

Star Trek S.C.E. 7
Invincible Book 1

by David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido

approx. 15,000 words

David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido
c/o Spectrum Literary Agency
111 8th Av., Suite 1501
New York, NY 10011
212-691-7556
FAX 212-691-9644

First officer's log, Commander Sonya Gomez, U.S.S. da Vinci, Stardate 53270.2.

I'm leaving the da Vinci.

Luckily, it's only a temporary assignment, to the planet Sarindar. Captain Scott gave me the assignment after we dropped the old Defiant off at Spacedock.

Sarindar's located in a fairly remote region-it'll take a week just to get out there from Earth-but it's in an area of space controlled by the Nalori. That area is pretty much all that stands between the Federation and exploration of Sector 969. I remember when I was on the Enterprise, Command had considered having us map that out, but ultimately decided against it. The Nalori would not permit a Starfleet vessel safe passage through their space, and going around would add several months to the journey.

I told Captain Scott that when we met in his office on Earth. He laughed. "Aye, lassie, the Nalori are a right unpleasant bunch. There was a border clash with 'em a couple hundred years ago-that was before even my time. We gave 'em a good punch to the nose, and they went back to their space with their tails between their legs. They haven't been too keen on the Federation ever since."

"So what's changed?" I asked him.

"The usual. They need our help."

The captain called up a holographic projection of Sarindar. As he spoke, the image rotated, then went in for a close view of a section of the surface. The entire planet appeared to be made of crystal. I can't wait to see what it looks like in person.

"Sarindar's completely scan- and transporter-proof thanks to an element called chimerium."

That surprised me. "Really?"

"You know of it, then?"

I nodded. "It's a composite of magnesite and kelbonite. They've found minute traces here and there, but--"

"Well, Sarindar's loaded with it, and the Nalori are tryin' to make use of it."

"You'd need to refine it first, but how can they mine it? It's much too dense to move manually. I don't know of any ship that could achieve escape velocity with a significant amount on board. You can't transport it, you couldn't get a lock. I don't think even a dimensional shifter would work." I ran a bunch of

possibilities in my head, then remembered a paper I'd done at the Academy. "Wait a minute, if you can put together a subspace accelerator to push it with a quick warp pulse-

Captain Scott smiled that avuncular smile of his. "Congratulations, lassie-you've worked out in two minutes what it took those bloody Nalori a couple centuries to figure out. In fact, they already designed themselves a subspace accelerator. But they're fallin' behind schedule, and there's a lotta bugs in the system. So they asked for Starfleet's help.

"Thing is, they still dinna like the Federation very much, and they like Starfleet even less. So they'll only let us send one person-in order, if y'can believe it, to 'minimize cultural contamination.' As if contamination is what they're worried out." He shook his head. "The good news is that the one person'll be in charge of the whole kit and kaboodle."

"And I'm supposed to be the one person?"

"Aye." Scott nodded. "And ye'll be in charge. The last supervisor quit in disgust, so that's where there's a vacancy, an' they figured they'd be better off with Starfleet's help at the very top. I've read that paper y'wrote about subspace accelerators-that's why I recommended you specifically."

That threw me for a loop. I never thought that Montgomery Scott, of all people, would find some old Academy paper of mine to be of the least interest. "Really, sir?"

Laughing, he said, "Aye, really. Thought it was brilliant, actually. Why d'ye think I recommended you to David back when he was trolling for someone to head up his S.C.E. team after poor Commander Salek died in the war?"

He not only read my Academy paper, it was what led him to recommend me to Captain Gold for the da Vinci. Wonders upon wonders. "I-I didn't know that, sir."

"Well, now you do."

We went over the other details of the mission. In addition to the chimerium problem, Sarindar is also in a star system that is home to a quasar/pulsar pair that interferes with communications and navigation. "Ye'll only be able t'send messages from the surface once every fourteen hours or so. For that matter, ye'll only be able to do any useful testing during those windows."

The biggest annoyance, though, was the revelation that the Nalori are a bit-well, backward about gender roles. The engineering team consists of several civilians made up of numerous Nalori races, all male.

Women don't do this sort of work in Nalori society.

"Wonderful," I said. "So you're asking me to lead a team that hates Starfleet, hates the Federation, and hates women?"

For the first time, Captain Scott sounded like a captain when he asked, "Is that a problem, Commander?"

"No, sir," I said with full confidence. "I can handle it."

The avuncular smile came back, and he sounded like an engineer again. "That's what I like to hear. You'll be headin' out with the da Vinci to Starbase 96, where you'll meet up with a civilian ship, the Culloden. It'll take ye the rest of the way."

Then Captain Scott put his hand on my shoulder. "I can't emphasize how important this mission is, lassie. The Nalori have been showin' us their backs for almost two centuries. This is the first time they've extended a hand. We may finally get the chance to explore Sector 969, and this is our first chance to study chimerium up close." The captain had that glint in his eye that Lt. Commander Duffy once described as the "new toy to play with" look. And he was right-chimerium has uncounted tactical uses, particularly against a technologically superior foe like the Borg or the Dominion.

"Don't worry, sir. I won't let you down."

"Of that, Commander, I have very little doubt. Now, be off with you. I've got an appointment."

We're now en route to Starbase 96. I've been studying everything there is to know about the Nalori in general and Sarindar in particular-which, unfortunately, isn't much. The latest updates on the Sarindar Project are two months old, and the information in the cultural database is sketchy at best. I'm going to have a talk with our cultural specialist, Carol Abramowitz, before we reach the starbase to go over some of this. One interesting thing-while the nation is called the Nalori Republic, the Nalori race is only one of the five members of that republic. And it looks like the work crew has representatives from all five.

The design of the SA is generally sound, but they've overdesigned it to an appalling degree, and some aspects of the engineering are, to be blunt, wrong and will need to be fixed posthaste. It's going to be a challenge to get the project up to speed, but I'm looking forward to it.
Personal log, Commander Sonya Gomez, U.S.S. da Vinci, Stardate 53271.5.

I think I need to kill Kieran.

Before the mess with the Defiant and the Tholians, we hit the latest in a series of landmines regarding our relationship.

If you can call it that.

What we had on the Enterprise was wonderful, while it lasted. When I transferred off, though, we weren't really able to keep it up, and since we got thrown together on the da Vinci again, it's been one awkward moment after another. When we're on duty, everything's fine, but the minute we see each other in the mess hall it gets-well, messy.

But then he had command of the da Vinci against the Tholians when Captain Gold and I were on the Defiant, and he did great. I'm happy for him, honestly-it's been a shot in the arm to his confidence, and one he really needed, to be honest.

The thing is-he's getting more aggressive with me. Yesterday we went over the duty rosters for when I'd be gone, and he sat closer to me than usual-his hand brushed against mine more than once, too. When some minor crisis in engineering came up, he suggested finishing in his quarters later-which he's never done before, not even when we were actually dating on the Enterprise. But then, it was easier to keep business and a personal life separate on a Galaxy-class ship. The da Vinci is a much smaller-more intimate-ship.

I think he wants to start up what we had on the Enterprise again, and I just don't know if I can handle that. For one thing, I'm his CO. And look at what we do. What if I'd been trapped in that dimensional rift or on Eerlik's moon? What if the da Vinci had been destroyed by the Tholians or the Pevvni or Friend or the Androssi?

What if I had to order him to go to his death?

But the last couple of days, he's been sniffing around me like my brother's dog when he was in heat. And I just can't give him an answer yet.

We'll be at Starbase 96 tomorrow, so at least I can get away from him-and he'll be in charge of the S.C.E. team while I'm gone, so he can put that newfound confidence to good use.

Sooner or later, though, I'm going to have to deal with this.

Later. Definitely later.

Personal log, Commander Sonya Gomez, S.S. Culloden, Stardate 53273.9.

This may be the most beautiful sight I've ever seen.

We're just starting to descend into Sarindar's atmosphere on the Culloden. The ship is owned by Zilder, a Bolian who was hired by the Nalori to ferry people to and from the surface, and perform various other technical and administrative tasks for the project. When I asked him how a Bolian contrived to get a ship named after a place on Earth, he just smiled and said, "Ho'nig will provide."

That's the really odd thing about Zilder. Ho'nig is the collective god of the Damiani, a humanoid three-gendered Federation species. I didn't think that anyone off of Damiano worshipped their god. It wouldn't bother me, except Zilder spent the first day of our trip trying to convince me to convert. After over twenty hours of his missionary zeal, I'd convinced him that my religion was none of his business, and he let up. If he hadn't, he'd be easy enough to avoid the Culloden is built to transport up to three hundred people, so with just the two of us, it's pretty roomy.

But I was talking about Sarindar.

From space, the planet looks mostly white, almost like it's a big snowball flying through the night. As you get into orbit, it starts to look more like a jewel-at the right time of day, from the right orbit, you can see glints and reflections. According to what I've read, the plant and animal life is all silicon-based, and the vast majority of it is crystalline.

We're descending now, and it's even more amazing than I could've believed. When you come out of the reddish-purple layer of clouds, you look up and see an orange sky. As expected, the delicate flora is photosynthetic living crystal. What I didn't realize is that the ground is also made up of similar substances jagged plains of diamond spikes, quartz-and-topaz mountains, and forests of amethyst. The water of the streams and rivers that I can see from the Culloden's viewport are sparkling and crystal-clear (literally!). Now we're flying in closer, and I can see some animals that I recognize from the file-a shii drinking from a stream, a meir gliding through the air, a pack of kliyor running into the forest.

The suns are starting to set, so the shadows and the reflections are especially spectacular, with colors bursting from all the crystalline flora.

Intellectually, I expected this to be a lovely planet, but I had no idea it was going to be this beautiful.

Ah, now, we're seeing something less beautiful the work site for the SA. The prominent feature of the site is the perfectly circular, two-hundred-meter-diameter, concave dish. In the center is an opening roughly four meters wide. The surface of the dish is incomplete, just an empty skeletal framework. Turning it into a full dish is part of what I need to accomplish here. The site's also dotted in many places by slender metallic towers that hold sensor palettes. The long shadows cast by the suns setting make it look very eerie.

We're about to land. I think I'm looking forward to this.

Supplemental, planet Sarindar.

I'm now settled in my tent. That's right, tent. I'm in a canvas tent. Not even a proper Starfleet shelter, but a tent.

I don't even know where to start. The equipment that I've seen is old and horribly maintained. Old, I can live with-since joining the S.C.E., I've dealt with everything ranging from three-thousand-year-old computers to hundred-year-old starships to state-of-the-art Androssi security devices-it's the badly maintained part that's going to cause headaches. The only weapons on the planet are sonic pistols and rifles that look like they're about a thousand years old. Light-based directed-energy weapons would be tantamount to suicide on a planet with so much crystalline flora and fauna-the beams would refract all over the place-so I didn't even take a phaser with me, though I did bring a Starfleet-issue sonic rifle as a backup. We're not likely to need weapons, but it's good to be prepared-especially given the unfortunate state of the Nalori's armament.

They don't have food replicators-the food is all cooked with these chemical stoves that don't work half the time. The food is stored in freezer units that also don't work half the time, so a lot of it is spoiled. In fact, Zilder had picked up some fresh food when he went to get me at the starbase-it got a much better reception than I did.

Which leads me to the workers themselves. As expected, they're a mix, but most of them are either Nalori or Osina. The Nalori are humanoid, with skin tones ranging from medium ash gray to almost charcoal. Their eyes, by contrast, are uniformly black, with no apparent pupils. They practice a form of ritual scarring of the forearms and face-according to the database, this marks rites of passage like adolescence, adulthood, marriage, birth of sons, veneration of elders, and so on, which Carol confirmed. Most of the men are bald, though I have no idea if that's biology or fashion, with long braided chin-beards of pale violet hair.

And they hate my guts.

Okay, maybe that's a little harsh, but when Zilder introduced me to the foreperson-a large man named Kejahna-I could feel the disdain oozing out of his pores.

The only one who wasn't hostile was Razka. He showed me to my tent-my tent!-and said he'd be serving as liaison between me and the workers. He seems nice enough-at least he didn't glare at me-so maybe this won't be so bad. And, since I'm both in charge and the only woman, I get my own tent. Every other tent has four people in it. Lucky me.

I'm going to try to get some sleep then see what I can do in the morning. But I already miss the da Vinci.

First officer's log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53274.1.

My first day on Sarindar was spent being given a tour of the SA site by Razka-after a breakfast of cold oatmeal because the main cooking unit broke down, and I didn't think to bring my own stove.

The design flaws that I found in the specs for the SA are exacerbated by shoddy work, and a backwards method of implementation. The first thing I did was order the detail assigned to construct the tubing for the delivery system to stop that and help in the digging of the hole for the antimatter reactor. The warp pulse is going to require the most testing, and it needs to be in place long before the tubing has to be finished. Kejahna wasn't happy about this, and the workers even less so-digging is much harder work, after all-but they agreed.

Another problem are the antigrav units, which are slow and go offline regularly, which slows the work down. After pointing this out to me, Razka said, "Welcome to Sarindar. This is the worst place in the galaxy. Nothing works here."

"That's going to change," I said, and proceeded to stop the tour, sit down, and look at one of the the antigravs.

"It's pointless, you know," Razka said cheerfully. "We've poked and prodded that thing for days at a time. Everything's in working order, it just doesn't work. This planet is cursed, you see."

"I don't believe in curses. I do, however, believe in faulty diagnostic routines."

Razka frowned at that. "What?"

"The diagnostic routine's all messed up. It's in test mode." I put the diagnostic program into the right mode, and it started listing all the things that were wrong with the unit. "They're probably all like this."

I called the assistant foreperson, J'Roh, over. J'Roh was a member of the Osina, an insectoid race-nothing like the Nasats, though. They have large compound eyes, tentacles instead of the more arm-like extremities that P8 Blue has, and six rather than eight of those extremities. None of them have Pattie's sparkling personality, either. The one trait they share with Nasats, though, is the ability to stand upright on their hind legs.

"This antigrav's diagnostic program's in test mode. So probably are the others. Fix that, then you'll know how to fix the units themselves. I want a detail assigned to take care of this."

J'Roh's voice sounded like a bird's angry chirp after a predator attacked its nest. "It still won't work."

"Maybe not, but you're going to do it anyway."

"Why should I?"

Before I could reply, Razka said, "Because if you do what she says and it still doesn't work, you'll prove that you're right, and that you're the smart one."

Amazingly enough, that seemed to work. J'Roh didn't say anything, but did start working on the unit. He didn't actually pull a detail together, but I decided to take what I could get.

My next task was to streamline the construction of the magnetic containment unit, which should have been done by now. The workers assigned to that task were about as receptive to my orders as J'Roh, but they went ahead and implemented the new duty schedule.

Finally, I went to the camp hospital to meet the doctor, a Gallamite man named Dolahn. Apparently, he was hired by the Nalori government because of his work with silicon-based life forms.

This assignment is proving to be much more challenging than I thought, but I'm confident that with Razka's help, I can accomplish our goal.

Personal log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53274.1.

Dolahn may be an expert in silicon-based life, but he needs some work on the carbon-based variety. The hospital-which is a solid, if crudely built structure-is full of people with either minor viral ailments (inevitable in a cross-species environment like this, especially since the Nalori aren't up to Federation medical standards) or work-related injuries.

(Annoyingly, half the injuries were sustained thanks to the faulty antigrav units, which wouldn't have happened if any of these idiots had the brains to notice that the diagnostics were in the wrong mode.)

The first time I met a Gallamite was on the Sentinel. I knew that they were basically humanoid, but with

much larger brains. What I had not known until that day on the Sentinel was that you could see that brain-their craniums are transparent.

Dolahn was shorter than the other Gallamite I'd met, and he wore a hat-Razka told me later that it was at the request of Kejahna. "He gave the doctor two choices," Razka told me, "wear a hat to hide the brain or have the brain removed by hand. Dr. Dolahn wisely chose the former option."

"So," the doctor said when Razka introduced us, "you're the new boss. Welcome to hell, Commander Gomez."

"Thanks," I said dryly. "Nice place you have here."

"Yes, finest medical facility on the planet-primarily by dint of being the only medical facility on the planet. My best advice to you, Commander, is not to ever, under any circumstances, get sick."

What comforting words from the local physician.

Zilder was also in the hospital, putting pressure on a small wound he'd gotten when realigning one of the sensor towers. He pulled me aside and said, "You know why Dr. See-Through Skull is here? Because no decent hospital in the Federation or anywhere else would take him. I only came here today because-while my faith in the great god Ho'nig keeps me strong-this is the only place with bandages." With that he smiled.

I smiled back, but it was difficult. The hospital is at about the level of a twenty-second-century colony hospital. They even have, believe it or not, an X-ray machine. I was half expecting to see a suture kit, but Dolahn at least has a dermal regenerator.

By the time I left the hospital, the suns had set, and the day's work was done. Sarindar looks a lot different at night. During the day, it's one of the most beautiful sights in the galaxy. The crystalline trees and bushes stretch into the sky and shine in the sunlight. The prismatic effects are glorious. At the right angle, you can see a tremendous spectrum burst-rainbows without rain. It's a streak of colors from red to violet, flying off into the sky. I have to admit that I spent a lot of time this first day letting myself get distracted by the colors and the bright beauty of it all.

At night, though, it doesn't look like much of anything. Sarindar doesn't have a moon, so the only illumination is provided by the stars and by the dull lanterns that had been issued to the work camps. I wish I'd thought to bring some Starfleet lamps, which would have illuminated the whole place, and perhaps glinted off the plants and ground, but the only one I have is attached to my sonic rifle. The Nalori lanterns cast the dullest of yellow glows-they seem to wash all the life out of the planet.

Or maybe it's the workers themselves. They sit outside their tents-tents-and eat, drink, play cards, tell stories, but there's no enthusiasm. Nobody is ever smiling. The stories I catch snatches of all sound depressing. The drunk ones are all melancholy, and the hungry ones only seem to be eating to sustain themselves (though, given the quality of the food, that's probably all you can expect).

And they all look at me with contempt as I walk by. I wonder how much of it is because I'm Starfleet and how much is because I'm a woman.

Not that it matters. I'm going to do this job, dammit. I've never failed an assignment yet, I'm not about to start now.

Personal log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53274.9.

It's amazing what you can accomplish by fixing an antigrav unit.

J'Roh skittered to my tent about ten minutes ago and said, "It works."

"What works?" I asked him.

"The load-lifter. I fixed everything the diagnostic program said was wrong with it. And it works."

"That's kind of how it goes, J'Roh-that's what diagnostic programs are for."

"Maybe for you, but that's never happened here."

"Did you fix the other units?"

J'Roh chirped. "No. I only just finished repairing the one you told me to fix."

"It took all day?"

"There were a great many things wrong with it-and, to be honest, I'd never fixed one before. Usually we would just smack it on the side."

I put my head in my hands. "What about the rest of them?"

"I fixed all the diagnostic routines on them-that was pretty easy, actually-and I assigned a detail to fix them first thing in the morning."

Probably the same detail I wanted to fix the antigravs in the first place. The point is, they all should be functioning within the next twenty-eight hours.

I needed that boost after the day I had, though. I went with Razka to check up on the detail that I reassigned from tubing construction to digging-turns out nine of them called in sick.

I went to Kejahna to ask him about this. He stands at almost two meters tall, and has arms roughly the size of warp nacelles. He has more scars on his face and arms than any of the other Nalori in the workforce. Part of me is curious as to what led to that, but most of me thinks I'm better off not knowing. In any case, when I asked him about all the sick people, he said, "Oh yes, they've all come down with Dakota's Disease. It's been going around. They'll be out for at least a day or two."

Dakota's Disease is a minor respiratory problem-not even a disease, really, more of a viral infection, but the doctor who discovered it was named Dakota, and the name stuck-that shouldn't even be enough to keep people off work. It is very easy, however, to fake the symptoms, especially with the substandard medical equipment in Dolahn's hospital.

In other words, the perfect thing for a "sick-out." The erstwhile tubing detail didn't want to dig, so they decided to make themselves sick to get out of working at something they didn't like. It's a particularly immature form of protest, and it wasn't something I was going to stand for.

"Dakota's Disease?" I said with as much shock as I could muster. "I'll need their names right away." I started inputting commands into my padd. "They'll each need to be isolated in separate tents for fifty-six hours."

"Excuse me?"

"Standard quarantine procedure," I said offhandedly. "We'll have to set aside nine tents for them each to stay in. Someone will have to be assigned to take them meals. Oh, and of course, the tent assignments will have to be rearranged, but it should only discommode a few dozen people, and I'm sure they won't mind for the good of the project. I mean, we wouldn't want them all to come down with this, would we? Besides, those tents can easily accommodate seven or eight people each instead of the four they have now."

In fact, the tents can barely fit four, and Kejahna knew it.

"Oh," I added, "and they won't be able to take their personal items with them when they switch tents. Too much risk of spreading the infection."

"That won't be necessary," Kejahna said. "This happens all the time."

"So did inefficient work, bad design, and poor scheduling. That's all changing, and so's this. Now I want each of those nine to report to the hospital, and once Dr. Dolahn has verified that they each have Dakota's, I want them each isolated in separate tents for fifty-eight hours, as per Starfleet Quarantine Regulation 471946A, Paragraph 9, Subsection C. If they don't have Dakota's, I want them back at work immediately. Are we clear, Kejahna?"

An interesting thing I've observed about a race with no discernible pupils is that they're not nearly as good at menacing stares as races who do. Nevertheless, Kejahna's expression was not a particularly pleasant one.

He finally said, "Very clear, Commander. I will let you know what the doctor tells me about their medical status."

"I'm sure you will."

Kejahna walked off. Razka looked at me with a smile on his face. "You remembered that regulation number from memory. I'm impressed."

I smiled. "Don't be. I made it up."

Completely deadpan, Razka said, "I'm shocked that you would do such a thing, Commander. Simply shocked."

I laughed at that, and then went on with the inspection.

Not surprisingly, by the end of the day, all of the digging detail had reported to work. Of course, they

were even more behind, but one takes what one can get.

Personal log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53277.1.

J'Roh now thinks I'm the most amazing thing he's ever seen, and has been telling anyone who'll listen-and many who won't-about how I lifted the curse on this planet. He started calling me "Sauul," which sounds similar to my given name and is Nalori for "curse-lifter."

It took his detail until noon yesterday to get all the antigravs fixed, but they did it. The units continued to work flawlessly all afternoon and all day today-which, as far as I can tell, is the longest they've gone so far without any one of them breaking down since the project started. I'm fairly confident that we'll be back on schedule within a day or two.

This has impressed some of the workers. Not all of them, mind you. The ones who tried the "sick out" still glare at me dolefully (though, at least they're almost done with the digging-it should be complete in time for tomorrow's test of the antimatter reactor). Kejahna also keeps glowering at me. Many others, though, have joined J'Roh in calling me "Sauul," and even smiling at me occasionally.

Of course, I didn't lift any curses, really, I just applied myself to the task. But the Nalori seem to believe in curses-and who knows? Maybe in some bizarre sort of way, I did actually lift a curse. Zilder keeps smiling and saying, "Ho'nig works in very bizarre ways," and who am I to argue?

But then, maybe I'm feeling whimsical after the story Razka told me tonight. We were sitting outside my tent (and no, I still can't get over the fact that I'm sleeping in a tent) sharing a particularly tepid supper of mashed vixpril-a root from the Nalori homeworld that's probably a delicacy when prepared right.

"There are legends of a monster, you see. There are animals here called the shii."

I told him I remembered reading about them in the mission briefing-and seeing them on the way down, for that matter. Four-legged creatures of solid crystal, they're predators, but not particularly harmful to carbon-based life, since they can only digest other silicon-based life. Kind of the local equivalent of lions or sharks.

"Ah yes, but you see," Razka explained, "there is the monster shii."

"Monster," I said dubiously.

Razka's voice started taking on a singsong quality, and he set aside his own bowl of vixpril. "The monster comes after those who would dare to try to tame Sarindar. All those who have come have been slain by the great beast, who claims the heads of the invaders as its prize."

"You're kidding, right?" I said as I washed down the vixpril with some mineral water.

Shrugging, Razka said, "That is the story, anyhow. It is why there have been so few expeditions to this world."

"I thought it was because of the chimerium and the suns."

Again, Razka shrugged. "Well, they complicated things-it makes the world hard to function in. The natural beauty attracted many, but they stayed away because of the stories of the monster shii."

"That's crazy."

Razka grinned. "Of course it's crazy. If it wasn't, you would not be here, Sauul."

Groaning, I said, "Please don't call me that."

"But it's true. There may not be any monster shii, but this place was cursed until you arrived."

"It's nothing any competent engineer couldn't have done. I'm much more interested in getting the antimatter reactor online."

"A task for tomorrow, to be sure. Unless," he said with a mischevious smile, "the monster shii attacks us in our sleep."

"Ri-ight."

"Oh come now, don't humans tell fanciful stories before going to sleep?"

"Actually, we do. Particularly around campfires. Or the equivalent," I added, pointing at the stove.

"My father often told me stories like that. I sometimes tell them to my children-including ones about the monster shii."

"How many children do you have?"

"Seventeen."

I almost dropped my spoon. He didn't seem to be old enough to have sired that many kids, and I said so.

"Well, it's much easier when you have five wives."

"Five."

"Yes."

"O-o-o-okay."

For some reason, the Nalori tradition of polygamy didn't come up in the cultural database I was given.

"It must be terrible for you to be so far away from them for so long," I said.

"Not really. In fact, it's something of a relief. I never really considered myself the marrying type."

"Then why'd you do it five times?"

"Oh, it has to do with one's status. The more important you are, the more wives you have-except, of course, it doesn't really work like that, you just accumulate wives to make yourself look more important.

And besides, we have to propagate the species. Much easier to do that this way."

I put down my vixpril unfinished. "If you say so."

"I say so."

Zilder came over and joined us. "Commander, don't you like your vixpril?"

"I'm just not that hungry."

He smiled. "That's because your spirit is empty. You need to fill it with the love of Ho'nig."

Razka good-naturedly let loose with a couple of epithets in the Nalori language. Zilder just laughed it off.

"You are impure, my friend, and that is a shame." He held up a small book with a cracked leather binding. The pages were dog-eared. "This is a copy of the Se'rbeq. There's a passage in particular I'd like to read to you, if I may." He opened up the book and flipped to a particular page.

I yawned and said, "Zilder, my religious beliefs are just that-mine, and none of your business. And while I'm sure the Se'rbeq is a fascinating read, I'm about ready for bed."

Undaunted, Zilder turned to Razka. "And what of you, my good friend?"

He yawned. "I also say that it is time for sleep. Good night, Sauul."

I wished him a good night, and he went off to the tent he shared with several other workers.

Zilder put his book away and scratched the ridge that bifurcated his face. "You wait, Commander. I'll save your soul before this project is done, and Razka's as well, I promise you that."

"Good luck," I said with a laugh, wondering what Ho'nig's views on polygamy were. Given that the Damiani have three genders and tend toward trios rather than couples, I suspect that they might be lenient. Pity-it'd be an easy out for Razka.

In any case, after wishing Zilder good night, I climbed into my tent and started this personal log.

Tomorrow, we'll tackle the antimatter reactor. I'm looking forward to it.

First officer's log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53276.9.

The test of the antimatter reactor was a qualified success. (Results appended.) The injectors are not at one hundred percent, and they need to be. If there's even the slightest imbalance, the warp pulse will be uneven, and the chimerium will get shot sideways or back down into the planet's surface, which could cause incalculable damage.

I was hoping to do a test of the SA within the next two days, but until the reactor is at peak, we can't risk it.

The good news is that the dish should be completed within those two days, even if we aren't ready for the first test yet. Morale has been steadily improving-the fact that the antigravs function is the primary reason, I would say-although the crew that has been transferred to digging details has been slow and malingering. Despite these problems, I believe we can complete our mission in a timely fashion.

Personal log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53276.9.

Zilder came to me first thing this morning and didn't have a word to say about Ho'nig. He did, however, have a lot to say on the subject of the ability of the antigravs to move the materials for the reactor.

"They can't do it?" I asked, incredulous.

"They can't do it on time," he said. "At least not just two of them. There's no way we'll be able to have

the thing completely assembled in time for the window."

All the testing is being done during the window when the suns calm down enough to allow outside contact. Sarindar has a twenty-eight-hour day-the windows are at high noon and midnight, and they only last from thirteen to twenty-two minutes.

I took out a padd and tried to see if there was some way to juggle the antigravs so that I could reassign one of them to Zilder, but they were all needed for other tasks-now that they were all actually working, every subsection had great use for them, and I didn't want anyone to lose their sudden enthusiasm for working. It was the only way to get anything significant accomplished.

Kejahna walked over then. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Zilder seems to think that you can't get the antimatter reactor online in time for the window to open at noon."

Kejahna looked down at Zilder. "Really?"

Zilder swallowed. "Not with only the two antigravs. See, we-"

"It'll get done," Kejahna interrupted. "If the antigravs can't handle it, we'll use our hands. Don't worry, Commander." And, for the first time since I landed, Kejahna smiled.

I smiled back. "What, me worry?"

Zilder looked at both of us like we were crazy, and then said, "Ho'nig help us all."

Still smiling at me, Kejahna said, "Ho'nig helps those who help themselves."

I got distracted by other things until 1355 hours-five minutes to noon, local time, meaning it was almost time for the test-and I went to the reactor. Zilder informed me that it was ready. With the suns at their apogee causing a cascade of colors in the trees, I ordered the test begun. The full results are attached to my officer's log.

I looked over at Kejahna, who just gave me a knowing smile that seemed to say, We used our hands. Some work needs to be done on the reactor, but at least I'm making progress-both with the accelerator and with the workers. I'll whip these guys into shape yet.

Transcript of tricorder recording by Commander Sonya Gomez, camp hospital, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53277.5.

GOMEZ Okay, Rimlek, tell me exactly what happened.

RIMLEK We were just-just sleeping. It-it all happened so-so fast. One minute, we're sleeping, the next, this-this-this thing is tearing us to shreds! We were-we were just lying there-sleeping, you know.

Suddenly, I hear this noise, like something's tearing. Doesn't sound like anything you usually hear, so I wake up-and just then, this big, I don't know, claw thing was ripping through the tent. It was terrible, it-

GOMEZ What did it look like?

RIMLEK It was-it was-it was like a whole bunch of crystal triangles. The head, all four claws, body, tail-they were all pointed at the end and flat on top.

GOMEZ A shii.

RIMLEK No! I mean, yes, it was like a shii, but-Commander, this was twice the size of any shii I've seen. I've-I've been on this planet since the project s-started a year ago, and-and I'm telling you, this was no-no shii. I've never s-seen anything this-this vicious. It-it tore through Saolhud like he was nothing. Nothing! It was terrible! And-and then it went after Kani and smashed his skull like it was a piece of fruit and then it sliced Mokae's head clean off and then it turned to me and I've never been so scared in my life and it came after me and those claws and those claws and those claws and please don't hurt me, don't hurt me, don't hurt me!

DOLAHN That's enough, Commander! He's going into shock-and Kani is already in a coma from blood

loss.

GOMEZ Report, Doctor.

DOLAHN Well, Saolhud and Mokae are quite dead-assuming it is them, since they're missing their heads. I'm going to go out on a limb and list the cause of death as decapitation.

GOMEZ What can you tell me about the wounds?

DOLAHN Aside from the fact that they were vicious?

GOMEZ Do they match what Rimlek said? Could a shii have caused this?

DOLAHN One with a massive glandular disorder, perhaps.

GOMEZ Doctor

DOLAHN I'm simply telling you what I saw. Yes, these wounds could have been made by a shii, but only one that was several times larger than any one that has ever been reported. I know whereof I speak, Commander. The shii and the other silicon-based life on this planet are my specialty, and I can assure you that this is not a shii found in nature.

KEJAHNA It's a monster shii, then.

GOMEZ Oh, come on.

KEJAHNA That's what the legends say, yes?

DOLAHN I wouldn't know. I don't pay attention to children's stories.

KEJAHNA Obviously, Doctor, they are not stories. We need to kill this thing.

GOMEZ Don't be ridiculous. Tell me, Doctor, are there shii on any other world besides this one?

DOLAHN No.

GOMEZ And when was the last time that anyone did an anthropological survey of this world prior to the start of this project?

DOLAHN Well, it's been about five hundred years-

GOMEZ And how detailed was that survey?

DOLAHN Well Look, I'm telling you that-

GOMEZ You're telling me that your "expertise" is at least five hundred years out of date. Which means it's quite possible that this is a normal evolutionary step for the shii.

KEJAHNA We still need to hunt it down.

GOMEZ Why?

KEJAHNA It attacked for no reason!

GOMEZ We don't know that. Rimlek was asleep when it attacked-and shii generally only attack when they're provoked. For all we know, Saolgud or Mokae or Kani did something to provoke it.

KEJAHNA They also attack for sustenance.

DOLAHN That wouldn't matter. They could no more consume carbon-based life for food than you or I could have a Spican flame gem for lunch.

KEJAHNA So are you saying we do nothing?

GOMEZ Of course not-but we don't need to hunt it down. We'll just improve our defenses. This encampment doesn't have any kind of protection against local fauna attacking-mainly because nobody expected it to. Have the rest of Saolgud's detail construct a fence around the perimeter.

KEJAHNA That will put us behind schedule again.

GOMEZ That detail's already lost four people, they were going to be behind schedule anyhow. And I'd rather play it safe in case the shii decides it wants to finish the job. Make sure the fence is electrified.

KEJAHNA This is a mistake, Commander.

DOLAHN If you two are finished posturing at each other, would you mind getting out of my hospital and letting my patients rest? Thank you.

Letter from Kejahna on Sarindar to Revodro on Nalor, fifth day of Sendrak, twenty-third year of Togh

My son

Your mother told me in her last letter that you are walking and talking now. This is good.

I am writing this letter to you so you know what it is that your father is doing away from you in this formative time of your life.

My work has taken me to the cursed planet of Sarindar. Perhaps your mother has told you stories of Sarindar. Well, they are all true. This is an evil place. Or, at least, it was.

Our government did not think it was ever a cursed land, but that those were simply stories to frighten children such as yourself. They told us that we were to come to this home of evil and construct machines that will mine the planet. There is an element here that is called chimerium. Supposedly, harvesting this element will make our government rich.

I suppose that it so, but I doubt that I will see any of those riches. Our wages are above standard, but nothing compared to what the government will reap from our labors. That is, it seems, the way of things-and it is worth it, perhaps, to make sure that you and all your brothers and sisters have a better life.

It has been worth it for other reasons, too. I have seen things that I thought I would never live to see. When I was your age, my father and mothers told me many stories to both frighten and excite me-no doubt, your mothers are doing likewise. Perhaps they have told you of the monster shii, or of the saul that can lift curses and bring the light.

I have seen both these things.

In order to explain how I have seen these things, I must first tell you about Commander Gomez. She was sent by the Federation. I'm sure you've heard stories about them, too. The evil empire who fought us three ages ago and demolished our fleet. To be honest, my son, when I heard that they were sending someone from that foul nation, I almost quit. I only did not because I knew that I would be blacklisted

from this kind of work-not only would the government never hire me, but neither would anyone else. I have my family to think of. So I stayed.

Our last supervisor was a good man by the name of Nalag. At least, he was a good man when we first came here. He had every intention of making this project work. He was a sensible man, who had a good plan for the machine we are building. He was also a calm, well-adjusted man, who always kept his beard short and neatly braided.

By the time he quit, he was a wreck. He screamed constantly. His beard had become a long, tangled mess that he didn't even bother to braid. He talked to himself.

Sarindar had destroyed him.

I feared that it would destroy all of us.

And then, then the government informed us that Nalag would be replaced by someone from the Federation.

Worse, a woman from the Federation.

For a woman to supervise a man's work is absurd. But I remembered you, my son, and the rest of the family, and I persevered.

When Commander Gomez arrived, she immediately set about to destroy Nalag's work. This offended me even more than her presence. She spit on the work of a good man. It was not Nalag's fault that this place is cursed, and his methods were good and fair.

Then she did something truly astounding.

She fixed the load-lifters.

You see, my son, the load-lifters were the true embodiment of the curse of Sarindar. They would not work. We tried everything we could to fix them, but still they would not work.

The woman had not been here an entire day before she solved the problem of the load-lifters. Since she worked her magic, they have consistently worked. My assistant, J'Roh, called her "Sauul" after that, and I was half-tempted to go along with it.

But I could not. She was still a woman, still from the Federation, and still spitting on the memory of the noble Nalag. This was made worse when she tried to use her Federation trickery on the workers who staged a simple protest.

All that, however, changed today.

I know what you are thinking right now. "When is he going to tell me about the monster shii?" Patience, my son.

Two days ago, four men were attacked in their sleep by a creature that one of them described as a monster shii.

Yes, that's right. It is real.

I can see your mothers now. They are all probably reading this and making disapproving sounds about how Kejahna is filling his son's head with insane stories.

And perhaps the two men who survived were telling absurd tales about the creature that wounded them and killed their comrades.

Yes, my son. The creature killed them.

I know this is harsh, but there is nothing to be gained by hiding behind euphemism. Two of my men were dead, two others badly injured. And the injured ones claimed it was a monster shii.

In any case, I soon learned the truth.

Either way, though-whether it was truly a monster shii or simply some other vicious animal-I knew we had to hunt this creature down. Commander Gomez said no to that, simply said to construct an electrified fence-which we did. But I knew that it would not be enough. I assumed that Commander Gomez, being only a woman, did not understand these things.

Today, Commander Gomez and I were discussing some aspect of the work when we heard a loud noise. We ran to the source of the noise, which was on the perimeter near the electric fence we had built. The first thing we saw was that the fence itself had been damaged-broken by something that ripped through it. There were pieces of the fence's structure inside the encampment-meaning that whatever broke the fence, did so by coming in from the outside. Since no one was allowed outside the camp

without permission (and they could not break this rule without electrocuting themselves, since only Commander Gomez and I held the keys to the fence) and since no one had asked for that permission, we knew that it was no member of the workforce who had done this-not that any of us could and live. I told Commander Gomez that the monster had returned. She scoffed. At the time I believed it was because she was only a woman and did not know better.

Then we saw it.

The monster shii is truly as the legends have said it looks just like a shii, only bigger. It actually looks much like a man-smooth head and pointed chin, though its chin is natural rather than the result of a beard-only the top of the head is flatter. And, of course, it is made of crystal and walks on four legs. And those legs are remarkably similar in shape to the heads. The legs-and the chin-are razor-sharp.

The one we saw was also stained blue with the blood of a man.

We saw the man, too-or, at least, his body, which lay on the ground under the monster. After a moment, I saw his head-tucked in between the monster's hind leg and rear shoulder. It was Kelrek. He was only three scars old, a mere youth.

As foreman, I had been issued a sonic pistol. I did not hesitate to use it, but even as I unholstered the weapon, the monster turned to run away. I fired, but missed-the sonic beam ripped through one of the tents, instead.

However, as the creature turned, I saw that it was bleeding-a silvery substance dripped from a gash in its side. I tried to fire again, but it seemed to move at warp speed.

Commander Gomez ran after it, as if that would do some good. Where I had unholstered my weapon, she had taken out her scanning device. She ran, continuing to look down at her scanner.

We reached the fence, at which point she stopped. The monster had gone through the same way it came, apparently unbothered by the electricity. We were not so fortunate-the charge from the fence was arcing all over, and we had to keep our distance.

Commander Gomez deactivated the fence, then turned to look at me.

She then said three words I never expected to hear her say to me "You were right."

"About what?"

"Forming a search party. There's no way anyone could've provoked that thing in such a way that it would break through the fence and make a beeline for Kelrek like that. We've got to track it down." She put her scanner away. "I was hoping to get some readings on the thing, but the tricorder's useless with all this chimerium around."

"We have a trail to follow," I said, pointing at the creature's blood trail.

She looked down at the silvery blood in surprise, then smiled. "Good catch. Okay, put a detail together-but one thing, Kejahna. I'm in charge of this party. We'll issue weapons to everyone, but nobody fires without my direct order, understood?"

"Commander-"

"Understood?"

In fact, I did not understand, but I gave in and nodded my assent-if not my approval.

My opinion of her tactics did not improve when she spoke to the hastily assembled hunting party several minutes later.

"I want to make something very clear here-this is not a hunting party. It's a search party. We know very little about this thing. Federation history is replete with encounters with life forms that we thought were utterly hostile and became good friends-ranging from the Klingons, whom we knew to be sentient, to the Horta, whom we had thought of as simple animals. Now it's possible that this, too, is just a nasty animal-it's also possible that we provoked it in some way. We will defend ourselves if we have to, but we are not going to hunt this creature down. For now, my main concern is to find the creature, retrieve the heads of the people it's killed, and learn more about it."

One of the party-an Osina named D'Ren-muttered under his breath, "And how is she supposed to do that?"

People from the Federation apparently have very good hearing, because she replied to that, even though she was not meant to hear. "We won't know until we make the attempt."

"Right," D'Ren said louder this time, "I forgot. You're Starfleet. You can do anything."

Commander Gomez looked up and down the line of men she was leading. "No one is to fire their weapons without my authorization. Anyone who does will be confined in the Culloden until the next window and shipped out of here. Is that understood?"

That surprised me. The threat was a very serious one-to lose this work would mean sacrificing great wages, and also virtually guaranteeing that the person in question would never work for the government again. And only the government pays this well.

After her speech, we marched out of the camp, following the trail of silver blood. There were nine of us, for luck.

This is an ugly, unpleasant world. There is no shading here-it is all glare and blinding light. The plants all have sharp edges and the ground is difficult to walk on. Aside from the occasional burst if the suns reflect the right way, there is no color here. It is bland and lifeless-no less than one would expect from a place so evil.

The blood trail became harder to follow after a certain amount of time, but the animal seemed to be going in a straight line, which we followed.

Before long, the suns started to set. Commander Gomez led the way-her weapon had a lamp attached to it, which became our beacon. Our own lights were much poorer, and since I brought up the rear of our "search party," I got the least benefit from that light. Only Commander Gomez had her weapon unholstered, at her order-and no one was willing to contravene an order that came with such potentially disastrous consequences.

We saw many creatures on the way. Some of them were even normal shii. Once D'Ren started at the sight of one, thinking it was the monster, and reached for his weapon. Before he could, though, the shii itself ran off. I assured him that that was not it-it was far too small.

This did not stop D'Ren from panicking once again when we happened upon a pride of shii, but they ignored us. All of them were fairly diminutive-nothing at all like the monster I saw in the camp.

Then we came to the cave.

Commander Gomez shone her light into the cave-and then gasped. Thinking that we would never get a coherent answer out of her, I ran to the front to see what she saw.

What I saw were skulls.

The skulls of animals. The skulls of men.

Hundreds of skulls.

As repellent as the sight was, the smell was worse.

In the camp every day are the mixed smells of food, the chemicals from the cooking units and the lamps, and the various materials used for the machines we construct. The smells of life.

When we left the camp, those smells dissipated to be replaced by nothing-for just as there is no color, there is no odor to this world, either. Nothing to indicate that anything worthwhile has ever come here. It is as sterile and antispectic as that idiot Gallamite wishes his hospital was.

But the cave

I hope, my son, that you live a long and fruitful life. And I hope you never have the smell of death invade your nostrils the way it did for me in that cave today.

Commander Gomez's lamp was insufficient to see all the way into the cave, so I could not begin to describe how many skulls were actually present. But I did know one thing some of them were very old indeed.

There was one head I saw that was not a mere skull, but in fact a head with a face still attached, belonging to Kelrek. It had been placed unceremoniously in a pile of skulls, no more or less important than any of the other hundreds of trophies this abomination had collected.

Immediately, the talking began. Everyone in the party wanted the creature dead. Some even unholstered their weapons.

"Put those weapons away," Gomez barked. "I told you-"

I was about to interrupt her. I was going to tell her that she was a fool. I was going to tell her that we needed to destroy this creature now. I was going to tell her that if she did not authorize us to eliminate the

monster, I would order the men to do it myself and damn the consequences. I was going to tell her that I didn't care what it took, I would see this abomination who would display the heads of men in such a manner eliminated. I was going to tell her that anyone who did not see things this way was a fool. I did not get the chance to say any of those things.

Because that is when the monster attacked.

I cannot say where the creature came from. All I know is that one moment, I was standing before Commander Gomez preparing to speak my mind to her, and the next I was diving for cover as a crystalline demon leapt into our midst.

After rolling on the ground for several moments, I looked up to see J'Roh flailing blindly at the monster, several other men running away from it-and Commander Gomez holding her ground.

The monster leapt into the air and then headed straight for Commander Gomez.

She still stood her ground, even as I cried out, "Commander, duck!"

Instead, she fired her weapon.

Then she ducked.

Unfortunately, she had only put the weapon on its lowest setting. Equally unfortunately, she did not duck fast enough. The creature sliced at her left arm, tearing her uniform and her skin.

To my amazement, Commander Gomez's blood was red. For some reason, I assumed that her blood would be a more normal blue color. Perhaps all her people have blood like that. Or perhaps she is special.

The creature came at her again. Though she lay on the ground, though one arm was injured, she managed to change the setting on her rifle and fire it.

Waves of sonic energy battered the monster in midair. It twirled around in mid-leap and spun like a head-ball being intercepted. It fell to the hard ground just as I had when it first attacked.

Unlike me, it did not get back up.

"Is it dead?" D'Ren asked.

"Looks like it is," Gomez said. "Dammit!"

J'Roh was chattering madly. "Did I not tell you all? Haven't I been saying all along that she is the saul?"

This proves it! She has destroyed the monster shii."

If I had not seen it with my own eyes, I would have called J'Roh a fool.

But I had seen it.

Commander Gomez is the saul. She has taken the curse of this evil place and removed it.

"Hail to Saul!" J'Roh cried, lifting his four front legs into the air.

The Nalori men did likewise with their arms, as did the Osina with their legs. Calwei, the lone Cabbi in the party, waved his flippers.

Regardless of their gestures, they all repeated J'Roh's cry.

"Hail to Saul!"

It took me a moment, but I joined in the cry.

Because, my son, I had seen it. In all the stories, there is one constant none can kill the monster shii. Yet she did.

Saul killed it.

We marched triumphantly back to the camp. By the time we arrived it was completely dark, but a large number of men-including the Bolian zealot, Zilder-were waiting for us at the entryway.

Four of the men carried the body of the monster back. As soon as he saw that, the Bolian cried out, "They have killed it!"

Cheers erupted from the assembled men.

I had wanted to display the monster's corpse on the fence as a testament to victory, and said so as we came in to the adulation of the other workers.

"No," Saul said. "Bring it to the hospital. I want Dr. Dolahn to conduct an autopsy."

"That fool wouldn't know which end to cut open!" Calwei said, to which many laughed.

Saul even smiled at that. "Maybe. But he's supposed to be an expert on silicon-based life, and I want to know where this thing came from."

I walked up to her as the four men continued toward the hospital and the remaining three told the others of our adventure. "We know where it came from, Sauul."

"Oh, don't tell me you're going to start calling me that, too."

Bowing my head respectfully, I said, "If you do not wish to be called that-

"I don't," she said quickly.

"In any case-Commander-it is a monster shii. It came, presumably, from other shii."

"Maybe. But Dolahn was right about one thing-it's a lot bigger than any of the other shii that we saw on the way out there. Or the ones I saw from orbit, for that matter. It might be some kind of mutation or something else. I want to know what." She took a deep breath. "In the meantime, I think we've all earned a night off. First thing in the morning, I want to work out a new schedule with you and J'Roh-with that thing dead, we should be able to get back on track."

"Of course, Sa-Commander."

"Meanwhile, I'm going to follow the corpse to the hospital, get this looked at." She pointed at her injured arm.

As she walked toward the Gallamite's chamber of horrors, I called after her. "Commander, if you wish-would you join us?"

She stopped, turned, and frowned at me. "Join you where?"

"Outside my tent. I intend to celebrate our victory with a bottle of Saurian brandy that Entorr thinks he's been keeping secret. I would be honored if the sauul would join us."

She sighed. "I'm not the sauul!" Then she smiled. "But I'd be equally honored to join you. Thank you, Kejahna."

And she did join us. We drank long into the night. Mostly, Sauul listened as we each regaled each other with stories. Some of them even were true, though they were less so the more we drank. It was very good Saurian brandy, and Entorr only sulked for a little while when I told him to bring it out.

Ah, but your mothers are no doubt distressed at this drinking and carousing so soon after talking of fighting and death.

But a victory should be celebrated. So should a miracle. And Commander Sonya Gomez-the sauul-is most definitely a miracle.

Thanks to her, I should be home to see you soon, my son. I look forward to it.

With all the love I have,

Your father,

Kejahna

First officer's log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53281.2.

Today at noon, we will be doing our first test of the annular confinement beam. This is the most important test we've done so far, as the ACB is an important component of the SA. The ACB is similar to the kind used in transporters but much more powerful by several orders of magnitude. It will be used to clear a path of vacuum through the planet's atmosphere, through which the payloads of chimerium will be accelerated with an eight-nanosecond high-warp pulse that will drive them up to the refinery.

I've been a bit concerned about this particular aspect of the SA, as it's the most experimental, inasmuch as no one's ever (to the best of my knowledge) created an ACB on this scale. It's also a very good thing that I-or at least someone from Starfleet-was assigned to this project before this test was done. The power systems for the ACB were not sufficiently recalibrated for the increased power. The nature of the ACB is such that, as the beam increases in size, you have to increase the power output logarithmically, not exponentially. If they'd built this up to the original specs as mandated by my predecessor, the best-case scenario would be that the ACB would burn out and shut down. Worst-case the entire SA would've exploded in a fiery mess, people probably would die, and the project would have to start over from scratch.

The original schedule that the project was on when I arrived didn't have this test being attempted for another two weeks. My own revised schedule had it for two days from now. I would like to formally

commend the foreperson Kejahna, my assistant Razka, and the assistant foreperson J'Roh for their exemplary work in bringing the project ahead of schedule, despite the numerous impediments that have been placed in our path.

Morale has improved tremendously since the unfortunate incident with the so-called "monster shii." I am still awaiting an autopsy report from Dr. Dolahn on the nature of the creature. However, my killing the thing has elevated me in the eyes of the Nalori workers. Many have taken to following J'Roh's example and calling me "Sauul." I have tried to discourage this, but to no avail. I'm also not entirely comfortable with the fact that it has taken me killing an animal to gain the respect of the workers.

On the other hand, I can't argue with the results. We've worked the bugs out of the antimatter reactor, the magnetic containment system is up and running, and we'll be ready to bring the antimatter pods online tomorrow. In addition, when I informed Kejahna and the workers assigned to the ACB that we'd have to so radically change the power systems output, his response to my criticism of the methods employed by my predecessor-for the first time since I arrived-was not hostile.

Now it is simply a question of waiting until noon when we get our pulsar/quasar window.

Personal log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53281.2.

I have learned several valuable lessons these last few days.

The first, and most depressing, is that if you want to gain the respect of a party of Nalori workers, kill a mutated animal (or whatever that overgrown shii was) that attacked your camp. All the sexism, all the anti-Federation sentiment, seems to have disappeared since we came back to the camp with the corpse of the "monster shii."

The second is that I'm no good at eulogies. We held a funeral service for Kelrek, Saolhud, and Mokae the day after I killed the shii. Nalori death rituals are fairly straightforward the bodies are burned, and a person of authority-of any authority, it doesn't have to be someone religious-commends their souls to the afterlife. To be precise, according to the crash course Razka gave me prior to the funeral, their deaths must be announced to the Shigemos so they can welcome their mazza into the Endless Wind. (This was something else missing from the cultural database I read on the da Vinci.)

I tried suggesting the ever-evangelical Zilder as a substitute, but the Nalori would hear none of it-Zilder is an infidel, as far as they're concerned. (Zilder's predictable response was, "Give me time to convert you all.") Of course, I'm as much an infidel, but Razka said that I was the only person on the planet qualified. I'm just grateful that the ritual calls for burning-burial wouldn't be possible on the glassy surface of Sarindar.

Still, I did my best, which was pretty awful. I see no reason to commit the stumbling, awkward mess to the record-I pointedly turned my tricorder off before the funeral-but suffice it to say, the Shigemos were suitably, if not always intelligibly, informed of the incoming mazza.

The third is that I need to double-check everything. I made what could have been a huge mistake by assuming that the power output on the annular confinement beam was properly adjusted for the size of the ACB, and it wasn't. Since the diagnostic programs were created by the same people who got the ratios wrong, no error was detected-especially since there's no point of reference for an ACB this powerful. J'Roh expressed a concern that the nodes might not be able to handle the additional power, but I made sure the auto-shutdown features were up and running in case of such a difficulty.

The fourth is that I've gotten remarkably dependent on a tricorder. On a planet so loaded with chimerium, a tricorder is often little more than a glorified paperweight. That's not entirely fair-medical tricorders still function, certain data can still be examined, and I'm of course recording this log on it-but there's still a lot I can't do. Every time there's a problem-and there's always a problem, no matter how smoothly things might be going at any given point-my instinct is to whip out the tricorder. I did it when the shii attacked poor Kelrek, and I've done it any number of times with the equipment. I'm tempted to just leave the thing in my tent, but it doesn't feel right to walk around the surface of a planet without the familiar weight on my side. Still, I've spent more time opening up the guts of machinery than even I'm used to.

The fifth is that the best way to guarantee that Dr. Dolahn will never do something is to tell him that it isn't

top priority. It's been several days since I told him I needed an autopsy of the monster shii, but he hasn't gotten to it yet. It was Zilder who explained my tactical error in saying that it wasn't top priority-apparently, the only way Dolahn ever does anything is if you emphasize that you need it right away. Even then, he may not get to it for days.

Of course, this really isn't a top priority. I'm curious as to how this creature evolved, especially since all the evidence does seem to point to it being an aberration. We saw plenty of other shii, all of a size commensurate with the anthropological reports. (And don't think Dolahn hasn't enjoyed reminding me of that.) I've decided to keep the electrified fence up as a precautionary measure, even though none of the other shii we encountered showed any interest in us.

Still, it's a side concern. The main thing is to get the project finished. I'm happy with our progress, and even happier with the smoother working relations-whatever the reason. But mostly I just want this to be finished so I can get back to the da Vinci. It's gotten to the point where I'm not even impressed by the crystalline ecology. When I got here, it was a beautiful new world-every time the sun struck a tree or bush resulting in a spectrum burst, I was captivated. I don't even notice them anymore.

Looking back over that, I'm getting depressed. Ten years ago, I came out of the Academy hell-bent to seek out the unknown, to experience what was out there in deep space. I wanted to see it all, and I didn't want to miss a thing. (Of course, what I got was the Borg and a rather brutal lesson in being careful what you wish for, but that didn't change my overall desire.)

Dammit, I'm not going to become one of those moldy officers that treats a new world as just another mission to go on instead of an adventure. I didn't join Starfleet to slog from one mission to the next. Next time I see a spectrum burst, I will stop and stare at it. Dammit.

Supplemental.

The test of the ACB was an unqualified success. The full results are appended to my main log, but suffice it to say, the power nodes were able to handle the additional input, the beam successfully shunted all the air out of the way and held its integrity for the entire time the window was open, and it shut down smoothly.

One thing I hadn't been expecting the ACB's brightness is such that all the nearby trees give off some pretty amazing spectrum bursts. Even some of the Nalori-who never seemed to be in the least interested in or impressed with the local lightshows-gasped appreciatively at that.

When Razka announced that the window was closing and we shut down the beam, a huge cheer went up. They started crying, "Sauul" again, and this time I just let them. It would've been churlish to deny them at this point.

The other good news is that we received assorted communique. Zilder and I went straight to the tent that held the comm equipment and went through what we received during the window. Most were of a personal nature, and would be saved to individual pads by Zilder later. Two were for me one from the da Vinci, and one from the Nalori government. I was eager to hear from Kieran and the rest of the S.C.E., but the other one was unexpected, so I told Zilder to put it on the screen.

A particularly long male Nalori face appeared. He looked pretty sallow, and his beard had more gray than violet. I had spoken to this man-the senator in charge of the project-once on the Culloden en route to Sarindar, but I couldn't for the life of me remember his name.

Zilder, conveniently, came to my rescue. With as disdainful a tone as I'd ever heard him use, he said, "Senator Moyya. Everybody's favorite person. I wonder what pearls of wisdom he has to offer."

"This message is to inform you, Commander Gomez, that we are less than impressed with your performance to date. The accelerator is still behind what we consider an acceptable schedule. When we asked Starfleet for assistance, we were assured that we would be getting the best. I have seen nothing in the preliminary reports to indicate that you could be given that description. We removed Nalag because he was behind schedule. While you have improved on his work, you are still performing your task at below par. Either you are incompetent or Starfleet's standards are lower than I was led to believe. If you

have not brought the project to what we deem an acceptable level, we will have to consider having you replaced."

That was it. I stared in open-mouthed shock at the screen for several seconds.

"Ho'nig," Zilder muttered, shaking his head. "Nalag quit, they didn't 'remove' him. Can you believe that?"

Having dealt with enough bureaucrats in my time, I had to say, "Unfortunately, I can."

"Should I prepare a reply?"

I thought about several creative ways to respond to that particular message. Then I got an inspiration.

Smiling, I said, "No. When the next window opens, send all the results and reports on the ACB test we have at that point as a reply."

"Any accompanying message?"

"None. Let the results speak for themselves."

Zilder also smiled. "Ho'nig is smiling on you today, Commander."

I laughed. "Whatever."

I downloaded the message from the da Vinci to a padd, then went back to the camp.

After finishing the day's work, I ate with the workers-something I've been doing every night since I killed that shii. It's been fun hearing the different stories.

Then I read the da Vinci message, which turned out to be from Kieran.

"Hey, Sonnie. Well, things are business as usual here on the ol' homestead. Captain Gold got a nice message from his grand-daughter-her child's going to be a girl, and she and his grand-son-in-law are arguing over the name. I started a betting pool, which the captain is pretending not to know about. Right now, 'Judith' is the favorite.

"Let's see-Pattie went into a fit yesterday. Carol got another recording of that Sinnravian drad music she loves so much. It's the latest from that guy who founded the 'atonal minimalist' subgenre. She's been playing it over and over again. I really wish you were here-'cause then you'd get to listen to Pattie request a new roommate. I hate being the first officer, you do know that, don't you?"

"I miss you-and not just because I want you to be first officer again. We had to crawl inside the guts of a derelict Tellarite freighter yesterday, and you know more about those weird overpowered engines they insist on. Fabe nearly blew the thing up-it was pretty ridiculous. We got out of it okay, though.

"There've been some nasty rumblings coming from the general direction of Deep Space 9-apparently they were attacked. Supposedly, the Aldebaran was destroyed and the Defiant had the crap kicked out of it, but that's all rumor. I'll let you know-I'm sure you don't get much Starfleet gossip out on that crystal ball of yours.

"Well, I gotta go-it's my turn to run engineering. Talk to you later, Sonnie, and try not to have too much fun."

Razka came in as Kieran was finishing up. "Is that your mate?" he asked.

I took a long enough pause that Razka probably thought I didn't hear him, and he repeated the question.

"I guess you could say that. Sort of."

"Do you like your mate?"

I smiled. Whatever else I could say about how I felt about Kieran, I could safely say that I liked him.

"Yeah, I do."

Razka looked thoughtful. "I haven't liked any of mine."

At that, I couldn't help but laugh-which turned out to be okay, because he laughed, too. Then he took out two mugs and started to pour some Saurian brandy.

Gazing askance at him, I said, "I thought we finished Entorr's stash."

"We did. You think Entorr's the only person who smuggled in brandy?"

"My mistake."

He handed me one mug, then raised his. "To mates. We cannot live with them, but we really cannot live without them, either."

I raised my mug as well, and decided not to tell Razka that he had just quoted a very old human cliché.

Personal log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53283.0.

Another good day. The antimatter pods are online and working well, the tubing is almost finished, the dish is finished, the delivery system will be online in two more days-a week ahead of schedule-we seem to have finally gotten the bugs out of all the sensor palettes, and the mining mechanics are almost finished as well.

Best of all, I was distracted no less than four times by a spectrum burst. I'm very proud of my sense of wonder, and grateful for its return.

Right now I'm relaxing in my tent with a bowl of halfway decent vixpril and a mug of Saurian brandy, having just read the latest letter from Kieran. Apparently those rumors about DS9 were true-a Jem'Hadar ship did attack the station, and now the entire Alpha Quadrant's at yellow alert. The da Vinci's still on its latest assignment-some three-hundred-year-old ship that they found in the event horizon of a black hole. Kieran joked that they're going to try to tow it out with wires, as if that could possibly work. They're also ready to drop that at a moment's notice in case this really is a prelude to another war. I hope that it isn't. I don't think I could deal with another war so soon after the last one. I still have nightmares about that time the Sentinel was trapped behind enemy lines. I know I got a commendation for that, and everyone talks about how heroic I was for getting the warp drive back online and then recalibrating our shields and warp signature so the Breen thought we were Cardassian-but the fact of the matter is, I was scared to death and running on pure adrenaline and instinct.

Then again, Geordi gave me a commendation for helping get the shields back up when the Borg attacked way back when. I still haven't the foggiest idea what he was thinking. I was the greenest of green ensigns, staring off into space at the drop of a hat because eighteen people died.

Not that I should be blas about death, of course.

God, listen to me. I think I've been drinking synthehol too long-my system isn't used to the real stuff.

That does it. No more of this damn brandy.

I still haven't written a response to Kieran since the last letter. He's probably going to start worrying. But I just don't know what to say to him.

At least he isn't pushing in these letters. That's typical, really. He never pulled his goofy aw-shucks act or his c'mon-go-out-with-me-again routine while on duty, and he wouldn't do it on an open channel, either.

What really gets me is that Razka asked me if he was my mate, and I almost said yes.

And yet, I haven't really thought about him all that much since I got here. Part of that is just the grind of the project, and part of it is probably just my predilection for avoiding anything unpleasant in my personal life.

That's our Sonnie Gomez. She can field strip a warp core, can fool a Breen into thinking an Akira-class starship is a Cardassian freighter, can get a subspace accelerator built with substandard equipment and cranky workers, can defeat the mighty monster shii-but can't get her love life straightened out to save her life. The last time things were in danger of getting really serious with Kieran, I was promoted and transferred off the Enterprise. I wonder if I could've fought to stay on the ship-I mean, there had to be something an antimatter specialist at the full lieutenant level could do on the Enterprise. On the other hand, I could hardly pass up that project on the Oberth. On the third hand

On the third hand, I'm definitely giving up the brandy. It makes me way too philosophical. And maudlin. I just heard a scream. Better go check it out.

Supplemental.

Oh my God.

Oh my God.

Oh my God.

Letter from Commander Sonya Gomez on Sarindar to the family of Kejahna on Nalor, tenth day of Sendrak, twenty-third year of Togh

Gentle beings

You don't know me, but my name is Sonya Gomez. I was recently put in charge of the Sarindar Project for which Kejahna, the head of your household, was the foreperson.

I regret to inform you that Kejahna is dead.

I am sure you have heard the legends of the monster shii on Sarindar. We had believed those legends to be false. It turns out that-like many legends-it has a basis in fact. A creature that fit the description in your culture's tales of the monster shii attacked the camp and killed three people last week. I had killed that creature myself, and thought that it was the last we'd seen of it.

However, yesterday another creature attacked the camp. It is quite a bit larger than the animal that I killed. It went through our electrified fence like it was nothing and went after the nearest people.

Kejahna was very brave. He leapt into the monster's path in order to save the life of another of the workers. He gave his life so that others would live. You would be very proud of how he died, though I know that it is small comfort to you right now.

We are about to go out to hunt the creature down, but I wanted to take the time to compose this letter in case I don't make it back. I felt I owed it to Kejahna to tell you myself about what happened.

He was an excellent worker, and a good man. I will miss him, and I feel his loss deeply-though not, of course, as deeply as you. He spoke often of his family during evening meals, particularly how much he was looking forward to spending time with his son Revodro when this project ended.

I hope I get to convey my condolences in person, and again, I am very sorry for your loss.

Sincerely,

Commander Sonya Gomez

First officer's log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53283.1.

There is a second "monster shii" on Sarindar. At 2342 hours, it broke through the electrified fence that surrounds the work camp. Unlike the previous shii, this one suffered no appreciable injury. It immediately ripped into the nearest tent, which belonged to Kejahna, the foreperson, and three other Nalori Erobnos, Caargenne, and Houarner. The creature definitely killed Kejahna-who leapt in front of an attack that would have decapitated Caargenne and was disembowelled-and gravely injured the other three.

The shii then carried all four bodies out of the camp.

I witnessed most of this, having come to investigate when I first heard the screams of the Nalori being attacked.

While I record this log entry, Razka is organizing a second hunting party. I have composed a hasty condolence letter to be sent to Kejahna's family. If Erobnos, Caargenne, and Houarner wind up killed, as I suspect will be the case, I will do the same for their families-assuming I survive. I fear that this creature will not be as easy to stop.

Razka is calling me. The party is ready to go.

End log entry.

TO BE CONTINUED

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Mack is a writer whose work for Star Trek spans multiple media. With writing partner John J. Ordovery, he co-wrote the Star Trek Deep Space Nine episode "Starship Down" and the story treatment for the Star Trek Deep Space Nine episode "It's Only a Paper Moon." David and John also penned the four-issue Star Trek Deep Space Nine/Star Trek The Next Generation crossover comic-book miniseries Divided We Fall. David's solo writing for Star Trek includes the Star Trek New Frontier Minipedia and the forthcoming Starfleet Survival Guide, as well as behind-the-scenes contributions to several Star Trek CD-ROM products. Invincible is David's first novel.

Keith R.A. DeCandido is the co-developer of Star Trek S.C.E. with John J. Ordovery, and also wrote several other S.C.E. titles (Fatal Error, and the upcoming Cold Fusion and Access Denied). Keith's other

Star Trek work includes Star Trek The Next Generation Diplomatic Implausibility (the first novel featuring Ambassador Worf), Star Trek Deep Space Nine Demons of Air and Darkness (part of the new series of DS9 novels taking place after the show's finale, and also part of the Gateways crossover), the two-book series Star Trek The Brave & the Bold (which features all four TV shows, coming in spring 2002), and the comic book Star Trek The Next Generation Perchance to Dream. He has also written best-selling novels and short stories in the worlds of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Doctor Who, Farscape, Marvel Comics, and Xena. Learn more than you needed to know about Keith on his web site at the easy-to-remember URL of DeCandido.net.