

STAR TREK™

The cover art features a dynamic composition of Star Trek characters. In the foreground, a Klingon warrior with a prominent forehead ridge and blue eyes looks intensely at the viewer. Behind him, a Klingon warrior with a beard and a Klingon warrior in a blue uniform are visible. The background shows a futuristic, metallic environment with blue and grey tones.

S.C.E.

#39

GRAND DESIGNS

Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

S.C.E. concept by John J. Ordover and Keith R. A. DeCandido

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CHAPTER

Now...

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

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

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

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

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

"No response, sir."

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

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

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

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

Oh no.

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

maneuvering the station so that it would fall on or near a populated area...

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, find out,” the captain snapped.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“On-screen,” Gold said.

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

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

“What do you want?” the captain asked.

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

CHAPTER

Three weeks earlier...

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was during initial talks with the Rhaaxan government that Starfleet expressed interest in establishing a base on the system’s fifth planet, where a colony had been founded nearly two centuries earlier. The system’s proximity to Romulan space made it an attractive location for a Starfleet facility that might serve as the base of operations for a new series of observation outposts along the border of Rhaax V, or Numai as it had been named by the colonists, also possessed rich deposits of dilithium and other useful minerals. With all of this on the discussion table, along with the government of Rhaax III’s eagerness to open up trade routes with Starfleet and the Federation, membership and cooperation seemed a certainty.

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

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

Unable to stop himself, Gold chuckled at Marshall’s bold statement. “No disrespect to you

diplomatic prowess, Ambassador, but that's obviously a goal that's easier stated than accomplished. From everything I've seen, the Rhaaxans on both planets appear to be set in their ways."

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

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

Then, the Federation arrived.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He leaned forward until his forearms rested on the conference table. As he did so, he caught himself staring for an extra moment at the prosthetic that had replaced his left hand, lost months earlier during the tragic mission to Galvan VI. The biosynthetic hand looked real, felt real, and was superior to his original hand in every measurable sense, a triumph of biomechanical engineering that had been the best way to provide him with a replacement for the loss he had suffered.

In a similar fashion, it now fell to Marshall and the *da Vinci* crew to craft a solution here, one that

was better than leaving the Rhaaxans to their own devices.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“*Hello, Captain,*” Gomez said. “*I’ve got good news and bad news. We’ve found evidence of advanced biogenics research. Advanced for them, anyway. Their level of technology is rough*”

equivalent to mid-twenty-second-century Earth.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Good luck, the captain mused.

CHAPTER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Randa allowed the security director his jaundiced view, despite the fact it was he who coordinated the ill-fated military action against the colony that had resulted only in a decimation of the Rhaaxian forces not equipped for such an engagement. Shalowon made no secret of his belief that Rhaaxian armies were hamstrung by the reluctance of the assembly to use all military options at their disposal, and his pronouncements of that view only served to turn a wave of popular sentiment against the leaders who authorized the attack. That led to the assembly’s attempt to threaten the colony with a nonexistent biogenic weapon, a threat that was defused by the very Federation officers invited by the assembly to help mediate the whole affair. Randa knew Shalowon remained convinced that the colonists’ fears of biological warfare would have led to the dissolution of the jurisdictional pact and paved the way for Federation admission.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Enough!" Randa surprised herself with the force of her outburst. "I called you here to offer me clear counsel, so set your tempers aside. I recognize now that our rush to threaten the colony was wrong. Regardless of where our research on biogenic agents may be, we have agreed to halt it. This is not the issue at hand now."

Shalowon spoke with a softened tone. "You heard the Starfleet woman as clearly as I did, Prefect. Do you not agree that the issue must be revisited? We must be on the verge of a discovery that will

make the colonists seriously consider our intent to establish our authority there. Continuing our research and reviewing our studies allows us to have the option of force should we need it.”

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

Have we come to this?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Can’t the colonists see how Federation membership is best for us both, Malik?” She was unable

keep the sound of a plea from her voice. “Don’t they understand that benefits are afforded to us both”

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

I wish I knew.

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

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

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

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

Randa kept her eyes on the table and slowly nodded.

But at what cost?

CHAPTER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Duff would have hated this place.

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

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

Okay, too much thinking and not enough eating, Stevens thought as he felt his stomach grumble. He toyed with the idea of trying the purple stuff before him, when a clear voice rose above the surrounding background noise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stevens laughed. “That’s gravy, my dear. I saw someone eating an open-faced sandwich smothered

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