

Star Trek S.C.E. 8  
Invincible Book 2

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Second officer's log, Lt. Commander Kieran Duffy, U.S.S. da Vinci, Stardate 53288.1.

I'm worried about Sonnie. And I'm worried about me, too.

The da Vinci's still at yellow alert while we wait to find out what's happening at Deep Space 9. There's every possibility that another war with the Dominion is in the offing. If that's true, we're all in for a galaxy of trouble, especially since our first officer's so far away.

Commander Sonya Gomez, first officer of the da Vinci, my immediate superior, and a woman I have grown very fond of over the years, is right now in the very distant Nalori Republic. That distance, combined with the Nalori's lack of Federation relay stations, means that just a communication to her would take two days to arrive.

I've already sent her two messages, but haven't heard anything back. I hope she's okay. The Nalori don't like the Federation much, and only asked for her because they needed her expertise to help build a subspace accelerator to help them get chimerium off the planet Sarindar.

A planet full of that super-dense ore is a great find, and I'm glad that we're getting to help mine it. I'm also glad that this will probably mean improved relations with the Nalori.

But I'm not glad that we're potentially on the brink of war, and Sonnie's so far away.

I miss her. And I'm worried about her.

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 that I killed, and which murdered several workers, 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, my assistant 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.

Letter from Razka on Sarindar to Marig on Nalor, eleventh day of Sendrak, twenty-third year of Togh.

My wife

I write to you for the first time since arriving at this dreadful place. The reason is I fear for my life. Since the cause of the fear still exists, I write. Before I go any further, however, I wish to make a request of you. Please kiss each of my children for me. When you do so, tell each of them that their father loves them. Even the ones who are too young to comprehend. You will understand why I ask this after you read this letter. But please, do that first. Thank you.

Of all my wives, you are the one I dislike the least. So I wish you to have this record of my life in this place. We are building a subspace accelerator here on Sarindar. It will allow our glorious government to harvest chimerium. That, I'm sure, means as much to you as it does to me. But they're paying me, so I won't complain.

The first thing that happened when I got here will amuse you. The foreman issued me a weapon. Me. It took three days just to figure out which was the right end to point. But the foreman insisted. He was a big man named Kejahna. He assigned me to be the aide to the project leader. That used to be Nalag. You would have liked Nalag. He was pleasant. He was also driven insane by this place. Much the same way you drive me insane, to be truthful. After he went mad, the government did something odd. They requested help from the Federation. The Federation sent a woman from Starfleet. I thought that made them madder than Nalag at first. But Commander Gomez has been magnificent. Several here started calling her "Sauul" because of her work. She made the load-lifters work. She brought the project on schedule. She fixed several errors in the subspace accelerator.

She also killed a monster shii.

No, your fears have not been confirmed. I have not gone insane. I sometimes wish I had, but no. The monster shii is real. It is not just the stuff of legends. And Commander Gomez killed it after it attacked and killed several workers.

The problem with legends isn't when they turn out to be true. It's when they turn out to be half-true. You see, in all the stories I've heard about the monster shii, I've never heard anyone mention two. But there were two here. The second one is much bigger than the first. It killed Kejahna and took three others. Commander Gomez told me to organize a search party. She and Kejahna did that the last time a monster shii attacked. I didn't want to go with her, but she insisted. Especially with Kejahana dead. Do you know what she told me? That I was the only person she trusted now. Armed with my sonic rifle and this undeserved responsibility, I went out with her.

Sarindar is a beautiful place in the daylight. At night, it is somewhat less so. When the sunlight glints off the flora, it's like walking in a jewel. Without that light, it's like walking in a tomb. Especially when we came across the dead bodies. Houarner, Erobnos, and Caargenne, the three who were taken. Also Kejahna's body. We found their remains on the ground, ripped to pieces. Except, of course, for their heads. The monster shii presumably still had them. The one Commander Gomez had killed had taken poor Kelrek's head.

We continued to follow the trail. It led to a large cave. Commander Gomez told me that the last monster shii was in a cave. This cave was apparently much bigger. But it had the same thing in it. Skulls. Many many skulls from many many animals. Some of them looked quite old. The monster shii had obviously been killing for a long time.

Commander Gomez, for some reason, kept saying that we had done something to provoke the monster. I explained that it didn't need provocation. It simply collected heads. Then she said that if it collected heads, it might have been rational. I suppose they teach that sort of silliness in Starfleet. Most of the party

thought her to be mad. Zilder, the religious Bolian pilot, summed it up best. "This is not one of Ho'nig's creatures." Ho'nig is his god. From the moment we met, he tried to convert me to worshipping Ho'nig. Unfortunately, his missionary zeal was not very convincing, and was even less so when the monster shii cut his head off.

I froze when that happened. I just stood there and watched as the monster shii leapt out of nowhere and ripped Zilder into pieces. Just two days ago, I was teasing Zilder about his conversion attempts. In fact, I joked that he should have tried to convert the monster shii. Then Commander Gomez would not have had to kill it. Instead, it killed him. Commander Gomez did not hesitate. She fired on the creature.

Several others followed suit.

I did not. I just stood there. My mouth was agape. I couldn't even raise my weapon. My first thought was that I would never see my children again. That is why I asked you to kiss them earlier. I swore at that moment that the first thing I would do if I made it back alive was express my love for my children. Not that I expected to get back alive. Even as most everyone else fired on the creature, it continued its rampage. The sonic rifle fire didn't even slow it down. This wasn't a total surprise, as it is about twice as big as the first one to attack. That one is a corpse presently sitting in the camp hospital. Its fellow started killing indiscriminately. After Zilder, it decapitated D'Ren and literally sliced Eridak in two. Entorr started to run away, and G'sob ran toward it.

Still I did not move. I just stood in the cave. People were scattering around me. The shii was slicing at anything that came near it. And the only sound I heard was the whining of the rifles. Sonic rifles don't give off any kind of emission the way a laser would. They just make that whining sound. I heard no screams, though I saw mouths move. I did not hear the sounds of flesh being rendered, though I saw it being done. But all I could hear was the sound of every rifle firing. Every rifle, save my own.

At least until Commander Gomez ordered a retreat. That, I did hear. Somehow, then, I found the wherewithal to make my legs move. We ran back to the camp. I came straight to my tent and began writing this letter. I have now fulfilled my oath to myself. When the next window in the suns' interference opens, we will send many messages. The primary one will be the one to request of the government that the project be terminated and we be allowed to leave. This letter, however, will go as well.

If I die here, please let my children know who their father was. Tell them that I was a coward, or lie to them, it does not matter. Just tell them.

Best regards,  
your husband,  
Razka

First officer's log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53283.9.

I have returned with the search party. We were able to trace the "monster shii" to its lair-another cave system, about half a kilometer farther from the camp than the smaller cave where the previous shii had its lair. This cave was much larger, and contained a concomitantly larger number of skulls. I was hoping to collect some skulls for samples for Dr. Dolahn to examine, but the opportunity did not present itself, as the shii attacked. Zilder, D'Ren, and Eridak were all killed, and several others were injured. (Tricorder recording of attack appended.)

It is after midnight, so our next quasar/pulsar window won't be until tomorrow afternoon. When that happens, I intend to send a message to the Nalori government, requesting that we have permission to suspend the SA project until we can deal with this problem. I'm also preparing a distress signal to send to the da Vinci-based on Lt. Commander Duffy's last communique, they may not be able to respond to it, but I'd rather play it safe.

I've also instructed the remaining workers to construct a sonic barrier around the camp. The electric fence we put up didn't even slow this creature down, and we need some kind of defense. True, the sonic weapons didn't work, but that may have been because they're not powerful enough. J'Roh-who, with Kejahna's death, is now the foreperson-pointed out that we'd have to cannibalize some of the sonic rifles to accomplish this, but to my mind it's worth it.

It's not like the guns were doing us any good

My next task is to find a way to do an active scan on this planet. I need to get proper sensor readings of this area, see what it is that's attracting the shii here. I suspect that we're doing something to provoke it. Animals generally don't attack without a reason. Since it can't digest carbon-based life, it obviously isn't after us for food. Besides, the specificity of the attacks indicates a possibility of intelligence. But this is all speculation until and unless I can get this tricorder to do some actual scans.

Personal log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53284.1.

A miracle has happened. I was up all night working on it, but I finally figured out a way to adjust the tricorder so I can get at least partial sensor readings of the chimerium-laced area. The resolution is awful, and the readings are spotty, but it's better than what we had before, which was nothing. I hope that I get to live long enough to share this breakthrough with Starfleet.

Razka's at my tent

Supplemental.

Razka has asked me to, for the second time on this expedition, perform the funeral rites for the people who were killed by the monster shii, which reminded me that I hadn't yet written condolence letters to the families of the ones who died-I already did one for Kejahna's family. I have to admit-I hate to admit-that I forgot about both duties in the rush of getting the workers to build the barrier and adjusting the tricorder.

I just remembered that time on the Enterprise-our first encounter with the Borg. I was an ensign, fresh out of the Academy, working in engineering under Geordi La Forge. The Borg cut parts of three decks out of the saucer section-with eighteen people in them. They were missing and presumed assimilated. I kept trying to focus on getting the shields back up, but I couldn't get those eighteen people out of my mind. Geordi said two things to me "Just put it out of your head" and "We'll have time to grieve later."

But the Nalori peoples have very particular funeral rites. And I'm a part of it now, whether I like it or not. Besides, there's not a helluva lot I can do until noon when we send the messages.

Supplemental.

The funeral was subdued. The ceremony was for everyone who died except Zilder. I think I did a better job of commending the mazza of the dead to the Endless Wind this time. I wish that I didn't have to keep practicing, though.

Eridak, one of the Nalori who died, only had two scars, both on his face, none on his forearms. From what I've learned, those are the basic coming-of-age scars. Every Nalori here has them, but he was the only one I remember who had only those two. Which meant he was very young. Too young to die.

Afterward, I checked the tent that Zilder shared with three other workers, and it turned out that he had made up a will since arriving on Sarindar. Rather than follow any Bolian traditions, his wishes related to the death rites of the Damiani. Zilder had worshipped the Damiani god Ho'nig, and according to the Se'rbeg-the holy book of Ho'nig-worshippers-he was required to be buried within three days of death. That, of course, isn't going to happen. The crystalline nature of this world makes it impossible to bury anything.

Zilder wrote his will on a piece of paper. He had made many corrections and addenda to it during his time here. He left the Culloden to the Nalori Republic, "as my thanks for hiring me to work for them." He left his copy of the Se'rbeg to me. He had originally left it to Nalag, my predecessor, but that had been replaced with my name. The exact phrasing was, "To [Nalag, crossed out] Commander Sonya Gomez, I leave my most valued copy of the Se'rbeg, the holy words of Ho'nig, in the hopes that [he, crossed out] she will find the same enlightenment and glory through it that I found over the years. This is the book that changed my life for the better. I hope it can do the same for [him] her."

I stared at the cracked leather binding of the book and shook my head. I had found Zilder's constant religious harping to be irritating from the moment he picked me up in the Culloden at Starbase 96 several dozen eternities ago, but now, realizing that I would never hear him imploring me to take Ho'nig into my life again, I found I was going to miss it.

I can't even give him a proper burial.

Dammit, this whole thing is falling apart. Yesterday, we were on schedule and the one danger to the project had been killed. Now, seven more people are dead, work has ground to a halt while we try to defend ourselves against a hostile alien-and try to find out why it's attacking us. How the hell did this happen?

I'm going to find out.

Supplemental.

I just finished my first scan of the area. So far, nothing. Razka came up to me and asked me what I was doing, and I explained to him that I was trying to determine why the shii was attacking.

Razka looked at me like I was insane. "Did you look at the skulls in the cave, Commander? This monster has been killing things on this planet for much longer than this installation has been here. Besides, what does the reason matter?"

"It hasn't just been killing, it's been decapitating and saving the skulls. It may be intelligent. We can't just kill it without finding out why."

"Perhaps you can't. And perhaps I can't." He got a funny look on his face when he said that. "But there are dozens of workers here who will do whatever is necessary to avenge their comrades. And, regardless of your status, Commander, they will not listen to any words you say about it possibly being intelligent or something to talk to. It is an animal, and it has already killed seven men. The only response that anyone here will support is to kill it."

Transcript of message sent from Nalori Republic Senator Moyya to Commander Sonya Gomez on planet Sarindar, twelfth day of Sendrak, twenty-third year of Togh.

We are distressed by your absurd request to suspend operations on the Sarindar Subspace Accelerator Project. We had been led to believe that the officers of the Federation Starfleet were professionals who did not succumb to the foolish ramblings of old women. To so insult the intelligence of this senate by suggesting that you have (again) fallen behind in the project's timetable due to attacks by a "monster shii" is bad enough, but to accompany it with a "recording" of an attack that is so obviously a forgery merely compounds the offense. It is obvious to us that the workers you claim were killed by this "monster" were malingerers and drunks who allowed themselves to be attacked by native fauna. It is equally obvious that Starfleet has sent, not their best as promised, but an incompetent and a fool. There are some voices among the senate who believe that Starfleet simply dressed a foolish woman in a commander's uniform and sent her to us, hoping we would not notice. The only way to prove those voices wrong is to get the project back on schedule.

Therefore your request is denied. Work will continue. Any unauthorized departure from the planet Sarindar will result in censure of those departing and all other workers on Sarindar from any and all government work for the rest of their natural lives.

First officer's log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53285.0.

In light of the Nalori Republic's refusal to accede to my request, I have ordered the workers to resume the scheduled construction of the SA. I have lodged a formal protest with the senate and with Starfleet Command over the gross inhumanity being displayed by the senate in this instance. A distress call was also sent out to Starfleet-specifically for the da Vinci, but sent on a general Starfleet frequency-fourteen hours prior to the reception of the senate's refusal. While it will take two days for it to reach the Federation, I have faith that someone will respond and, if necessary, evacuate the planet.

Departing is only an option if another ship arrives, as the Culloden is keyed to Zilder's DNA. The radical dissimilarity between Bolian DNA and that of any of the races represented on this project-not just that of the assorted Nalori races, but also of my human and Dr. Dolahn's Gallamite genetic structure-renders it impossible to "hotwire" the Culloden, at least with the equipment available to me.

I have instead devoted my resources to restructuring the duty schedule in light of the reduced personnel, maintaining our defense against the shii, and attempting to improve the presently limited ability of the tricorder to scan the surrounding area despite the high concentrations of chimerium. I am hoping that Dr. Dolahn's autopsy of the first shii will give us some idea of how we can either defend against or communicate with this creature. In addition, I intend to take a bioscan of a "normal" shii, to give me a base for my readings.

I will continue to send updates and recordings of the monster shii to the Nalori senate in the hopes that they will come to their senses.

Personal log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53285.2.

I just finished a trip outside the encampment to take a bioreading of the shii. I had forgotten that these are capable of being elegant creatures. The normal-sized ones are roughly the size of a pony, and they move through the crystalline landscape with an impressive grace. After twice nearly being killed by the mutant versions of these-or whatever they are-it's nice to be reminded that the "normal" ones are quite noble beasts.

In fact, they're more noble than a good chunk of the sentients presently on the planet. I had to put someone on guard over the Culloden after four different incidents of people breaking into the ship to try to get off-planet. They didn't succeed, of course, but that's hardly the point. These are people who make their living working for the government. That same government has made it clear that any attempt to leave the planet will result in them never working again. A lot of these people have families, but they're willing to risk it to get out of here.

I, on the other hand, am willing to risk going outside the sonic barrier to get those bioscans. Luckily, I wasn't attacked by the "monster."

Not that anyone wouldn't have volunteered to come along to protect me. Nobody's called me "Sauul" since the massacre at the cave, and I've been getting the doleful looks that I got when I first arrived. Nobody's invited me to join them for meals, either.

The project is even more behind schedule, with much less than a day's worth of work getting done either of the last two days, even taking the lesser numbers into account. Everyone wants to leave. No one wants to work.

And I can't blame them.

But I need to find out what is causing the shii to attack us. There has to be a reason.

Someone's raising the alarm.

Supplemental.

Another attack. Five people are dead-the guard on the Culloden and the latest four who tried to commandeer it. While they were trying to break into the ship-I'd placed a coded lock on it, along with a recording device-the shii attacked. The ship is docked outside the perimeter of the sonic barrier, so the shii had a clear path to them. In fact, I'm stunned that none of the others who've attempted escape before them were similarly attacked.

All five corpses were missing their heads.

One thing I did notice is that one of the victims-G'sob, one of the Osina assigned to the tubing detail-managed to wound the shii. His weapon was set on a lower intensity, but a higher frequency, than normal. I checked his weapon-the shii left it behind-and its reading indicated a different setting from what it actually fired.

For the first time since I arrived on Sarindar, the substandard equipment is working in my favor. Thanks

to G'sob's rifle being defective, we now know that we can wound the creature. As good news goes, however, this isn't much. I suspect that things will only get worse. Personal log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53286.2.

Things have gotten worse.

Half the workers have refused to leave their tents. The ones who still have sonic weapons-many of them were cannibalized to make the sonic barrier around the encampment-are clutching them to their persons and threatening to shoot anything that comes near them. They've all readjusted their weapons to the setting G'sob used.

I've tried to get them to go to work, but I have no hold over them anymore. The senate's decree has served to completely undercut any authority I had with these people, even as it undercut their own authority as well. No one here can possibly take seriously a body that refuses to accept the existence of something most of them have seen with their own eyes. And yet, the fact that they don't believe me about the same thing has given the workers carte blanche to ignore my orders.

Neither the tubing nor the mining mechanics are finished, even though they should have been by now. The delivery system is offline, and probably will remain that way-especially since the three most talented members of that particular detail are now all dead. In my next message to the senate, I intend to ask for replacements, if they can't be bothered to actually shut down the project. There's no way I can complete the SA without sufficient personnel, and even if everyone left was working their hardest-which they most definitely aren't-we couldn't finish this thing.

I've been scanning for twenty-eight hours, and I can't find a single reason why the shii is attacking. I'm half-tempted to go back to the cave and try to do a scan there, but I don't think it's worth the risk-yet. But it may come to that. I'm still awaiting Dr. Dolahn's autopsy report on the shii I killed. He said he'd get to it today, but he's said that every day since I first brought it to him.

I've also come up with an idea for how to trap the creature without killing it.

First officer's log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53286.8.

I have managed to increase the worker morale slightly. The tubing was finally finished this morning, so I reassigned them to construct a trap for the shii. This was work they could actually get enthusiastic about, since they're stuck on the planet for the time being. (My numerous communiquis to the senate have met with a resounding silence. I'm hoping to get a reply from the da Vinci tomorrow.)

The principle of the trap is quite simple it's a box that's divided into two halves by a set of metal bars. (I had been hoping for duranium, but all that's available is a steel composite left over from the tubing.) Three people stand on one side of the bars, armed. The other side is open. Based on the bioscan I took of the regular shii, there's one particular ruby-like flower that they are fond of eating. The plan is to place several of those flowers into the open end of the trap. Once the shii enters, a force field will be activated, trapping the creature inside. The three armed people then fire on the creature at the low-intensity-high-frequency setting, which should be enough to stun it, or at least wound it enough to subdue it.

The detail has taken to the task with relish, and I'm hoping they'll have it done by nightfall. Kugot, Amuk, and Entorr have volunteered to serve as the executors of the trap.

Supplemental.

The trap has failed. Entorr, Kugot, and Amuk are dead. One of the weapons misfired and damaged one of the bars. The shii flailed and sliced through the bar. All three missed the shii with their shots, and then were, unfortunately, prime targets once the bars went down. It is unclear why the three of them did not escape through the rear hatch, but their failure to do so resulted in their tragic deaths. Entorr was killed by decapitation. The other two were also beheaded after they were killed. The creature departed with all three heads.

I doubt the creature will fall for the same trap again, and we don't have the material to reconstruct it in any case.

I am still waiting for the final autopsy report from Dr. Dolahn on the shii that I killed. I, in fact, intend to make that a priority. Scans of the region continue to fail to identify any reason why the shii would be attacking us.

Personal log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53287.0.

Okay, my official log has the formal report about how exactly Entorr, Kugot, and Amuk were killed. I need to say, however, that that was the most pathetic sight I have ever seen in my life! Much as I hate to speak ill of the dead, I really have to wonder about those three. Did they have a death wish? Admittedly, part of it was the fault of the ever-substandard Nalori equipment. At least one of the rifles was on the wrong setting.

But still-how the hell can you miss something at point-blank range?

The shii took the bait we laid out. I activated the force field. The shii realized it was trapped and started making this squeaky noise. I gave the order to fire.

And they missed.

Worse, one of them-Entorr, whose weapon was on the wrong setting-hit one of the bars. That weakened the steel enough so that it started to buckle. The shii must have noticed this-or maybe it would have attacked the bars anyhow. Either way, it sliced through one of the bars, leaving the three Nalori vulnerable-

-especially since they panicked and started firing wildly instead of doing what they were supposed to do in case something like this happened, which was run out the back door. I made sure that there was a method of escape in case something like this happened, and they didn't use it.

I've been sending regular updates on the situation to the senate, including images of every attack of the shii. I'm really of two minds as to whether or not to send this one, as it makes all of us look like idiots. Naturally, everyone's blaming me for the trap not working, even though it should have worked, if those three jackasses had done what they were supposed to do.

Okay, that's not fair. They panicked. It happens. But that panic got them killed.

The last batch of messages included one from the da Vinci. Even though it's time-stamped two days after I sent out the distress call, it has no acknowledgment of it. I've continued to send it each opportunity, so with any luck they will get it eventually. According to Kieran, things are going better-it turns out that there isn't going to be a war, and the da Vinci has been assigned to help the folks at Deep Space 9 put the station back together. Fabian Stevens used to be assigned to DS9, so he's probably happy about the assignment.

Right now, I really wish I was back with them. I wish I could watch Fabian and Pattie crawl around a warp core with me, listen to Carol make one of her snide remarks, try to decipher Soloman's chirpy computer-speak, watch Bart write a letter on paper to Anthony, hear Captain Gold go on about his grandchildren. Hell, I wouldn't even mind listening to Corsi complain.

But most of all, I miss Kieran's smile. That dopey, aw-shucks smile that he always gets on his face when he decides to torture me by reminding me of when I spilled hot chocolate on Captain Picard.

Work on the SA has crawled to a halt. The team that put the trap together is down to one person now, and he refuses to work. Nobody's tried to steal the Culloden-mainly because of what happened last time-but nobody's willing to work, or talk to me, either.

I'm going to go to the camp hospital and sit on Dolahn until he gives me an autopsy report.

Partial transcript of autopsy report of sample S019 (a.k.a. "monster shii") by Dr. Dolahn, Sarindar Medical Unit, thirteenth day of Sendrak, twenty-third year of Togh.

DOLAHN Ah, Commander Gomez, I was just going to summon you.

GOMEZ I see you're actually working on the autopsy.



DOLAHN Don't sound so surprised, Commander. I admit, I've been dilatory in getting to this, but caring for Kani and Rimlek has been difficult-I almost lost them a couple of times.

GOMEZ I'm sorry, Doctor, I didn't realize

DOLAHN Yes, well, there was no way you could've known.

GOMEZ Especially since you didn't tell me. If you actually gave me reports

DOLAHN [makes throat-clearing noise] Yes, well, be that as it may, I have begun the autopsy, and I've come to rather a shocking revelation.

GOMEZ What?

DOLAHN Whatever this creature is, it isn't native to Sarindar.

GOMEZ But-

DOLAHN It may appear to be a shii-and rather a mutated one at that-but it isn't. Take a look at this. Some of these match the way the internal organs of a shii are supposed to be arranged, but half of them aren't even actual organs. I've been studying silicon-based lifeforms for most of my career, and I can't make heads nor feet out of any of th-

GOMEZ These aren't organs.

DOLAHN I beg your pardon?

GOMEZ These aren't organs.

DOLAHN What are you doing with that thing? I thought those Starfleet contraptions of yours were just glorified recording devices on this planet.

GOMEZ I've been able to modify this one to get at least partial readings, even with the chimerium. And according to the readings I'm getting right now, these don't behave like "proper" organs because they're biomechanical.

DOLAHN Commander, most silicon-based life might read on a tricorder as "biomechanical" due to the nature of their-

GOMEZ Doctor, contrary to the opinions of the Nalori government, I'm not stupid. I compensated for that. But this creature was never alive in the traditional sense. It's an artificial lifeform. In fact

DOLAHN What is it?

GOMEZ If I'm reading this right, some of these "organs" are actually chameleon circuits. Some people at the Daystrom Institute were working on something like this, but they were never able to make it work.

DOLAHN For those of us who don't follow every move of the Daystrom Institute, Commander, what, exactly, is a chameleon circuit?

GOMEZ It's something that allows a mechanism to change its outer form. You program it to alter its

appearance. The problem is, the power demands to let something with an unstable molecular structure perform stable mechanical functions were always way in excess of what was practical. Whoever built this was able to solve that. This is amazing.

DOLAHN Why would anyone build something like this?

GOMEZ I don't know. But this changes everything. I need to study these circuits, see if I can figure out the programming.

DOLAHN What, you're going to work here?

GOMEZ Unless you have a better idea, Doctor. I won't have the space to do this in my tent, and this is the closest we have to a lab in the camp.

DOLAHN Fine, if you must, but please stay out of my way.

First officer's log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53288.6.

I have left Razka and J'Roh in charge of what remains of the project-apparently the crew working on the mining mechanics have been throwing themselves into their work, on the logic that it's better than waiting for something to kill them, though everyone else is sulking in their tents. I, meanwhile, have spent the last twenty-eight hours trying to figure out what makes the "monster shii" tick.

And, I'm happy to say, I think I've found it.

I've been able to extract a visual record from the creature's "eyes"-actually recording devices. It took a while for me to determine how to read the things-I finally managed it by constructing an image translator, cannibalizing parts from Dr. Dolahn's X-ray machine, of all things.

Some time in the past-it's impossible to be sure how far, as the manner in which this mechanism tells time doesn't have an obvious analogue to Federation or Nalori timekeeping-an expedition of aliens came to Sarindar. I can't say what they were called-the universal translator renders the references to them simply as "the owners"-but the two shii were the protectors for the expedition. Their job was to keep them safe and gather food for them.

The owners are quadrupedal beings who look like at first glance like a hybrid between seals and dogs-but honestly they don't look like anything I've ever seen before. The expedition seemed to be a simple archaeological survey.

However, I noticed as time went on that the owners looked weaker and gaunter-and that there were fewer and fewer of them. My best guess is that they succumbed to some kind of disease. After a certain amount of time, they were gone.

If the shii-the protectors took on a large-scale version of the form of shii when they arrived on Sarindar-had any notion of what happened to the owners, they gave no indication of it. They simply continued carrying out their duties.

Those duties included gathering food. The owners, I soon realized, feed on the cranial matter of animals. This explains the hoarding of heads and the discarding of the bodies. To their minds, they're still gathering food for their masters, despite the fact that those masters are never going to return.

Personal log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53288.9.

I've been working on a way to try to communicate with the "shii." I've moved to my tent, since the doleful looks from Dolahn (pardon the pun) have gotten tiresome.

The work Bart Faulwell has done in upgrading the universal translators to understand Bynar speech when they communed with computers or with each other was turning into a boon. Most of that work was programmed into my da Vinci-issue tricorder, so I was able to start building a language algorithm for the shii.

Razka came by to give me a report, and asked me what I was doing. I explained it to him-including what

I'd learned about our attacker.

"Why do you want to talk to it?"

"To convince it to stop. It doesn't realize that it's doing anything wrong. If we can explain to it that its masters are dead and it doesn't have to hoard food for them anymore, maybe we can get it to leave us alone."

"To what end? Commander, this is pointless. These are simple automatons. You no more 'killed' anything last week when you shot the first shii than I did when I crashed my father's hovercraft when I was a child."

"Razka, I appreciate-"

"Commander, you are an engineer. So are most of the men working here. When a piece of equipment malfunctions, you turn it off."

"No, you try to fix it. Razka, I really do understand what you mean, but I can't just condemn this thing without giving it a chance to stop. I killed the first one in self-defense-maybe if I can talk to it-"

Razka laughed. "You're even calling the creature 'it.'" Then he grew serious. "Let me put it another way, Commander. You are in charge of this project. This project has been endangered by these two creatures. Don't you owe it to the men you're responsible for to do whatever you can to safeguard them? Yes, it's true, this thing has been left without any kind of guidance, and it's simply following its programming. But Kejahna, Rimlek, Entorr, G'sob, D'Ren, and the others are all dead. You yourself commended their mazza to the Shigemos. What of them?"

I found I didn't have an answer to that.

He left.

I went back to work. Maybe he was right. But the next time I saw that thing, I was going to try to talk to it.

Him. Her. Whatever.

First officer's log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53289.1.

All requests to the Nalori senate have gone unanswered. There is also no reply from the da Vinci or anyone else from Starfleet.

The sonic barrier that we erected around the camp has failed. The sonic rifles that the Nalori were issued were not designed for such sustained use. One of them had a breakdown in the control unit when the coils overheated. The fact that they even use coils instead of an EPS system is an indicator of how substandard they are.

Unfortunately, the breakdown of one converted rifle caused a cascade reaction, and now none of it works. I have managed to reconstruct parts of the barrier, but that makes it all but useless. Unless the barrier is "airtight," as it were, the shii can get through with ease.

The only way to properly fix the barrier is to cannibalize the remaining sonic rifles, but-even if I could convince the workers to give them up-that isn't a viable option. This is our only defense against the creature.

And, since the camp is no longer a safe haven, I need to take action.

The trap would have worked if the shii had actually been hit with any of the shots fired at it. One thing that did work was the lure. So I'm going to try the lure again, this time in the camp hospital. It's generally the most crowded place anyhow, so it would probably scope it out in any case. Meanwhile, I will move everyone to the space beneath the SA. Dolahn should be able to convert it to a makeshift hospital, and I'll put the remaining armed workers on guard.

Once that's done, I'll lure the shii with the ruby flowers and try to communicate with it. I've programmed my combadge so that its translator will render the machine language of the shii, based on what I could glean from the first one.

Letter from Razka on Sarindar to Marig on Nalor, fifteenth day of Sendrak, twenty-third year of Togh.

My wife

Yes, another letter. Because once again I have been reminded of my mortality. Once again, I ask you to

kiss my children for me before reading the rest of this letter. Thank you.

Commander Gomez yesterday hit upon the idea of setting a lure for the monster shii. By the way, she has learned that this creature of legend is in fact a machine. It was programmed by strangers who came here on an expedition. The expedition died, but the two shii lived on. These strangers feed on the brains of other living creatures. This is why the monster shii take the heads of men. They are gathering food for their dead masters. Tragic, in a way, especially given the number of good men who have had to die. In any case, Commander Gomez decided to lure the creature.

A previous attempt to trap the monster failed, but she did succeed in luring it with a glemnar flower. So she cleared out the hospital and had Dr. Dolahn and J'Roh construct a new hospital under the subspace accelerator. This was sensible, as the old hospital is the easiest place to defend. The new hospital will be even easier to defend. So all the wounded and sick, the doctor, and all the remaining healthy people were moved to the new hospital. Commander Gomez remained behind at the old hospital. She liberally spread the glemnar flowers and waited. She felt that the monster shii would come to the hospital. Her plan was to try to talk to it. She thought she had come up with a way to do so. At least she was not foolish enough to try this without backup. She was armed with her Starfleet sonic rifle. All she had to do was wait until the monster came. We would wait in the hospital until it was safe.

That, at least, was the theory. Unfortunately, the practice proved somewhat different. We had very few sonic rifles left. Mine, having gone completely unused since I was issued it, was one of them. Those of us who were armed stood guard at the two entrances to the hospital. One led to the dish, the other to the underground tubing. I was stationed along with J'Roh at the dish entrance. The other four were at the tubing entrance. This made sense. J'Roh was not a very good shot, and you know what I'm like with a weapon. It was very unlikely that the shii would come in through the dish, as it would have to climb up onto it and then slide to its center. The tubing provides a more direct access. That, therefore, had the best guard.

Not that we thought it would matter, of course. We all assumed that Commander Gomez's plan would work. Well, actually, I assumed that. So did J'Roh. He was the one to first call her "Sauul" after she solved the riddle of the load-lifters. And so did some others. Most, however, thought that the plan was a foolish one. Many wanted it to work anyhow, but only so that the shii would kill Commander Gomez. In fact, I distinctly remember that part. Querti had just said, "If we're lucky, the beast will take her bait and take that hideous head of hers off." Then he started to say something else as Anilegna started to laugh. Then the entryway buckled, making an awful tearing noise. Then a triangle-shaped claw ripped into Anilegna's torso. As he coughed up blood, Querti lifted his rifle and made as if to fire. The claw, still stained with Anilegna's blood and encrusted with his innards, continued its arc and ripped both the rifle and Querti's hands to ribbons.

Next to me, J'Roh aimed his sonic rifle at the door. Unfortunately, there was nothing to aim at. The shii hadn't come all the way through, and the parts that had were blocked by Querti and by Anilegna's remains. Not that it would have mattered to me. As before, I froze.

Oddly, this time, I couldn't hear the rifles firing, but I could hear Querti's screams. People closer to me than he was were saying things. I think Dr. Dolahn cried out, and several people ducked under the beds, but I didn't hear that. The shii ripped through the rest of the doorway, but I didn't hear that, either. I continued to hear Querti's screams, though.

Once he had a clear shot, J'Roh fired his rifle. So did one of the other guards at the door. The second guard's rifle literally exploded in his face. That, I did hear, as well as his screams, intermingled with Querti's.

A hole seemed to open up in the shii's torso, but it didn't slow down. It sliced the head of the first guard clean off, while the second guard continued to scream in pain. Then it got quiet for a moment. I noticed that the shii cut Querti's head off as well.

Suddenly, the sound exploded in my ears. Dolahn telling everyone to take cover. J'Roh screaming for me to shoot. The second guard still screaming in agony. And I still couldn't move, couldn't fire my weapon, couldn't speak.

I wanted to, Marig, that's the worst thing. As loudly as J'Roh was screaming at me, I was screaming at

myself. I tried to motivate myself to do something. But I could not budge. I told myself that the deaths of Kejahna, Kelrek, D'Ren, Entorr, and all the others had to be avenged. I told myself that others would die any moment. I told myself that Commander Gomez had said that I was the one she trusted.

But mostly I just thought about how I was going to die. And I was so frightened of that possibility that I could do nothing but think about it. And so fear continued to grip me as the shii decapitated Kani and Rimlek. Both of them had been attacked by the other shii that Commander Gomez had killed. Though they survived, they had been left comatose. Now they, too, were dead.

J'Roh leapt down from our guard post at the doorway and shot the creature again. It started to bleed mercury as the other one had. But its wounds did not seem to stem its horrific tide. With one slash, it cut J'Roh's body in two. Then Dolahn, the Gallamite doctor, ran up to it. Dolahn is not what I would consider a brave man. In fact, I would mostly consider him a fool. Like all Gallamites, he has a transparent head, so you can see his brain. Someone used to joke that he wore a hat so no one would know how small that brain truly was. The sad truth is, he wore the hat because Kejahna threatened to kill him if he didn't. In any case, Dolahn ran up to the shii. He was only armed with some kind of edged instrument. He stabbed the creature in an odd place. It was right in the creature's lower thorax. Probably where its stomach was. After the doctor did that, the shii cut his head off, too.

His head lay on the floor, the hat having fallen off. I could see his brain. It was not small. In fact, it seemed rather large.

Then the shii collected all the heads it had severed. I noticed that all the wounds that had been inflicted healed. Well, almost all. The one Dolahn inflicted continued to drip mercury even as it collected heads. When it was done, it tucked the heads under a foreleg. Then it ran out the way it came.

Slowly people started to come out from under the beds and tables. The floors were awash in blue from all the blood. Some red was mixed in, from the doctor.

A moment later, Commander Gomez ran in. She asked, "What happened?"

Some mad fool burst out laughing at that absurd question. It took me a moment to realize that I was that fool. I continued to laugh while someone else-I believe it was Mranol-explained that the shii had come through and killed fifteen more people. The odd thing is, I hadn't even noticed all the deaths. But I was certainly wasn't going to contradict Mranol.

I am now sitting in my tent. I am not sure if I'm ever going to leave the tent again. I have now had my rifle for almost an entire year. It has gone unfired the entire time. Could I have made a difference, either in the cave or in the hospital? Probably not. But perhaps I might have helped save a life or two.

It is obvious that I am not worthy to live when so many good men like Kejahna and Dolahn and J'Roh have died. Tell my children that I love them, Malig. And tell them that their father is a coward and a fool.

Best regards,  
your unworthy husband,  
Razka

Personal log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53289.4.

I'm a complete idiot.

I made the biggest mistake you can make-humanizing a machine. Well, maybe "animalizing" is more accurate. But I should have realized that my idea wasn't going to work.

The ruby-like flowers weren't what lured the shii to the trap in the first place, it was the three Nalori. It was looking for more food to collect for its masters. Because it's a machine. Machines do what they're programmed to do, and this one is programmed to kill animals and decapitate them so their masters can eat.

So naturally, when you collect everyone in one spot, that's where it's going to go.

God, it's like I'm a green ensign back on the Enterprise again. And now fifteen more people are dead, and it's my fault. I'm supposed to be in charge, and all I've done is get people killed.

One of the workers-I don't even know his name-just came in and asked me to perform the funeral rites again. I was surprised at this, but he said something that surprised me even more

"It is not your fault, Commander, it is ours. We fooled ourselves into thinking you were the saul, that you had lifted the curse of this miserable place. But you are, in the end, just a woman-as you yourself told us all along. You did not wish us to call you saul, and we should have listened. Instead, we are simply all victims of the curse of Sarindar."

With that, he left.

I wish it made me feel better, but it doesn't even come close. I've failed in my duty here. And it's past time I made up for it.

First officer's log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53289.7.

I've received a transmission from the da Vinci, but it's garbled. The only thing I know for sure is that the signal originated from the Trivas system, which is an unclaimed region of space near the border between Federation and Cardassian space. Unfortunately, it's not clear from the message if they were cutting short their mission to the Trivas system or if they couldn't cut short that mission.

I'm proceeding on the latter assumption, and plan to once again attempt to activate the Culloden. First, however, I must perform funeral rites for those who have most recently died at the hands of the shii.

Personal log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53289.9.

After the service for those Nalori who died in the hospital, I checked to see what rites needed to be performed for Dolahn. According to the database, most Gallamites didn't practice any particular death rituals, but some belonged to a religion known as Ambrushroi who do require that the body be burned within six hours of death. However, there's no evidence that Dolahn was Ambrushroi-and in any case most non-Ambrushroi Gallamites don't care what's done to their bodies, and Razka told me that Dolahn had no family. So I ordered his body burned anyhow. Seemed the best thing to do.

It's like the Dominion War all over again-each day goes by with us all wondering who's going to die next. No.

That's not going to happen.

I'm going to face this thing. I've assigned one of the engineers to work on the Culloden. As for me, I'm going to find the shii and either convince it to stop what it's doing-or stop it myself.

Letter from the workers on the subspace accelerator project to Commander Sonya Gomez, sixteenth day of Sendrak, twenty-third year of Togh.

Commander Gomez

By the time you receive this letter, we will be gone. We have faith in Starfleet's ability to rescue you. Nomis and Repooc were able to bypass the DNA encoding on the Bolian's ship, and we are taking it. We are willing to face the consequences of our actions. A choice between not working and dying is no choice at all.

We wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors, Commander. We apologize for placing the burden of being saul on you. That was our mistake, and we hope you can find it in your heart to forgive us, assuming humans have hearts like ours. We should have known that the curse of Sarindar would destroy us all.

Razka has said that he will remain behind, and he will deliver this missive to you. Razka is a good man, and we are sure he will be helpful to you.

We are sorry that we were unable to finish the subspace accelerator, but the curse has shown us that it was not meant to be.

Regretfully,

Your former staff

Transcript of tricorder recording by Commander Sonya Gomez, outside SA project camp perimeter, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53290.1.

GOMEZ Please, wait! Don't attack! I'm not your enemy, and I'm not food.

SHII Speak you.

GOMEZ Yes, I speak. I am sentient. I'm not an animal for you to kill for food.

SHII Do not comprehend "sentient." You not owner.

GOMEZ No, I'm not one of the owners, but I'm very much like them.

SHII You not owner. Await owners.

GOMEZ Your owners are gone.

SHII Do not comprehend "gone."

GOMEZ They-they ceased to function. They died. You don't need to keep gathering food for them.

SHII Function to gather food and protect.

GOMEZ I know that. But without the owners, that function no longer exists. You need a new function.

SHII Do not comprehend "new."

GOMEZ It means that things have changed. You have to adapt to the situation.

SHII Do not comprehend "changed."

GOMEZ Oh, great.

SHII Do not comprehend "adapt."

GOMEZ You've been committing murder for no reason. We can't defend ourselves against you, and you have no need to attack us.

SHII Do not comprehend "murder." Am fulfilling function. Must gather food await return owners.

GOMEZ The owners are gone! They're dead! They've ceased to function!

SHII Must gather food.

GOMEZ Please, you must listen to me.

SHII Do not comprehend "dead." You not owner. Your instructions relevant not. Must gather food.

GOMEZ There's no need to gather food! There's-dammit! [sonic rifle fire]  
Personal log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53290.3.

The bastards took the Culloden.

I saw it taking off after I managed to get away from the shii. It attacked me after I tried to reason with it, but the rifle on full blast managed to at least force it to run away, though I didn't do any appreciable

damage to it. For that matter, there's no sign of any other injury its taken. Not surprising, given its chameleon circuitry-it can heal any "wound" by simply shape-changing over it.

Right after it ran off, I heard the screaming sound of impulse engines. My heart soared for a brief instant, as I thought it might be either the Archimedes or the Franklin, but I quickly realized that it wasn't a Starfleet impulse signature-and it was the sound of a ship taking off, not landing.

Then I looked up to see the Culloden taking off.

I ran back to the camp, only to find Razka alone. He showed me the note the workers left for me. I asked Razka what the hell was going on.

"I should think the letter explains it all, Commander. They have left."

"So why are you still here?" I asked him.

He smiled. "My job is to assist you. You're still here, so I'm still here."

I stared at him. "What's the real reason?"

"Does there need to be another reason?"

"No, but I'm pretty sure there is one."

Razka sighed and then he smiled at me. "All my life, I have prided myself on always doing the best job I could. I have always excelled at the tasks I have been given. Mind you, not all those tasks were especially challenging, but that wasn't the point."

He started to pace. "The other day, I was given another simple task to help you track down the monster shii. When it attacked, I did nothing. I could not fire my weapon. I could not move. You were threatened, and I did not move. My comrades were wounded, and I did not move. Zilder was killed right in front of me, and I did not move."

He looked up at me with a stricken look. I'd never seen him like this-he'd always been so easygoing and pleasant before.

"So I have stayed. Because it is my job to aid you, and I will not fail again."

I nodded and said, "All right, fine. It's just you and me, then. We can either wait until that thing comes and gets us, or we can stop it once and for all. It's not going to listen to reason."

"Why should it, Commander?"

I actually chuckled at that, which surprised me. I hadn't thought I had any chuckles left in me. "You were right. I forgot the first rule of programming."

"Which is?" Razka asked.

"A machine is only as good as what's put into it, no more, no less. Garbage in, garbage out. Now c'mon," I said, hefting my sonic rifle, "we've got to take out the garbage."

Razka and I went and used the remnants of the camp perimeter barrier and the remaining Nalori-issue sonic rifles to form a small barricade for the pair of us. We're within the confines of that barricade now, having just finished modifying my own sonic rifle. It now emits a pulse intended to immobilize the shii for several minutes. Of course, there's no way to test it until the shii attacks

We're waiting for midnight to come around. The next window in the pulsar/quasar interference will provide us with the best chance to stop it. I'm recording this log entry while we wait. We've both eaten some field rations, and we're as ready to go as we can be.

It's funny, I've been thinking back at all the life-or-death situations I've been in in my career. I mean, I spent the first three-and-a-half years of my career on the Enterprise, where we had life-or-death situations on what seemed to be a weekly basis, starting with the Borg. Then there was that one-year project on the Oberth, which was pretty sedate until all hell broke loose at the end when the Romulans turned up out of nowhere.

Then there was the Sentinel. And the war.

I'm sick of people dying. I'm sick of losing people. Whether they're friends, comrades, subordinates-it doesn't matter.

It stops now.

I reached into one of the pouches on my uniform-where I'd normally keep my tricorder. I had put Zilder's copy of the Se'rbeq there-not entirely sure why. I'm not particularly religious. I remember what Kejahna joked when we tested the antimatter reactor "Ho'nig helps those who help themselves." He mainly said it



to tease Zilder, who didn't think that the reactor would be ready in time with only two antigrav units. Now they're both dead. And I need to use their work to help stop the monster that is trying to destroy that work.

It's almost midnight. Time to get moving.

First officer's log, Commander Sonya Gomez, planet Sarindar, Stardate 53290.6.

At ten minutes prior to midnight, I came out from behind the barricade, leaving Razka safe inside. I had the feeling that the shii would attack us as soon as it could. Its function is to collect heads for its owners. It had targeted my particular head on three occasions now without getting it. I don't know if its capable of grudge matches-in fact, I'm sure it isn't-but I also suspect that it was programmed to keep trying to fulfill its goals. That meant that it would keep trying for me until it had my head.

That, at least, was my plan. It turned out to be accurate. I waited near the concave dish that formed the most prominent part of the SA. The tricorder was able to detect its approach, and I fired a shot from the sonic rifle near it to give it pause. Then I ran toward the SA dish.

As soon as I got to the ladder that would lead me up to the SA, I fired a shot with the rifle at the ground behind me then again at one of the crystal bushes near the ladder. It wouldn't delay the shii much, but I only needed to slow it down enough to make up the difference between its four legs and my two

Excerpt from a letter from Razka on Sarindar to Marig on Nalor, sixteenth day of Sendrak, twenty-third year of Togh.

everything seemed fine until the barricade failed. I should have known that the curse of Sarindar wasn't finished with me just yet.

Luckily, Commander Gomez is no fool. She gave me her tricorder device. She had modified it so that it would emit a sonic pulse. The idea was that if the monster shii came for me, I should activate the pulse. As soon as the barricade failed, I clutched the tricorder to myself for dear life. I looked at the tableau in front of me.

A fierce wind was blowing, as often happened at night. The crystalline trees and bushes made a mild tinkling noise that almost sounded musical. To the right was the massive concave dish that was the focus of so much of our labors. Commander Gomez was climbing the ladder to the dish. The monster shii was standing at the ladder's base. I somehow doubted it had ever encountered anything like this ladder before.

Then it turned to look at me. It ran for me.

It happened again, Marig. I froze.

But this time, I was able to push the button. Though I could not raise or activate a weapon, I was somehow able to make myself activate the sonic pulse. And it worked. The monster shii stopped dead in its tracks. Then it went for me a second time. I pushed the button again.

(In fact, Marig, it is truly not a button, but a touch-sensitive control. But allow a frightened old man to wax poetic.)

Amazingly enough, it worked again. And a third time. After that, the monster shii turned around and ran back toward the ladder. I looked up to see that Commander Gomez had climbed up to the top of the dish

First officer's log, supplemental.

as soon as I got to the edge of the dish, I turned to see that the shii had turned its attention to Razka. I braced my legs in the struts of the ladder, then fired a shot over the shii's head.

Since the shii was staying about three meters away from Razka, yet facing him, I assume that the sonic pulse I built into the tricorder worked. But I had no way to judge how long it would last, and besides, I

needed to get the shii up to the dish. So I fired.

Sure enough, the shii turned around-probably deciding that Razka's head wasn't worth all this trouble anyhow-and ran back to the ladder. It loped over to the bottom of the ladder, then tried to figure out how to climb up it.

I looked down and tried to figure out the same thing. The shii had triangular "paws"-no individual claws or fingers or anything like that. Presumably the shii that the creature emulated had evolved that way as the most adequate way to navigate Sarindar's glassy surface. Unfortunately, it wasn't very useful for climbing up ladders with rounded rungs.

Of course, the whole point of the exercise was to lure the shii up the ladder to the SA dish. Something else I didn't think of. Latest in a series, collect 'em all.

Then the shii's paws changed shape to something closer to a human hand. That made sense. It, and its smaller companion, had taken on the shape of a shii in order to blend in with the local fauna, and, being a machine, hadn't changed shape to anything else since then because it didn't have reason to.

Now, though, it did. Armed with its newfound opposable thumbs, it clambered up the ladder. As soon as the shii was about three-quarters of the way up the ladder, I did some clambering of my own, onto the outer edge of the dish. The plan was to get the shii up on the edge also, then immobilize it.

It was a good plan. So naturally, it went all to hell

Excerpt from a letter from Razka on Sarindar to Marig on Nalor, sixteenth day of Sendrak, twenty-third year of Togh.

I watched as Commander Gomez stood on the dish's edge. The monster shii climbed the rest of the way up. She raised her weapon. The creature, however, moved faster than expected.

Actually, that is not true. The creature had been moving fast all along. It is simply so fast that it's difficult to comprehend just how fast it is. I suspect that Commander Gomez failed to anticipate this. One cannot blame her. This monster is very easy to underestimate.

The monster attacked her, knocking her weapon out of her hands. She lost her balance, and fell into the dish. The rifle, though, fell down the outside of the dish and plummeted to the ground.

This presented me with something of a dilemma, Marig. You see, Commander Gomez needed that rifle in order to stop the shii. Which meant that I needed to grab the rifle and get it to her. However, that meant getting much closer to the shii than I particularly wanted.

Besides, I knew that if I picked up the rifle, I would freeze again. I remembered Commander Gomez's words. She told me of the engineer's axiom that when garbage goes in, garbage comes out. I am like that. I hold a rifle, I freeze. It is the way of things.

But I promised Commander Gomez that I would continue to do my job. I told her that that is why I stayed behind. Of course, that is not the real reason. The truth is that the other workers did not want me with them on the Culloden. They also did not want Commander Gomez with them. While not all of them believed her to be bad luck, enough of them did. And enough of those also thought I fell into that category. That was why they waited to take off until they knew that she was away from the camp.

However, I did not wish her to know that. Besides, what I told her was true. I wanted to redeem myself, to do my job. I owed her that much. I owed myself that much.

So I ran for the rifle. I picked it up. And I climbed the ladder, trying not to pay attention to the scream of pain I heard from the inner workings of the dish

First officer's log, supplemental.

I tumbled into the inside of the dish, the duranium panels colliding with my body in a nastily bone-jarring manner. I managed to halt my descent, stopping myself at what appeared to be fifty meters down into the dish-or halfway to the center. It was about where the dish started to flatten out a bit and get less steep.

I quickly tried to get my bearings, trying to stand up and keep my balance. The rifle was nowhere to be seen, which made my life a helluva lot more complicated. The shii was still at the perimeter of the dish. Since I was unarmed, and could barely keep my balance, I was at a distinct disadvantage.

Then it started running down the dish toward me, its "paws" having morphed back into shii form, since that was much more efficient for decapitating.

This worked in my favor, actually, as the claws-which could easily get a grip in the crystalline surface of Sarindar-couldn't grab hold of duranium. So instead of loping gracefully down the inner surface of the dish, it slipped, slid, and tumbled down the dish, past me, and toward the center.

I just needed to be able to press this advantage-unfortunately, no real opportunity to do so presented itself. Instead, I found myself facing this creature from fifty meters away with it standing between me and my only legitimate means of escape-the center of the dish. There was a small hatch in the center that was my best bet for getting out of there-climbing up the edge of the dish wasn't going to be much of an option. Then the creature somehow managed to get enough of a grip on the dish to take one giant leap toward me. Starfleet training kicked in, and I managed to roll with the impact as it landed on me-rolling upward at first, then tumbling back down toward the center as gravity took over from the force of impact. I took a kick at it, but before I could, it slashed at my cheek. I cried out in surprise as much as pain, then followed through on the kick.

The kick didn't do much to damage it-though it felt like it had done plenty to my foot-but it wound up being enough for the shii to lose its balance and start scrabbling around on the dish some more. Under other circumstances, I might have found it amusing, watching it try desperately to maintain some kind of grip, its arms flailing as each attempt failed.

I was standing in the middle of a concave dish at night on a crystal planet facing a creature out to kill me. I was armed with nothing more than a torn Starfleet uniform and a battered copy of someone else's religious text-and my brain, which I had always relied on in the past. However, it was failing me now. There had to be some way to keep the creature still long enough for me to get off the dish, but I was damned if I could think of it. I needed to get the rifle back

Excerpt from a letter from Razka on Sarindar to Marig on Nalor, sixteenth day of Sendrak, twenty-third year of Togh.

with the rifle slung over my shoulder, I started to climb. I am grateful that my great list of weaknesses does not include a fear of heights. Climbing the ladder was not difficult. In fact, I had done it several times before during the project. No, the fear that gripped me solely had to do with why I took the climb. But I continued to climb. And I tried not to think about the scream I had heard. I also was hearing odd scraping noises.

I got to the top of the dish and I saw that the monster was trying to attack Commander Gomez. For her part, Commander Gomez was trying to get away from it. She was bleeding from her face and her uniform was torn and ripped.

As soon as she saw me, she shouted at me to shoot the monster

First officer's log, supplemental.

I don't think I've ever been happier to see anyone as I was to see Razka at that moment. I screamed at him to shoot the shii. Once he did that, everything else would come into place.

He held up the rifle

Excerpt from a letter from Razka on Sarindar to Marig on Nalor, sixteenth day of Sendrak, twenty-third year of Togh.

but once again I failed to shoot. I was programmed, it seemed. Nothing I could do could make myself push the button. Not even the constant shouting of, "Shoot it!" from Commander Gomez. Not even the monster finally being able to slash at both her face and her torso. I saw her strangely colored blood flowing from two wounds in her face now, as well as her side, and still she shouted, "Shoot it!" And still I could not pull the trigger.

Garbage in, garbage out.

I knew for sure that I was not someone who could fire a weapon. I was, however, still the aide to the head of the project. So I would do what I'd been doing. I would help her.

Commander Gomez was about seventy meters down the dish and about ten meters to my left. I could not trust my ability to throw the rifle to her. I could, however, trust gravity. I laid the rifle down on the surface of the dish and let it slide toward the center

First officer's log, supplemental.

the pain in my side was the worst I'd felt since that mugato sliced me open on Neural years ago, but I managed to crawl the twelve meters to where the rifle was going to wind up. Razka wasn't a fighter, and I respected that-I just wished he realized it before that thing sliced me open.

Speaking of which, it was still trying to maintain its grip on the dish, and was hoping to use me as an anchor. It dug one claw into my boot heel as I was crawling over toward the rifle. I managed to yank my foot out of the boot, which sent the thing sprawling back down toward the center, once again trying to get some kind of footing.

The salty taste of my own blood from the two cuts in my cheeks, pain slicing through my entire torso like a phaser set on burn, I pounced on the sonic rifle, rolled painfully onto my back, and saw the shii getting ready to pounce on me again.

It was almost funny-as it leapt through the air, I saw that my boot was still wedged to its claw.

I fired the rifle.

The shii was immobilized.

Unfortunately, its momentum was still carrying it through the air, and it landed right on top of me.

As bad as the pain in my side was before, it was a thousand times worse now. I cried out in agony.

But the good news was that the shii was just a dead weight on top of me.

A very heavy weight. I managed to push the thing off me-and it still didn't move-and tapped my combadge. "Computer, time."

The grating, atonal voice of the Nalori computer said, "The time is 0014 hours."

I had cut it close-the quasar/pulsar window would close any minute. If I didn't do this now, I wouldn't be able to for fourteen hours. "Computer, activate ACB."

I now had two minutes to get to the center of the dish before the annular confinement beam reached full power

Excerpt from a letter from Razka on Sarindar to Marig on Nalor, sixteenth day of Sendrak, twenty-third year of Togh.

I had thought that everything was fine. The monster was stopped as planned. Commander Gomez was activating the beam that would stop it. And now she was moving toward the center. I too moved toward escape. Her route would take her to the underside of the dish. Ironically, the door she was using was the same one that I guarded at the secondary hospital. My own route was simply back the way I came. Then I saw that the monster had started to move. And Commander Gomez hadn't reached the hatch yet. I reached for the tricorder, hoping I might be able to stop it. Unfortunately, I fumbled the device and dropped it. It fell the dozens of meters to the ground. So instead, I called the commander's name

First officer's log, supplemental.

and it was a good thing he did, because I was able to whirl around and fire one last time at the creature. Unfortunately, doing so seemed to rip open my wound, and I cried out.

Then I heard the steady thrum that indicated that the ACB was about to come online. If I stayed where I was, I would be reduced to my component atoms inside about half a second.

I dove for the hatch

Excerpt from a letter from Razka on Sarindar to Marig on Nalor, sixteenth day of Sendrak, twenty-third year of Togh.

and then I started climbing madly down the ladder. I had no idea if Commander Gomez had heard me or not. My main concern at that point was my own survival. That, and the death of the monster shii. I heard the sound of the mighty engine that powered the dish. Forces that were intended to displace atmosphere and create a vacuum sliced through the air. The noise was deafening. The light was blinding. When we first tested the beam, I was standing at a safe distance. Now I was at anything but. I don't think that my ears will ever cease ringing. Nor do I believe that the spots will ever disappear from in front of my eyes.

But I have to say it was a spectacular view. The nearby crystalline trees reflected the shimmering beam, which shot into the night with such intensity that I thought it would bisect the entire galaxy.

A lifetime later, the beam finally ceased. There was no sign of either Commander Gomez or the monster shii.

Second officer's log, Lt. Commander Kieran Duffy, Shuttlecraft Archimedes, Stardate 53291.0.

I'm on final approach to the planet Sarindar. According to the Nalori Republic representative that Captain Gold talked to when the da Vinci entered Nalori space two hours ago, all contact with Sarindar was lost several days ago, but they came across the transport ship, the Culloden, that had been assigned to the project. The Nalori had assumed that everyone else on the planet had been killed, but the testimony of the workers on the Culloden, combined with sensor readings the da Vinci took show that the interference around the planet has gotten too heavy for even com signals to get through.

I just hope that Commander Gomez is okay.

Supplemental.

I landed on Sarindar to find the remnants of a tent system, some broken-down machinery, a very large concave dish-

-and Commander Gomez and a Nalori getting very drunk on Saurian brandy.

As soon as she saw me, the commander ran toward me and leapt into my arms. Before she did, I noticed that her uniform was torn in dozens of places and looked (and smelled) like it hadn't been laundered in weeks, she had two nasty cuts on her face, and she was clutching her right side as she ran.

Then she kissed me.

I would say that the commander is alive and well and doing just fine.

Personal log, Commander Sonya Gomez, U.S.S. da Vinci, Stardate 53291.5.

I had been quite convinced that Razka and I were going to get completely plastered long before anyone rescued us. But I didn't care. I was so giddy from actually defeating the shii and knowing that I was going to live, that the fact that we would probably starve to death if someone didn't show up soon wasn't

something either of us wanted to think about.

Then I saw the Archimedes come swooping down out of the atmosphere. It was the most glorious sight I'd ever seen. (Razka said it was the second-most glorious, as he gave first prize to the ACB wiping out the shii. Sadly, I didn't get to see that, as I was under the hatch at the time.)

Part of it was the brandy, part of it was euphoria-and part of it was sheer stupidity, given my torso wound-but a big part of why I ran into Kieran's arms was simply because I didn't want to ever let go of him.

I learned a lot on this mission, and found out a lot of things about myself that I didn't like. Primary among them was that life is too damn short to let the good things get away.

What Kieran and I had on the Enterprise was a good thing. There are probably dozens of good reasons why we shouldn't start up our relationship again, but right now, I can't think of a single one of them.

Now we're back on the da Vinci. I've been in touch with Senator Moyya, and he actually apologized to me. Apparently he wasn't showing the recordings I sent along to the rest of the senate because he believed they were fakes. One of his fellow senators insisted that he look at the full communique from Sarindar, and suddenly the senate thought that maybe their initial reaction was a bit on the harsh side. Unfortunately, by the time the senate realized their mistake, all communications had been lost with Sarindar thanks to worse interference than usual from the quasar/pulsar combination. That's also why the da Vinci's com signal was so patchy. They had, in fact, dropped their mission to Trivas like a hot potato and come to rescue me.

The current plan is to assign new workers to the camp, with Razka now in charge, at my recommendation. He will follow the work schedule I laid out, and-without the two shii to terrorize the workers-the SA should finally be finished. The senate has also promised that Starfleet will be allowed to aid the team that studies and harvests the chimerium-and, best of all, they're willing to talk about allowing Starfleet safe passage through to Sector 969. Which means the mission that Captain Scott gave me back on Earth has actually been fulfilled.

This should be good news. I just wish it hadn't come at the expense of so many lives.

I was seriously tempted not to have Dr. Lense get rid of the two scars I got. Razka said that they made me look like a Nalori who'd gotten his coming-of-age scars, and in a sense he was right. But I decided to get rid of them anyhow. Keeping scars is an affectation suffered mostly by people with more mental difficulties than I'm willing to put on display. I did it after Captain Gold debriefed me and I talked to Senator Moyya.

Now I'm in my quarters, having been instructed by both Dr. Lense and Captain Gold to relax. But I can't sleep. I keep thinking about Zilder and Kejhna and J'Roh, and the score of others who died under my command.

I guess the only way I can make their deaths have any meaning to me at all is to live.

And I intend to do just that.

"Gomez to Duffy. Please report to my quarters."

End log entry.

## 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, Cold Fusion, and the upcoming Here There Be Monsters). 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 2002), and the comic book Star Trek The Next Generation Perchance to Dream (reprinted in the trade paperback Enemy Unseen). He has also written best-selling novels, short stories, and nonfiction books 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](http://DeCandido.net).