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S.C.E.

#22

WAR STORIES

Book Two of Two

Keith R.A. DeCandido



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Androssi Vessel Overseen by Biron

STARDATE 53678.9

Overseer Biron had spent several days perusing the log entries of the current crew of the U.S.S. da Vinci that he had obtained from a now-deceased Yridian trader. These logs included ones from that vessel as well as members of its Starfleet Corps of Engineers staff who served at other posts during the recent war between the Dominion and its allies and the United Federation of Planets and its allies.

Biron was starting to form a clearer picture of what it was that had enabled the crew of the U.S.S. da Vinci to outwit and defeat him on two prior occasions. It was something he never would have deduced based on the empirical evidence he had acquired in those face-to-face encounters.

The crew of the U.S.S. da Vinci improvised.

Biron always approached every mission with a carefully laid-out plan. True, there were always variables, but rarely did they impinge on the plan to a degree that was mathematically significant.

On the other hand, the U.S.S. da Vinci crew seemed to be able to adapt to variables with great ease. Where the variables—mostly introduced by the very presence of the U.S.S. da Vinci—on the planet Maeglin and at the space station Empok Nor had proven to be too much for Biron to overcome, his opponents seemed to thrive on it.

Perhaps it was because they were so actively involved in military engagements. While Biron did occasionally have to defend his ship and engage in battle situations, they were comparatively rare. Androssi military engagements were handled by the Elite's standing army, supplemented as necessary by members of the worker class conscripted into service.

He would need to factor this ability into his plans.

That and the Starfleet people's inexplicable predilection for forming personal attachments. That was a definite weakness that Biron needed to exploit.

He made a note of these items, and then continued his research. One particular mission of the U.S.S. da Vinci conducted during the war against the Dominion piqued his interest...

U.S.S. Da Vinci

STARDATE 51993.8

Fabian Stevens materialized in a remarkably tiny transporter room.

At least this one can be called a “room,” he thought. During his last Starfleet tour, the young engineer had served on the U.S.S. *Defiant*, a warship that had a transporter room so small, they referred to it as the “transporter bay.” This ship—the *Saber*-class U.S.S. *da Vinci*—was only slightly larger than the *Defiant*, which gave it at least the capacity to have a proper transporter room.

He looked over to see that the Nasat engineer—she called herself P8 Blue, but told Fabian that “Pattie” was an acceptable form of address—and the golf ball had both materialized next to him.

It wasn’t really a golf ball, of course—unless the golf game was being played by creatures fifteen times the size of humans—but the spheroid’s resemblance to an outsized version of the ball from the Earth game was uncanny. Its surface was a glossy white substance of some kind, and covered with slight circular indentations. It had no visible seams; the small indentations enabled it to sit still on a flat surface without rolling.

“Welcome to the *da Vinci*,” said a steady voice from the mahogany-skinned Vulcan who stood on one side of the transporter console. “I am Salek, first officer of the *da Vinci* and commanding officer of the S.C.E. team aboard ship. You must be Stevens and Blue.”

The Nasat—who looked like a giant blue pillbug, albeit with eight legs—made an odd tinkling noise, then said, “Correct.”

“Reporting for duty, as ordered, sir,” Fabian added.

The tall, sandy-haired human who stood on the other side of the console from Salek grinned. “And that must be our new toy.”

“Yes, sir, it is,” Fabian said.

“I’m Kieran Duffy—second officer of the ship, second-in-command of the S.C.E. team. You’re looking for second-best, you come to me.”

Fabian smiled. “I’ll keep that in mind, sir.” He’d been worried when he found out that the S.C.E.’s CO on this ship was a Vulcan that things would be stiffer and more formal than he was used to. If this Duffy character was any indication, though...

Turning to the transporter operator, Salek said, “Chief Feliciano, transfer the device to the lab.”

“Yes, sir,” said the black-haired human.

Salek turned back to Fabian and Pattie. “Your personal effects—including your larvae,” he added with a look directly at Pattie, “have been sent to your cabins. The majority of the complement of the *da Vinci* share quarters. You will be sharing accommodations with our cultural specialist, Dr. Abramowitz, and Stevens will do likewise with our linguist, Dr. Okha.”

“Sounds chummy,” Fabian said.

One of Salek’s eyebrows climbed up his forehead. “In a word, yes. Duffy will escort you to your quarters. It is now 1432 hours. The entire S.C.E. team will meet in the lab at 1500 hours to discuss our

mission.”

Pattie made another tinkly sound. “We’ll be there, sir.”

“Good. Come with me,” he said to the Nasat, and led her out of the room.

Fabian regarded the second officer. “A linguist and a cultural specialist? I thought you S.C.E. types built bridges and orbital platforms and stuff.”

Duffy smiled. “Only if we have to. Didn’t you read up on us before taking this glorious assignment?” he asked as they departed the transporter room and turned left.

“Honestly, no. Until two days ago, I thought I was being assigned to Utopia Planitia. Then I find out that there’s an opening on the S.C.E. team on the *Vinci*—I didn’t even know there were S.C.E. teams on ships.”

“Yup. Have been for as long as there’s been a Starfleet. Right now, we’ve got four *Saber*-class ships that all have the same kinda setup. The *Musgrave*, the *T’Pora*, and the *Khwarizmi* are the other three. We gad about the galaxy, righting wrongs, saving damsels in distress, and reaping glory worthy of our exalted status.”

Fabian blinked. “Really?”

“No, not really. Actually, we gad about the galaxy fixing things, saving machines in distress, and getting no glory whatsoever, but what the hey—it’s a living. And sometimes what we have to fix is written in another language or it belongs to someone else, so people like Chan and Carol come in handy.” They walked up to a door. “Here you go.”

Shaking his head, Fabian said, “Bunking up with someone else—it’ll be like old home week.”

“How so?” Duffy asked with a slight frown.

“I used to serve on the *Defiant* under Chief O’Brien. We—”

A huge grin bisected Duffy’s face. “You know the chief?”

Laughing, Fabian said, “Know him? He ran me ragged for two years. Actually, he was great to work for.”

“I bet he was. He and I were both on the *Enterprise* together. Hey, look, the quarters are pretty boring, as quarters go, and we’ve both got half an hour—let me buy you a drink, and we can compare Miles O’Brien stories.”

“Sounds good to me, Commander.”

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Fabian was halfway through a cup of coffee—he hadn’t really gotten a good night’s sleep since leaving Mars for Starbase 375, thence to meet up with the golf ball and Pattie and then report to the *Vinci*—and Duffy was on his second quinine water with a twist of lime. Fabian was hearing all about the chief’s wedding.

“We had a pool going as to how badly Data would screw up the dancing, but he was sure-footed as all get-out. You would believe an android can cha-cha?”

“Where’d he learn?” Fabian asked.

“Rumor had it that Dr. Crusher taught him, but I never bought that. Crusher never seemed to me to be the dancing type.” He gulped down the remainder of his water, then asked, “So what’s your story, Stevens? What brought you back into Starfleet after two years under the chief’s thumb?”

“Well, my tour ended right after we lost a good friend of mine—Enrique Muniz. Good guy, great engineer, awful poker player.”

Duffy smiled. “Everything you want in a shipmate.”

“Something like that. He died on a mission to salvage a Jem’Hadar ship.” Fabian shook his head. “It’s funny, I always knew the risks, but it never seemed real until Muniz died. So I decided I’d had enough. I didn’t re-up, went home to the Rigel colonies, and helped my parents out with their shuttle service while I tried to figure out what to do with my life.”

“And you figured you’d come back to Starfleet?”

Fabian nodded. “The war kind of figured it out for me. I was bored to death on Rigel, and I realized I missed Starfleet. And then, when the war kicked into high gear, I—well, corny as it sounds, I figured it was my duty to sign back up. Besides, I figured there’d be a need for engineers.”

Duffy grinned. “You got that right.” He looked up. “Computer, time?”

“The time is 1457 hours.”

“We’d better get going,” Duffy said, getting up. “Don’t want to be late for your first meeting.”

“That would be bad, yes,” Fabian said, also rising.

“We’ll pick this up later. If nothing else, I want to know exactly how it is that the chief had a second kid by way of a Bajoran major.”

“Okay, but only if you tell me how Commander Worf, of all people, midwived Molly.”

Another grin. “Deal.”

* * *

“The device was found in the wreck of a Jem’Hadar ship that was taken from Chin’toka three weeks, four days ago,” Salek said as he stood next to the golf ball.

Theda Vinci’s main lab was a good-sized room—for a ship this small, anyhow—currently occupied by Salek, Duffy, Pattie, and Fabian, as well as two short, dark-haired humans, one male and one female, and a Bynar pairing. The latter wore civilian garb; Fabian had had no idea that there were any Bynars working with Starfleet, though he was grateful. No better computer experts existed in the galaxy.

First Duffy had performed the introductions. The humans were Chan Okha, ship's linguist, and Carol Abramowitz, the cultural specialist. The Bynars had the designations of 110 and 111, though Fabian knew it was going to take him weeks to remember which was which. They didn't look alike, of course, but they were sufficiently similar—and seemed to cluster together and move as a unit—making it difficult to know where one short, bald-headed, slim-limbed alien began and the other ended.

“The ship itself provided no useful intelligence that Starfleet did not already possess, but this device was found on the vessel's main bridge. P8 Blue was part of the team that salvaged the device.” Salek then nodded at the Nasat.

Standing on her hind legs, Pattie stepped forward. “Thus far, there isn't much to tell. The device doesn't have any obvious function, and scans have detected material unknown to Starfleet databases. However, the scan we did was cursory at best.”

Duffy smiled. “So our job is to curse a bit less?”

Making another one of those tinkly sounds, Pattie said, “Something like that, yes.”

Fabian noticed that Salek made no reaction to Duffy whatsoever. He would have expected some kind of noise of disapproval from the stolid Vulcan, but Salek remained all business. That'll teach me to stereotype people, he thought ruefully.

One of the Bynars started to speak: “We might be able—”

Then the other Bynar continued. “—to integrate with—”

“—the computer systems of the device—”

“—and learn its function.”

Okay, Fabian thought, that's going to take a lot of getting used to. He knew that Bynar pairs were heavily integrated, but he'd never actually met any before, and so was unaware that they finished each other's sentences like that.

“That would be a logical step to take,” Salek said. “However, precautions should be taken.”

Abramowitz said, “So Okha and I are here, why exactly? Cheerleading?”

Salek regarded the woman. “I assume, Dr. Abramowitz, that you are sufficiently versed in the cultures of the Dominion member races that the Federation and its allies have come into contact with that you might be able to provide some insight into the device.”

Okha grinned. “And I can cheerlead in fifteen different languages. Thirty, if you count the dead ones.”

“Really?” Duffy said. “How do you say ‘sis-boombah’ in Old High Andorii?”

While the banter went on, Fabian noticed something: the surface of the golf ball looked familiar somehow. He hadn't realized it before, but Salek's comment about Dominion member races started the gears turning in his mind.

Before he could pursue this, he noticed a subtle change in the vibration of the bulkheads.

Duffy looked up. “We just went to warp.”

“Warp eight, from the feel of it,” Pattie said.

Fabian frowned. “Feels more like warp seven to me.”

Salek raised an eyebrow again. “We are, in fact, traveling at warp seven-point-three.”

Pattie made another tinkly noise—Fabian noted that each one had sounded different, and he wondered if he’d ever figure out how they related to her emotional state.

“Sabers are like the Defiant,” Fabian said to the Nasat. “Overpowered and undersized, so it’s easy to overestimate how fast they’re going.”

“Two quatloos to the new guy,” Duffy said with a grin.

A voice sounded over the speakers. “S.C.E. team, report to the observation lounge.”

“That’s us, folks,” Duffy said. “Let’s go.”

* * *

Within a few minutes, they all reassembled in the observation lounge, another small room, but this one with a big window that looked out on the distorted starfield that indicated that the *Vinci* was at warp. Three others were present in addition to the group that had been gathered in the lab. One was a medium-height human with snow-white hair, bushy eyebrows, and grandfatherly blue eyes. The four pips and red trim on his uniform indicated that he was Captain David Gold. From what Fabian understood, the captain had no background in engineering, so he was unclear as to what the older man was doing supervising a group of engineers.

Then he thought about the engineers he’d known in his time, and realized that it was probably better this way....

The other two were a human woman with blond hair tied back severely in a bun and a Bolian man with no hair whatsoever. The former wore gold, the latter blue, which made it tough to tell where his collar ended and his neck began. The thickness of the ridge that bisected his face and the looseness of his skin indicated that he was quite old.

Everyone sat except for Pattie, who explained quickly that chairs on starships “weren’t built with me in mind,” and Gold began the meeting.

“First of all,” he said in a pleasant but authoritative voice, “I’d like to welcome our two new crewmembers aboard. Fabian Stevens, P8 Blue, welcome to the *Vinci*. I’m Captain David Gold, and they tell me I run the place. I assume you know most of the team. This,” he indicated the human, “is Lt. Commander Corsi, our chief of security, and our chief medical officer,” he now indicated the Bolian, “Dr. Tydoan.”

The Bolian nodded his head and said, “A pleasure. You’ll both need to report for physicals within the next three days.”

“Assuming they have time to,” Gold added quickly. “I know we’ve got that widget from Starbase 375 to look at, and that still needs to get done. But we’ve got another priority ahead of it.” The captain touched a control on the desk, and the viewscreen behind him lit up with a schematic from what looked to Fabian like a standard Federation communications relay station. Such stations were positioned throughout Federation space, boosting comm signals a thousand-fold and allowing near-instantaneous communication across most of the Federation. During the war, those relays were of even greater value. Fabian also noticed that the one showing on the screen had taken some rather severe damage.

“This is a comm relay in the Phicus system. Some Cardassian ships carved a chunk out of it yesterday, and we need to fix it, pronto.”

Corsi leaned forward. “Sir, the Phicus system is hardly what I’d call secure. We’ve been holding on to it by our fingernails.”

“Calm down, Corsi,” Gold said, “we’re gonna have support. The Appalachia and the Sloane will meet us at the relay.”

Fabian recognized both ships as Steamrunner-class vessels. Not bad for support, he thought, but a hair skimpy.

Apparently, the security chief felt the same way. “Sir, that’s insane. The Cardassians have been dancing on the edge of that system for weeks. We can’t go in there with only two ships for backup. Starfleet has to—”

Gold held up a hand. “Way ahead of you, Corsi. I already asked Starfleet what was in the Saurian brandy they were drinking when they cut those orders. Turns out that’s all they can spare for now.”

“We can’t wait until more backup’s available?”

“It won’t be for forty-eight hours, and the relay can’t wait that long to be fixed.”

Security chiefs are all alike, Fabian thought as he watched Corsi fold her arms. She had the universal cranky look that all the security chiefs that Fabian had ever met had.

“We’ll arrive at Phicus in twelve hours.” Gold then gave Salek a nod.

The Vulcan, who had been sitting with his elbows on the table and fingers steepled together in front of his face, leaned back and unclasped his hands, leaving them to rest on the tabletop. “We will continue our examination of the Dominion device until we arrive at Phicus. At that point, Duffy, Blue, and I will commence with repairs on the communications relay. Stevens, 110, and 111 will continue their examination of the device, with the assistance of Okha and Abramowitz.”

“Hey, maybe we’ll luck out and dope it out before we get there,” Duffy said with a smile.

Salek turned to Duffy. “Luck is not something upon which we should depend.”

Still smiling, Duffy said, “S’why I said ‘maybe.’”

“Let’s get to it, people,” Gold said, rising from his chair. Everyone else did likewise.

Corsi, Fabian noticed, still looked aggravated. Okha and Tydoan looked bored. The rest of the team,

however, seemed eager to get at the problem, as everyone made a beeline for the lab.

I think I'm gonna like it here, Fabian thought.

* * *

Twelve hours later, Fabian wasn't liking it here so much.

The Bynar pair had attempted to interface with the golf ball, but had found no way to access the systems. Sensors indicated some kind of mechanism, but if there was a computerized intelligence behind it, they couldn't find it.

At least, they couldn't find it via sensors. Ideally, they would just open it up and take a peek, but they found no access ports either.

"Geez, even a real golf ball has seams," Fabian finally said in frustration as the latest attempt to gain ingress met with failure.

"Not this one," Duffy said with a sigh.

Pattie made one of her tinkly noises. "Perhaps we should attempt to use a phaser on the golf ball."

"That is an unacceptable risk," Salek said. "The device was found on the bridge. Logically, that means it might well be a weapon—or, at the very least, be booby-trapped."

"Yeah, the Jem'Hadar wouldn't have it on the bridge," said Duffy, "if it wasn't important."

"Or if it wasn't theirs."

Fabian turned to see that Abramowitz was speaking.

"You're all leaving out one possibility," she continued. "What if the Jem'Hadar found it and they don't know what it is either? Maybe it really is a golf ball with a pituitary problem."

"There is an indication—" 110 started.

111 finished. "—of electronics within the golf ball."

"So?" Abramowitz shrugged, her short black hair bouncing slightly. "Maybe it's a gyroscope to keep it on track after it's been hit off the tee."

Laughing, Fabian said, "You play golf?"

Abramowitz nodded.

"Go fig'. I thought my grandfather was the only person left in the Federation who played."

"Nah," Duffy said, "I had an aunt and uncle who played, too. My parents used to send me to stay with them whenever I was being too annoying."

Fabian found himself speaking without thinking, his frustration at twelve hours of dead ends lowering his

resistance. “Spent a lot of time with them, did you?” He immediately regretted speaking up. True, Duffy had a relaxed manner, but he was an officer, and they didn’t usually take kindly to the enlisted folk making snide remarks.

To Fabian’s relief, however, Duffy just laughed and said, “More than I would’ve liked to, yeah. Never took to the game, though. I was always about eight million over par.”

“As diverting as this discussion of human gaming practices is,” Salek said, “we should return to the business at hand. While Abramowitz’s suggestion has merit, we must assume, for the nonce, that this belongs to the Dominion or one of its allies.”

Blinking, Fabian looked at the golf ball again. One of its allies. Once again, he had that familiar feeling, and those words triggered it.

Then, finally, it hit him. “That’s it!”

“What is ‘it’?” Salek asked.

“I knew I’d seen something like this before.” He turned to the others. “A few years back, I was serving on the *Defiant*. We went into the Gamma Quadrant to mediate a trade dispute involving the Federation, the Karemma, and the Ferengi. A couple Jem’Hadar ships attacked and we all wound up in the atmosphere of a gas giant.”

“All?” Duffy asked, sounding serious for once.

“It was us, two Jem’Hadar, and a Karemma ship. At one point, the Jem’Hadar fired on us, but the torpedo didn’t detonate on impact like it was supposed to.” He smiled. “Dumb luck, really, but it kept us alive long enough to get out of it in one piece. The funny thing is, the torpedo was designed by the Karemma.”

“Aside from the obvious irony,” Pattie said, “how does that help us?”

“The surface of this thing is made of the same material as that torpedo. It didn’t have any visible seams, either, but Quark managed to get it open.”

110 and 111 exchanged glances. “You got it open—”

“—with a subatomic particle?”

“Uh, no,” Fabian said, trying to hold back a laugh. “Quark is a Ferengi bartender.”

“The *Defiant*’s a warship that’s even smaller than this,” Pattie said. “How did you have room for a bartender?”

Fabian felt himself losing control of the conversation. “He wasn’t the bartender on the ship, he—”

Salek mercifully interrupted. “As fascinating as this discussion is, I’m afraid it will have to wait. We will be arriving at the Phicus system in ten minutes, thirty seconds. Duffy, Blue, you’re with me. The rest of you, carry on.”

Fabian stared at Okha, Abramowitz, and the two Bynars. “Carry on, huh?” He shook his head. “So,

should I finish the story?”

“There was a story?” Abramowitz asked.

“Soriar estarifo,” Okha said suddenly.

Everyone looked at him.

Okha shrugged. “That’s the closest I can come to ‘sis-boom-bah’ in Old High Andorii.”

The Bynars stared at the linguist for a moment, then turned as one toward Fabian. “How was this bartender—”

“—able to get at the mechanism—”

“—of the torpedo?”

Fabian sighed. “He wouldn’t tell us. He said he used a regular tool kit, and made a comment about never revealing a trade secret.” He looked up. “Computer, compare sensor readings of the device to that of the Jem’Hadar torpedo confiscated aboard the U.S.S. Defiant on stardate 49265. Is there a design correlation?”

“Material used to house specified Jem’Hadar torpedo is a ninety-nine-percent correlation to the material used for the surface of the device.”

“Okay, so it’s almost definitely Karella.”

“Do they play golf?” Abramowitz asked.

“Not to my knowledge,” Fabian said, finding himself unclear as to whether or not the cultural specialist was serious. “What I need is a standard emergency tool kit.”

Okha snorted. “Good luck.” At Fabian’s questioning look, the linguist continued. “This is an S.C.E. ship. There’s nothing ‘standard’ on here. Everything is top of-the-line and refurbished and toyed with and tinkered with.”

Fabian sighed and started putting together a mental list. Quark managed to get the torpedo open with nothing but the equipment found in a standard emergency tool kit, and Fabian was damned if he was going to let that Ferengi troll outdo him. . . .

* * *

Salek fit the ODN conduit into the communications relay with a gloved hand. That meant that he was now done with seventy-six percent of the work he had assigned to himself to do, and should have his tasks completed within the hour. He reached into the supply case that he had magnetically attached to the side of the relay in order to retrieve another new ODN conduit. Several dozen of them had been vaporized by the Cardassian attack, and several more damaged, as were many isolinear optical chips. Salek had appointed himself the task of replacing them. Even as he did so to one of the outer sections of the relay—remaining tethered to it via his magnetic boots—Duffy was reattaching the relay’s hull plating in another section. Both of them wore EVA suits. Blue, meanwhile, had gone to work on the transmitter array.

As he pulled out the latest conduit, he activated the communicator in his EVA suit.

“Away team, report.”

“Aft hull plating’s almost welded on,” Duffy reported. “Then I can get to the fore. Pity I don’t have the golf ball, then I could play through.”

Blue’s voice then came over the comm line. “Transmitter array should be online in about twenty minutes.”

“Excellent. I have replaced half of the ODN conduits and all of the isolinear chips. Carry on.”

Salek, of course, did not bother to rein in Lt. Commander Duffy’s humorous excesses, having long since realized that they were part and parcel of his personality, and they never interfered with his ability to perform his duty. Salek, therefore, had no reason to complain.

His sister had cautioned him against signing on with the S.C.E. She had encouraged him to take a post on the T’Kumbra, with its all-Vulcan crew, but Salek did not see the logic in that. Besides, there were no positions available for a lieutenant commander on that vessel, and he saw even less logic in taking an inferior position.

“The humans are so—emotional,” his sister had said, as if this were some great revelation.

“Of course they are,” he had told her. “And Betazoids are telepathic, Tellarites are aggressive, and Andorians are blue. These are well-documented facts. I see no reason for any of them to interfere with my choice of posting. Unless you think so little of me that you expect me to succumb to emotionalism simply by being around them.”

“No,” his sister had replied. “I simply do not wish you to suffer needlessly.”

“I fail to see how I will suffer.”

His sister had dropped the subject after that, for which Salek was grateful. He had found his assignment as first officer of the *theda Vinci* to be most satisfactory. They performed an important service for the Federation, and the crew under him was exemplary.

Salek was especially pleased with the arrival of the Nasat engineer. P8 Blue could survive without an EVA suit in a vacuum for as long as she could hold her breath—a figure measured in hours—and that, combined with her multiple, more flexible limbs, allowed her access to places a suited humanoid couldn’t get at. Her presence cut their repair time by a factor of ten—a not inconsiderable amount, especially given the precariousness of this system. Lt. Commander Corsi’s fears regarding the Cardassians were well founded.

Looking out into space, Salek saw the hulls of the *Sloane* and the *Appalachia*—illuminated by running lights—in a defensive position proximate to the relay. At present, he could not see the *theda Vinci*, as its orbit had taken it to the other side of the relay relative to Salek’s own position.

“Uh oh.”

Frowning, Salek activated his comm link to Duffy. “Report.” He commenced with replacing the next ODN conduit.

“I just found something that I think is—oh, crap. Duffy toda Vinci.”

“Go ahead,” said Gold’s voice.

“There’s a beacon of some kind in the comm relay—it looks like Cardassian tech. As far as I can tell, it’s relaying sensor data via a subspace comm link.”

“Deactivate it immediately,” Salek said.

“I’m not sure I can yet, but even if I do, I don’t think it’ll make a difference. I’m picking up a Cardassian transporter trace on the thing.”

Salek’s eyebrow raised. “In all likelihood, the Cardassians who attempted to take this system beamed it into the relay.”

“Damn,” Gold said. “Duffy, hold off on deactivating it for a minute. What kind of data is it sending?”

“Not sure yet. Give me a minute.”

“Sir, we cannot allow the beacon to remain active,” Salek said. He continued his work on the ODN conduit, as he was easily capable of splitting his focus. “It represents a security risk.”

“So does deactivating it. It means they know we found it and they may come back to try to take another shot at the comm relay. It might be more useful to us as a decoy. If it’s there to eavesdrop on our comm channels, we might be able to turn it to our advantage. Deliberately feed false intel through the relay.”

Not for the first time, Salek was reminded as to why Starfleet did not assign engineers to captain the S.C.E. vessels. Sometimes a more galactic perspective was needed on their missions. It was a most logical setup, as Salek had not thought of the possible tactical uses of the beacon.

“It’s a nice idea, sir,” Duffy said, “but I don’t think it’s gonna work. I just tapped into what, exactly, this thing is sending. If my tricorder’s reading its Cardassian right, it just sent an SOS out. It knows we found it.”

Salek heard a sigh from Gold. “That tears it, then. Yellow alert. McAllan, alert the Sloane and the Appalachi that we may be having company soon, then see if Starfleet can deign to send us some backup. Duffy, kill that thing before it sends over full technical specs of all three ships. Salek, how much time do you have left?”

“Approximately forty-four minutes, twenty-nine seconds.”

Gold snorted a laugh. “The proper definition of the word ‘approximately’ you should someday learn, Salek. All right, get a move on. Can you get the work done faster with more people?”

Just as he finished replacing the latest ODN conduit, he replied, “Negative. There are only two areas that need repair work of the type that can be accomplished by humanoids in EVA suits. Additional personnel would simply be in the way. The remaining tasks can only be performed by Blue.”

“Gee,” Blue said, “only on board a few hours and already indispensable. It’s good to be me.” She made a noise that corresponded in the Nasat lexicon to laughter.

“So why are you wasting time jabbering at me? Gold out.”

Salek, of course, had been working while talking to the captain, but there was little to be gained by reacquiring the comm signal and pointing that out.

“Got it!” Duffy said. “Okay, this puppy won’t bark no more.”

Salek interpreted this comment to mean that he had successfully deactivated the beacon.

The second officer continued. “If the Cardassians want to know what’s coming through this relay, they’ll have to come here themselves.” A pause. “Not that I, y’know, want that or anything, but—never mind. Duffy to Feliciano. Diego, lock onto the piece of equipment half a meter in front of me and beam it to the lab. Tell the new guy not to touch it.”

“Yes, sir.”

As Salek began removing a damaged ODN conduit, he wondered how Stevens, 110, and 111 were proceeding with the attempt to ascertain the function of the Dominion device.

* * *

A sonic driver. A lousy, rotten, stinking sonic driver.

Fabian had managed to cobble together the actual components of a standard emergency tool kit from the assorted tool kits on the *Vinci*—all of which were far better equipped than any tool kit he’d worked with on the *Defiant* or on *Deep Space 9*. While he did so, a small device that—to Fabian’s experienced eye after serving on a Cardassian-built space station for two years—looked to be of Cardassian design was beamed into the lab. Chief Feliciano said that Duffy had told “the new guy” not to touch it. Fabian plotted several types of revenge on Duffy for the crack while he started trying each of the tools on the golf ball.

For whatever reason, the emissions of the sonic driver had two effects—they made 110 and 111 wince and they removed a panel of the golf ball. Said panel had no visible seams until after it came off.

“How’d you do that?” Okha asked.

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Fabian said, taking out his tricorder. Then his eyes widened at what the display told him. “Wow.” He looked over at the Bynars. “Are you two reading what I’m reading?”

“If you are reading—”

“—several dozen weapons systems—”

“—a propulsion system—”

“—and a sophisticated computer core—”

“—then yes, we are reading—”

“—what you are reading.”

Fabian sighed. "I wish I could say that was a relief." He was about to tap his combadge when an indicator light went on over the doorway to the lab.

Theda Vinci was at yellow alert.

Abramowitz pursed her lips. "That can't be good."

"Never is," Okha muttered.

"Stevens to bridge. This may not be the best time, sir, but we've pried open the golf ball, and, uh—well, it's interesting."

"Good job, Stevens. Report," Gold said.

Taking this as a sign that he could go on at greater length despite the alert, Fabian said, "Apparently this is some kind of small, mobile weapon. The outer casing is designed to survive space travel and protect the components, which is why we couldn't read it until we got it open. We're gonna do a more thorough analysis now. Unless there's a more pressing concern?"

"Not for you. We're just playing it safe up here, waiting to see if the Dominion wants to crash the party. Let me know what you find out."

"We will, sir. Stevens out." He turned to look at the diminutive, bald-headed aliens next to him. "Okay, Mutt, Jeff, let's get to work."

"I am 110."

"I am 111."

"There is no Mutt—"

"—or Jeff here."

Again, Fabian sighed. Stick with Duffy for the jokes, he admonished himself.

As he ran the tricorder over the golf ball, he decided to brave a question. "If you two don't mind my asking, how did a couple of Bynar civilians wind up on Theda Vinci?"

"None of our kind—"

"—has ever joined Starfleet—"

"—although we have assisted Starfleet—"

"—in many computer-related endeavors."

"It was decided—"

"—that one pairing—"

“—should serve as observers on a Starfleet Corps of Engineers vessel—”

“—during this time of war—”

“—to render assistance where needed.”

Smiling, Fabian said, “That’s very considerate. You consider enlisting for real?”

The two Bynars exchanged glances. “We have—”

“—consideredit.”

Fabian wondered if he had hit upon a sore point. Before he could pursue it, however, two security guards entered. At least, Fabian assumed them to be security. True, they were enlisted personnel, based on their lack of rank insignia, and their uniforms had the gold trim of operations, but Fabian knew a grunt when he saw one. For one thing, they were armed; for another, they had that tense, coiled look that every security guard he’d ever known had—and that no engineer he’d ever met could master. When engineers got tense, they became all frazzled; when security guards got tense, they shot things.

“Can I help you guys?” Fabian asked.

“Yellow alert,” the shorter, paler one said. “SOP is that we stand guard on any projects. Core-Breach’s orders.”

Fabian laughed. ““Core-Breach’?””

“That’s Lt. Commander Corsi’s nickname behind her back,” Okha said with a grin. “Nobody’s had the guts to say it to her face.”

“Well,” the darker, taller guard said with a grin, “not twice, anyhow.” He stuck out a hand. “I’m Vance Hawkins.”

Fabian returned the handshake. “Fabian Stevens. Just came on at the starbase.”

“Stephen Drew. Welcome to the loony bin, Stevens.”

“We have—”

“—found something.”

Turning around, Fabian saw that the Bynars looked excited. At what, he wasn’t sure. They didn’t carry tricorders, and they had spent the time since Drew and Hawkins entered communicating with each other in a high-pitched whine. Fabian asked them what they found.

“We have found—”

“—access to the computer core—”

“—of the golf ball.”

“‘Golf ball’?” Drew said with a smirk.

Okha looked with annoyance at Stevens. “See what you’ve done? Now even the twins are doing it. This is how we wind up with bad names for things.”

Primly, Abramowitz said, “There’s nothing wrong with golf balls.”

Looking at his tricorder, Fabian said, “Maybe, but there’s a lot not to like about this one. Can you guys access the core?”

“Of course,” 110 and 111 said in perfect unison.

Then they went back to their high-pitched whine. Looking at Okha, Fabian asked, “What is that they’re doing?”

“It’s a rapid-fire form of communication in straight binary code, and moving at a somewhat ludicrous speed.”

“Have you ever tried to translate it?”

Okha frowned. “No. Why would I?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Abramowitz said, “maybe to get some insight into another culture?”

“That’s your job,” Okha said with a shrug.

“It should be our responsibility.”

Suspecting that he was opening an old argument between these two, Fabian said, “Never mind.” He turned back to look at the Bynars, who had now placed two hands—one the left hand, the other the right hand—into the opening Fabian had created in the golf ball. “Should they be touching it like that?”

The high-pitched whine got a bit louder, and the Bynars’ eyes seemed to roll up into their heads. Fabian noticed that whatever they were saying was perfectly matched. They were uttering their rapid-fire binary code in perfect unison—which, he realized, was why it seemed louder. He had been recording everything with his tricorder already, but now he set it to make a separate record of just the Bynars’ utterances, and to attempt a translation once they were finished. It was as much for his own curiosity as anything, but he thought it might also provide insight into the golf ball.

“That’s really outstanding.” Fabian looked at Okha and Abramowitz, who seemed less than impressed. “I mean, that level of communication with a computer, it must just be—” He shook his head. “Outstanding.”

Abramowitz smiled. “You said that already.”

Shrugging, Okha said, “We’ve all gotten used to it.”

A very loud, high-pitched wail cut off any response Fabian might have made. He—and everyone else—turned to see 110 and 111 crying out in what looked like pain.

“Get them out of that!” Okha cried.

Even as Hawkins and Drew rushed over to the golf ball, Fabian said, “Wait! We don’t know what separating them will do!”

Ignoring this admonition, Hawkins grabbed for 110.

That was followed by a flash of light, a massive electrical discharge, and Hawkins being hurled across the lab and into a bulkhead, which he hit with a rather sickening thud.

Drew tapped his combadge even as he backed off from 111. “Drew to sickbay. Medical emergency in the lab.”

“On my way,” came Tydoan’s voice.

Neither 110 nor 111 had budged, though they were still screaming. Fabian listened carefully. “I think they’re still screaming out binary code.”

“Who cares?” Okha said. “We have to separate them.”

“I’m open to suggestions,” Drew said.

Fabian ran over to the assorted tools he’d found when he was trying to reassemble his tool kit. He needed one particular tool that he’d seen. He was amazed when he saw it before, as he thought his mother was the last person in the entire galaxy who actually had one.

C’mon, c’mon, it’s in here somewhere.

The Bynars’ screams continued.

Finally, he found what he thought might work.

As he rummaged, Drew said, “What, you’ve got some super-scientific gizmo that’ll get ’em outta there?”

“Something like that,” Fabian said as he stood up, holding a long piece of metal, with two small prongs at the end of it. One of the prongs was movable.

Drew frowned. “What the hell is that?”

“A wrench.” Fabian rummaged some more and found a pair of nonconductive gloves. “Everybody stand back,” he said as he put them on.

Abramowitz and Okha did so—Drew did not, but stayed about a meter behind Fabian. Fine, if Mr. Security Guard wants to keep an eye on me, who am I to say no?

Slowly, Fabian approached the golf ball. 110’s (or was it 111’s?) left hand was in the left-hand part of the opening, with 111’s (or 110’s) right hand in the right-hand part. Both their mouths were wide open, letting loose with a maddening barrage of high-pitched ones and zeroes. This close, Fabian could see the arc of electricity linking them to the golf ball—indeed, that was all that linked them. Neither hand was actually touching any part of the inner workings of the golf ball, which made Fabian’s life easier.

I hope to hell this works.

He shoved the wrench in under 110's (or 111's) hand.

A flash of light encompassed his eyes, and the next thing Fabian knew, he was lying on the floor, on top of something rather lumpy, and feeling a bit dazed. "What happened?" he asked in a slurred voice.

"You fell on top of me is what happened," came a muffled voice from under him, which he realized was Drew.

Clambering into a standing position, Fabian chuckled. "I did tell you to stand back."

Drew also got upright. "Remind me to listen to you next time."

"Fine. Listen to me next time."

Sighing, Drew said, "Yeah, you're gonna fit in just fine here." He looked around.

Fabian did likewise and was at once glad to see that 110 and 111 were now separated from the golf ball and distressed to see them unconscious—possibly dead—on the floor. The little boxes they each wore on their belt—some kind of processing unit, he knew—were broken and smoking, small components falling onto the deck next to them.

Tydoan entered then, along with two other people, one an older human male, the other a young human female, all in blue-trimmed uniforms.

"What is it this time?" the Bolian asked. Then he noticed the security guard against the bulkhead. "Not Hawkins again. I'm going to just give him his own damn bunk in sickbay. Copper, Wetzel, look him over. I'm gonna take a look at the twins."

The other two started examining Hawkins while the elderly Bolian knelt down next to 110 and 111. As he ran the scanner over them, he started muttering, "Damn stupid engineers sticking their noses in where they don't belong, and then they wonder why they're hurt all the time. Should just retire and be done with it."

"Will they be okay, Doctor?" Fabian asked.

Tydoan ignored Fabian as he finished his examination. Then he stood upright, groaning. Fabian thought he heard the Bolian's knees actually crack. "They'll be fine," he finally said. "Bynars can take a heaping dose of juice, but this was more than a heaping dose. I'll bring 'em to sickbay and—"

"That won't—"

"—be necessary."

Fabian looked down and saw that the Bynars were both starting to rise.

"Hang on, you two," Tydoan said. "You took a major jolt, and—"

"The 'jolt' we took—"

"—is well within—"

“—standard Bynar tolerances, Doctor.”

As they spoke, Fabian’s tricorder beeped. He looked down at the display, and his jaw became unhinged. Oh, this isn’t good. Quickly, he switched his tricorder off and purged the records of the Bynars’ utterances, suddenly quite grateful that he’d isolated them.

“We thank you—”

“—for your concern—”

“—but it is unwarranted.”

“Besides, we have critical information—”

“—that we must impart to Captain Gold—”

“—right away.”

Fabian looked at Tydoan. “I’m afraid they’re right, Doctor.”

“Fine.” The doctor threw up his hands. “Don’t take care of yourselves. What do I care?” He walked over to Hawkins.

“Stevens to Gold,” Fabian said, tapping his combadge. “We have some more information on the golf ball, sir. And it’s not good.”

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, Fabian sat in the observation lounge, along with Gold, Corsi, and the two Bynars. They had waited that long to have the meeting only because 110 and 111 needed to replicate new data boxes. Apparently their ability to function at a slow enough level to interact with other life-forms was aided considerably by those boxes, and without them, they’d never be able to process data slowly enough for anyone else to understand.

“The golf ball appears to be a multipurpose weapon, Captain,” Fabian said, calling up the sensor schematics from his tricorder on the lounge’s viewscreen. “Its housing, as I said before, is the same as that used by the Jem’Hadar for their torpedoes. It can survive the ravages of space and of atmosphere with little difficulty. It’s also equipped with three different miniaturized directed energy weapons of similar design to that of a Jem’Hadar warship.”

“How powerful?” Corsi asked.

“The yield is roughly equivalent to that of a Defiant-class ship’s phasers.”

“Gevalt,” Gold muttered.

“There’s more, I’m afraid.” Fabian touched a control, and the image focused in on another component of the inner workings. “What you’re looking at there is a propulsion system that allows the golf ball to travel at speeds up to full impulse. In addition, it contains a computer core that is very complex, which 110 and 111 were able to commune with briefly.”

“We are still—”

“—recovering from the shock—”

“—but we learned that the device—”

“—is capable of independent motion—”

“—and firing, based on a sophisticated—”

“—artificial intelligence.”

Corsi shook her head. “A self-sufficient, self-directing, obscenely fast mobile weapon?”

“More than that—”

“—we’re afraid, Lieutenant Commander.”

Gold shook his head. “Much more, I don’t think I could take.”

“The golf ball can transmit—”

“—a computer virus.”

Fabian smiled wryly. “It almost ate my tricorder. I was recording what 110 and 111 were saying, and they were screaming the code for the virus. Luckily, I purged it before it got too far—though if they’d gone on much longer...”

“We have already begun a diagnostic—”

“—of all the computers on the ship—”

“—to make certain that no other systems—”

“—besides Mr. Stevens’s tricorder—”

“—were affected.”

Gold leaned back in his chair. Fabian thought it interesting that, while Corsi looked a frightening combination of appalled and angry, Gold only looked thoughtful—and not nearly as shocked as Fabian would have expected. Almost as if he knew what was coming.

“How pervasive,” the captain asked after a moment,

“would this virus be?”

“It transmits—”

“—in machine language.”

“There is no known computer system—”

“—that would not be vulnerable to it—”

“—in theory.”

Leaning forward, Gold asked, “In practice?”

“We believe that we were in contact with the program—”

“—long enough to devise a countermeasure.”

“Good.” Again he leaned back. “In a set of reports from Starfleet Intelligence that I received two weeks ago, they mentioned that the Dominion was working on something like this. The mobility, they mentioned. The weapons, they mentioned. The virus, they didn’t mention. They also thought the prototype would be ready to go within a month.”

Corsi pursed her lips. “Two weeks is within a month.”

“That’s what both Admiral Ross and I were afraid of when they found that thing. And now we learn that it’s worse than we thought.”

“Red alert. Captain Gold to the bridge.”

Gold tapped his combadge even as the alert lights bathed the observation lounge in a red glow. “Report, McAllan.”

“Two Galor-class Cardassian warships and a Jem’Hadar strike ship have warped into the system, sir. The Appalachia and the Sloane are moving to intercept.”

“Damn. Get us between them and the relay. Our priority is to protect the away team. Gold to Salek.”

“Salek here.”

“The Dominion just came to find out what happened to their beacon, Commander. How much more time do you need?”

“For a satisfactory repair, nineteen minutes, ten seconds. For a repair that will suffice until such a time as this star system is more secure, four minutes, thirty seconds.”

“Good.” Gold rose from his seat and headed toward the exit. “Transporter room, this is Gold. Get a lock on the away team and beam them back here—”

The doors closed on him, leaving Fabian with Corsi, 110, and 111. The security chief rose from her chair and headed toward the other exit.

“Uh, excuse me?”

Corsi stopped, turned, and regarded Fabian with a look that made the engineer want to crawl under the table for the next six months. “What?”

“Ah, I’m new—I don’t really know what my duty station is during red alert.”

In a tight voice, Corsi said, “Unless you’ve been given a specific duty assignment, which you obviously haven’t, you’re to report to your quarters.”

Without another word, Corsi turned on her heel and left.

“Is she always that—direct?” Fabian asked the Bynars.

“No,” 110 said.

“Usually she is worse,” 111 added.

“Lovely. Well, I guess I should go to my quarters.” Fabian hadn’t even been in his quarters since he came on board. And to think, I gave up Utopia Planitia for this. . . .

* * *

“Captain on the bridge!”

David Gold rolled his eyes at the words of his tactical officer. “McAllan, knock that off and give me a report.” Since reporting to the *da Vinci* two months ago, McAllan had insisted on that bit of protocol even though the captain himself found it unnecessary at best and embarrassing at worst. Leaving aside any other consideration, the *da Vinci* bridge was tiny enough that Gold’s presence there would be patently obvious to anyone on it without the need for it to be blared from the tactical station. . . .

“Enemy vessels closing in at full impulse. They’ll be in weapons range of the *Appalachia* and the *Sloane* in two minutes.”

Gold looked at the recent Academy graduate at the conn station and struggled to remember his name. Finally, it came to him. “Wong, position report.”

Wong turned to face his captain. He didn’t look old enough to shave. “Holding position at thirty thousand kilometers from the relay, sir.”

Turning to the redheaded Bajoran at ops, Gold asked, “Ina, what would be the effect of extending shields around the relay?”

Ina ran her fingers over her console, then said, “Shields’ effectiveness would be reduced to sixty-five percent.”

Damn. If these were just the Cardassians, that might be enough, but Jem’Hadar ships were just too damned powerful to go in with that much reduced shield effectiveness. “So much for that idea. Wong, keep your fingers nimble. We have to keep that relay intact, clear?”

“Crystal, sir.”

“Good.”

“Appalachiato da Vinci.”

Gold had been expecting to hear from either Don Walsh or Ahmed al-Rashid before long. I guess Ahmed won the coin toss. “Go ahead, Appalachia.”

“We shall do our best to keep the enemy at bay, David. How soon will your team be finished?”

In response, McAllan said, “Sir, Commander Salek is signaling for beam-out.”

“There’s your answer, Ahmed. We’ll hold position, try to keep the relay in one piece.”

“Excellent. It would be more so with a Sovereign-class vessel or two at our backs, but we must make do with what we are granted.”

“Sad, but true. Go get ’em, Ahmed. We’ll watch your back. Da Vinci out. McAllan, lower shields.” He opened an intercom channel, then. “Transporter room, get the away team back here.”

“Aye, sir,” Feliciano said.

“McAllan, get the shields back up as soon as they’ve materialized, and put the tactical display on the main viewer.”

The screen changed from a view of the comm relay to a computer-generated overview of the battle arena. On the left-hand side of the screen, the two Steamrunner-class ships. Coming in on the right-hand side, two Cardassians and one Jem’Hadar. And at the bottom, the communications relay and the Da Vinci itself. Small text next to each vessel indicated the status of each ship—shields, weapons, life support, etc.

Here we go, Gold thought, forcing himself to sit up straight.

As the first exchange of phaser fire among the combatants began, Gold wondered how long this would go on. Over his five decades in Starfleet, he’d seen plenty of combat, but nothing like what he’d had to endure against the Dominion.

One of the Cardassian ships was trying to maneuver around toward the comm relay, but Appalachia cut them off, taking quite a few hits into the bargain.

Gold’s most fervent desire, of course, was to die in bed, surrounded by as many of his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren as were still alive and could fit in the room. However, he knew that such a fate was not terrifically likely—and had become somewhat less likely since the likes of the Borg and the Dominion came along, not to mention those skirmishes with the Klingons during the year and a half that the alliance with the Empire broke down. It was, in fact, during that eighteen-month period that Gold had seriously considered turning in his combadge for good. One of his oldest, dearest friends, Captain Mairin ni Bhroanin of the Starship Huygens, had been killed in action against the Klingons, and he told his wife, Rabbi Rachel Gilman, that he was considering retirement.

The Appalachia let loose with a phaser barrage on one of the Cardassian ships. “The Appalachia’s penetrated their shields,” McAllan reported. “Hull breach.”

Ina added, “Jem’Hadar moving in on Appalachia’s position.”

“C’mon, Ahmed, move your tuchis,” Gold muttered.

Ironically, given that she would be the greatest beneficiary of having her husband home on a permanent

basis, it was Rachel who had talked him out of retiring. Probably, he thought ruefully, because she saw how miserable I was when I was assigned to Earth. After Gold's first command, the *Schiaparelli*, was decommissioned, he requested an administrative post on Earth in order to be near his family. That lasted about six months.

"You belong in space," Rachel had said at Mairin's funeral.

"I belong with my family."

"You'll always belong with your family, but for now you also belong in space. Someday, it'll just be the one. Then you come home."

Ina interrupted Gold's reverie. "One of the Cardassian ships is moving in on our position."

"Steady, Wong," Gold said. "Keep us between the Cardassians and the relay."

Luckily, Gold's continued ability to survive to retirement was aided by Starfleet's decision to give the S.C.E. a better class of ship. For a long time, the S.C.E. had only the use of half-refitted decommissioned ships, held together with little more than selfsealing stembolts and happy thoughts. Later, they were given more current vessels, but still very much bottom-of-the-line. With Starfleet's recent focus on ships better able to defend themselves, prompted by the *Enterprise*'s encounter with the Borg nine years earlier, Starfleet had set aside four of their newest ships—the *Saber* class, intended mainly as a small, maneuverable combat vessel—for the S.C.E.'s use, knowing that sometimes they would need to do more than just crawl around alien wrecks.

Like right now, Gold thought irritably as Cardassian phasers plowed into the *Vinci*'s shields. "Return fire, full phasers!"

"Firing," McAllan said.

"Ready quantum torpedoes, fire on my mark."

Ina said, "Sloane firing on the Cardassians—they're moving off."

"Phaser fire ineffective," McAllan said.

"Fire torpedoes." Gold clenched his left hand.

"Firing."

"Sloane is continuing to fire," Ina added.

McAllan sounded a bit more triumphant as he said, "Cardassian shields are down!"

The *Sloane*'s phaser fire combined with the *Vinci*'s torpedoes to destroy the Cardassian ship.

Gold took no joy in the destruction of the Cardassian vessel. He wouldn't have done a single thing differently given the chance—the Federation was at war, after all—but he saw no reason to take any pleasure in death. One of the reasons why he jumped at the assignment to the S.C.E. when Admiral Sitak offered it to him was that the Corps of Engineers' purpose was to fix things.

So why do we always wind up in the position of destructor?

He put aside such philosophical musings, as they were pointless in times of war, and focused on the tactical display. Again, he clenched his left fist—theAppalachia had suffered considerable damage, though they'd also done likewise to the other Cardassian ship.

Most depressing was the display that indicated a total lack of significant damage to the Jem'Hadar, who were the more worrisome of their foes.

“Hold position, Wong. And let's hope Don and Ahmed can keep this up....”

* * *

Fabian sat on his bunk in the incredibly dull quarters that he shared with Chan Okha. The linguist himself sat on his own bunk, reading a padd. Fabian had made three attempts to start a conversation, which were met with one-word answers.

I need to do something.

He went over to the computer terminal on the small desk near his bunk. The quarters were slightly larger than the cabins on theDefiant, but only slightly, and at least he hadn't had to live permanently there—his quarters were on Deep Space 9. Living full-time in these cramped confines was going to be more of a challenge.

Calling up the tactical display from the bridge, he saw that the battle was going decently, but not great. TheTheda Vinci was still in one piece, as were the Jem'Hadar, but the other four were taking a beating.

Looking over the field, as it were, it was obvious that the twoSteamrunner s were an even match for the twoGalor s.No, make that one Galor, he thought as a combination ofda Vinci torpedoes andSloane phasers took out a Cardassian vessel. But still, theAppalachia had taken a massive pounding, and wasn't going to be a player in the fight for much longer.

And in an even fight, we don't stand a snowball's chance in hell against a Jem'Hadar ship. Which means we have to even the odds a bit. Do something to modify the weapons or improve the shield frequency, or use something—

Fabian smiled.Or use a weapon they don't know we have.

Standard procedure notwithstanding, Fabian headed to the doors to his quarters.

“Where you going?” Okha asked.

“Lab. Want to try something.”

Okha shrugged. “Your funeral.”

“That's what I'm trying to avoid,” Fabian said as he walked through the doors.

He got to the lab door and saw Drew and one other security guard standing outside the door. Fabian started mentally rehearsing how he was going to justify his presence at the lab.

However, upon seeing him, Drew simply said, “Figured I’d see you here before too long. The Bynars and Commander Duffy are already in there.”

“Ah.”

Drew smiled a knowing smile. “You were expecting me to give you a hard time and say that the lab was off-limits while we were at red alert, right?”

Fabian smiled sheepishly. “Yeah, kinda.”

“Only way to enforce that on this ship is to stick all of you in the brig until the red alert’s over. Mind you, Core-Breach probably considered that....”

Laughing, Fabian said, “I believe it.”

He entered to see, as Drew had indicated, 110, 111, and Duffy standing around the golf ball.

Duffy looked up. “Ah, the new guy joins us. Couldn’t keep away from the gizmo, huh, Fabe?”

“Fraid not, Commander. Besides, I just checked in with the bridge.”

Growing more sober, Duffy said, “Yeah, I know. Salek’s up there now, giving the captain a hand. I thought I’d be more use down here.”

“If we can get this thing to work for us, we might be able to use it on the Jem’Hadar.”

Grinning, Duffy said, “That’s what I was hoping, too. Great minds think alike.”

“And so do ours,” Fabian said, without missing a beat.

As one, 110 and 111 looked up at the two humans. “We believe that—”

“—we have come up with a way—”

“—to defend our computers—”

“—against the virus.”

“Well, that’s good news,” Duffy said.

“We will program the virus protection—”

“—into theda Vinci computer now.”

“This protection will need—”

“—to be programmed into all—”

“—Federation and allied computers.”

Duffy nodded. “Good work, guys. Get to it.” He turned to Fabian. “Meantime, we’ll see what we can

do about getting the hang of our golf game.”

Fabian smiled. “Let’s play through...”

* * *

“Shields down to forty percent.”

Salek stood next to McAllan at the tactical station. “Damage control teams, report to deck six.”

Gold pounded a fist on the command chair. The second Cardassian ship and the Appalachia had both been destroyed. He muttered a quick Kaddish for Captain al-Rashid, and wondered if he’d live to give Fayah and their children the bad news in person.

The Sloane was limping along with no shields, weapons, or communications capacity, very little power, and life signs indicating that a quarter of the crew were dead. Gold hoped that Captain Walsh was one of those still living, if for no other reason than that Don still owed Gold a rematch for that chess game Gold lost last year at Starbase 96.

Amazing the things you think of under pressure.

“Captain, we cannot continue to trade blows with the Jem’Hadar.”

Gold sighed at Salek’s statement of the obvious. “Have we done any damage?”

“Their shields are down to sixty-five percent,” McAllan said. “Another hit, sir—our shields are at ten percent.”

One more minute and I have to abandon to the comm relay.

“Duffy to bridge. Captain, we’ve been able to gain control of the golf ball.”

Smiling, Gold remembered why Starfleet engineers had reputations as miracle workers. “Can we use it on the Jem’Hadar?”

“Definitely, sir. We can deploy it through the cargo bay. Stevens rigged a tricorder that can feed it instructions. The weapons’ll plow through their shields, and then we can hit ’em with the virus.”

“I find it difficult to believe,” Salek said, “that the Jem’Hadar would not have a defense against their own computer virus.”

“Sir, 110 and 111 think they can make it work for us. And even if they can’t, we’ll only need a few seconds of distraction to keep them from defending themselves.”

Another shot from the Jem’Hadar hit. “Shields are gone,” McAllan said.

“We’re out of options,” Gold said. “Get going, Duffy.”

“Yes, sir.”

Salek said, “McAllan, prepare all remaining torpedoes. Fire them when Duffy and Stevens deploy the

weapon.”

“Jem’Hadar coming in for another pass,” Ina said.

Tapping his combadge, Gold said, “Now would be good, Duffy.”

“Give us a sec, sir. We’re just getting into the cargo bay now.”

Gold then said the words he’d been unable to say until now, but he had no choice. “Wong, evasive, pattern alpha, full impulse.” They couldn’t protect the comm relay if they were vulnerable. He just had to gamble that the Jem’Hadar would pursue the *Vinci* and attempt to finish them off before going after the relay.

That gamble, at least, paid off. “Jem’Hadar in pursuit,” Ina said.

“We’re ready to go,” Duffy said.

Salek said, “Fire torpedoes.”

McAllan fired the torpedoes, a combination of photon and quantum, which managed to do a certain amount of damage to the Jem’Hadar’s shields.

One torpedo did not hit the Jem’Hadar, however—mainly because it wasn’t a torpedo, but Duffy’s “golf ball.” Energy weapons fired from the tiny projectile right at the Jem’Hadar.

“Enemy shields are down,” McAllan said, sounding surprised.

“Their power signature is decreasing rapidly,” Salek added, “well out of proportion to the damage they have taken. Logic would dictate that the computer virus has infected them—and that same logic would suggest that we finish what it is starting. McAllan, fire phasers.”

“Yes, sir.”

A moment later, the Jem’Hadar ship exploded, the victim of the *Vinci* phasers.

The bridge was silent for several seconds.

“Sir,” McAllan said, breaking the silence, “we’re being hailed by the *Sloane*. I guess they got their comms working.”

“Put it through.”

“Nice job, David.”

“Good to hear your voice, Don.”

“Good to be heard. I don’t know what kind of magic your S.C.E. people worked, but I’m grateful.”

“I just wish we could’ve pulled the rabbit out of our hat before we lost Ahmed and his people.”

“Yeah, me, too. In any case, we’re gonna need a tow.”

With any other crew, Gold would have thought Walsh was crazy to think that a Saber -class ship could tow a much larger Steamrunner -class vessel.

With this crew, however, Gold just smiled and said, “We’ll get right on it. Gold out.” He turned to Salek. “Good work, Salek—and a big mazel tov to 110, 111, and the two new folks. Blue’s unique abilities got the relay fixed fast, and from the sounds of it, Stevens was a big help with Duffy.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

“Now let’s see what we can do about the Sloane. . . .”

Androssi Vessel Overseen by Biron

STARDATE 53679.3

Biron finished reading of the U.S.S. da Vinci’s retrieval and usage of the Dominion mobile weapon and was, despite himself, impressed. Once again, the crew of that ship had improvised and managed to defeat a demonstrably superior foe in the Jem’Hadar.

Just as they had twice defeated Biron, also a demonstrably superior foe.

He read the remainder of the log entries, including the account of the deaths of Commander Salek and Dr. Chan Okha. It had, he decided, been worth the expenditure of time to obtain these log entries. He had learned much about the crew of this vessel in his perusals: psychological susceptibility to the ravages of combat; inappropriate grieving over the deaths of lesser beings; relationships between workers and officers; all of these and more were vulnerabilities that Biron could exploit.

He made several notes as to courses of action he could take that would cripple the crew of the U.S.S. da Vinci and prevent them from interfering with his proper duties ever again.

The first thing he needed to do was ascertain the location of Dr. Tydoan. The former chief medical officer for the U.S.S. da Vinci had resigned from service in Starfleet after the cessation of hostilities with the Dominion. Biron did not possess any record of his activity following his resignation, since such records were beyond the purview of what he had originally requested from the now-deceased Yridian.

“Attention, Overseer. We have received a subspace communication from the sponsor. It requires your immediate attention.”

The voice was Sub-Overseer Howwi’s. All thoughts of petty revenge against the crew of the U.S.S. da Vinci fled Biron’s mind temporarily. His primary duty—indeed, his only duty—was to his Elite sponsor. A communication from him took precedence over anything else. Biron would locate Dr. Tydoan at a later date.

However, the time would eventually come when the opportunity to take revenge on Captain David Gold, Commander Sonya Gomez, Lt. Commander Kieran Duffy, and the rest of the crew of the U.S.S. da Vinci would present itself.

Biron found himself looking forward to that time with somewhat inappropriate, yet rather enjoyable anticipation.

About the Author

The codeveloper of *Star Trek: S.C.E.*, KEITH R.A. DECANDIDO has written or cowritten five previous eBooks in the series, including the award-winning stories *Fatal Error* and *Cold Fusion*, as well as the two-book *Invincible* (with David Mack) and the *Gateways* tie-in *Here There Be Monsters*. He also wrote the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* novel *Diplomatic Implausibility*, the *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* novel *Demons of Air and Darkness*, the cross-series duology *The Brave & the Bold*, the TNG comic book *Perchance to Dream*, and the DS9 novella “Horn and Ivory.” The year 2003 will see the debut of *Star Trek: I.K.S. Gorkon*, a series that is the first to feature the Klingons in a starring role, as well as a contribution to the *Star Trek: The Lost Era* miniseries, and more *S.C.E.* eBooks. In addition to all of this, Keith has written novels, short stories, and nonfiction books in the universes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Doctor Who*, *Farscape*, Gene Roddenberry’s *Andromeda*, *Marvel Comics*, *Xena*, and much more. He is the editor of the original science fiction anthology *Imaginings* and the author of the upcoming novel *Dragon Precinct*, which mixes high fantasy with police procedurals. Find out evil rumors about him by checking his official Web site at DeCandido.net, and start a few by joining his official fan club at www.kradfanclub.com. He has long since abandoned the outmoded notion of “sleep.”

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by David Mack

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