

Other eBooks in the Star Trek Starfleet Corps of Engineers series from Pocket Books

- 1 The Belly of the Beast by Dean Wesley Smith
- 2 Fatal Error by Keith R.A. DeCandido
- 3 Hard Crash by Christie Golden
- 4 Interphase Book 1 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore
- 5 Interphase Book 2 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore
- 6 Cold Fusion by Keith R.A. DeCandido
- 7 Invincible Book 1 by David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido
- 8 Invincible Book 2 by David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido
- 9 The Riddled Post by Aaron Rosenberg
- 10 Gateways Epilogue Here There Be Monsters by Keith R.A. DeCandido
- 11 Ambush by Dave Galanter & Greg Brodeur
- 12 Some Assembly Required by Scott Ciencin & Dan Jolley

coming soon

- 13 Caveat Emptor by Ian Edgington
- 14 No Surrender by Jeff Mariotte

Star Trek S.C.E.

12 Some Assembly Required

by Scott Ciencin and Dan Jolley

15,550 words

Scott Ciencin
13515 Eagle Ridge Drive 523
Ft. Myers, FL 33912
941-768-5312
FAX 941-768-2946
sciencin@cs.com

Authors represented by
Jonathan Matson
Harold Matson Agency
276 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10011
212-679-4490
fax 212-545-1224
jonpmats@aol.com

To Denise. With thanks to Jeff Mariotte, John Ordovery, Keith R.A. DeCandido, and Paula Block.

-S.C.

This is for Dad and my brother Clint, who got me started on all this stuff way back when.

-D.J.

Chapter One

Korl Harland kept his eyes fixed on the central monitor, taking in Drei Silveris's voice while he ignored the erratically shimmering photon array over his head, and the steadily growing tremors beneath his feet. His hands flashed across the control array.

"Professor," Silveris said, steadying himself in the lab's doorway, his own eyes glued to a hand-held seismic readout, "it's reached theta pattern! Shockwave impact in less than two minutes!"

"I am aware of our time constraints," Harland said calmly. The photon array, its normally soothing patterns of light swimming and transforming in the air above him, flickered and dimmed.

Silveris stepped hesitantly into the lab and found that, on top of his dread and horror at the approaching catastrophe, his mind still found room for awe and a trace of fear of the immense, mysterious alien machine housed there.

The professor leaned closer to the controls and spoke, voice barely above a whisper. "I believe you can hear me," he said. "I believe I can talk to you."

Another tremor came, this one more violent; a stack of pads toppled from a nearby workbench and one of the lab's windows shattered. Harland's eight-fingered hands flew across the machine's control console, searching, practically begging the system to respond.

Professor Korl Harland, the Keorgan who had made possible his planet's petition to join the United Federation of Planets by inventing the Keorgan warp drive, had assembled-to the best of his abilities-the huge alien computing system in his own workshop, which occupied space in a building on the outskirts of Yirgopolis, Keorga's capital. Yirgopolis itself, with a population of just under three million citizens, was a coastal city, nestled into a bay on the eastern seaboard of Keorga's most populous continent. Part of a chain of cities and towns stretching both north and south along the coastline, Yirgopolis gleamed as the heart of Keorga, the brightly focused center of Keorgan art-art which had already attracted interplanetary attention... art which, along with the rest of Keorgan culture, currently faced a threat of cataclysmic proportions.

Harland worked as fast as he could, tried every control combination he could think of as perspiration beaded on his brow and ran down between his vividly colored eyebrows. He knew it could work. He knew it could be done. He'd seen it.

Just after he and several assistants had assembled the machine seven days ago, the big central monitor had flared briefly to life, a brilliant violet energy matrix playing across the screen for precious seconds before fading to black. Since then the screen had come to life on three other occasions, but for no more than a few seconds at a time, and in response to what seemed to be random manipulations of its control console.

Now, with tremors rumbling through Yirgopolis and shockwaves approaching that could easily level the city, Harland wanted nothing more than to see the computer flare to life once again.

So when the first shockwave struck and brilliant violet light flooded the lab, Harland's eyes filled with tears of joy.

Elsewhere in Yirgopolis-roughly one kilometer from Harland's lab-two small children huddled together in the basement of their home. They had been playing a game, but when the earth began to quake and rumble they grew frightened and hid together in a corner.

Rand, the boy, held his younger sister Ria close to him, despite her struggles. "I have to see if Munna's all

right!" Ria cried, referring to their pet, which lived in an aviary behind the house.

"Munna's fine," Rand said. "She'll just fly away if anything bad happens." But Ria slipped free of her brother's grasp and dashed across the basement floor.

She never made it to the stairs. In a single movement the earth convulsed and split apart beneath them, a chasm suddenly yawning between brother and sister. Wooden beams and chunks of metal and glass rained down around them as their house ripped nearly in half. None of the destruction registered on Rand, though. All he could see was his younger sister as she teetered on the edge of the gaping chasm, then toppled backward into it.

Nor was he aware of a quick violet flicker in one corner of the basement near the ceiling... or of the small, glittering sphere which abruptly materialized there, hovering, light winking from its surface.

The only thing in Rand's mind, as he dove forward and lunged to grab a scrap of Ria's clothing, was the fervent, soul-deep wish that the tremors would stop, that the ground would close, that everything would go back to the way it was before the earthquakes started.

The glittering silver sphere revolved, gleamed once-and a sheet of violet energy exploded from it, blasting outward from Rand and Ria's house to encompass all of Yirgopolis, all of its surrounding countryside, in slightly less than two seconds.

The shockwaves traveling through the earth rapidly slowed, then stopped altogether, canceled out by a strange new vibration through the rocks and soil. Just as quickly, massive spikes of violet brilliance erupted from the ground and joined together, pulling the ruptured earth closed again, setting aright the toppled buildings, effecting millions of tiny repairs within the space of a heartbeat.

Then, before any witnessing Keorgans even had time to process what they saw, the violet energy crackled and vanished.

In the basement of their home, Rand found himself holding a sobbing Ria in his arms, crouched on a floor that only revealed its earlier destruction in the form of the tiniest of hairline cracks.

Yirgopolis breathed again, pulled back from the brink of grinding, shattering death.

And as Rand comforted his sister, the glittering silver sphere, still unseen, gleamed once more and faded out of existence, leaving only an odd, deep whispering voice

"Test Program One complete. Sentients compatible with interface parameters. Readyng Test Program Two."

In his laboratory, Harland sprawled on his back on the floor, staring up at the computer's central monitor as the violet energy matrix faded from the screen. It took him a few moments to realize Silveris was speaking to him.

"They've stopped! The shockwaves have completely stopped!"

Harland glanced over at Silveris, who kept looking from his seismic readout to a window onto the city and back again. Silveris rushed to Harland's side as the older man got to his feet.

"You did it, sir! You made the system respond!"

A little shakily, Harland approached the control array, then ran his hand over it. He got no response... the energy matrix had gone. The great machine stood cold and lifeless. But Silveris was correct the system had stopped the shockwaves. It had saved Yirgopolis from destruction. And he had brought it to life. Somehow, in some way, he had woken the machine from its slumber, if only briefly.

The ground beneath no longer trembled... but Harland knew it could only be a temporary reprieve.

"I will understand you," he whispered. "I will."

He went back to work, more determined now than ever.

Chapter Two

The maximum-security cells on Starbase 27 would not have been described as roomy. Or cozy. Or

comfortable, for that matter. A guest of this particular Starfleet detention facility, if he were feeling generous, might go so far as to call the cells Spartan, or possibly utilitarian. But most of the inmates used words like cramped, and claustrophobic, and oppressive, before they started in with the profanity. Thajus Stone had compiled a list of adjectives he intended to use to describe his own cell, but when his door opened and he got a good look at the Starfleet officer in charge of his case, he decided he'd be better off keeping his mouth shut.

Lieutenant Commander Demosthenes Tull, if he'd followed typical Starfleet protocol, would have sent a couple of junior officers down to bring the prisoner up for interrogation, but he'd found that people tended to become more cooperative the longer they stayed in his presence. So he went to fetch Thajus Stone himself.

As it turned out, Stone looked more or less like an ordinary human male, somewhere around thirty-five years old. Stone's eyes were huge, but so were most people's when they first saw Tull. At nearly three meters tall and more than a meter wide, with dusky skin stretched over muscles like boulders, and human features except for eyes that glowed an opalescent green, Tull was accustomed to being stared at. He was also accustomed to getting swift results without having to do or say much of anything. His physical presence seemed to speak volumes to apes like Stone.

"You're coming with me," Tull said.

In a tiny voice with no trace of bravado whatsoever, Stone said, "Okay."

An hour later Tull sat in his office, waiting for his transmission to go through. He spent the time reviewing footage of Stone's interview on his padd.

"Look, I've put a few of those systems together myself, and I couldn't figure out how to work this one," Stone had said, in the very best spirit of cooperation. "So I sold them this thing-so what? If I couldn't get it to work, no chance could they get it to work. And what's the harm? Their money's good."

Tull sat up straighter in his chair as Captain Montgomery Scott's distinctive burr issued from his comm speakers. A bad neutrino storm between Starbase 27 and Starfleet Headquarters prevented video from accompanying the signal, but Scott's voice was enough.

"All right, lad," Scott said affably. "What can I do for you, then?"

Tull found himself at a loss for a few seconds. He'd studied Montgomery Scott's career through all of its spectacular and bizarre twists and turns, and held the man in considerable awe. He hadn't expected his transmission to be patched through directly to the officer in charge of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers, but here he was, talking to a legend. He swallowed.

"Well, sir, the Cortez delivered a man to us yesterday by the name of Thajus Stone. Stone's a scoundrel, half-smuggler, half-ragman, and we brought him in on gun-running charges..."

"Yes? There's more to it, I'm guessin'?"

"Yes, sir. When he realized what a tight spot he was in, he started telling us about other things he'd done, operations we knew nothing about. Things we might not have suspected at all, if he hadn't told us."

"I see. And how does this involve the S.C.E., Commander?"

"Well, sir, Stone says he visited a planet called Keorga a week ago, and sold them a Class 10 computer system. I ran a check on Keorga, sir. They're being reviewed for possible entry into the Federation. A month ago they put in a requisition with Starfleet for a planetary management computer system, but were denied pending the outcome of their petition."

"So the Keorgans got impatient, and went and got one somewhere else... Did Stone say where he found this device?"

"Only that he bought it off another trader, no questions asked. Aside from its purported capability rating, he knew nothing about it, not even its manufacturer. Stone also maintains the system was inoperative when he sold it."

"Inoperative because it was damaged, or because he didn't know how to operate it?"

"Possibly the latter, sir."

"Hmmm. Best run over there and take a peek at what the Keorgans're doing... make sure they don't burn their fingers." Scott paused, then "Don't you worry, lad. I know just the people who can handle this."

Chapter Three

Bart Faulwell sat in the mess hall of the U.S.S. da Vinci, proudly regarding his first true work of art. The ship was a small one and the only place to put his masterpiece on display and invite critiques was here. He waited patiently and soon a steady stream of crewmembers came by and gave their opinions. Robins from security pointed at the sharp edges at the sculpture's apex and the oddly flowing waves near its base. "What a hideous paperweight. If I were you, I'd try to get back whatever you paid for it. Unless-was that a gift? It doesn't say much about the taste of your friends if it was. Then again, it doesn't say much about your taste if you actually did pay for this."

Orthak from engineering tapped it tentatively with a flipper. He jumped when it moved. "I didn't know you were studying primitive artifacts."

Those reactions, it turned out, were among the most kind and encouraging.

The bridge operations officer, Ina Mar, shook her head. "I can honestly say I've never seen anything like it."

A sigh escaped the beleaguered linguist. "And you hope you never see anything like it again, I'm sure."

The Bajoran said nothing and moved on to the replicator.

Bart's dismay at the overwhelmingly negative reactions to his sculpture didn't stop the floodtide of criticism he had invited. In fact, so long as he sat here sipping his French roast coffee, there seemed to be no end in sight.

Carol Abramowitz now stood before his table. The short black-haired intercultural relations expert crossed her arms over her chest. She looked suspicious. "Did a child make this?"

Bart frowned. This was not why he had chosen to make an attempt at creative expression. "No, this is my creation. Something new I'm trying."

Carol simply stared.

Opening his hands widely, Bart said, "It's art."

"Oh. That's what you're calling it."

"This is an expression of my innermost feelings."

"About what? Clutter?"

"It should speak to you."

"I don't think that has anything to say that I would want to hear. Did it just move?"

The ship's medical technician, John Copper, drifted his way. "This? This is what's inside you?" Fearfully, he backed away making a strange gesture, some ancient, arcane ward against ill tidings.

Lt. Commander Duffy came in, took one look at it, grinned, and said, "Blazes! The irony! The sheer wit is astonishing." Then he sipped his quinine water, laughed, and left the mess hall.

Soon, only Bart and Carol remained.

"Actually, I had a specific reason for coming to find you," Carol said.

"Tormenting me wasn't your primary objective?"

"No, just an unexpected bonus. It turns out we're going on an adventure."

"Oh?"

"Captain Gold just received word from Starfleet about two different situations that need to be addressed. One is urgent. The other's not so urgent. Guess which one the puny cultural relations expert, the linguist, and the computer guy are going on?"

"Right... details?"

Carol was staring at his sculpture again. She didn't seem to trust it. Maybe it looked shifty to her. Like it was going to do something terrible.

Maybe she wanted to see if it would move again.

"Carol?"

She snapped out of it. "Yes, the mission. Well, while the good captain gets to go off and handle a nice juicy terraforming-gone-wrong, settlement-in-danger, puppies-that-need-saving kind of thing, we're going to see about some business concerning a computer on Keorga."

"Keorga," Bart mused. "As I recall that world is a haven for artistic types. Good. At least there what I'm

trying to say with my art should be understood and appreciated."

"So what is it you're trying to say?"

"If I have to explain it, then what's the point?" Bart asked. "So it's you, me, Soloman-and Fred."

Carol's brow furrowed. "Fred?"

He nodded at the sculpture.

"You named it after that monster on Maeglin?"

"Why not? I thought it'd be a fitting tribute to someone who sacrificed himself for the greater good. Isn't that's what art's all about? Expanding the boundaries of expression, indulging in non-linear thinking?"

"I mentioned the horror part, right?"

Bart smiled indulgently. "Okay, I understand why Soloman is going. Why us?"

"We have to go back a little. The Keorgans requested a planet-controlling computer from the Federation. The request was denied."

"Why?"

"For one thing, they're not part of the Federation yet-their membership application is pending-and for another, the request was made at the same time they attempted to requisition sixteen cubic tons of dark chocolate and a Klingon Bird of Prey."

"A Klingon Bird of Prey?"

"I would have been more concerned about the chocolate. Yes, a Bird of Prey. It seems they liked its contours and thought it would look very pretty in one of their gardens."

"Oh."

"A particularly shiftless trader sold them a planet-controlling device. It came with an instruction manual. Only, it's in a language no one's ever seen before."

Bart considered this. "Their not being able to read the user's manual sounds like it might be a good thing. Remember what happened when Ganitriul went bad on Eerlik? And that was a planet that had had a planet-controlling device for thousands of years. You're saying Starfleet wants the Keorgans to have this power?"

"Obviously, Starfleet can't dictate the behavior of an independent world," Carol said. "Choosing to supply or withhold a piece of technology is well within Starfleet's rights. Shopping elsewhere is well within the rights of Keorgans. What's important now is that the Keorgans possess an object of considerable power."

"If they figure out how to put it together and activate it."

"Which they might," Carol said. "Or they may put it together wrong, get it working partially, and not be able to control it..."

"So-our job is to educate and advise. If they're determined to put the system together, we help them do it correctly and help them to use it safely and efficiently. And with the instruction manual in a language no one's ever seen before, a linguist is required. Very good. So that's why I'm needed. What about you?"

Carol bristled. She looked away. "I'm not exactly sure. The Keorgans have already agreed to accepting our aid. The captain referenced some obscure incident and said he was sending me on this mission because of my sparkling personality. I have no idea what he's talking about. Anyhow, we're supposed to report to the shuttle bay in an hour."

"I'll be there."

"As long as it's without Fred."

She left just as their resident Bynar entered. "Hiya, Soloman," Bart said cheerily. "Do you know about our mission?"

"I do, yes. And I'm very much looking forward to our journey."

"Ah," Bart said, nodding toward his sculpture. "A fellow art lover, are you?"

His heart sank as he watched Soloman take in the lumpy, sometimes twitchy thing before him. "Is that what that is? I thought it was an anti-personnel device."

Bart sighed.

Everyone was a critic.

Chapter Four

Bart, Carol, and Soloman made the trip to Keorga on the Archimedes mostly in silence. Bart spent the entire time reviewing a copy of the alien user's manual on his padd and attempting to decipher its never-before-seen language; Carol passed the hours by listening to her favorite music (through a pair of earphones, to the others' intense relief); and Soloman, who piloted the shuttle, seemed content merely to study the instrumentation and gaze out the viewscreen.

Exactly on schedule Soloman said, "Approaching Keorga. We'll be leaving warp space in... sixty-two seconds."

Carol pulled off her earphones, allowing Bart to hear a couple seconds' worth of drad music-just as it hit a spectacularly screechy note-while he put away his padd. She caught the expression on his face and narrowed her eyes, nailing him with a stare. "Not a word," she said.

Bart feigned total innocence. "A word? From me? About what?" Carol cocked an eyebrow as Bart continued, "Surely not about your taste in music, since, as you know, I have absolutely no opinion about that." They kept up the pantomimes, Carol's stare and Bart's pretended ignorance, for several more seconds before Bart failed to suppress a chuckle and Carol grinned.

Soloman said, "We have arrived."

The sight waiting for the S.C.E. crew as they dropped out of warp was nothing short of breathtaking. Keorga, if left to its natural state, would have closely resembled Earth in size, composition, and atmospheric patterns-but the Keorgans had most definitely not left it to its natural state.

Keorgan artists had perfected a way to energize the planet's wind currents with low-level, controlled photon streams; as the shuttle descended, the Bynar and the two humans gasped at the softly glowing, constantly shifting multi-hued streamers and waves of light that encircled the planet.

"Mother of mercy," Carol whispered. "It's... it's like the aurora borealis, over the entire planet!"

Bart stared, openly floored. "The lights, they'd-they'd have to be diffuse enough not to interfere with air traffic, the closer you get. It's-it's astounding, do you see what they've done? They've created art designed to be appreciated from a distance. From off-planet! They've turned their entire world into a work of art."

Soloman squinted at the flowing, swirling light patterns, then back to the controls. "What they have done is make it virtually impossible for me to operate the sensors," he grumbled. "Far too much interference. Fortunately I have the landing coordinates already programmed..."

If Bart had had to choose one word to describe Yirgopolis, their destination, he would have chosen "vibrant." The city burst with colors, from the huge tapestries that adorned the sides of whole buildings, to the free-standing sculptures on each street corner, to the dazzling, floating light shows that seemed to appear and disappear in random locations-Carol commented that they looked like super-advanced lava lamps, then had to explain what a lava lamp was. She then said that these were actually called "controlled photon arrays," or, more commonly, "dreamwaves."

The citizens of Yirgopolis were no exception to the rule, either. Their long, loose-fitting clothing ran through every color of the spectrum, and many of them wore their hair in large, elaborately styled coifs that seemed to be sculptures in and of themselves. With their gentle amber-colored eyes and soft, robin's-egg blue skin, the Keorgans were a people who celebrated color in every way possible.

And the music! As soon as the S.C.E. crew stepped out of the shuttle, which Soloman had brought down on a landing pad atop a governmental building in the center of the city, subtle, deeply affecting strains of song reached their ears. The Keorgans had mastered ambient sound; try as he might, Bart couldn't spot any speakers.

"Now that's music," he said mischievously to Carol, who studiously pretended not to hear him.

The joyous colors of the city seemed to permeate the bright-eyed young Keorgan male sent to guide them. His brilliant red clothing billowed in the breeze and his vivid yellow hair swept behind him. He introduced himself as Drei Silveris, presidentially-appointed aide to Professor Korl Harland.

"We are told you have come to assist us with our computer system," he said. "We're very grateful and

we're delighted to welcome you to Keorga."

The emissary smiled, lowered his gaze, and spread his arms open wide in a gesture of welcome and benevolence. Carol emulated his movement perfectly.

"Please, come with me. I'll take you to the professor." He turned and led them across the roof to a waiting elevator.

Carol angled her head toward Bart as the trio respectfully walked a good five paces behind their guide.

"Well," Carol said, quite pleased. "I'd say we're off to a good start. These people are pleasant and civilized. And I hardly think they're facing any great crisis with the computer, considering Silveris's demeanor."

Bart didn't immediately respond, as his eye was caught by an emerald green dreamwave nearby. She sighed theatrically, and Bart turned to her and smiled. "Sorry. Was distracted."

"From now on I'll keep further observations to myself. At least that way I'm assured of an appreciative audience."

"Hardy har har."

As they descended aboard the elevator, a video monitor on one wall lit up, and they found themselves watching a pre-recorded greeting from the Keorgan President, a man by the name of Thibor.

"I regret that I cannot come to speak to you in person," Thibor's image said after introducing itself, "but my presence is needed elsewhere. We are told you have come to assist us with our computer system. We're very grateful and we're delighted to welcome you to Keorga."

Bart felt a sudden and odd sense of alarm. The president's words were identical to those of his emissary. Word for word. They had even been delivered with the exact same inflections, the exact same rhythms and cadences. The repetition struck him as ingenuine and raised red flags in his mind.

The president's image was about to speak again when the recording suddenly clicked to static and the elevator trembled. The ambient music shut off, too, and its abrupt absence seemed momentarily deafening. Grabbing a railing for balance, Bart asked, "What was that? An explosion?"

Silveris also had a solid grip on a rail. "No. That was one of the earth tremors."

As the elevator doors opened and they exited into the building's lobby, Carol eyed Silveris closely. "One of the earth tremors? You've had more than one?"

Silveris's calm expression never changed. "Yes." He nearly stumbled as another tremor made the entire building shudder.

Soloman was about to speak when the tremor rapidly escalated into a full-blown earthquake.

Yirgopolans scattered in panic around them as a massive shockwave tore through the city. Silveris motioned for them to follow him, but then the lobby floor lurched and they were all thrown off their feet-and before Bart's eyes, the street outside split in half, one huge block upthrust more than four meters. Twisted and sheared pipes protruded from the pavement, spilling water and some kind of gas into the air-

-and even as another shockwave struck, a colossal explosion came from just down the street, blasting the remains of the lobby's front windows inside in a hail of broken glass.

Carol gasped as she saw a rippling river of flame moving up the broad avenue outside, forcing its way along with a new explosion every thirty or forty meters.

"The earthquake has severed our fuel lines!" Silveris cried. "They've ignited!"

The worst of the earthquake seemed to have passed as Silveris and the S.C.E. crew got to their feet again-but the fire raging through the ravaged street outside seemed to be getting worse by the second. Bart grabbed Silveris by the shoulder. "What about your fire control system? Can it handle this?"

"It already should have! The whole city is equipped with extinguisher nodes, but the quake must have damaged them."

"Can they be activated manually?" Carol asked, staring at the growing conflagration.

Silveris's brow furrowed in concentration. "Yes... yes, there should be a manual hub-" He stared around them, then pointed to a narrow door very close to the front of the building. As they ran toward it they could feel their skin begin to tighten from the heat as the fire on the street built in intensity. It had already begun to spread to buildings on the street's other side.

Silveris threw open the door, then let out another cry of dismay; the quake, or the blast, or possibly both, had smashed through the outside wall into the small room where the manual extinguisher controls were; not only did a sheet of flame on the floor separate the Starfleet people from the wall-mounted console, but a fallen beam had smashed through the controls, leaving only exposed circuitry and wiring.

Bart turned to face the others. "Do we have a plan B?"

But Soloman, staring at the damaged console, said, "I do not think we will need an alternate course of action, Bart-if one of you can get me to that console."

"Just wait a second," Carol said, pulling out her phaser. She set it to its widest dispersal and lowest setting, aimed it at the floor of the extinguisher control room and pressed the trigger.

It worked; the fire, along with about a quarter centimeter of the floor, vanished between them and console. Soloman rushed to the controls, ran his fingers across them for a few seconds. As he worked, a string of incomprehensible, high-pitched sounds came out of his mouth. Bart knew this was the Bynar's way of communing directly with the computer system.

Within seconds, nozzles sprang up out of previously concealed ports in the pavement outside and sprayed thick gray liquid in long, sweeping waves, targeting the fire perfectly. Within seconds the blaze was extinguished completely.

Bart, Carol, and Silveris all stared around them. Bart was shocked by the sudden calm. Soloman came back out of the control room, and, after a few moments of silence, Carol turned to Silveris and spoke in a no-nonsense tone.

"You knew about the earthquakes," she said. "What we just witnessed is tied in to the computer system, isn't it?"

"Yes," Silveris said, as calm and composed as ever.

He didn't elaborate, so Carol pressed further. "You need a planetary system-because of the earthquakes? Is that it?"

"Yes, that's correct."

Soloman stepped forward. "What kind of a threat are you looking at, from the seismic activity?"

Still perfectly composed, Silveris said, "There is a combination of seismic forces-tectonic shifting, as well as a large geothermal vent emergence-converging on Yirgopolis. If we cannot stop it, Yirgopolis, along with most of this continent's eastern coast, will be destroyed."

None of the three S.C.E. crew could hide their amazement. Quietly, Bart said, "That wasn't in the report, was it? I didn't just overlook that part?"

Finally, Carol said, "And you didn't tell Starfleet about this when you asked for a system earlier? Why?" Silveris's pleasant expression never changed. "No one ever asked us."

Chapter Five

Silveris sat on a bench several meters away from the S.C.E. crew as the bullet-shaped monorail whisked the group to Professor Harland's facility in the capital city's western sector. The trio wished to talk privately-as privately as one could on a monorail with seats for at least fifty Keorgans that was two-thirds filled to capacity. Silveris sat contentedly with folded hands, waiting to tend to the visitors when and if his services were required.

Carol put forth three different conspiracy theories to explain the odd behavior of the Keorgans. She was in the midst of a fourth when Bart took out his padd and went back to studying the strange alien language of the user's manual for the Keorgans' new computer. Soloman sat motionless beside her, also paying no attention whatsoever to her tirade. Carol didn't seem to notice that her audience had, for all intents and purposes, fled from her ranting.

The monorail ride was smooth and pleasant. The slight hum of the track had been attenuated to produce a subtle musical accompaniment that altered depending on temperature, wind direction and velocity, and many other factors. Bart listened to the sounds and was reminded of windchimes.

Carol's face was set in a grimace. "But the real reason I think these people act so innocent is-"

"We're going to need help," Bart said, stopping Carol in midstream. Soloman snapped to attention and turned to look his way.

Bart ignored Carol's flustered expression. "They need the computer to calculate exactly where to plant explosive charges, so that the immensely destructive forces building within Keorga can be safely redirected and dissipated. And there may not be much time left before a true cataclysm occurs."

Carol was already tapping her combadge. "On it."

Bart waited as Carol continued to tap-then stab-her combadge. Nothing happened. The da Vinci certainly should have been within contact range. However, their signal was not reaching the ship.

"There must be some kind of atmospheric condition blocking our transmission," Carol said. "Maybe that swirly artsy thing we passed through."

Bart shook his head. "The shuttle's computer made contact with Keorga to get landing instructions just before we entered the atmosphere. It can't be that."

Soloman cocked his head to one side inquisitively. "Perhaps energies within the atmospheric field somehow affected our communicators as we passed through the disturbance." The Bynar took out a small set of tools and went to work on opening and examining the inner workings of his combadge.

"Maybe Silveris will have some idea of what's going on," Bart said. He waved to the man and motioned for him to come over.

Silveris smiled and repeated Bart's hand signals. Other Keorgans on the shuttle did the same. Soon, dozens were waving and making the strange motion, many looking confused, each amused.

"They're acting like ten-year-olds," Carol muttered. "Their world could be destroyed at any moment and they want us to believe they're off in their own little universes, living in the moment with no regard for anything else. Unless... unless it's true and there is no guile, no subtext with these beings. And I mean none. That would make these people the most childlike in existence." She shuddered. "Blazes, it's even worse than I thought!"

"I think that evaluation's a bit harsh," Bart said. "They're an alien race. We can't expect to understand them so quickly. I suppose I should just be grateful that my hand signals weren't in any way offensive to them. A simple wave in some cultures could signify a marriage proposal or a desire to engage in a death duel." He frowned at his companion. "And shouldn't you be the one telling me these things? This is your specialty, after all."

"I gave you my evaluation. They're like children. I can perform the ritual greetings, dances, salutes and even mating calls of a hundred other cultures, but I have never had any luck fathoming the inner workings of a child's mind."

Bart raised an eyebrow. "I take it you don't like children?"

"They're small. You can't look them in the eye without getting down on their level. This information is known to them and they use it to their advantage. You can't trust them. And they smell bad."

Bart laughed. "They do not. Honestly, Carol, kids are not that bad."

"Maybe not to you. You were one of them, once. I was spared that horror."

"You were never a child," Bart said with a raised eyebrow.

"I have vague memories of being vertically challenged for a brief period of time. But, no, I was never a child."

"Far be it from me to argue the point. I wasn't there. You may well have been hatched at the point of maturity for all I know."

Carol ignored the barb and said, "You know what the worst part about them is? You can't talk to them. Communication is absolutely impossible."

"It's never been a problem for me."

"Of course not. You're a codebreaker. You're used to unraveling bizarre nuances in language."

"And you study other cultures. How can you have a full appreciation of the way another race behaves when something so sweet, innocent, and without guile as the actions of a happy child not only eludes, but actually threatens you?"

"I'm not threatened," Carol said defensively. "I'm simply happier when they're not around."

"Maybe that's why the captain chose you for this mission," Bart said. "This way, you can expand your

horizons, broaden your repertoire."

"I think it had more to do with a perceived insult of his wife's recipe for chicken matzoh ball soup, frankly," Carol said.

"Really?"

"I can't help it that on Bramman IV they add ingredients that make it indescribably delicious," Carol said.

"Ingredients, I might add, that his wife's recipe could only benefit from. What was I supposed to do? Tell a white lie and say it was the best I'd ever tasted?"

Knowing that he'd never convince Carol that the answer to that question was "yes," Bart stood up.

"Silveris, please join us. We have questions for you."

The attach nodded happily and rose. The other Keorgans were still exchanging waves and making "come over here" gestures while they laughed and played.

Silveris sat down across from the engineers.

Bart smiled. "Is there anything else you're not telling us?"

"Of course," the attach said.

"Such as?"

Silveris scratched his ear. He looked perplexed. "You would like a recitation of all the knowledge I've acquired over my lifetime? I'm not sure I can remember it all, but I'd be happy-"

"No," Bart said, realizing he had to be much more specific with his questions. "Is there more you can tell me relating to the planet controlling device?"

"Yes," Silveris said.

Bart waited. Then he realized his error. "And would you give me that information?"

"Of course."

Again, silence. Bart refused to become flustered. This was, after all, his own fault. He now had an idea of the kind of people with whom he was dealing. Still...

Soloman interceded. "Please. Allow me. The directness of these people is akin to speaking with a computer. It requires precision."

"Be my guest," Bart said.

Nodding, Soloman turned and locked gazes with Silveris. "Please give me the additional information about the planet controlling device now."

Silveris spoke. He recited facts and figures relating to the transaction, how the merchant who sold them the system was found, the number of crates it arrived in, the precise dimensions and weight of each piece, the way the machine seemingly powered up and created energy constructs that reconstructed the damaged city, the precise color of each light on what they took to be the control panel, the particular smell-

"Wait," Soloman said. "Tell me more about these energy constructs."

Silveris did. The level of power he described was off the charts for a simple planet controlling device.

Bart listened intently-and found the information chilling. He turned to Carol and Soloman. "We are definitely going to need help."

Soloman held up his disassembled communicator. "There is nothing wrong with our communicators. However, we cannot use them to reach our ship. Have any other communication difficulties occurred since we arrived?"

Silveris nodded. "There was the disruption of the President's message to you."

"I thought that was because of the earth tremors," Bart said.

"I do not think so," Silveris said. He tapped a small palm computer that rested in his lap. "I have been unable to send or receive messages to the President since that time. I have also been unable to receive updates from any government branch or news service. Oh, happily, however, the last communication from Professor Harland indicated that he had made some breakthrough with the global communications software of the planetary controlling device. I have every hope that all will be well shortly."

Bart ran his hand through his thinning brown hair-which was getting thinner the more time he spent with Silveris. "Wait a minute. Are you saying it hasn't occurred to you that Professor Harland's latest tinkering with the computer may actually have caused this black-out?"

"No, I did not make any such connection. Why would I?"

Bart buried his face in his hands. "Thank you, Silveris. That's enough for right now."

When he looked up, the Keorgan was still there.

"We would like a moment alone," Bart said.

Silveris smiled and nodded. "Yes. Solitude can be a pleasant experience. So can having companionship."

Bart gave a pleading look to Soloman.

"Please go back to your original seat," Soloman said.

Silveris rose, nodded, and departed.

"This is wonderful," Soloman said, sighing with contentment. "Everyone on this world says exactly what they mean. No more, no less!"

"It's maddening," Carol said. "Exactly like dealing with children. No socialization. No inhibitions. Just pure id."

Bart scratched his beard. "Maybe we can set the shuttle on autopilot, have it broadcast a distress call from orbit, then return at a preprogrammed time."

"One of us would have to return to the craft to do so," Soloman said. "Our communicators cannot reach the Archimedes."

"Give me instructions and I'll handle it," Carol said. "I don't seem to be much use on this mission otherwise."

"Let's see what the situation is at Professor Harland's lab, first," Bart said. "If, indeed, Harland caused the communications difficulty and we can find a way to fix it, we can contact the shuttle from his lab and there won't be any need for your going off alone. It is a planet filled with children and childlike beings, after all. Wouldn't want you to face that kind of horror alone."

Carol looked away imperiously. "Whatever course is most logical."

Then-there was nothing left for them to say. Long minutes passed as the shuttle rushed toward its next stop.

Bart thought about going back to his attempts at translation, but the inner calm he needed to do his best work on such matters had been shattered. If he had any hope of finally making a breakthrough, he would need to take a moment to meditate-or, at least, focus his mind on other matters-before returning to that important duty.

He noticed a pair of Keorgans, a male and a female, hand-crafting a beautiful shawl. The shawl glowed with brilliant swirls of color. As Bart watched, ever changing patterns of energy appeared in its weave. His own entree into the special world of self-expression sat beside him in his bag. Rising, he carried Fred, his sculpture, to the artisans, and humbly asked permission to display his creation. They gave it happily. The male artists examined the sculpture closely, turning it in his many-fingered hands several times. He giggled when it moved.

"May I keep this?" the artist said. "My son would enjoy playing with it. And so would I."

"Oh, yes, me, too!" the female artisan added.

A toy. They think my sculpture is a toy. Ah, well. At least Fred was being appreciated on some level...

"Take it, please," Bart said. Even here, his work wasn't understood. Maybe he just wasn't cut out to be an artist.

Bart returned to his seat. Carol was looking out the window, staring at the beautiful spires of the city. It almost looked like a fairy-tale kingdom, Bart thought. But he seriously doubted that Carol saw it that way. He wondered what her childhood must have been like. He knew she had joined Starfleet for family reasons. Her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother had all served in Starfleet. She once admitted that she felt a great sense of obligation to keep the family tradition. But that was all he knew. Not one story of a wild prank she'd committed when she was younger, not one heartfelt tale of a schoolgirl crush, not even a single mention that any current interest she held was a holdover from her youth. Nothing. For that matter, he had no idea why she became an intercultural specialist, as opposed to an officer like her other family members.

Maybe she had hatched fully mature, after all.

Bart turned his attention back to the Keorgans. It was odd. He'd always held the belief that those with

artistic bents also had a high capacity for abstract thought and reasoning. But the Keorgans were the most literal, factual people he had ever met. They made Vulcans and android lifeforms appear to bristle with subtext and machinations in comparison. Yet they produced wonderfully imaginative works of art beautiful paintings and holos of places never before seen or imagined, amazing flourishes, nuances, and new concepts in architecture and design, and their music... it practically reached into one's soul.

They seemed to have no imagination, but they were intensely creative.

It was a mystery, that much was certain. But he enjoyed mysteries. When the immediate crisis was under control, he would see if he could solve the riddle of the Keorgans and their many contradictions.

The monorail slowed as it approached a station.

When the immediate crisis was brought under control? Bart considered the threat shrouding this planet and its people-and that they were cut off from outside help.

It seemed much more likely.

Chapter Six

Carol, Bart, and Soloman stood in Professor Harland's lab, gazing up at the gargantuan computer system before them. Harland had his back to them, conversing quietly with Silveris.

"Either of you ever seen anything like this before?" Carol asked.

Bart simply said, "Nope."

Soloman made a soft little sound in his throat before answering. "It is much smaller than either Ganitriul or the master computer on Bynaus. But I have never seen one precisely like this. I must confess that I'm anxious to begin work upon it."

Professor Harland appeared dismayed, based on Soloman's reading of his facial expression. According to Harland's records he had, within seconds of beginning work on assembling the computer system, calculated every possible combination and configuration of the machine's seventeen individual components. Along with his assistants, he had perfectly assembled and reassembled the computer to fit each scenario, and he had tested it in each configuration in a complex battery of well thought out operational trials. Even Carol seemed impressed.

"I don't understand," Harland muttered. "When the first true crisis arose, the system met the challenge. I thought I had something to do with it. But none of my actions provoked a response within the system during the second crisis. Then, when I was out of the room, the system flared briefly, and all communications were disrupted. All this on its own. Perhaps I really had nothing to do with solving the first crisis, after all."

Silveris was consoling the scientist. Soloman asked permission to examine the system and both Keorgans gave their enthusiastic assent. His first task would be to try to locate the cause of the communications failure and deal with that.

In seconds, he was communing with the central control array, speaking in Binary. Nothing happened. None of the strange alien symbols Harland had recorded appeared. Crouching, Soloman let his fingers trace lightly across the smooth metal surface of the computer's housing-and popped a hidden panel loose. Harland gasped, but didn't say anything. Bart murmured, "My word."

The interior of the alien computer seemed to be alive-not alive in the sense of a living, breathing, organic organism, of course, but alive nonetheless. Streams, waves, and individual particles of violet light swam and flowed inside the machine in intricate, hypnotic patterns, pumping and pulsing as if with a heartbeat of its own. Soloman lifted one hand, flexed his fingers, and slowly, very slowly, reached inside the computer.

A violet burst of energy sent the Bynar flying back. He smashed against the lab's rear wall and slumped to the floor. Bart and Carol raced to his side, but he was shaken, not hurt. They kindly helped him to his feet.

"I tried to interface with the system," Soloman said. "It defended itself. My friends, I have reason to think the system is an-"

He stopped as he noticed something alarming. Every shadow in the room was fading. Gazing out the

window, he saw that the day had grown overcast, and stunning clouds that shifted from ruby red to a soft, pale yellow now obscured the sun.

The building suddenly shook with another earth tremor, hard enough to make everyone in the room fight to stay on their feet-

-and with a brief, shrill whine, the massive computer system came to life again. Harland cried out happily, but quickly lost his smile when he got a good look at the central monitor; the violet energy matrix was there again, but this time it seemed chaotic, firing across the screen in random, jagged patterns.

Bart grabbed Carol's arm and pointed. "Look at that!"

Carol and Soloman both turned and saw it the power cables running from the wall to the back of the computer, thick as Carol's wrist, shimmered with the by-now very familiar violet radiance. "What's it doing?" Carol asked, staring. "Traveling on power lines...?"

And then the whole world became a glare of blinding blue-white, followed a nanosecond later by a clap of thunder like a catastrophic meteor impact that shook the walls.

"What is happening?" Silveris called fearfully. "What is this?"

More eye-burning glares burst through the windows in an explosive display, while the deafening thunderclaps began rumbling together into one long, bone-rattling basso crash.

Soloman ran to the window and looked out-and saw what only he could see, with his eyes unaffected by sudden shifts in light intensity. He let out a high-speed, untranslatable burst of the Bynar language, loud enough for Bart to hear as he stumbled to Soloman's side.

"What's out there?" Bart shouted, keeping his eyes turned away from the window. "What do you see?"

For a few moments Soloman had no words to describe it. Rolling out from Harland's lab in every direction was a wave of lightning strikes, slashing from sky to ground in a savage cascade of electrical fury.

Squinting, Soloman thought he could see the computer's energy signature, traveling along the city's energy grid-yes, there, as he watched, a crackling violet arc jumped from a lightpost to a powered sign above a store window... and less than a second later a massive bolt of lightning obliterated the sign.

Yirgopolis's vegetation began to burn, ignited by the thousand-degree temperatures of the lightning strikes-trees exploded with each strike, their sap instantaneously boiled to steam-and though the automated fire systems were now back on-line and functioning, the devastation escalated rapidly.

Signage, transports, bridges, buildings themselves, all sustained heavy damage even as Soloman watched.

The Bynar turned his back to the window and looked up into Bart's and Carol's eyes, raising his voice to be heard over the constant peal of thunder. "Lightning-lightning is striking everywhere, following the power routes and circuitry." He looked over at the computer, which still seemed to be going haywire. "I do not know how, but the system's malfunction is calling down lightning all over the city!"

Bart stared at the computer's power cable for a second, checked to see where Harland and Silveris were-both of them were frantically, and unsuccessfully, trying to accomplish something with the computer's controls-then pulled his phaser. "So we disconnect it," he said, and was about to take aim when Carol grabbed his arm.

"What are you doing?" she cried.

Bart's eyebrows shot up. "Making the lightning stop?"

Carol growled in frustration. "What, Corsi's not here, so you're going to be the idiot? Listen to me-we don't know what cutting off the power like that will do to the machine, and at this point we can't afford to damage it. With the communications out and no guarantee we can get help in time, this system may be our only chance for survival."

"Well then I'm open to suggestions." Bart put away his phaser and held up empty hands. "I'm just the linguist."

"Wait a moment," Soloman said. "Lightning strikes are caused by positive charges building up on the ground. They then attract lightning from negatively charged clouds."

Carol frowned. "So, for some reason, the computer is positively charging all of the city's wiring..."

"... and we need to get rid of that imbalance," Soloman finished. He looked around, thinking quickly-and his eyes fell on Bart's phaser. "Bart-give me your weapon. Maybe we can use it after all."

Bart and Carol followed Soloman to the wall where the thick power cable disappeared into it; the Bynar had already taken out his own tricorder, and he plopped down on the floor, his hands nearly blurring as he disassembled both devices. He spoke without looking up.

"Get me access to the wiring, please? Bart? Carol?"

Working together, Carol and Bart quickly removed the faceplate from the wall socket, revealing softly glowing green, blue, and gold circuitry inside the wall. Bart shook his head, winced at another super-loud thunderclap, then said, "Leave it to the Keorgans to make their wiring aesthetically pleasing."

Harland noticed their activity and came dashing over. "What are you doing? Can I help?"

Soloman spoke, again without looking up, as he placed the combined tricorder and phaser against the wall and connected a small relay to the power cable junction. "I have stripped down the phaser's emission range and adjusted it. If this works as I plan it to, your city's power system will soon be flooded with negative ions."

Before Harland could say a word, three things happened simultaneously the loudest thunderclap yet smashed over the building like a physical wave, causing everyone except for Soloman to clap their hands over their ears and squeeze their eyes shut; the searing glare of the lightning intensified to an unrelenting assault of light like a billion magnesium flares; and Soloman activated the modified phaser, rocketing its signal into the Keorgan circuitry.

The sudden silence left their ears ringing.

Brilliant spots danced in front of their eyes as they all blinked, trying to restore their vision.

And with a whirring sigh, the computer again went dark, the jagged energy matrix fading from the screen. Outside, a gentle rain began to fall, drops hissing as they landed on super-heated pavement and charred foliage.

It all ended so suddenly that Carol felt like laughing. She exchanged elated grins with Bart and Soloman, and would have laughed out loud, if not for a distant, threatening rumble up through the floor another earth tremor.

The S.C.E. scientists got to their feet and turned to face the computer. Professor Harland and Silveris stood nearby.

"You were about to voice a theory," Harland said. "Something about the system's nature, I believe?"

Soloman nodded. "I think this is far more than a planetary controlling device. It's displaying self-awareness. I think it is--"

A booming voice from the center of the room cut him off. "Energy grid established. Test Program Two will now be engaged."

Soloman's voice was low and hollow "-an artificial intelligence."

Chapter Seven

"At least it's speaking in a language we can understand," Bart said. "I've tried everything I know, but I can't get anywhere with the alien language of its user's manual."

"Now all we have to do is get it to listen," Carol said.

Soloman boldly approached the system. "Why did you need to establish an energy grid? What are you testing?"

The machine's only response was a burst of violet energies, a swirling matrix of light that nearly blinded everyone looking its way.

Covering her eyes, Carol growled, "Give me the instructions for the Archimedes. We need to get a distress signal out to Starfleet now."

Soloman hastily prepared all the data she would need.

"You may want to consider going with it," Bart said.

Carol's nostrils flared in fury. "Because I'm no use here? Or because--"

Bart didn't have time for this. Something about this mission was causing Carol to allow her personal issues to cloud her judgment. He turned from her. "Silveris, I think you should go, too, and report to your president that as wide a planetary evacuation as possible should not only be planned, but placed

immediately in operation."

"Such measures are underway," Silveris said. "That is why the president was unable to meet with you."

"Again, information that would have been useful before we were summoned to a deathtrap masquerading as a tea party!" Carol fumed.

"Quite enough," Bart said. "Carol-go."

Silveris accompanied Carol as she left the lab. She saw Bart poring over the alien user's manual with Harland and Soloman looking into the blinding light of the computer, as if considering another attempt to interface with it. Then she was being hurried toward the rail station and quickly taking a seat.

"We have very few ships for evacuation," Silveris said. "By going with your shuttlecraft and ensuring that the distress call is sent from orbit and received by Starfleet, you will indeed be performing a valuable role in helping to save our people. I thank you."

Carol suddenly felt ashamed for her behavior. Here was a being facing the possibility of death and the destruction of his world, and his priority was to make sure that she did not feel sad or useless. It was just... Well, the very idea of a race totally without guile had been unsettling to her. From the moment she had been able to speak, she had always tried to extrapolate every possible meaning behind every word and gesture she observed. She had always believed that beings such as these could not exist.

Her time among the stars, however, had taught her that all things were possible.

Carol smiled at Silveris. "No," she said. "I thank you."

Suddenly, another tremor shook the rails of her shuttle. Several Keorgans cried out in surprise and alarm. Before she was even fully aware of what was happening, the rail ahead split apart and her shuttle was sent careening into empty air. Carol felt her heart rise into her throat as she was tossed from her seat and the spires of the city stabbed toward the shuttle's nearby windows.

Crushing, jarring death was seconds away

Then it all stopped.

Carol's eyes opened wide as she took in the sight of a giant, glowing, purple hand wrapped around the shuttle. Then the car was gently lowered fifteen stories to the ground, and she joined the stunned Keorgans as they filed out to get a look at their savior.

A twenty story tall violet energy construct in the form of a smiling, gentle genie stood high above, his arms crossed over his massive chest. He stood in the middle of a large park. Buildings and walkways surrounded the clearing. The Keorgans gathered around Carol.

"Human woman, I read of this being in the Earth document entitled Arabian Nights," a young Keorgan boy said. "Are you familiar with him, too?"

Carol bristled because of the informality of his approach and the manner in which he addressed her, which she could easily have taken as sexist or superior, but she couldn't deny that she was intrigued by his statement and so she took his words at face value. She was human. She was a woman. He honestly had said nothing insulting. "Were you... thinking about him when we went off the tracks?"

The lad shook his head. "No. I was frightened and not really thinking at all. It happened so quickly."

"But you were wishing the monorail wasn't derailing, weren't you, wishing something would save you?"

Carol felt excited. Perhaps she had begun to get at the purpose of the computer system's tests, perhaps even the true purpose of the machine itself Granting wishes. Making heart's desires come true.

Again, the lad shook his head. Carol frowned. She needed to feel that she was truly contributing to the mission, and she certainly wanted to quantify the impossible figure standing high above, to whom she owed her life. Unknown quantities always set her on edge. "How did you feel about Arabian Nights when you read it?"

"The document seemed odd to me. It contained events that conflicted with known historical facts regarding the planet at that time, such as anti-gravity throw-rugs and such."

She smiled. She was speaking to a child and smiling.

At least Bart wasn't here to see it. Then she'd never hear the end of it.

The energy construct of the genie looked around. He cocked his head to one side as he spotted something in the distance.

"Hey, you up there!" Carol shouted. "Genie guy!"

The energy construct did not look down. Instead, he turned and moved off, the bottom half of his body, a trail of smoke, barely touching the ground.

"Wait up, I've got three wishes for you!"

The energy construct didn't slow. Weird. This thing was made of the same energies that had helped to reconstruct the city before the S.C.E. crew's arrival, and of the same energies that took control of the city's power grid. It was linked to the computer, to the "test" it was performing, and it was in the form of a being whose sole existence was to grant wishes. Yet he ignored her.

She looked at the faces of the Keorgans. They didn't appear to be bothered or upset to have an energy construct that was twenty stories tall and shaped like a figure out of Earth mythology in their midst. It was a thing they could see, a thing that clearly operated in the physical world, a thing that was not harmful.

And that appeared to be sufficient information for them to keep from being alarmed by it.

Carol, despite her bravado when calling out to the genie, had felt terrified of it, though she couldn't quite put into words why that should be so...

Silveris touched her arm. "What is... is that Tirellan's third symphony? No, it's something else. A composition even richer than I would have thought possible..."

At first, Carol didn't know what he was talking about. Then she heard it a vast, rich trill of music, even more beautiful than other Keorgan works they'd heard-and rapidly increasing in volume. She looked up, in the direction of the sounds, and her jaw dropped.

Enormous energy-construct musical instruments stretched across the sky, playing themselves-the music was so beautiful, so perfect... Even to her.

A weeping Keorgan male stepped out from the small group of fellow travelers. "My symphony... complete and perfect, exactly the way I had always dreamed it. I had abandoned it years ago because I could never solve the many problems inherent in its structure. I haven't even given it a conscious thought in months, yet..." The expression on his face was of sheer bliss. "What I've always wanted, more than anything, is to share this work with the world..."

Suddenly, the music rose in volume. In seconds it became so loud that Carol gritted her teeth and plugged her ears with her fingers. For a few moments the sounds softened, but then increased again, coming in teeth-rattling bursts and waves. She heard explosions, and turned to see windows shattering under the barrage.

She grabbed the arm of the Keorgan composer. Such a gesture went against all her training, but somehow, that didn't seem to matter right now.

"Make it stop," she said.

"How?" he asked.

"The same way you made it start in the first place. Wish for it to come to an end. Wish it out of existence."

The composer tried. Carol had no doubt of that. She studied his face and saw the intense mental effort he devoted to following her command. But the symphony only grew louder.

Then other constructs winked into existence. From where she stood, she could see chaos erupt throughout the city.

Building blocks made of violet energies appeared, some creating massive damage to buildings as they wedged themselves between them and piled higher and higher, creating newer, and even more towering buildings, that were ultimately unstable. The blocks fell to the ground, causing injury or possibly worse to screaming Keorgans who fled in fear. The blocks reshaped and piled themselves in ever more complex geometric patterns, creating more and more damage.

Elsewhere, bright violet streamers appeared. They danced and streaked throughout the city, causing accidents by obstructing the view of Keorgans operating machinery, blinding others while they were at the controls of transports, and making still others dizzy by twirling around and around them-sending some falling off roofs or out of high windows.

Amazing violet flowers grew up from the ground and uprooted and overran several blocks at a time.

Yet-the most amazing thing of all is that while some people were injured, the constructs always managed

to intersect one another or somehow create a buffer or safety net to catch falling people or cushion blows. Carol flashed on memories from her childhood, in which her parents allowed her to fall and get hurt, but only mildly so-it was the only way she would ever learn anything, they said.

"Second test completed," a booming voice said from everywhere and nowhere at once. "Secondary level interface with inhabitants achieved. Primary systems now activated. System function may now be achieved."

Suddenly, Carol understood what was going on. At least part of it.

"These tests," Carol said to Silveris. "The first was to see whether or not an interface could be established with the conscious mind of this world's people. The second was to gauge if a deeper connection to the Keorgan subconscious could be established. That's why the system needed control of the power grid-to create all these constructs."

Silveris nodded.

"I want you to get to the president using any means necessary," Carol said, jamming the small portable padd Soloman had given her into his hands. "Explain the situation, then assign one of your pilots to study the directions on the padd and take the Archimedes to deliver our distress signal."

"What about you?" Silveris asked. "Will you be safe?"

"I'm more than safe," Carol said, smiling as she grabbed the arm of the composer and hauled him off in the direction of Harland's lab. "I'm a woman on a mission!"

Chapter Eight

Harland looked up from his portable seismic monitor. Bart could see the panic rising in his eyes as the ground heaved and vivid purple light beamed in through the windows from the chaotic energy constructs outside. The sky-symphony's music grew even louder, and what little glass remained in the windows began to crack.

"How much time do we have?" Bart asked, gesturing to the seismographic monitor.

"I-I am not sure," Harland answered, again consulting the diminutive screen. "Not long. A powerful shockwave just ran through an outlying town, about twenty kilometers from here, and..." he glanced up at Bart, trying to stay calm, "I see indications of lava emerging in a drainage canal."

Bart turned to Soloman, who was again studying the computer. "It looks like we're about ten minutes away from getting turned into charcoal."

A commanding voice sounded from the doorway as Carol appeared, a Keorgan at her heels. "Oh, now who's being the negative one?"

Carol quickly related all she had experienced and the conclusions she had drawn.

"All right," Bart said. He nodded toward the Keorgan composer. "But why bring him here?"

Pointing to the window, Carol said, "That construct came from his conscious and subconscious mind. If the A.I. is a genie that's just been loosed from its bottle, well, here's one of the people it's granted a wish."

Soloman nodded. "I see. The A.I. will not allow me to interface with it, but it has, in some way, interfaced with this Keorgan. And if that interface is still active, which it appears to be from the noise outside, perhaps, through this man, we can find some way to communicate with the system and have it build constructs that will help us avert the natural disaster about to befall this area."

"Bingo," Carol said.

Keenly aware of the short time available to them, Bart approached the composer. "Your desire was to complete your symphony. The A.I. took that desire, that wish, and fulfilled it, it made your dream a reality. What did you feel was holding you back when you attempted to finish your great work? What was it you felt you needed to complete this accomplishment?"

"Knowledge," the composer said softly.

"Is it knowledge you now possess?"

The composer paused for a moment. He looked off, his head nodding, his eyes vacant, as if he had, with a thought, transported himself to a solitary place in which he might mentally compose an opus. Then he returned, his eyes filled with tears.

"It is," he said. "I now understand exactly my failings in creating my symphony in the past, and how easily they could be addressed. I also understand how to replicate that feat, why-listen!"

He looked up and suddenly, the thunderous music from without changed completely. What had been a furious attack was now a quiet meditation. In the sky, the instruments themselves changed shape.

"He's in... he's in control of the construct," Carol said.

"I see that," Bart said. Now the question was how to use that knowledge to their advantage. "The A.I. did more than simply fulfill his wish. It gave him the tools to accomplish the goal himself. It helped to evolve him."

Carol again thought of the scenes of chaos she had witnessed in the city, and the way the energy constructs kept the Keorgans from sustaining more than minor injuries, just as her parents had done when she had been a child. And she thought of the "toys" she had seen throughout the city. Particularly the out-of-control building blocks.

"They're learning toys," Carol said. "It's not wish fulfillment or even evolution the A.I. is after, it's learning. It taps into the conscious and unconscious mind to help craft tools that will facilitate learning."

"But these objects are running amok, causing mass destruction," Bart said. "Why?"

Professor Harland pointed at the computer. "I think only it can tell us."

Bart touched the composer's arm. "I want you to concentrate on a desire for knowledge of a particular subject. What we need to know is how to communicate directly with the A.I. It speaks in a language we can understand, but it will not respond to any of our direct questions."

"Yes, Keorgans are always direct, this should be no problem for you," Carol said.

The composer swallowed and attempted to do as he was instructed. Outside, his construct changed shape several times, and his symphonies became a chaotic jumble of unfinished compositions. Nearly a minute passed before the man crumbled to the ground, clutching his head. He couldn't do it. Harland raced over and helped the man to the corner.

"They're direct on one level, but not on others," Carol noted.

"Yes," Bart said. "It must have something to do with how they can create such imaginative works when they seemingly have no imaginations. The secret to unlocking that contradiction may be the key to reaching our goal." Bart knelt beside the composer. "Tell me What are you trying to express with your music?"

"Express?"

"What is its meaning? What statement are you attempting to make?"

The Keorgan stared at him blankly.

"All right, how did you feel when you composed it? And how do you want it to make other people feel when they hear it?"

"I... felt pleased. There was synchronicity. Balance. An equilibrium to the equation. That is what I hope all will feel when they hear any of my works."

"Indeed," Bart said. He turned to Carol and Soloman. "The A.I. is interfacing with the minds of the Keorgans, attempting to decipher what it is they wish to learn through their conscious and unconscious thoughts and desires. The ultimate desire of the Keorgans seems to be to create art and music, yet they're also very skilled at the sciences. They have no form of fiction, no holos, no books, no myths, because they have no capacity for subtext. Yet they create pictures of places they have never seen, places that have never existed. They create symphonies and styles of musical expression unlike anything ever before encountered in the universe. But how can any of this be? Solve one puzzle, and it might just solve them all."

Soloman said, "He said they wish to achieve synchronicity. Equilibrium. Balance. Are these not common factors between science and the arts? Could one not argue that music is simply a matter of math, the same with painting, and so on? A randomizing of certain variables while holding to certain structures with others?"

The Bynar rose and quickly crossed to the computer's open control panel. Before anyone could stop him, he thrust his hand into the glowing array of violet energies once more.

This time, it looked as if he was being electrocuted-his whole body spasmed-but, gritting his teeth,

Soloman whispered, "We need you to stop the seismic and geothermic activities here."

Another burst of violet energy sent him reeling away from the computer as more of the strange characters materialized on the screen, and the computer's voice boomed out again. "Incorrect protocol."

"I do not understand this," Soloman said. "It has helped to save the lives of Keorgans before. Why won't it listen now? Why won't it help?"

"I don't think it's interested in protecting the Keorgans per se, that's not a part of its programming," Bart said. "It did, however, protect them in the city when they were being threatened by their own conscious and unconscious mental projections run amok. The seismic and other difficulties facing the planet are not being caused by the Keorgans or the energy constructs that act as learning tools. That's why it's not concerned about the danger."

"What if it understood that it was in danger?" Carol asked. "It's acted to protect itself before. And look at all those constructs it made before we arrived, the ones that unmade all the damage the city had suffered."

Bart shook his head. "Those creations came before the A.I. was fully activated. It first created constructs that acted on the conscious mind. Then it made those to act on subconscious desires. But that's over with. Those tests are finished. Now its mission is to teach, and nothing else."

Soloman struggled to his feet. "I have to try again."

The Bynar went to the machine and again attempted to interface. Immediately, Soloman was obviously in severe distress-the muscle spasms were growing more severe-but he repeated his words. "We need you to stop the seismic and geothermic activities here."

The computer's response was immediate. "Incorrect protocol."

The defensive energies swept out once more, but this time Soloman withstood them. He forced his hand deeper into the machine, then, with a strange, unearthly scream he sprang away from the machine, staggered to the nearest wall and collapsed.

Carol rushed to him, Bart right behind her.

"Soloman! Are you hurt?" Carol cradled his head. "What happened?"

Bart had never seen such a haunted look in Soloman's eyes. The Bynar gasped, "Too much-too uncertain, too... arbitrary..."

Bart and Carol exchanged looks. Bart said, "Six, we don't understand. What are you saying?"

The Bynar shook his head as if trying to clear it. "All the... all the complexities... the computer..." He took a few deep breaths and sat up, tried again. "It is not a computer. Not in the traditional sense, anyway. It performs calculations, yes, but... but it fully understands subjective thought. Shades of meaning, irony..." He shuddered. "It hurt. Not physical pain, exactly, but... it felt as though my brain were about to burst." As the two humans watched, speechless, Soloman got to his feet and took a few steps toward the alien computer again. Outside, the sky began to darken, but not because of beautiful multi-colored clouds airborne volcanic ash had begun to blot out the light. The ground tremors growled out a long, steady vibration.

Harland went to his portable seismic monitor. "It's a matter of minutes now. Four at the outermost."

Bart ran his hand over his mouth. He was closer to figuring out another piece of the puzzle. He could feel it.

Suddenly, the codebreaker's eyes flashed open wide. "Subjective thought! Yes. Now I understand the symbols on the control panel and in the user's guide, these are not characters that comprise words. They're pictographs. Images that represent concepts and the progression of ideas, all related to the realm of the conscious and subconscious mind. Universal ideas and themes, such as the house, or dwelling place, as the residence of the psyche, keys as opportunity, water for emotions, are all represented here."

"That might explain why the constructs are out of control," Carol said as Bart hurried to the user's manual. "The A.I.'s first two tests were successful, but only to a point. The Keorgans have conscious thoughts and unconscious desires, but they are all arranged in a literal motif. There's no dreaming, no symbolism, not as the A.I. understands it and is searching for it, but its testing parameters were not well enough defined for it see that until it was too late and its systems were fully engaged."

Bart was sweating as he looked up from the user's manual. "It's too complex. I can do it. I can break this

code, I can decipher these symbols, but the manual itself is not user-friendly. There's no indexing, no cross-referencing, and that's probably so that a novice could not just jump ahead and take shortcuts to learning. But it's not helping us right now. It would probably take a day to read it thoroughly."

"We have two minutes," Harland said nervously.

Soloman put his hand on the composer's shoulder. "Can you bring your construct here? Reduce it in size and volume so that it would fit inside this room and not deafen us?"

"I'll try," the composer said.

Outside, the cacophony steadily became more orderly, once more organizing itself into a single symphony. But instead of growing softer, it became louder, and soon, blinding violet light flooded in from without as the "instruments" came crashing through the wall, raining glass and debris on everyone. The object then grew smaller and quieter, hovering at a height the others could easily reach.

Soloman touched the construct, and there was no pain, only a hauntingly familiar sensation of unity that he had not experienced since the death of his mate. He walked to the computer, one hand surrounded by the now silent energy matrix that swelled and altered in its crackling violet forms as it adjusted to Soloman's thought patterns.

"First interface achieved," Soloman said.

"It's true," the composer said. "I can't feel it any more. I'm not one with the construct any longer."

Again very slowly and carefully, Soloman reached inside the computer, this time better prepared for what he would experience-but still his back arched horribly as his body shook in spasms of mental agony-then suddenly relaxed somewhat, allowing him to slump forward against the housing. Again the computer's voice spoke to them "What do you want to learn?"

Soloman spoke out loud, his voice shaky, his eyes squeezed tightly shut. "I... we... want to learn about... the ferrous asteroids orbiting throughout this system. We need... a controlled electromagnetic projector... to bring one or more of them here to us."

The computer's "circuitry" flared a tiny bit brighter for an instant. "Crafting necessary tool now."

It took maybe three seconds. The energy surrounding Soloman's hand shimmered, flickered, and transformed into a glittering cone, maybe thirty centimeters from base to point. Soloman stood, looked up at the cone, and it flared a stunning shade of green.

"Can you-" Carol started, then swallowed. "Is it... working? Can you tell how to control it?"

"I can feel it," Soloman said. "It's-intuitive. It's as though I've always known how to use it."

Bart asked, "Can you make the learning tool do what you want?"

Soloman gazed at the object in awe and wonder. "I think I can."

The building shook violently, forcing them all to stagger to keep their feet. "You'd better go ahead, then," Carol said urgently.

Soloman nodded, stared down at the cone, closed his eyes-and lifted his arm to hold the object above his head.

No light sprang forth from it; whatever action it took was invisible to the naked eye. But they felt the effects immediately, and on a level that no sentient creature on that planet had ever felt before.

The earth moved.

Not the random, violent thrusting and destruction of two tectonic plates grinding against each other, or the long-brewing, explosive upheaval of an erupting volcano. It was much smoother than that, and yet at the same time much more affecting and profound. Wind suddenly rose and whipped against the building, clouds rushed toward them and smashed apart, and outside along the coast, the ocean's waters rippled and receded before flowing back up to the beaches...

...and then it was over. The earth tremors which had become a constant murmur in the background had ceased entirely; for the first time in what seemed like an eternity, the ground beneath their feet was stable. But Soloman was still connected to the machine.

"You did it!" Bart cried in delight. He approached his friend, but Carol put a hand on his arm, stopping him.

"What did he do?" Professor Harland asked meekly. "What just happened?"

Slightly distracted by the sight of his friend still fused with the A.I. and in obvious pain, Bart said, "Soloman created a magnetic tool powerful enough to reach millions of kilometers into space and bring back asteroids to study..."

Carol finished the thought for him. "And he used it to shift your planet's crust. Very, very carefully, he stabilized the plates along your coastline, and then shifted Keorga's crust so that the budding volcanoes will now erupt on your ocean floor. Your whole world just moved about ten kilometers to the left."

Harland looked confused. "But... if the crisis is over, then why is Soloman still interfaced with the computer?"

As if in answer to the question, a booming voice rose about them. "Learning tool used incorrectly. Stated objective to bring asteroids closer for study not attained. Intervention required. Assistance will be given."

The "top" spun even higher, lifting Soloman's arm, and activated once more. Again, its effects were invisible to the naked eye. But the computer filled them in on the details of what had just occurred.

"Fifteen asteroids located. All fifteen will breach planetary atmosphere in five minutes and be close enough for study fourteen seconds later."

Bart paled. "Close enough for study? How close is that?"

"Ground level."

"Wait!" Bart called. The machine was actually responding to his queries. "What about the safety overrides? You're programmed to protect those who use the learning tools."

"The rules of learning were manually overridden. Automatic safety feature no longer engaged. Discipline must be maintained. A lesson must be learned. Thank you for using Learning Mech."

The voice fell silent. Bart hollered questions but they went unanswered. Fifteen asteroids striking the surface of this planet at once? In five minutes, where they were standing would be ground zero for an extinction-level event.

"We have to shut this thing down," Carol said. "All we've managed to accomplish is to trade a continent-threatening crisis for one that could destroy this entire planet!"

Bart snorted. "Maybe where it comes from, the impact of fifteen asteroids to a user is the equivalent of a scraped knee." He looked to the user's manual. If only there were more time...

Soloman finally spoke. "I have to let it know I've changed my mind. I have to convince it I don't care about studying ferrous asteroids..."

Bart stopped him. "But-is that true? The A.I. will know."

Soloman lowered his head. "I have that interest, yes. Perhaps I can make it send me to them..."

"I think I know a way of terminating the system," Professor Harland said. There was pain in his voice.

The pain of willing sacrifice. "But Soloman must not hear. He is still interfaced with the computer. What he knows, it will know. That is probably why it won't release him until he has learned his lesson."

Harland told the others his plan.

Soon, Bart and Carol were beside the trapped Bynar.

"Do you really understand what you're getting yourself into here?" Bart asked. "Carol, it should be me."

She shook her head. "One has to lead. One has to follow. There's no way I can lead in this. I only pray I can put aside my ego so I can follow."

Taking a deep breath, she thrust her hand into the energy construct. Waves of energy surged through her, but there was no pain, only a strange sense of surrender that she had rarely felt in her life. She felt the A.I.'s programming combing her mind and struggled to let down the defensive walls she had erected to protect her thoughts and innermost feelings since childhood.

Beside her, Bart talked softly and quietly, using a technique he had studied called hypnotic regression.

"Find your earliest and happiest memories," Bart said. "Find them and melt into them, let them become your world..."

Carol tried, but there were so few, and so many negative instances to move beyond...

Outside, raised voices that might have been thunder crashed through the city, deafening, ever rising roars of anger and frustration. The sounds of her childhood.

And in one corner, Harland stood near the wrecked wall, nervously watching the readings of his portable seismic monitor. "I'm detecting disturbances. Shifts in the waves. Objects of great size are approaching. It is the asteroids..."

"You must go back further," Bart said softly. "Find a time when you were contented, when the world was fresh and new..."

She considered her childhood, perhaps, as it might have been. As she had so richly imagined it... Then it came to her a single day when she had been visiting her aunt and she had been left alone on the woman's estate. An entire afternoon of freedom, of racing through fields, of not thinking or worrying, but simply enjoying life as only a child could...

"System error detected," said the A.I.'s booming voice. "Previous interface test results in error. Maturity Level Five not attained. All failsafes engaged. System shutdown imminent."

"The readings are changing!" Harland said. "The asteroids are being recalled!"

Bart looked to the shattered wall to the city beyond. "And the constructs are fading from existence. We've done it!"

But Carol couldn't hear any of it. She was lost in that moment of her youth, a single afternoon in which she had found contentment and could laugh and play and dream without consequence.

It was her world now-and a part of her never wanted to leave.

Chapter Nine

The remaining two weeks before the rendezvous with the da Vinci passed quickly. Communications had been immediately restored, but with the A.I. shut down and the planet's seismic and geothermic difficulties under control, there was no longer any need for urgency.

Bart watched as Professor Harland told the story of those last few minutes to a group of children.

"You see, when the A.I. ran its preliminary tests to see if it could interface with our race, it also scanned for certain factors that led it to interpret the level of maturity of our people to be acceptable for the learning tools it would craft. Our lack of what the humans call imagination, subtext, or guile, coupled with our intellectual sophistication, caused the computer to believe that we were mature enough for its lessons. But when the human woman joined the interface with the Bynar, she allowed the machine to comb her earliest and happiest memories and see that the level of maturity needed had not indeed been attained. Thus it recalled its learning tools and shut itself down. The system has since been disassembled. And our new friends have agreed to give us books and plays and holos to help us understand these new concepts. There is peace and goodness in unity."

"What about the human female?" a girl asked.

Harland shrugged. "She is... recovering."

While Bart sat on a nearby bench in the park, Carol came racing up to him. With a silly giggle she said, "Tag! You're it!"

"Again, am I?" he asked. He was now midway through the translation of the computer's user manual. The machine, of course, was far too dangerous to ever be reactivated, but the mystery of the machine's creators and their strange language continued to fascinate him.

"I dunno," Carol said, her hands behind her back, alternately rocking and pivoting.

"Well, when you figure it out, you let me know. 'Kay?"

"Kay!" She ran off-and immediately ran back. "It's funny, that thing that happened with our shuttle. I remember talking to Mr. Silveris. And you know what?"

"What?" Bart asked patiently.

"He said 'a small group of artists found many of its components aesthetically pleasing and so they used a construct to disassemble it.' And you know what?"

"What, Carol?"

"I think I'm going to spin and spin and spin!" With a laugh, she spun herself around until she was dizzy. Then she collapsed on the ground, laughing. A sudden, serious expression came over her. "I went off again, didn't I?"

"Don't worry," Bart said. "You'll be back to normal before too long. You'll be adult and serious and

crabby just like before."

"And suspicious. I'm suspicious, you know."

"Yes, I know."

Then her voice was high and childlike once more. "And you know what else?"

Bart smiled. "No, but I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"Your art made me think about a poem I read once," Carol said, her voice distant, neither childish nor mature. "It had something to do with always seeing life through the eyes of a child." Her eyes glazed over.

"And it was squiggly!"

"That was its greatest feature, yes," Bart said.

Carol hopped to her feet, wobbled a little from the dizziness, then ran off to play with a group of children.

Bart considered that if he were another kind of person, he might take a holo of this extraordinary event and keep it on file in case Carol ever got so full of herself again.

Then he pushed the thought aside, thankful that he was not.

He did, however, know what the subject of his next letter to Anthony was going to be

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Scott Ciencin is a New York Times best-selling author of adult and children's fiction. Praised by Science Fiction Review as "one of today's finest fantasy writers" and listed in the Encyclopedia of Fantasy, Scott has written over fifty novels and many short stories and comic books in a variety of genres. His most recent work is the novelization of Jurassic Park III for Random House and Survivor, the first in a series of original Jurassic Park adventures for young readers. He is currently working on The Journal of Anakin Skywalker, Buffy the Vampire Slayer Sweet Sixteen, several original properties, and an upcoming Angel novel (also in collaboration with Dan Jolley). Scott has been a favorite author in the popular Dinotopia and Godzilla series, and his other books include Shadowdale and Tantras (as Richard Awlinson); the six-book Dinoverse fantasy adventure; Gen13 Time and Chance (with Jeff Mariotte); the Vampire Odyssey trilogy; and the comic books Superman Metropolis Special Crimes Unit, The New Gods, and Star Trek The Next Generation The Killing Shadows. Scott lives in Fort Myers, Florida, with his beloved wife Denise.

Dan Jolley has been writing comics for every major publisher in the industry since the early 1990s. Among the characters Dan has brought to life are cult darlings like Vampirella, licensed film creations such as Aliens, and pop culture icons like Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman. Dan achieved wide critical acclaim for JSA The Liberty File, an alternate-universe story set in World War II starring Batman and several Golden Age heroes, and for Obergeist, currently being published by Top Cow, a sci-fi/horror story of a Nazi butcher scientist seeking redemption for his crimes. Dan's upcoming projects include a Sabretooth mini-series for Marvel and a collaborative Angel novel with Scott Ciencin. Some Assembly Required is his first published novel. Dan lives in Macon, Georgia.

COMING NEXT MONTH

Star Trek S.C.E.

13

CAVEAT EMPTOR

By Ian Edgington

The crew of the Ferengi trader thought they were getting a fantastic new computer at a stunningly low price. But too late they realized that the price they'd pay for the machine from Beta 3 was far too high

A distress call reveals something that astonishes the U.S.S. da Vinci crew—a ship full of polite, docile, and generous Ferengi! Soon, Commander Gomez and her team from the S.C.E. realize that the Ferengi have

been taken over by Landru, the ancient super-computer that has returned a century after being dismantled by the Starship Enterprise to wreak havoc once more.

And Landru has set its sights on the da Vinci next

COMING IN FEBRUARY FROM POCKET BOOKS!