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# STAR TREK™

## S.C.E.

### #28

## BREAKDOWNS

Keith R.A. DeCandido



**POCKET BOOKS**

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Dedicated to the memory of Uncle Cal  
and Cousin Calvin

## Chapter

# 1

“It is the opinion of this tribunal, after careful investigation of the events at Galvan VI, that neither Captain David Gold nor any member of the crew of the U.S.S. *da Vinci* is in any way culpable for the deaths of twenty-three members of the ship’s complement, and that those deaths, while tragic and most lamentable, were in the line of duty. Starfleet considers this matter officially closed.” Admiral William Ross looked down from the dais at David Gold. “You’re free to return to duty, Captain.”

Gold, who was standing before the raised wooden platform in Starfleet Headquarters in San Francisco, said, “Thank you, Admiral.”

Sitting between Ross and Captain Montgomery Scott, Admiral Sitak said calmly, “These proceedings have concluded. Dismissed.” He then clanged the bell on the dais once.

The declaration and the bell were both formalities. There was no one present besides the three line officers and Gold himself, the former sitting behind the raised wooden desk and in front of the large blue-and-white Federation flag. Gold had requested that the session be private. He saw no reason for the rest of the surviving crew of the *da Vinci* to sit through this, nor did he feel spectators were appropriate. As captain, it was his responsibility and his alone—if any punishment were to be meted out, he would be the only one to accept it. The rest of them have been through enough.

Both Ross and Sitak rose and departed the room quickly, but Scotty approached Gold, who hadn’t moved despite his dismissal. “Are y’all right, David?” the older man asked solemnly.

“No. For starters, I’m still getting used to this thing.” He held up the biosynthetic left hand that replaced his original, lost—along with so much else—at Galvan VI. “It looks and behaves just like the

original—hell, it even has that liver spot on my knuckle—but it feels wrong.” Gold let out a long sigh. “And then there’s the whole matter of half my crew’s being dead.”

Scotty put a hand on Gold’s shoulder. “David, lad, you cannot blame yourself.”

“Someone else I should blame? I’m the captain, Scotty. You know as well as I do where that particular buck stops.” He shook his head. “If I’d just done something different—”

Waving an admonishing index finger at Gold, Scotty said, “None of that, now. You start playin’ ‘what if’ games, and you’ll run around in circles till Doomsday.”

“I know, I know, but if I hadn’t moved the *Vinci* closer to the *Orion* maybe—”

“Maybe the *Orion* would’ve hit the *Vinci* at such an angle that it would have ripped your ship in twain and you’d all be dead instead of just twenty-three of you.”

Gold fixed Scotty with an incredulous look. “You can’t assume that.”

“You’re right, I can’t. So why’re you?” Scotty asked.

Closing his eyes, Gold said, “I can’t believe I fell for that. I must be getting old.”

“No, you’re tired. And I don’t blame you. Come on, lad, I’ll walk you out.”

Scotty led Gold out of the hearing room. As they proceeded down the corridor, the old engineer said, “I recall something Dr. McCoy said once. Some young person asked him what he thought about death. Leonard looked him right in the eye and said, ‘I’m against it.’”

Despite himself, Gold smiled. He had only met the aged Admiral McCoy a few times, most recently when the *Vinci* brought the old *Constitution*-class U.S.S. *Defiant* home, but that certainly sounded like something he’d say. “Can’t say I disagree.” The smile fell. “Truth be told, I’m tired of it. One of my oldest friends died in a skirmish with the Klingons a few years back. I seriously thought about retiring then. Rachel talked me out of it—but things haven’t gotten any better. Salek and Okha died during the war, and 111 died right after it. My son Nate and his wife died when the *Dominion* took *Betazed*. A couple months ago, I was reunited with Gus Bradford just long enough to watch him die. And now this.”

“Times like this,” Scotty said, “I think about Matt Franklin. Good lad, Franklin. Young ensign in *Starfleet*, fine engineer, had a good career ahead of him. He was assigned to the *Jenolen* a few weeks before that ship was asked to escort some old relic to his retirement at the *Norpin Colony*.”

Gold saw where this was going, but also knew better than to interrupt Scotty in mid-story.

“After the ship crashed, he and I were the only survivors. We worked out a way to preserve ourselves in the transporter buffer so as to not be usin’ up all the life support. It almost worked.”

“The fact that you’re telling me this story means it did work,” Gold said.

“I am. Franklin isn’t. He didn’t make it. His pattern degraded. Perhaps we could’ve done somethin’ different. But we didn’t, and Franklin died. A young man, his whole life ahead of him, doesn’t live, while the old man on his way to retire does.”

“You’re saying I shouldn’t let this bring me down?”

They arrived at the large entryway to Starfleet HQ. “I’m sayin’ that life goes on, until it stops. Nothin’ we can do about it, except to keep livin’. Until we stop.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Gold said as the massive double doors parted, and the captain felt the cool breeze of a typically pleasant San Francisco afternoon brush against his face.

“Abouttime you got out of there.”

Gold blinked. He looked at the front steps leading up to HQ’s entrance to see his oldest son Daniel and his wife, Jessica Silver, getting up from where they’d been sitting on the staircase. They were munching on sandwiches—pastrami on rye bread, from the looks of it, which meant they’d been sent with a care package from Rachel—but moved to greet Gold and Scotty as they came through the doors.

Daniel—a tall, broad-shouldered man who had inherited his mother’s brown eyes, his father’s brown-gone-white-too-damn-fast hair, but was otherwise the spitting image of his uncle Adam, Gold’s giant of a brother—clasped his father in a warm embrace. “It’s good to see you, Pop.”

Gold sighed. “Don’t call me ‘Pop,’ son.”

Breaking the embrace and grinning widely, Daniel said, “Don’t call me ‘son,’ Pop.”

“You know,” Jessica said, with a grin as wide as her husband’s, “that routine wasn’t funny the first eight thousand times, either.”

“Like that’s ever stopped anyone in this family,” Gold said as he hugged his daughter-in-law. As short as Daniel was tall, Jessica’s beautiful hair, which now matched her last name, was tied in a simple ponytail that stretched to the middle of her back. Usually she had it tied up in so elaborate a fashion that Gold wondered why she didn’t just cut it and be done with it. As usual, she wore her massive gold hoop earrings with a Spican flame gem dangling inside the hoop. Daniel always said that her green eyes glowed more than the flame gems, and her smile glowed more than her eyes.

“You remember Montgomery Scott,” Gold said quickly, indicating the captain.

“Of course,” Daniel said. “It’s good to see you again, Captain.”

“Ach, it’s ‘Scotty,’ like I told you last time. Has your mother tried the haggis recipe I gave her?”

Daniel and Jessica exchanged a nervous glance. Gold had to restrain himself from a chuckle. Scotty had gone to the house for dinner a few months back. Afterward, Scotty had asked Gold if his wife, Rachel Gilman—one of the finest cooks on the East Coast—had ever made haggis. Gold had thought Scotty was joking at the time. As if Rachel would ever let that in her kitchen. . .

“Not yet,” Daniel said slowly.

Scotty laughed, which seemed to relieve the tension. “No surprise there.” Sighing overdramatically, he added, “’Tis an uphill battle, bringing the joys of fine cuisine to the heathens o’ the galaxy.”

In a mock aside, Gold said, “This from a man who drinks liquid peat bog—on purpose.”

Letting out a mock-indignant snort, Scotty said, “I’ll leave you to it, lads—and lass. David, I’ll be in touch. We’ll speak in a few days about the da Vinci repairs and, ah, personnel matters.”

“Of course.” That was a duty he was not looking forward to, but needed to be addressed sooner or later. Luckily, the da Vinci’s extensive repair schedule—the ship was all but being rebuilt from scratch—meant it could be later. Still, at some point, twenty-three positions needed to be filled. Probably more than that, Gold thought solemnly. A disaster like this almost certainly meant that some crew members might be transferring or leaving Starfleet altogether.

Possibly even the CO. The thought came unbidden, and Gold banished it back to whatever nether region of his brain hatched it. Now was not the time to be making decisions like this.

He looked at his oldest son. Now is the time for family.

\* \* \*

The house was built in the Riverdale section of the peninsula known as the Bronx—the northernmost part of New York City—sometime in the twentieth century. A two-story dwelling surrounded by a large yard bordered on all sides by a thick privet hedge, the house had been the home of Captain David Gold and Rabbi Rachel Gilman for five decades.

Gold had seen an image of the house that was taken from an old-style photograph, circa 1990 or so on the old calendar, and it didn’t look any different now than it did four hundred years ago. Gold knew better, though—in fact, none of the original material used to construct the house was present in the current building, as the march of technology had allowed every aspect of the dwelling’s structure to be replaced with something superior. When she was a particularly inquisitive teenager, Gold’s daughter Eden had asked if that meant it was truly the same house that was constructed four hundred years earlier.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Gold had said then, “but it’s the same home.”

When the Starfleet transporter deposited Gold, Daniel, and Jessica on the front lawn of the house, next to the massive dogwood that Gold planted as a sapling the day they moved in fifty years ago, his first thought was, I’ve been away too long.

Whatever his second thought might have been was lost to the impact of over sixty pounds of golden retriever on his chest. Gold had, of course, braced himself—no one entered the front lawn without being greeted by Freser—so he was only forced to stumble backward a step or two while Freser rested his front paws on Gold’s shoulder and proceeded to welcome him home by making sure that no part of his face remained unlicked.

Scratching the retriever behind his ears, Gold laughed between face-licks. It was the first true laugh he had allowed himself since the da Vinci got the summons to Galvan VI. “Yes, Freser, Daddy’s home.”

Frederick barked his approval at this state of affairs, and finally got back down on all fours. However, he continued to run in a circle around Gold, even as he, Daniel, and Jessica approached the front door.

“Got another surprise or two for you inside,” Daniel said.

Gold raised an eyebrow. “Son, Freser trying to knock me to the ground isn’t a surprise, it’s an inevitability.”

“Fair enough.” Daniel opened the front door. “But still...”

The first thing that hit David Gold when the door opened was the smell. The kitchen was all the way on the other side of the house from the front door, but there was no containing the olfactory smorgasbord of Rachel Gilman’s cooking, especially when she was making one of her patented feasts. From the competing delightful odors of fish, chicken, beef, assorted sauces and soups, and freshchallah bread, she had made enough to feed all of Starfleet. That, in itself, was not an indicator of the number of people present in the house—it only took having two nonresidents over to prompt Rachel to cook enough to feed an army—but, Gold soon realized, that the number was fairly high.

For the second thing he noticed was that the massive living room was packed full of family. The first one he noticed was his five-year-old great-grandson Tujiro crying out, “Hi-Ojiisan!” and running straight at Gold’s leg with as much enthusiasm as Freser had.

He looked around and took all the faces in—many of them slightly altered versions of his own and Rachel’s faces. Daniel’s youngest son (and Tujiro’s father) Michael, and his wife Hiroko, sat on the couch, along with Nate and Elaine’s girls Danielle Hirsch and Simone Meyer—their respective husbands, Ira Hirsch and Jared Meyer, stood behind them. Gold’s pregnant granddaughter Ruth Graylock, looking ready to have the baby at any millisecond, sat in the big, comfortable chair, with her husband Rinic Kayven sitting on the arm, and their boy, little Rinic David Kayven—no longer so little, he was almost as tall as Ruth now—sitting on the floor at her feet. Standing behind the chair was—

My God, it’s Eden.

Eden Gilman and her husband, Robert Graylock, stood holding hands, and smiling as goofily as everyone else was at his entrance. He’d seen his oldest daughter maybe three times in the past twenty years, and she hadn’t, to his knowledge, set foot in the house in at least a decade. He’d last seen her only a few months ago, at the memorial on Betazed for Nate and Elaine.

“Welcome home, Pop-Pop.”

“Good to see you, Dad.”

“About time you got here!”

“How long you gonna stand there with your mouth hanging open, Grandpa?”

“I bet he catches flies!”

“Hush, Rinic!”

Gold shook his head. “My—my goodness.”

Daniel leaned down to whisper in his father’s ear, “Told you, Pop.”

A voice came booming from the staircase to Gold’s left. “At last, the House head returns! Perhaps now we may feast!”

Gold turned to see a tall Klingon dressed in a long, dark green cassock decorated with several medals. Barely visible behind him was a small woman who had inherited her mother’s glowing green eyes and her grandmother’s firm jaw: Daniel’s youngest daughter, Esther. The man was her newbeau —what’s the



Klingon word? Oh yes, “*parmachkai*”—Khor, son of Lantar. Briefly, Gold wondered how Freser had reacted to Khor—and how Khor had reacted to Freser. Since both Klingon and canine were in one piece, Gold assumed that the meeting went well—or Esther sensibly had the two avoid each other altogether.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you here,” Gold said, surprised. “In fact, I wasn’t expecting to see any of you here. This is—” He wiped away the tears that welled up in his eyes. “This is wonderful. Thank you all for coming.”

Then a whiff of matzo-ball soup caught him. “I’ll be right back,” Gold said, and made a beeline for the kitchen.

No one moved to stop him. They knew better.

Gold almost hesitated before crossing the threshold into the kitchen, wanting to hold the moment of anticipation.

He first met Rachel Gilman at the track at Starfleet Academy. Gold, a champion runner in his day, was part of the Academy track team that was facing off against the team from Columbia University, an institution in New York City that Rachel was attending as an undergraduate, and for which she was also a champion runner. Finding the young student with the curly, light brown hair, almond-shaped brown eyes, distinct cheekbones, and snub nose to be rather attractive, Gold had gone over to talk to her. She had expressed sympathy on his team’s upcoming loss, and he had laughed. “We haven’t lost yet,” he had said.

“Until now.” She had said it with complete certainty. There had been no doubt in her mind.

So Gold had made a wager that his team would win hands down. She had accepted, but only on these terms: The loser had to make dinner for the other—from scratch. A product of the replicator age, Gold didn’t know how to boil water, but he had been sufficiently confident to make the bet anyhow.

After Columbia’s upset victory, Gold had made an attempt to cook a meal, which resulted in the entire dormitory’s being evacuated for what was initially believed to be a chemical explosion. As they stood outside the dorm while Security put out the fire, she had looked at him with her brown eyes and the expression that was somehow half-smile and half-frown, and said, “Next time maybe you’ll listen to me?”

A week later, she cooked him dinner, ruining him for replicated food for the rest of his life. A year later, they were married. Two years later, he went off to his first posting on the *Gettysburg*, and Rachel became a rabbi and started teaching. Three years later, they moved into this house. And fifty-two years later, he had yet to have cause not to listen to her.

Now he entered the kitchen, which had been remodeled to her exact specifications fifty years ago, and modified regularly ever since. Every type of cooking appliance available—and a few that weren’t—had a place in this kitchen, down to a wood-burning stove, which she rarely used (but oh, when she did!). She stood over a pot of soup, stirring it with one hand, even as she added a few spices to another pot with her other hand.

Rachel Gilman’s hair was still just as curly, though it had as much gray as brown now. Her brown eyes now had crow’s-feet, and her magnificent cheekbones were less pronounced.

She was more beautiful than ever.

As always, she looked at him, gave him that same half-smile, half-frown she'd first given him outside the smoke-filled dorm room, and said, "You're home."

As always, he smiled, and said, "I'm home."

He could tell that she saw the joy he felt at seeing his family, and that she also saw the great sorrow right behind that at what had happened at Galvan VI. Without saying a word, she reassured him that they would talk about it later, for as long as he wanted, but that for now he should just take joy in being with his family.

"You have five minutes to get out of that uniform and into some proper clothes."

"I forgot to bring my dress uniform."

She held up the wooden spoon threateningly. "Don't make me have to kill you, Captain. Go change."

"Yes, ma'am." He turned to leave, then turned back. "How'd you get Eden and Bob to come?"

"I asked them."

Gold blinked. "And?"

"That's it, David. Sometimes it really is that simple."

Before he could reply to that, he heard Freser barking, followed by a distinctivewhoomp!

Turning to his wife, Gold asked, "Expecting anyone else?"

"Actually, no. You'd better go check." Rachel didn't sound too terribly concerned, so Gold didn't, either. It could have been one of the neighbors, or one of the children, of course.

He went back into the living room, just as Daniel was opening the front door. The rapid-fire pounding of small feet to his right heralded the arrival down the staircase of Anne Meyer and Ike and Jake Hirsch, Danielle and Simone's children. Now standing by the loveseat with Esther, Khor said, "It seems your guard animal has claimed another victim, Captain."

Maybe Esther didn't keep them apart, after all. That was a story for later, however. First, he needed to see who it was Freser had decked.

Gold moved to stand next to Daniel at the doorway. At first, all he could make out was the massive retriever, licking the form of some kind of humanoid lying on its back.

"He's gotten a lot bigger."

At the voice, Gold almost stumbled. Daniel steadied him just in case, but he looked just as surprised as Gold was. Then they both ran out, along with Jessica and Esther, Khor right behind them.

"Freser, disengage!" Khor said sharply.

To Gold's surprise, Freser immediately backed off the figure and ran back toward the privet hedge.

Definitely a story for later, Gold thought, since he'd never been able to get Freser to obey commands so readily, unless they involved food.

Thoughts about the Klingon's ability to bond with his dog retreated as soon as the figure sat upright, leaning against the ground with his elbows. "A lot bigger," he said.

His face was almost identical to Daniel's, only with a bigger nose, and his hair was still all brown.

"Joey?"

Gold hadn't even laid eyes on his third child in ages—since before he took command of the *Vinci*, certainly. He hadn't been able to make Nate and Elaine's funeral on Betazed, and father and son hadn't spoken in years.

Daniel quickly walked over and offered his younger brother a hand up. Joey took it, and Daniel pulled him up into a bear hug. "It's so good to see you again, kiddo."

Joey coughed, but returned the hug. "You're as bad as the damn dog, big guy."

After they broke the embrace, Joey looked at his father. "Hi, Dad. Heard you were home. Thought I'd drop by."

This time, Gold didn't bother to wipe away the tears as he hugged his son for the first time in far too long.

## Chapter 2

Sonya Gomez sat in the attic of her parents' house in Vieques, staring at a lump of clay.

The attic had been converted to a studio for her mother, Guadalupe Gomez, when they moved in thirty years ago. Sonya rarely came up here after the accident when she was ten years old that ruined one of her mother's most important commissions. In fact, that incident had led to rampant speculation as to the efficacy of Sonya's later chosen career as an engineer.

Now she stared at the clay, wondering if it were some kind of metaphor for the shapeless mess her life had become, or if she were just being too philosophical.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out the ring.

The only light in the attic came from the setting sun through the small window, but it reflected off the diamond, briefly blinding Sonya.

Damn you, Kieran.

Why did he have to propose? Why did he have to die right after he proposed? Why did Starfleet have to test their damn super-weapon on a planet with a life-form on it?

Sonya had gone to the memorial service Starfleet held for the entire crew of the *Orion* and the

twenty-three who died on the *Vinci* at Galvan VI. Aside from Ensign Tony Shabalala, who was still on bedrest after suffering severe burns, the survivors of the *Vinci* were all there. But Sonya didn't speak to any of them. She just sat stoically through all the speeches and ceremonies. In fact, she hadn't said a single word to any of her crewmates since Dr. Lense officially pronounced Kieran Duffy dead in the shuttle bay.

Least of all Gold.

Her thoughts already dark, they grew darker as she thought of David Gold, a man she had once admired, callously sending Kieran into the atmosphere of Galvan VI knowing full well it was a one-way trip, and then not even doing her—the first officer of the ship, never mind the fact that she and Kieran were lovers—the courtesy of telling her until it was far too late.

The service, held on the grounds of Starfleet Headquarters in San Francisco on a depressingly sunny day, had been a decent Starfleet ceremony. Admiral Ross delivered a eulogy that managed to be poignant despite its necessarily generic nature, given that he had to memorialize over two hundred people. In a touch Sonya would no doubt someday come to appreciate more than she was capable of doing right now, Captain Scott—in his dress uniform and kilt—played “Amazing Grace” on the bagpipes after the eulogy.

Throughout the service, all Sonya could think of was Kieran proposing, and her own indecision.

A squeaking sound followed by the slam of wood on wood heralded the opening of the trapdoor from the second floor of the house, light from the hallway streaming into the workshop in a V shape. A moment later, Sonya's older sister Belinda popped up into the attic like an old jack-in-the-box.

“Here you are. We were getting ready to send out a search party. Dinner's ready.”

“I'm not hungry.” Her voice sounded hollow to her own ears, but she found she didn't care enough to try to modify her tone.

Belinda climbed the rest of the way up the attic ladder and stood before her younger sister. Though they both shared the same hazel eyes, jet-black hair, and sharply defined cheekbones that, as their mother had put it, was the hallmark of the Gomez women, they were aside from that a study in contrasts. Sonya was short and lithe, where Belinda was tall and stocky. Sonya kept her hair long, where Belinda's remained close-cropped. Sonya's face was angular, Belinda's round. Plus, Belinda always wore bright primary colors—usually several at once—where Sonya tended toward more muted earth tones in her civilian garb. At present, Belinda wore a bright blue-and-white linen jacket over a red silk tank top and matching red linen pants. For her part, Sonya was dressed in a simple brown one-piece outfit, mostly because she couldn't be bothered to put any thought into what she was wearing—or, indeed, into much of anything else.

“You're already too skinny, *mija*. If you don't get downstairs and eat something, you're gonna waste away to nothing.”

Normally this was the part where Sonya would point out that she had only turned out so skinny because Belinda kept stealing her food when they were growing up, but she didn't have the energy to engage in the usual family banter.

“Just start without me, okay? I need to be alone.”

“Ess, you’ve been alone for a week now,” Belinda said. They’d been calling each other “Ess” and “Bee” since Sonya was a toddler and couldn’t pronounce her sister’s full name, so settled for the first letter. “Mamiandpapi might be willing to let you sit and sulk as long as you want, but I’m sick of it. I want my sister back, not this mopey—”

“I’m not in the mood, okay?”

Putting her hands on her hips, Belinda said, “No, it isn’t. This ain’t you, Ess. You don’t mope. I know you and this guy were close—”

“He proposed.”

Belinda’s entire face seemed to freeze. “What?”

Sonya pulled the ring back out. “He wanted to marry me. He proposed right before we went to Galvan VI. Then—then everything went to hell, and—”

“What did you say?”

“I didn’t say anything,” she muttered.

“What?”

“I never gave him an answer, Bee. And then he had to go on that damn suicide run, and I never told him and I never got to say that I loved him and I couldn’t say good-bye and—”

The words tumbled out of her mouth so fast she couldn’t keep up, and then, finally, she broke down. All the tears she had held in check since the *da Vinci* left the Galvan system burst forth.

She wasn’t sure when her sister pulled her into the hug, but she welcomed the embrace, sobs convulsing her as she took solace in her older sibling’s arms, her tears staining the blue-and-white jacket.

“I’m sorry,” Sonya finally said, leaning back so she could see Belinda’s face, but not quite breaking the embrace.

“You kidding?” Belinda grinned. “I’m ecstatic! This is the most emotion you’ve shown since you got here. I was starting to think you were replaced with an android or something. Doesn’t that happen to you Starfleet guys all the time, getting replaced with android duplicates?”

“Changelings more often these days,” Sonya said with a small smile, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

“Androids, changelings, sentient moss, whatever. I can never keep that stuff straight.”

“That’s why you didn’t last as a news reader.” Among Belinda’s many abortive attempts at a career was a stint as an onscreen anchor for the North American regional feed of the Federation News Service.

Drawing herself up in mock haughtiness, Belinda said, “I didn’t last as a news reader because I got tired of the office politics at the FNS.”

“That’s your story and you’re sticking to it, right, Bee?”

“Damn right, Ess.” She grinned again. “Damn, mija, it’s good to hear you talk like yourself again. I missed you.” She got up, pulling on Sonya’s arm. “Come on.”

Sonya resisted the tug. “I don’t really feel like dinner.” She hadn’t been able to stomach much food since Galvan VI.

“The hell with dinner, you and I are going to walk to Punta Mulas.” Before Sonya could object, Belinda added, “And I’m not taking no for an answer. If you won’t go, I’ll send mami and papi up here and they’ll eat in front of you.”

“I—I can’t. Not to Punta Mulas. Let’s go to the beach, instead.”

Belinda winced. “No, not the beach, Ess. There’s always tourists there, and they all want my autograph.”

Snorting, Sonya said, “What, there aren’t tourists at the lighthouse?”

“Not as many, and they’re too busy gaping at the lighthouse.”

“The beach, or I take my chances with mami and papi.”

Sighing overdramatically, Belinda said, “Fine, the beach, then, as long as I get you out of this damn attic!”

\* \* \*

The sand felt warm between Sonya’s toes as she and Belinda walked in companionable silence along Sun Bay Beach, each holding their shoes while they walked on the sand. Like the house, the beach was on the southern end of the island. Located just to the east of the main island of Puerto Rico, Vieques boasted several magnificent beaches, but Sun Bay was considered the finest, with its beautiful, crystal-clear water and tilted palm trees, providing just enough shade to keep the Caribbean sun from being too intolerable.

I always meant to take Kieran here, but we never got around to it. The only vacation they’d been able to take since they got back together again on the *Vinci* was that all-too-brief leave on Betazed between the Enigma Ship encounter and the construction of *Whiteflower*—the latter of which was cut off in order to answer the Orion’s distress call at Galvan VI. On Betazed, they had had a lovely picnic in a grassy park. Sonya didn’t think she could stand going to the similar park around the Punta Mulas lighthouse just at the moment. At least the beach didn’t have any specific connotations that might remind her of Kieran.

Belinda finally broke the silence. “This was the same guy you dated on the *Enterprise*, right?”

Sonya nodded. “It was going really well, too. I felt so—so good around him. It’s weird, when we dated on the *Enterprise*, it was always—nice, but nothing spectacular. After I went over to the *Oberth*, we didn’t see each other for years. I hardly ever thought about him—though when I did, I really missed him. Then I was assigned to the *Vinci*, and there he was. Same goofy smile, same good heart. But now I was his CO. I thought it was going to be hard, but then we went on our first mission together to Maeglin, dealing with the Androssi for the first time.”

“The Androssi?”

“Long story. Suffice it to say, we got out of it, barely. But Kieran and I worked perfectly together. It was like we were back on Geordi’s team on theEnterprise again. And then, after Sarindar...” She trailed off. Sonya hadn’t told the family about Sarindar.

Sure enough, Belinda asked, “What happened on Sarindar?”

“A lot.” She shook her head. “It’s funny, I’ve faced death almost every day since I joined Starfleet. Each posting I served at had an element of risk—on theSentinel, we were on the front lines of the war half the time—but it wasn’t until Sarindar that I actually felt like I was going todie. It was after that that Kieran and I started getting serious again. It was wonderful—and the work was better, too.” Sonya stopped walking right in front of one of the angled palm trees, bent from years of being blown by tropical winds. “We made a good team, onand off duty. And then...” She leaned back against the tree, the breeze blowing through her curly black hair.

“He proposed.”

Nodding, Sonya repeated, “He proposed. And you know what’s driving me craziest, Bee? I don’t know what my answer was going to be.”

That caused Belinda’s hazel eyes to go wide, and her jaw to fall open, her mouth in an O. “You didn’t know? You couldn’t make a decision?”

“No, I couldn’t. What’s the big deal?” Sonya asked, confused by her sister’s shock.

“Ess, this isyou we’re talking about.”

“I know that.”

Belinda shook her head. “Remember when you were six and you wanted a cat, andpapi said that you could only have one if you helped him convert the attic tomami ’s studio? Every day, after school, you helpedpapi out, doing everything you could, because you wanted that damn cat.”

Sonya smiled at the memory of Blanco, the gorgeous white Persian they’d gotten when Sonya turned seven. Blanco wound up staying with Belinda after Sonya went to the Academy, finally dying at the ripe old age of twenty-three a few years ago.

“Remember when you were ten and you said, ‘I’m gonna join Starfleet and be an engineer’?”

“Vaguely.” She wasn’t sure that it was when she was ten, but she knew that she’d had the urge to join Starfleet since she was a little girl.

“You spent the next eight years living, eating, breathing, and sleeping Starfleet’s entrance exams. You did everything you could to guarantee, not only that you’d get in, but that you’d be at the top of your class. So when you announced in your third year that you were going to be posted to theEnterprise just like your friend Lian was, we all knew that was where you were gonna wind up.” Belinda frowned. “What is it?”

“Sorry,” Sonya said in a small voice. She had flinched at the mention of Lian T’su, a year ahead of Sonya at the Academy and one of the first friends she had made there, who had gone on from her posting on theEnterprise as an ensign to a fine career culminating in the captaincy of theOrion —and a nasty death at Galvan VI.

Belinda went on. “I don’t think you ever met a decision you didn’t like—and didn’t stick with. I wasn’t surprised you made chief engineer so fast, or that you were so good at it. You were meant to command.” She grinned. “Not like your bratty older sister.”

At that, Sonya smiled. Besides her brief time in front of the camera as an FNS anchor, Belinda had been, at various times in the last decade and a half, a sculptor like her mother, or, rather, not like her mother, as she was awful at it; a soccer player, until a knee injury forced her out of professional play; a deep-sea diver; an actor; a transporter technician; and now a soccer coach.

“But you’ve always been the one to jump in feetfirst, to make a decision and stick to it. So what happened?”

Sonya shook her head. The sand suddenly felt cold between her toes. “I don’t know.”

## Chapter 3

The meal was, of course, spectacular.

By the third course, everyone in the Gold-Gilman house was stuffed beyond reason. Then the aroma of the roast chicken hit, and they suddenly had room for just a little bit more.

Rachel assured everyone as they each gamely took one more bite of food they were not convinced they’d be able to fit that there was plenty more in the kitchen, as she always did.

Gold found himself sitting quietly at the head of the table, listening to the family talk. Nobody broached the subject of Starfleet or the da Vinci or Galvan VI. Instead Daniel talked about his and Jessica’s new job jointly supervising the maintenance of orbital habitats. Simone went on at some length about Anne’s accomplishments at school, to the latter’s great embarrassment. This prompted Michael to wax similarly rhapsodic about Tujiro, and soon everyone was talking about how wonderful their children were, which led to Ruth pretending to be aghast at the high expectations her soon-to-be-born daughter would have to live up to. This in turn led to everyone wondering what the girl’s name would be, which Ruth refused to answer—so everyone decided to ask Rinic, who was even more stoic.

God, I missed this, Gold thought, as even Khor got into the act, telling everyone what he was doing on Earth (some kind of errand for the Klingon High Council that involved talking to some Federation councillors).

After dessert—Rachel’s famous cream puffs, which somehow everyone found room for—Khor, Esther, Eden, and Bob all said they had to leave.

The latter two had hardly spoken during the meal, and Gold protested, “Princess, we’ve barely had the chance to—”

“Dad, I’m not your princess,” Eden said gently. “I’m a grown woman with a life of my own. It was nice to visit, but we need to get back home to Montréal.”

It wasn’t until after they had said their good-byes that Gold realized that he had had no idea that Eden



and Bob were living in Montréal now.

“And where are you two going?” Rachel asked Esther and Khor. “I know you gave up your apartment when you decided to go meandering around the galaxy,” she said to Esther, “so I know for a fact you don’t have a place to stay.”

“We will be residing in the Klingon Embassy in Paris,” Khor said firmly.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re staying here.”

Rachel spoke in the tone that Gold knew would brook no argument. Gold stole a glance at Esther, who looked amused, obviously knowing that the Klingon didn’t stand a chance.

“With all due respect, Rabbi Gilman, while we have found your hospitality to be excellent, it is not fit—”

Rachel hit the Klingon councillor with the same half-smile, half-frown she hit her future husband with outside the Starfleet Academy dorm room. “If you find my hospitality ‘excellent,’ Khor, son of Lantar, then you will not sully it by refusing my invitation.”

Khor hesitated. “You realize what you are saying.”

“I teach a very popular class in intercultural studies, Khor. I know about Klingon rules of hospitality.”

Esther then came to her boyfriend’s rescue. “And I also know about my grandmother’s rules of hospitality. We’re staying here tonight, myparmachkai. If nothing else, there’s no way, after sleeping on that damned metal slab of yours for the entire trip here from Qo’noS, that I’m passing up a chance at the guest bed here—with itsmattress—for a night.”

The Klingon looked back and forth between his lover and her grandmother. “If that is your wish, then it shall be so. I shall make the sacrifice of sleeping in comfort.”

Joey then stepped forward. “I need to get going also. Abigail expected me back home an hour ago.”

“You should have brought her with you,” Rachel said.

“I don’t think that would’ve been such a good idea.”

Gold frowned. “Why the hell not?”

“Just—trust me, okay? Look, I have to go.”

“Can’t you stay a little bit, Joey?” Gold asked, realizing that, like Eden, Joey had hardly said a word over dinner. No doubt, like his father, he was content to listen and catch up on the family gossip that he hadn’t heard in years. But Gold had good reason to remain quiet—everyone knew what he’d been up to. “I’d like to know—”

“Know what, Dad?” Joey asked, suddenly belligerent. “What I’ve been doing with my life? Now’s a helluva time to ask.” He took a breath and calmed himself. “I’m sorry. Look—I have to go.”

“Joseph Gold,” Rachel said, “you can’t just—”

“Yes, I can, Mom. And I am. I appreciate you telling me that you were having this get-together for Dad, and I’m glad I came. But this doesn’t change anything. You’re all related to me, but I’ve got my own family now. Good-bye.”

With that, he walked out the door.

“Damn,” Daniel said. “You want me to go after him, Pop?”

Gold shook his head. “There’s no point. He’s right. Family this big’s bound to have stray threads that get cut off from the rug.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Rachel said. “He’s just being a stubborn ass, like he’s always been.”

“Can’t imagine where he got that from,” Gold said with a smile. “Look, I’m just glad Joey came. And Eden and Bob, for that matter, even if I didn’t get to talk to them. Right now, it’s good just to see them, after all that’s happened.”

Danielle and Ira, Simone and Jared, and Michael and Hiroko came downstairs. “What did happen, Pop-Pop?” Michael asked. “The kids are all in bed—”

“They might even get to sleep sometime in the next three hours,” Hiroko added.

“—so I think we’d all like to know what happened to you.”

When he walked in the door to his home for the first time in years, David Gold wasn’t ready to talk about Galvan VI. Now, though, after all his family had done to make him forget it for a little while, it was time to remember again. The dead deserved that much, and more.

Of course, he left the classified specifics of the Wildfire device out of the story, but he told them all he could. Most of all, he told of the sacrifices so many of the crew made, from Stephen Drew’s giving up his own life to make sure the medical staff and their patients made it out of sickbay alive; to Kowal, Feliciano, Friesner, and Frnats, the four members of the damage-control team who got the structural integrity field up and running, thus keeping the ship in one piece a while longer; to Lieutenant McAllan pushing his captain out of the way of a collapsing ceiling, saving Gold’s life, if costing him a hand; to Kieran Duffy’s ultimate sacrifice that not only saved the ship, but an entire species.

Silence descended upon the living room for many minutes. Finally, Khor spoke up. “They died well, Captain.”

“Like that’s a comfort,” Jared said.

“It should be, human,” Khor said sharply. “Death is the one inevitability of life, the one thing on which we all may rely.”

“If it’s such a foregone conclusion,” Jessica asked, “what difference does it make how we go to it?”

“Every possible difference,” Khor said. “Captain Gold’s brave crew died doing their duty, sacrificing themselves so that others might live. Were they Klingons—and indeed, even though they are not—I can say with pride that they would be welcomed in Sto-Vo-Kor among the honored dead.” He held up a mug of bloodwine, which he and Esther had brought as their contribution to the meal, and of which only the two of them had partaken. “I salute them.”

Rachel held up her own glass of eis wine. “I join the salute.” At the surprised looks of most of her family—except Gold—she said, “Khor is right. They did what they had to do, and what many people would not have been able to do. I would rather they were still alive, but if they had to die, it’s best that this is how they did it. So I salute their memories.”

Quietly, Gold said, “As do I.” He held up his own mug, which just had coffee in it.

One by one, the rest of the remaining family also raised their drinks.

\* \* \*

The following morning, Gold slept in. He awoke to an empty bed, with the smells of breakfast summoning him to the kitchen. Putting on a bathrobe, he went downstairs to see Daniel, Jessica, Ruth, and Esther sitting around the kitchen table, munching on muffins, with Rachel standing over the oven.

“Morning, Pop.”

“Don’t call me ‘Pop,’ son.”

“Don’t call me ‘son,’ Pop. Sleep okay?”

Gold smiled. “Don’t know, I was asleep the whole time.”

Ruth looked plaintively at Rachel. “Gramma, have those two always been like this?”

“Only since Daniel could talk,” Rachel said.

“Where’s everyone else?” Gold asked as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

Ruth said, “Rinic had to get little R.D. off to school, and Danielle, Michael, and Simone had to do the same with their kids, only they all went off.”

“Khor had that meeting in Paris,” Esther added.

“We’ve got a few days, Pop,” Daniel said, “so we figured we’d stick around, if that’s okay.”

“To that, I’m gonna say no?” Gold grinned as he took a seat next to his pregnant granddaughter. “You know, they took a pool on the da Vinci as to what name you and Rinic would pick for my great-grand-daughter. Of course, I’m not supposed to know about that. . . .”

Blinking, Ruth said, “You’re kidding.” She shook her head. “That’s weird.”

“What is?”

“Well, aside from that nice Bolian doctor I met that time, and that Scottish guy with the mustache, I don’t even know any of your crew.”

Gold chuckled. “Fewer than you think. The doctor you met has retired, and the Scottish guy is the S.C.E. liaison here on Earth, not part of my crew.”

“Yet they’re making bets about my daughter?”

Shrugging, Gold said, “It’s just the usual shipboard nonsense.”

“It’s still weird, Grandpa.”

Gold considered. “That’s not the worst thing my crew’s been called.”

My crew, he thought. He liked the sound of that. Whatever silly thoughts were telling him to retire had obviously retreated. He wasn’t ready. Not yet.

Four years ago, when hostilities had broken out between the Federation and the Klingon Empire thanks to changeling infiltration at the highest levels of the Klingon military hierarchy, one of Gold’s oldest friends, Captain Mairin ni Bhroanin of the U.S.S. Huygens, was killed in combat. At Mairin’s funeral, Gold had confessed to Rachel a desire to retire.

“You belong in space,” she had said.

“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.”

That day had not yet come. He needed to be home right now, but he knew that he’d need to go back to space soon enough.

“So what’s on the agenda for today, Pop?” Daniel asked.

“Research. I need to speak to the families. Khor was right, they all—” He hesitated. “They all died well. Their families deserve to know that. So, since I’ve got a few weeks before the *Vinci* will be ready to go back out, I’m going to take that time to track down the families of all twenty-three of my people who died and pay my respects. In person if they’re on Earth, over subspace if they’re not.”

“Anything we can do to help?” Jessica asked.

Gold smiled. “Just keep being here. That’s been the best present anyone could’ve given me. Beyond that—I’ll let you know.”

\* \* \*

The first person whose family Gold tried to find was David McAllan.

For two years, every time Gold came onto the bridge, McAllan insisted on saying, “Captain on the bridge.” It was a bit of protocol that had fallen out of favor, though never actually stricken from the regulations. Some captains still insisted on it, of course. Gold had always found such people to be a little too full of themselves. In particular, Gold found it a ludicrous custom to maintain on a ship whose primary purpose was to work in the service of the S.C.E., probably the least spit-and-polish branch of the service.

But McAllan did insist, and it got to the point where Gold actually started looking forward to it.

He'd never hear it again, and worse, the reason why he'd never hear it again was because that brave, ultracompetent, spit-and-polish young man sacrificed his own life for that of his captain. Because that was, after all, the proper thing to do.

To Gold's shock, he realized he knew nothing about McAllan. Most of his crew, he could recite at least one hobby or odd personal habit or something about them, but about McAllan he drew a blank.

His Starfleet record, unfortunately, revealed no useful data. His only listed relatives were a mother and father, who both died when McAllan was at the Academy. McAllan's residence was a house in Greece that he shared with four other Starfleet officers. However, a call to that house revealed that all four were away on assignments, with the house under automated care until one or more of the owners came back to Earth.

I owe my life to the man, and I can't even memorialize him to his family or friends.

With an empty feeling in his stomach, Gold called up the service record of Chief Diego Feliciano.

\* \* \*

"He won't come out of his room. I don't know what to tell him."

Gold sat in the dining room of the home in Havana, Cuba belonging to Arlene Rivera and the late da Vinci transporter chief. Rivera, a nurse, had been married to Chief Feliciano for ten years. The "he" she referred to was their son, Carlos.

"He turned seven a few days ago. That's when he first locked himself in there. Now he only comes out to go to the bathroom. That's when I've been bringing him food. But he won't talk to me or to anybody." Rivera had been holding a mug full of coffee for the entire time Gold had been sitting across from her nursing his own cup. She had yet to take a sip from it. A petite woman, she had jet-black hair and a round face that was marred by bloodshot brown eyes. "Diego promised he'd be home for his birthday this time. He missed it last year—because of the war, he couldn't get away."

The captain remembered Feliciano talking about having to miss his son's birthday when they had gone on a mission to salvage an alien ship near a secret Federation outpost. Ironically, that had been the mission on which Commander Salek—Gomez's predecessor—was killed.

"He promised that he would be home this time." Tears started to run down her cheeks. "Why didn't he keep the promise?"

Gold's voice was a cracked whisper. "He would have. Diego always spoke fondly of you and Carlos. 'My little Carlitos,' he always called him."

A smile struggled to get through the sadness on Rivera's face. "Carlos hates being called that. I think that's why Diego did it." She shook her head, the sadness victorious over the fleeting smile. "Why did he have to die now? He lived through an entire war; why did this have to happen?"

"I can't answer that. All I can say is that he died saving the lives of his crewmates—and his sacrifice may have saved an entire race. And I also know that that doesn't mean a damn thing to a seven-year-old boy who won't come out of his room. But someday, he will understand."

"Good. Then maybe he can explain it to me." She closed her eyes. "I'm sorry, Captain, I'm not being

fair to you.”

“Nobody expects you to be fair, Ms. Rivera—hell, you’ve got no reason to be. It’s completely unfair—believe me, I know. I had to bury my own son during the war—he was on Betazed when the Dominion took it.”

“Still, it means a lot that you came here. You didn’t have to do that.”

“Diego didn’t have to sacrifice his life the way he did, either. But he chose to. I think the very least I owed him was to let his wife and son know how sorry I am—and how much you meant to him.”

\* \* \*

“Get out of my house!”

K.E. Bain all but slammed the door in Gold’s face when he arrived at the apartment in Juneau, Alaska, he shared with his daughter, Lieutenant Kara Bain, the beta-shift ops officer. “Mr. Bain,” Gold began, “I’m sorry, but—”

“You killed my daughter, you son of a bitch. What the hell were you doing flying around a gas giant anyhow? I’m amazed anyone got out alive.”

I was trying to salvage a warhead that would’ve wiped out the planet—and maybe destroyed an entire race—but I can’t tell you that. Intellectually, Gold understood the need for classified information, but there were times when it really irritated the hell out of him.

“Mr. Bain, I just wanted to tell you—”

“There’s nothing you can tell me that I want to hear, Captain. Now get the hell off my property before I shoot you.”

Then he actually did slam the door in Gold’s face.

\* \* \*

“I just wanted to tell you I’m sorry for your loss.”

Benjamin Kogleman, the son of Security Guard Claire Eddy, seemed genuinely confused by Gold’s words. He was fidgeting with a padd, constantly looking down at its display between sentences. “Well, thank you—I guess. I mean—well, if you don’t mind my saying so, sir, why did you come all the way out here?” Kogleman lived in a small tent in the midst of the Gobi Desert, where he worked as an archaeologist.

Gold smiled. “It wasn’t that hard, Mr. Kogleman. I have access to a transporter.” In fact, it had taken a certain amount of doing—mostly lobbying by Scotty—to give Gold unlimited transporter access during this period for him to visit the Earth-based families of his deceased crew. The initial response was confusion on the part of Starfleet’s bureaucracy, which didn’t see the need for personal visits. As if “need” has anything to do with what’s right. “And I wanted to extend my personal sympathies on the death of your mother.”

“Again, thanks, but it really wasn’t necessary. Starfleet informed me of Claire’s death. Honestly, we

were never all that close. I mean, I'm sorry she's dead, but—it really wasn't necessary for you to come all this way. I mean, you're a Starfleet captain." He laughed a rather fake-sounding laugh. "You must have better things to do with your time than to schlep out here to the middle of nowhere."

"Not when it comes to something like this." Gold hesitated, no longer sure that he wanted to perform this duty. He still had the option of leaving and letting Starfleet simply courier the damn thing, especially given this indifferent reception.

Hell, I've come this far. Besides, I give in now, those damn bureaucrats win. Holding out a small box, he said, "Your mother was honored with a Starfleet Citation for Conspicuous Gallantry." He opened the box to reveal a gold pin and purple ribbon. "You're listed as her next of kin, so you're the one who gets it."

Kogleman blinked. "I am? I mean, she listed me? That's—odd. I didn't think—uh, thank you, of course, Captain," he said quickly, taking the box and closing it. "That's very considerate of Starfleet. Believe me, I'll treasure this—uh, this honor. Look, I have to get back to work, unless there's anything else, some kind of ceremony or something?"

Gold shook his head. "No, Mr. Kogleman, that's all. Thank you for your time."

"Right, of course. Thank you, Captain."

\* \* \*

The second-to-the-last trip of the dozen or so that Gold had to take on Earth was to Dublin, Ireland, where Susan and Edward Drew currently lived. They had raised their grandson Stephen Drew, one of the best security guards on the ship, since his parents died when he was a boy.

Their house was located in the midst of a series of paved walkways, with a lovely stained-glass window taking up much of the upper portion of the front door. Gold rang the bell, and was greeted by a woman of medium height and wide build, paper-white hair framing a round, friendly face. This had to be Susan.

"I'm Captain David Gold," he said.

"Of course you are. Please come in, Captain," Susan said in a musical voice with an accent Gold couldn't place. He knew that Drew's family had lived all over Earth—Susan's work as an engineer took her all over the planet—until they retired to Dublin after Drew joined Starfleet. Gold remembered Drew saying once that his grandparents had always thought it ironic that he was assigned to an S.C.E. ship, given his grandmother's occupation.

She led him into a small kitchen that, surprisingly, had an old-fashioned stove next to the replicator (Rachel, of course, had one just like it, but she was a special case) and a lovely wooden table, in the center of which was a tea set.

At that table sat two men, one quite familiar: Vance Hawkins, one of the few surviving security guards from the *Vinci*, and Gold knew, Stephen Drew's best friend. The tall, dark-skinned man was wearing civilian clothes, and immediately stood up at Gold and Susan's entrance.

"Sir!"

Gold waved his arm. "At ease, Hawkins."

A short, skinny man also rose, offering his hand. Like Hawkins, he was bald, though Gold assumed that it was a more natural condition than the fashion choice of the security guard. “Young Vance here was payin’ his respects, Captain. I’m Edward Drew.”

Returning the handshake, Gold noted that Edward retained an Irish accent. “A pleasure, sir. I’m only sorry I couldn’t meet you both under better circumstances.”

They all sat down, except for Edward, who asked, “Would you like some tea, Captain?”

Not normally a tea drinker, Gold nonetheless accepted the offer. Edward retrieved a mug from the cupboard, then sat and poured tea for them both.

“It’s good of you to come, Captain,” Susan said. “Such a terrible, terrible thing. Vance was telling us what happened.”

“It must be even worse for you,” Edward added. “To lose so many. You have our sympathies, Captain.”

“Thank you,” Gold said, surprised.

“Stevie spoke well of you—of all the people he served with.” Susan smiled. “His letters were full of stories about your adventures.”

Edward chuckled. “Of course, he had a few choice words for that Commander Corsi of yours.”

“But he respected her. And you, Captain,” Susan added quickly. “And all the people he worked with. He said it was much better than the usual Starfleet ship because—how did he put it? ‘The officers don’t have poles up their asses.’”

Gold somehow managed not to sputter his tea.

“He was even sweet on one of them—one of the engineers, a woman named Norma. He said on any other ship, he wouldn’t have even thought of asking out an officer, but that you, Captain, fostered such a pleasant atmosphere that it seemed perfectly natural.”

Drew was interested in Weiland? Gold shook his head. Too often the captain was out of the gossip loop.

Hawkins said, “Yeah, he was finally ready to work up the courage to ask her for a date when we were putting Whiteflower together—then the crisis hit, and he backed off. He figured there’d be time afterward. It’s not like he was in any—” He hesitated. “Excuse me.”

With that, Hawkins suddenly got up and left the kitchen.

Also excusing himself, Gold went after him. He found the large security guard standing in the middle of the living room, surrounded by some rather tacky-looking furniture, even tackier-looking statuary and othertchotchkes, and a rather nice painting of a much younger Susan and Edward in a suit and wedding dress.

“You all right, Hawkins?”



“I’m fine, sir, it’s just—” Hawkins took a deep breath. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It never does, son.”

Hawkins shook his head. “No, not just death—I’m used to seeing people die. Comes with the territory, especially in Starfleet security. No, what I mean is that Drew didn’t make it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sir, I don’t know if you noticed, but Steve never got hurt. Since we signed on to the *Vinci* together back during the war, I’ve been thrown into bulkheads, shot, stabbed, beaten up, cut, got turned into a lunatic by a thousand-year-old computer, and hit repeatedly on the head. It became a running joke, to be honest—I was spending more time in sickbay than Dr. Lense. But Steve, no matter what, came out fine. Never got hurt, not even a scratch. But this time—this time, I come out okay and healthy.” He shook his head again. “It’s just wrong, sir.”

Putting a hand on Hawkins’s shoulder, Gold said, “You won’t get any argument from me, son.”

Susan’s voice came from behind them. “Is everything all right?”

Gold turned to see Susan and Edward standing in the doorway.

“I’m fine, ma’am,” Hawkins said. “I just needed to—it isn’t—”

Susan walked over and embraced the—much larger—Hawkins. “It’s all right, Vance. I know how close you two were. I know how much you miss him. We all do.” She broke the embrace. “Now come back into the kitchen before your tea gets cold, and you can tell us some more embarrassing stories about Stevie.”

Hawkins smiled. “I don’t think I’ve got any left—at least, not any that I could tell you.”

Edward chuckled. “D’you think it’s anythin’ we haven’t heard before?”

“No, just that Steve made me promise never to share the stories with anyone—least of all the three of you.”

“If it’s about that practical joke you played on Stevens and Faulwell while we were at *Whiteflower*, I wouldn’t worry about it.” Gold spoke lightly, though Hawkins’s dark face suddenly went gray.

“You knew about that?”

“It’s a small ship, Hawkins.” He grinned. “And the old man wasn’t born yesterday.”

Susan led them back into the kitchen. “Now this we have to hear.”

For most of the rest of the afternoon, the four of them sat in the kitchen, drinking tea, and sharing stories.

\* \* \*

“You ever plan on coming to bed?”

Gold looked up from the workstation in the study to see Rachel standing in the doorway. It took him a second to focus on her—he'd been staring at the screen for quite some time, and his eyes weren't as young as they used to be—and even when they did, Rachel still looked a bit foggy.

“What time is it?” he asked.

“Two hours after you said you'd be in bed within half an hour.”

Gold shook his head. “Sorry. I forgot about the time differential on Betazed, so I'm waiting for it to be a reasonable hour on the part of the planet Deo's family's in.”

“And it can't wait until tomorrow?”

Having visited all but one of the families of his Earth-based crew, Gold had spent an entire day contacting those off-world. He'd already spoken to Security Guard Frnats's cohusbands on Bolarus, Engineer Orthak's egg-mates on Wadgira, Security Guard Loten Yovre's brothers and sister on Bajor, Engineer Alex Chhung's partner and adopted son on Canopus, Security Guard Andrea Lipinski's parents on Berengaria VII, and Chief Engineer Jil Barnak's sister on Atrea. Now he was waiting for the right time to contact Lieutenant Elleth Deo's parents on Betazed.

“I'm sorry, love, I was just thinking about Nate and Elaine.”

Rachel came the rest of the way down the stairs. “That's all you've been doing—thinking. I thought the whole point of this time off was to not think for a while.”

He chuckled bitterly. “That's like telling someone not to think about a pink elephant. The minute you're told that, you can't get pink elephants out of your head.”

“I'd rather you were thinking about pink elephants. Maybe you could count them to help you sleep. In bed.”

That's my wife, he thought, subtle as a sledgehammer when she wants to be. “I know,” he said. She stood behind him and put a hand on his shoulder. He put his hand over it—it was warm and comforting. “But I owe it to them—to all of them—to be there. I think it helped them. For some of them, it helped me, too, to be honest. You'd like the Drews—they have an old stove and make a damn fine cup of tea. Hawkins was there, too, and—”

“David?”

“Yes?”

“Tell me in bed. You're pushing too hard. Take a rest. You're no good to anyone if you exhaust yourself in an attempt to be the über-captain.”

He looked up at those beautiful brown eyes. Over fifty years ago, he learned the hard way never to argue with this woman. Besides, she was right. How often did he come home? How often was he actually around to share his bed with her? I'm so busy trying to do right by my crew I'm forgetting to do the same for the woman I love.

Gold shut down the workstation and followed his wife to the bedroom.

Just one more trip to take tomorrow....

# Chapter

## 4

“I need to get out of here.”

Sonya declared this to her parents and Belinda over breakfast one morning—the first meal she had eaten with them since her arrival.

“Is the food that bad?” her father asked with a wry smile.

“No, of course not, but—”

Her mother, wrinkles softening the same sharp cheekbones she had passed on to her daughters, gazed at her daughter with the family’s hazel eyes. “What is it, mija?”

“I need to go to Portland. To see Kieran’s mother—and his grave. I know he wanted to be buried next to his father, and—” She hesitated. “I don’t know why, I just need to go.”

José Esteban put a large hand over his daughter’s small one. His hair, as jet-black as it was when he was a boy, a fact of which he was inordinately proud, fell down over his eyes, which Sonya had always thought made him look like a very dark sheepdog. “Then you need to go.”

Her mother asked, “You want us to come with you?”

Sonya started to say no, then thought about it. “Let me ask Ms. Duffy tomorrow when I contact her. I don’t want to drop in unannounced.”

“Good thing,” her mother said. “I raised you better than that.”

Belinda smiled. “You did? I must’ve missed that part.”

“Mostly, yes.” Lupe Gomez fixed her daughter with a look.

Sonya wondered if she were missing something here. “Is everything okay?”

“Nothing you need to worry about, mija,” Belinda said with a glower at their mother.

“Okay.” Sonya looked at her father, who had brushed the hair away from his eyes, so there was no mistaking what the message was behind the look he gave her: Stay out of it. The relationship between Lupe and Belinda was akin to an old roller coaster, and it looked like it was about to hit one of its downward cycles after years of steady upward climbing.

“It’s not like there aren’t other openings for soccer coaches,” Belinda added, thus providing the reason for the latest difficulty. Bee’s gone and screwed up another career.

Her mother raised an eyebrow in an almost Vulcanlike manner. “Really? Even ones who’ve been fired three times for violating school policy?”

“It’s a dumb policy.”

Lupe stood up. “Just once, would it be too much to ask, just once, for you to stick to something? To make a decision and actually abide by it for more than five minutes, like your sister?”

Sonya flinched.

“Lupe, please,” her father said in the long-suffering tone that Sonya recognized from previous Belinda-mamifights, “don’t drag Sonya into this.”

“Why not, it’s her favorite trump card to play,” Belinda said, also standing up. “Sonya’s the perfect daughter who does everything right. Except she doesn’t always.”

Shooting a look at Belinda, Sonya said, “Bee, what’re you—?”

“Maybe if she’d actually told that guy yes when he proposed, he wouldn’t have accepted a suicide mission.”

Her voice barely a whisper, Sonya said, “That’s not how it happened.”

“That’s how it looks to me, Ess. You didn’t say yes, so he didn’t have anything to live for. How’s that for little Commander Perfect, huh? So don’t go telling me that I’m the failure in this house.”

With that, Belinda stormed out of the kitchen.

Sonya felt like she had been punched in the stomach. My God, it is my fault.

“I’m sorry, mija,” Lupe said. “You shouldn’t have had to listen to that garbage.”

Garbage, right. Then she thought for a moment. Of course it’s garbage. Kieran was crazy sometimes, but he wasn’t stupid. He only went because Gold ordered him.

“It’s okay, mami. But—I think maybe I should go to Portland alone.”

Her mother sat back down. “Don’t let your sister—”

“It has nothing to do with her,” Sonya lied. In fact, the knowledge that her mother had used Sonya’s success as a weapon in her on-again, off-again war with Belinda was a major influence in her new-found desire to go alone. “I just need to do this myself.”

José gave her a look, his hair once again falling in front of his eyes. Kieran’s hair used to do that all the time, too, she thought sadly. “You’re sure?” he asked.

She nodded. “I’m sure.”

\* \* \*

Gomez supposed she could have requisitioned a transporter to get her from Vieques to Portland, but she found that she preferred taking a shuttle service. Flying over the North American continent gave her a little bit of time alone to think.

What am I going to do now?

She couldn't go back to the *da Vinci*. Leaving aside the bad memories, there was simply no way she could serve under David Gold again. Being on the same ship with him would just be a constant reminder of Kieran's death. She knew that Starfleet had cleared him of any wrongdoing, and for the other twenty-two of her crewmates, she agreed with the tribunal's decision. Gold didn't do a thing wrong—

—until the very end when he condemned the man she loved to die, knowing full well what that would mean, and concealing the information from her. That was something she simply could not forgive, even if Starfleet found they could.

At present, the other three *Saber*-class ships assigned to the S.C.E. had first officers/S.C.E. commanders, so a lateral move was out of the question. But there were plenty of ships out there, and one of them, she knew, had to have need of a chief engineer. She would miss the challenges of the S.C.E., not to mention the remaining *da Vinci* crew, but there was certainly a part of her that missed the thrill of running an engine room. It might be nice to get back to that. She made a mental note to compose a transfer request when she got back home.

The shuttle flew over the Rocky Mountains. For some reason, she was suddenly reminded of Kieran's love for flying around in gravity boots—a predilection that had been put to good use on *Maeglin* only a few months ago when they were trying to round up some strange creatures that had come to the planet through an interdimensional gateway. I remember thinking I was going to kill him for being so reckless. Funny, how silly turns of phrase like that sound when the person actually dies.

It wasn't long before the shuttle arrived in Portland. Gomez went the rest of the way on foot.

She had expected the house to be bigger, for some reason. Kieran was always describing it as this huge place. Probably remembering it from a kid's-eye perspective, she thought.

The woman who answered the door was, unlike the house, bigger than Gomez had been expecting. She had only seen Christa Duffy on a viewscreen, with nothing to really give her scale, so she hadn't been expecting someone so dauntingly tall. Of course, Kieran wasn't exactly short, either, and he had to get it from somewhere.

"Sonya! It's good to finally meet you!" She immediately drew Gomez into a hug that was, in its own way, as all-encompassing as one of Belinda's. "You're as beautiful as Kieran said."

Tears welled up in Gomez's eyes. "So are you." Christa had the same kind brown eyes, the same warm smile, and the same mousy brown hair as her son, though the latter was flecked with gray ("Less than you'd expect," Kieran had said once, "but more than she'd like").

After breaking the embrace, but still clutching to Gomez's arms, Christa said, "I'm so glad you came."

"I'm sorry I didn't come sooner, but I needed—"

Letting go of her arm with one hand that she held up in admonishment, Christa said, "I understand. Besides, plenty of people have been here. Kieran's sister Amy has been by so much she might as well move back in. Some of your crewmates have been by, and some of your old friends from the *Enterprise*, including that nice Mr. O'Brien and his family."

Gomez smiled. Why does it not surprise me that the chief stopped by?

“And I got a very nice letter from Fabian Stevens before he went off on a trip somewhere.”

That made Gomez flinch. She hadn't even thought about Fabian. He must be hurting in his own way as much as I am. To her shame, she realized that she not only didn't know where he had gone for his trip, she didn't even realize he had gone on one in the first place. In fact, she didn't have the first clue as to where any of her surviving shipmates were. Vaguely she recalled P8 Blue saying something after the service about bringing her larvae home, but aside from that...

“And of course, Captain Gold is here now.”

Were Christa not still holding her arm, Gomez might have stumbled. That bastard is here? How dare he show his face in this house?

“He brought the Federation Medal of Honor they gave Kieran, and—Oh, but where are my manners? Come in, please. Let me show you the house.”

Christa tried to lead her in, but Gomez started to move backward. “Maybe it's best if I—”

Then the captain himself appeared behind Christa in the doorway. “Gomez. Good to see you. I was starting to get worried.”

Just standing there, like nothing happened. “I don't have anything to say to you,” she said coldly.

Gold flinched, as if he'd been slapped. Good, Gomez thought.

Christa looked back and forth between the two of them. “Am I missing something?”

“If you are, Ms. Duffy, so'm I. Gomez, what's the—”

As they had with Belinda in the attic, the words suddenly came pouring out of Gomez's mouth. “It's all your fault! You killed him, you son of a bitch, and then you have the gall to show your face here!”

“Gomez—”

“You murdered him! He wanted to marry me, and you killed him, and you wouldn't even tell me!”

“Marry you?”

Gomez had no idea whether it was Gold or Christa who had made the exclamation, nor did she care. “I will not stay here with you, so either get the hell out of this house, or I'm leaving.”

“I'll decide who stays in my house, Sonya, if you don't mind,” Christa said with a steely tone.

Realizing she'd overstepped herself, Gomez quickly said, “I'm sorry, Christa. I didn't mean—”

“To tell a woman who just lost her son how to run her own house? To insult a guest of that house?”

“You don't understand—”

“My son is dead, Sonya. It wasn’t enough that I had to bury my husband, now I’ve buried my son. You don’t know what that’s like, nor how much you need family and friends who understand at a time like this.”

I know now, Gomez thought, but wisely did not say aloud. “You weren’t there, Christa, you don’t know what he did.”

“He didn’t do anything Kieran didn’t ask to do,” Christa said.

That brought Gomez up short. “What?”

In as gentle a voice as Gomez had ever heard Gold use, the captain said, “Duffy volunteered to disarm the device. And he knew full well what that meant.”

“No. You’re lying. He wouldn’t have done that. He asked me to marry him.”

“As God is my witness, I had no idea. He didn’t tell me that.”

Gomez turned and ran into the yard, screaming, “You’re lying!”

She ran around to the back of the house, all the way to the big oak that was the centerpiece of the large lawn, collapsing onto the well-manicured grass and leaning against the massive tree. At waist-height, she could see some bark scarring—a remnant of a German shepherd named Alexander, the so-called “Houdini dog” of Kieran’s youth. They could, of course, have repaired the bark, but Kieran had asked to leave it there as a memento of Alexander’s many escapes from his tether to that tree.

To her lack of surprise, Gold had followed her. He was dressed, she noted, in civilian clothes that only served to add to the grandfatherly mien he usually carried. All the better to fool you with, she thought.

“I’m not lying, Sonya,” he said.

She looked up at his blue eyes, which were, maddeningly, filled with sorrow and compassion. He had never called her by her first name before that she could remember.

“Even if he did volunteer, how could you—”

“Let him? It was his job, Gomez. Yes, you two were a couple—and more than that, apparently, if he actually popped the question—but that had nothing to do with my decision, or his volunteering. I took a helluva gamble even letting you two have that relationship. But I assumed that you were professionals and understood the risks of what might happen. If you did, then what the hell are you complaining to me for? And if you didn’t, then I question whether you belong in Starfleet.”

Gomez wanted to object, to ask how he dared to question her commitment to Starfleet—but she found she could not. He’s right, she finally admitted to herself.

“He didn’t tell you he proposed?”

Gold shook his head. “He came to me with his farkochte plan to stop Wildfire after you gave me your farkochte plan for getting the engines restarted. You came up precisely once in the conversation. You know what he said? ‘Don’t tell Sonya.’”

Tears now streaked from Gomez's eyes. "Why didn't he—"

"He said you had enough on your mind. Which, considering you were about to run the world's fastest warp-core installation and startup, was not an irrelevant concern."

"It still doesn't make sense," she muttered. "Why did he—"

Unbidden, Belinda's words came back to her: "I don't think you ever met a decision you didn't like—and didn't stick with." More words from the previous day: "You didn't say yes, so he didn't have anything to live for."

And something Geordi La Forge said on the Enterprise over a decade ago: "You're awfully young to be so driven."

"Oh, God."

Frowning, Gold asked, "What is it?"

"He thought I refused." Gomez felt like a black hole had opened in her stomach. Her breaths came shallowly. "It's my fault. I didn't give him an answer right away, and he assumed that meant no."

"That's ridiculous."

"No, sir, it isn't." Gomez clambered to an upright position. "I've always been—well, decisive. When I decided to go into Starfleet, I didn't rest until I qualified for the entrance exams. At the Academy, I was determined to be on the Enterprise, so I made sure I was the best. When I met Kieran, I was the one who made the first move, and when I got the promotion and the transfer to the Oberth, I was the one who broke it off. For that matter, us getting together again after Sarindar was my decision." She looked away. After spending the last several weeks hating this man for something that was, in fact, her own fault, she found herself unable to look him in the eye. "When Kieran proposed, I couldn't give him an answer. I was indecisive. He must've interpreted it as a negative answer, and—and he volunteered to die instead."

"Gomez, that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard in my life."

She looked up sharply at Gold, who was regarding her with an expression that reminded her frighteningly of the one her father used to have when she and Belinda got themselves into trouble as kids.

"Yes, Duffy volunteered for the suicide mission, but he was the only one who could perform it. He had started the deactivation sequence of the Wildfire device back on the Orion; if anybody else went, they'd have had to start from scratch. It's pretty damned unlikely that anyone else would have made it. Hell, the only other people who knew the codes were me and Corsi, and neither of us were in any shape to do so."

Involuntarily, Gomez looked down at Gold's left hand. The doctors on the Mjolnir, the ship that rescued the da Vinci after they escaped Galvan VI's atmosphere, had given him a perfect biosynthetic hand that looked just like the old one, but at the time of the mission, Gold had been literally crippled. As for Corsi, she had still been partially paralyzed.

"Besides, if Duffy hadn't done it, he still would be dead. And so would the rest of us. The engines didn't come online until after the point of Wildfire's detonation. You, me, Duffy, Stevens, Corsi, Blue, Ina, Wong, Lense, and the rest of us would be bits of protomatter making up whatever it is Galvan VI would



get turned into by that damned thing—and so would the Ovanim.”

Gold put his artificial left hand on Gomez’s shoulder, and reduced his tone to a near whisper. “Sonya, Kieran didn’t do what he did because he wanted to die. He did what he did because he wanted you—and everyone else on the ship, and the Ovanim—to live.”

Now Gomez did look David Gold in the eyes. What she saw was a man in tremendous pain for the losses he suffered. She knew that he blamed himself as much as she blamed herself—maybe more so. But he also knew what a fool’s game that ultimately was.

“It’s easy to assign blame,” he said. “It’s hard to go on living. It’s been my impression that Commander Sonya Gomez is the best there is at doing what everyone thinks is hard and making it look easy.”

Do I want to do that? Do I want to go back to the *Vinci* without Kieran—and with constant reminders of his death around me? It would be easier to just go home and write up that transfer request. No one would think ill of me.

In her mind, she heard Belinda’s voice: “Make a damn decision, already, Ess!”

“I’ll have to go on living, then,” she said.

“Good. Now let’s go back inside. There’s an old woman in there who had to bury her son. Having done that myself all too recently, I know this isn’t a good time for her to be alone.”

Gomez saluted. “Yes, sir, Captain.”

He smiled, apparently understanding what she meant by the anachronistic gesture.

“Apology accepted, Gomez. Let’s go.”

## Chapter 5

The next several days were a whirlwind of activity for Gomez and Gold both. They had twenty-five vacancies to fill—in addition to those who died, Lieutenant Ina Mar had requested a transfer and Medtech John Copper opted to retire. The surprise, Gomez had thought upon reading Ina’s transfer request, is that she’s the only one. As for Copper, he’d been making noises about retiring for as long as Gomez had been on the *Vinci*, so that wasn’t much of a shock, either.

The last time a member of the command staff died in action, Gold had left it to Captain Scott to recommend a replacement—he suggested Gomez—and both captain and first officer were happy to solicit another recommendation from Scotty to replace Duffy.

Even with fobbing replacing Kieran off on someone else, Gomez found that Gold’s prediction was holding true: It was hard. Every requisition, every upgrade, every crew replacement was a reminder of what they had lost—of what she had lost.

Is it going to be the same? She’d been on the *Vinci* for almost a year, yet the place felt as much like a family as her own home. More, sometimes, she amended, thinking of Belinda and mami’s latest spat.

In fact, Gomez had spent most of her time leading up to the da Vinci's relaunch at Gold's house in New York. They were able to do their jobs as efficiently from there as from Starfleet Headquarters, and it enabled them to do so away from the hustle and bustle. They both made regular trips to McKinley Station, particularly Gomez, making sure that the upgrades that she and Kieran had been talking about for months were being integrated. Gomez was especially glad to see that several modifications were based on Kieran's ideas for the Roebing, the ideal S.C.E. ship he'd been designing in his spare time. In addition, the computer was getting a massive upgrade courtesy Soloman's designs, which the Bynar—having returned from a mission to Vrinda with Carol Abramowitz and Bart Faulwell—was also overseeing personally.

Yes, it was hard, but it was made easier by doing much of the work from the Gold-Gilman residence. After weeks of barely eating, Gomez found that working proximate to Rachel Gilman's kitchen enabled her to make up for that, with interest. I think I've gained a kilo a day since we came back from Portland.

One afternoon, Scotty contacted them with his recommendation for a new second officer. "Also, you'll be happy to know that the da Vinci'll be ready two days ahead of schedule."

"Good," Gold said.

Scotty shook his head. "Good isn't the word for it, lad. In my day, it'd take six months to do a repair job like she needed, not a few weeks—and we probably would have just scrapped the lot and started from scratch."

Gold snorted. "Your day, hell. Five years ago."

Gomez smiled wryly. "Nothing like fighting a war against a technologically superior foe to motivate you to improve your repair efficiency."

"Aye, more's the pity. In any event, I think you'll like the lad I'm recommendin'. He's a Tellarite, name's a Mor glasch Tev. He's as good as they come."

"That's good enough for me," Gold said.

"I know that name." Gomez thought for a moment, then the memory came bubbling to the surface. "Isn't he the one who wrote that monograph on methods of penetrating cloaking shields last year?"

"Aye, and the one on miniaturizin' transporters."

"Sounds like a winner," Gold said.

They discussed some other business, then Scotty signed off. Rachel Gilman then came in from the hallway—they had been working in the study upstairs.

"So how soon before you sally forth again?"

"In three days," Gold said.

"Perfect. I have an idea."

Gomez smiled. Rachel having an idea usually meant that said idea would be implemented, one way or

the other.

When she gave her idea, Gomez's smile widened further.

\* \* \*

The day before the *da Vinci* was to be released from McKinley Station, Gold tethered Freser to the dogwood in preparation for several arrivals. He and Gomez had sent out messages to the remaining fifteen Galvan VI survivors who were remaining aboard the *da Vinci*, and one by one, they all beamed or shuttled or walked up to the house in the Bronx.

Freser tried desperately to leap about, but the leash was intact. Obviously, Gomez thought with a pang of sadness, he's not a Houdini dog like Alexander.

Some were dressed in uniform—like Soloman, who had beamed down from McKinley after giving the new computer a final once-over. Others were in civilian garb—like Carol Abramowitz, who had come straight to the Bronx from her trip to Pacifica. Both she and Bart Faulwell were looking especially pleased with themselves as they listened to Fabian Stevens tell of his adventures doing a cargo run with Domenica Corsi and her father. Wonder what Fabe's gonna say when he finds out the species of our new second officer, Gomez thought, and only wincing a little at the thought of Kieran's replacement.

Very few were listening to Fabian, however, as they were either pestering Pattie Blue with questions about the rather historic rediscovery she'd made on the Nasat homeworld of a sentient, plant-based species living on the planet's surface, or pestering Robin Rusconi about her rather bizarre experience with an interdimensional portal on the moon.

Before long, though, Gold called the "meeting" to order. Which, in practical terms, meant that everybody stood on the lawn and faced Gold as he addressed them.

"We've been through hell and back—almost literally. A lot of good people gave their lives. Other ships have survived disasters like this only to see the remaining crew split up, sent to the nine winds. But that's not the way we do things around here. We're the S.C.E., after all, and if there's one thing I've learned is that, when we see something that's broken, we not only fix it, we make it better. I have every faith that you'll do the same for the *da Vinci* tomorrow when we take her back out.

"But we're also a family—a big family, and believe me, I know from big families." Several people chuckled at that. "And I was reminded of something recently. In times like this, families come together. So I've brought you all here today, on the eve of our going back out into space, to reassure you of that, and to invite you all to join me in celebrating our lives. We've had time to mourn our losses—it's time we started moving forward. Now before we take this party inside, I want to deal with some business."

That was Gomez's cue to step forward with the large box that Starfleet Command had sent. "Promotion time came and went while we were in drydock," Gomez said, "so we've got a few to take care of." She reached into the box and pulled out a hollow rank pip. "First of all, to Nancy Conlon, I hereby promote you to the rank of lieutenant junior grade, and also officially give you the position of chief engineer of the *da Vinci*."

Conlon had stepped forward to accept the pip, but stopped short at the second part. "What? You're making me chief? Sir, I'm flattered, but—"

Gomez attached the rank pin to Conlon's collar. "You earned it, Nancy. Hell, if helping install a warp

core and starting it up in less than an hour doesn't qualify you for chief engineer, I don't know what does."

"I'm not sure what to say," Conlon said.

Gold grinned. "'Thank you' works."

"Yes, sir," she said quickly. "Thank you both, sirs. I hope I can live up to this."

"You will."

In turn, Gomez doled out promotions to Songmin Wong and Anthony Shabalala, both also to lieutenant junior grade. Shabalala was also taking over the alpha-shift tactical officer duties from the late David McAllan; Wong was remaining alpha-shift conn officer.

Then Corsi stepped forward. "The officers don't get all the fun here. Vance Hawkins, step forward."

Hawkins did so at full attention, which looked amusing to Gomez's eyes, since he was still wearing civilian clothing.

"I hereby promote you to the rank of chief petty officer, and appoint you deputy chief of security." She allowed a small smile. "You and Robins are going to be the only ones I can count on for a while, and I want you to help me beat the new recruits into shape."

"I won't disappoint you, sir."

"Damn straight you won't," Corsi said, meaning every word of it.

Still, Gomez thought, Domenica sounds a bit more playful than usual. Maybe that trip with Fabian did her some good.

"Now then," Gold said, "there's a fine old Jewish tradition: When major life events happen, we respond by gathering in a large group and eating copious amounts of food. Conveniently, I married the best cook on the planet to provide us with the latter. So, if you'll follow me..."

Gold led the other sixteen inside. As soon as he opened the front door, Gomez caught a whiff of the kitchen. Rachel had made some amazing dishes over the last several days that Gomez had been spending at the house, but this beat all of them into olfactory heaven: fish, chicken, beef, assorted sauces and soups, and fresh bread that Gomez knew would melt in her mouth.

It's going to be very hard to go back to replicated food after this, she thought.

Gold had set up the large wooden table in the dining room with eighteen chairs—including one specially modified for Pattie—and invited everyone to take a seat as Rachel brought in the matzo-ball soup.

After the third sip, Abramowitz turned to Gold. "Captain?"

"Yes, Abramowitz?"

"I was wrong."

Gold smiled. Gomez, for her part, frowned, and wondered what that was about.

Soon, people were telling stories. Hawkins talked about one of his and Drew's shore leave misadventures, which led to Stevens telling a similar story about a bar crawl he and Duffy had engaged in during the war shortly after Stevens signed on to the *Vinci*. (Gomez was torn between anger and gratitude that Kieran had never told her the full story.) Wetzel described the entertaining process of separating Robins's and Lipinski's hair after it was fused together, with Robins adding colorful commentary and Conlon—the instigator of the practical joke—sinking deeper into her chair. Blue then told a tale of her, Barnak, Feliciano, Frnats, and Orthak on leave on Starbase 96, when some idiot had a problem with a group of five people from five different species sitting together that almost led to a brawl, and did lead to the person in question having five different drinks spilled on his head. Lense even told a story about her and Emmett.

Gold then asked Soloman, “Were you able to restore any of Emmett?”

“Not as such. I'm afraid that the EMH on the *Vinci* will be akin to what he was when he was first installed.” He turned to Lense. “I'm sorry, Doctor. I did attempt to retrieve the data, but the damage was too extensive.”

“It's all right,” Lense said. “I was hoping he might be restored, but I wasn't really counting on it. I don't think I want to call this one Emmett, though.”

The stories continued through the fish course, the chicken course, the beef course, and dessert. As he was polishing off his baklava, Stevens decided to do something he'd never done before.

He told the Tellarite story.

Gomez forced herself to keep her composure, but she appreciated what Fabian was doing. Everyone here (except Rachel) had heard the Tellarite story—from Kieran. He loved recounting it, though it was hard to say which he enjoyed more: embarrassing Fabian by telling it behind his back or embarrassing Fabian by telling it in front of him.

By telling it now, Fabian assured everyone that none of the dead would be forgotten, but that the living were, as Gold had said, moving on.

Eventually, the party broke up, though some decided to stick around for coffee, tea, and fruit in the living room. More stories were exchanged, and some started talking about the modifications and improvements to the *Vinci*—the addition of guest quarters, for example, as well as the expansion of the hololab, the more versatile tractor beams, and the industrial replicator.

Sonya Gomez wasn't sure if she was going to be able to face going back up there. It had been one thing to reconcile her own feelings of anger toward Gold and her ambivalence about Kieran. Even there, she still, weeks later, had no idea what answer she was going to give Kieran to his marriage proposal. All she knew for sure was that she missed him terribly.

Tomorrow, she'd find out if she could go on without him.

## About the Author

KEITH R.A. DECANDIDO is the codeveloper of *Star Trek: S.C.E.*, and has previously written *Fatal*

Error, Cold Fusion, Here There Be Monsters, and the two-part War Stories; he also cowrote the two-part Invincible with David Mack. His other Star Trek work ranges from the novels Diplomatic Implausibility and Demons of Air and Darkness to the two-book series The Brave and the Bold (the first single story to encompass all five TV shows) to the comic book Perchance to Dream to the novella "Horn and Ivory." Keith is flooding the market with his prose at the end of 2003. His short fiction will grace the pages of Deep Space Nine: Prophecy and Change and New Frontier: No Limits in September and October; October will also see the release of his Star Trek The Lost Era novel The Art of the Impossible; and he'll be debuting his Star Trek: I.K.S. Gorkon series in November and December with the books A Good Day to Die and Honor Bound—these will be the first Star Trek novels to focus exclusively on the franchise's most popular aliens, the Klingons. Keith, whose work has been praised by Publishers Weekly, TV Zone, Dreamwatch, Cinescape, and several Web-zines, is also the editor of the groundbreaking anthology Imaginings, the author of many novels, short stories, and nonfiction books in the worlds of Buffy, Farscape, Andromeda, Marvel Comics, Xena, Doctor Who, and many more items that continue to keep him from ever getting enough sleep. You can tell him how sick unto death you are of him by e-mailing him at [keith@decandido.net](mailto:keith@decandido.net), laugh at his Web site at [DeCandido.net](http://DeCandido.net), and justify his pitiful existence by joining his official fan club at [KRADfanclub.com](http://KRADfanclub.com).

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