kind of void. It's about time we brought someone on for a positive reason."

"Huh," Gold said. "I think you're right."

"We don't have much extra space, so we shouldn't make a habit out of it," Gomez quickly added. "We'd end up with people sleeping in the hallways. And you know how well Domenica would take that."

Gold tried his best not to laugh. Instead, he said, "We haven't brought her on board yet, Gomez. The choice is still hers. We're just here to make the offer."

"May I ask you a question, sir?"

"Of course."

He could see Gomez scanning the rest of that year's graduating class. Gold had stopped counting after a while, adjusting his estimate of their numbers to somewhere between "enormous" and "ridiculous."

"Why did you back her application to the Academy?"

"He didn't." Rachel Gilman walked up, a glass of champagne in hand. Her short, graying brown curls still seemed a bit more matronly than the sleeveless, very fitted black dress she'd chosen for the reception. He still knew better than to try to change his wife's mind about anything, however, and hadn't even brought up the subject.

In the corner of his eye, Gold saw Gomez do a double-take. "Her record lists a letter of recommendation from you."

"Oh, I sent a letter of recommendation," he said, "but I wasn't the one who ended up backing her application."

Before Gomez could get another word out, a very familiar face approached. Her already gray curls had

become a little lighter in the intervening years, and a couple more lines had etched themselves into her features, but Katherine Pulaski still looked much the same as when he'd left her on Drema Station years before.

No, she looks happier. Working in that institute must be doing her good.

“Captain Gold. Rabbi Gilman. Good to see you again. Commander Gomez, it's been a long time.”

Gomez shook off the look of surprise. “Dr. Pulaski? What brings you in from the Phlox Institute?”

An enigmatic look spread across the doctor's features. “They asked me to give one of the commencement addresses. What brings the two of you to graduation ceremonies for Starfleet Medical?”

Raising one gray eyebrow, Gold gave Pulaski a sideways glance. Her name had been nowhere to be found on the commencement program. “We're here to discuss a staffing issue with someone.”

Folding her hands behind the small of her back, Pulaski said, “I heard about your CMO, Captain. Good news travels fast. Elizabeth Lense is one of the best we have. Please give her my congratulations on the baby.”

Gomez gave a curt nod. “Of course, Doctor.”

On the monitors, student after student in vivid royal blue commencement robes passed across the dais and received his or her diploma.

“Captain Gold?”

Gold nodded, looking down to find a tiny Belandrid in a formal operations-yellow uniform standing just to Rachel's right. “Lolo? Is that you? How have you been?”

“No problems,” it said, puffing with pride. “Assigned to the Hood now. Deputy Chief Engineer.”

Gold introduced his wife and Commander Gomez to the little creature, and both women seemed intrigued with the Belandrid.

When the graduate finally walked over to them, her blue-and-black dress uniform was immaculate. Her commencement robe was slung over her left arm, and a small etched crystal cylinder was in her right hand. He'd heard they were redesigning the diplomas for both Starfleet Academy and the Medical Academy, but he hadn't yet seen one.

“Blue is your color,” Gold said.

Sarjenka blinked quickly, then snapped to attention, but Gold quickly shushed her with a hand. “This is your graduation,” he said. Quickly checking her uniform collar, he was pleased to see that she'd already attained a junior-grade lieutenant ranking. “Lieutenant,” he added, “how does it feel?”

“Good, sir.”

“Requested assignment to Drema Station, I see? Dr. Klesaris needs help already?” Gold raised an eyebrow and then shot Pulaski a glance. The look he got in return just said, “very funny, now get on with it.”

Sarjenka looked down at the diploma in her hand. “I wanted to take this knowledge back to help my people, Captain. However, I understand that until Starfleet sees fit to allow me to leave, I’m obligated to serve.”

Gold looked over at Gomez and Rachel, who had torn themselves away from asking Lolo questions. Rachel gave him that soft look that she always did when trying to encourage him to go through with something.

“I’m here to offer you an opportunity to go where you’re needed, Lieutenant.”

“Excuse me, sir?”

Raising his eyes back to Sarjenka, he said, “What would you say if I told you we need your help?”

“We, sir? What kind of help do you require?”

Gomez took a step forward. “Theda Vinci’s CMO is expecting a child. She has come up with bad idea after bad idea to try to distract me from the fact that she desperately needs an assistant. We need someone who can stand up to her if necessary, who’ll do what it takes to treat the patient, and who’ll stand up to Captain Gold if he won’t come in for his checkups.”

Gold rolled his eyes at that. “I’ve been in for every one of my checkups, Gomez,” he said, playing along.

“Of course you have, sir.”

Rachel cocked one eyebrow. “And the messages they’ve sent me were nothing but social calls.” Leaning over to Sarjenka, her voice took a more conspiratorial tone. “He may look like a teddy bear, but he hates being poked and prodded. He won’t tell you that, but he does.”

Sarjenka let out a giggle. Pulling herself back together, she said, “Are you asking me to join your crew, sir?”

“That’s what I’m asking, Lieutenant.”

She made a grand show of thinking it over, then smiled as broadly as she had that day he’d agreed to bring her to Earth, and said, “I’d be honored, sir.”

## About the Author

TERRI OSBORNE made her professional fiction writing debut in 2003 with the critically acclaimed “Three Sides to Every Story,” the Jake Sisko and Tora Ziyal story in the *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* tenth-anniversary anthology, *Prophecy and Change*. Her other fiction work includes “‘Q’uandary,” the Selar story in the *Star Trek: New Frontier* anthology *No Limits*; *Star Trek: S.C.E.: Malefactorum*, the landmark fiftieth installment in the series; and “Eighteen Minutes” in the tenth-anniversary anthology *Star Trek: Voyager: Distant Shores*. Beyond that, she is hard at work at more fiction, both in and out of the *Star Trek* universe, including an original dark fantasy novel set in Dublin, Ireland in 1940. Find out more about Terri at her Web site: [www.terriosborne.com](http://www.terriosborne.com).

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