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## ISHTAR RISING BOOK 2

Michael A. Martin & Andy Mangels



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# Chapter

## 1

Stardate 53798.2—First Officer’s Log, Commander Sonya Gomez. Theda Vinci’s mission to aid in Project Ishtar, the Venus Terraforming Project, has taken a turn for the worse. While the initial phase of “blowing off” Venus’s turbulent atmosphere with specially designed force fields was successful, an unforeseen consequence has been a series of volcanic upheavals that are threatening the ground stations on the surface—not to mention the viability of Project Ishtar. For now, our primary concern is evacuating the personnel in Aphrodite Station, which is the ground station in the most immediate danger. I am leading an away team in a shuttlecraft to begin that evac.

\* \* \*

As Domenica Corsi and Fabian Stevens piloted ShuttlecraftKwolek toward Venus, Commander Sonya Gomez sat just behind the cockpit, studying the readouts on the small display in front of her. This is going to be close, she thought, her entire body knotted with the tension that only an urgent engineering crisis could create.

She swiveled in her chair and looked back at P8 Blue, who was sitting in the specially constructed slope-backed chair near another small bank of instruments.

“How are those numbers holding up, Pattie?”

“It’s going to be a rough ride, but we should be able to make it through the force fields with minimal loss of structural integrity,” she said.

Seated beside Pattie, Lieutenant Commander Tev lifted his gaze from a tactical display and spoke toward the cockpit. “Commander Corsi, make sure you approach the force-field boundary at exactly the calculated angle. Miss it by the smallest margin and you could bounce us off the field lines and back into space.”

“Or it could be even worse,” Pattie said, clattering her mandibles for a moment and making a strange

sound that Gomez translated as her version of splat! “To coin a phrase, we might be squashed like a bug.”

Gomez smiled at the self-deprecating humor, but Corsi only grunted in response, obviously concentrating on her flying. A little humor certainly didn’t hurt, given the unrelenting grimness of their current situation.

One of the project’s technicians had provided them with the vibrational frequencies of the force fields, so that they could penetrate them and try to get down to Aphrodite Station before the approaching lava flow destroyed it. If that hasn’t happened already, Gomez thought. Recent sensor readings had revealed that the lava was moving toward the ground station far more quickly than had originally been apparent. And the Kwolek’s passage through the topologically complex, interlacing force-field network was bound to be tricky, even with the vibrational frequency data. And once down, they might have only seconds to effect any sort of rescue, most likely a hastily improvised one.

“Aphrodite Station, this is Shuttlecraft Kwolek. Please respond.” Gomez keyed several panels on the touchscreen, modulating back and forth across the gamut of usable frequencies, but all that came through was a crackle of static. There wasn’t even an amplitude spike to imply that anyone might be trying to respond. This rescue mission might be completely in vain. But there’s no way of knowing that for certain except by making the attempt.

“Sensors still show nothing,” P8 said. “But I’m reading some very strong subsurface rumbles, with shear waves, compression waves, and crust motions I’ve never seen before.”

Great, Gomez thought. “What do you make of it?”

“I think the lava inundation could accelerate even further,” P8 said. “We’re running out of time.”

“Doing my best,” Corsi said through clenched teeth. The forward windows revealed only noxious yellow and brown gases that confounded any sense of direction. If one tried to measure the Kwolek’s motion by the available visual cues, the shuttle might as well have been standing still.

Judging from the feel of the inertial dampers in the deck plating, Gomez knew that Corsi had slowed the shuttle considerably in the last few seconds. Tev checked a panel and announced, “Three hundred meters to outer force-field boundary. Two hundred fifty. One seventy-five. Seventy-five. Fifty. Twenty-five.”

The atmosphere outside the forward windows had grown so dense, thanks to Project Ishtar’s force fields, that they had the look of a solid wall. Gomez reflexively checked her shoulder harness as Corsi and Stevens flew the Kwolek toward that apparently impregnable barrier at a steeply decelerating rate.

“Make sure our shield frequencies still match Project Ishtar’s,” Gomez said.

“Checking,” Pattie said, tapping at her console with multiple extremities. “We still have a positive match.”

“Confirmed,” said Tev. “But we still don’t know exactly how passing through multiply interleaved force fields will affect the shield-frequency compatibility.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” grumbled Corsi, turning to glance at Tev.

“Eyes on the road, Dom,” Stevens said.

“Force-field boundary now ten meters from ventral hull,” Pattie said, then continued counting down

quickly. “Now!”

For a moment, the Kwolek was suspended in the air, like a fly caught in amber, and then it was pushed downward with tremendous force. Gomez grabbed the edge of her console even as her body slammed upward against the harness. The shuttle’s engines and inertial dampers both let out a sharp whine before the ship wobbled, then finally steadied and quieted.

“Now that was a ride,” Stevens said with a grin.

“Did the fields close up all right behind us?” Gomez asked.

“Yes,” P8 replied. “That jolt we felt was from the superpressurized gases that followed us through the aperture for a nanosecond or so.”

The viewscreens were clearer now, though the air was tinted a dingy goldenrod hue, as though saturated with pollen. Gomez tried the communicator again. “Aphrodite Station, this is Shuttlecraft Kwolek. Please respond.” As before, nothing issued from the console speakers except a burst of background static. Gomez smacked her palm against her leg in frustration.

“We’re getting low enough to see something,” Stevens said, pointing forward.

“That doesn’t look good,” said Corsi, unnecessarily.

As they descended further, the forward windows presented a relatively unobstructed view of Ground Station Aphrodite—or rather, what was left of it. The roughly disk-shaped, twenty-meter-diameter facility had been built on a small mesa-like bluff. Part of that bluff had crumbled, and had taken a substantial section of the station’s external pressure dome with it.

And surrounding the partially shattered mesa was an almost blindingly bright, white-hot magma sea.

“There’s no way anything could still be alive down there,” said Tev matter-of-factly.

“We don’t know that yet,” said Gomez. “We have to find out for sure. Take us in closer, Domenica.”

“That lava flow is getting closer, too,” P8 said. “It’s almost reached the facility’s main level.”

“The sensors are still being confused by the ionized atmosphere,” Tev said. “So unless the survivors get outside, a transporter lock’s out of the question.”

Gomez nodded grimly. “Then we’re going to have to get them out some other way.”

“They can’t go out in this soup without being immolated,” Stevens said. “Even the best environmental suit wouldn’t last more than a few seconds out there.”

Corsi glanced at Gomez. “Even if we could get them outside in EV suits, where am I supposed to land this beast? The roof’s too unstable. It’s barely able to hold up its own weight, let alone ours.”

Gomez studied the partially collapsed roof, which was glowing a dull red in the places where the Venusian atmosphere had begun to melt it. A structure that looked a lot like a water tank sat precariously on the roof’s far edge. Was there some way to make use of that?

“I think I know what to do,” P8 said, rising from her chair. Gomez noticed that the Nasat also seemed to be examining the station’s roof very carefully. “And I’m the only one who can do it.”

“What do you have in mind?” Gomez wanted to know.

Pattie’s gaze grew intense. “First, I’ll need some of our construction tools. . . .”

## Chapter

## 2

As the shuttle hovered scarcely more than three meters above the station’s damaged roof, the air below it shimmered for a moment. The transporter beam dissipated with agonizing sluggishness, finally leaving P8 Blue standing on the roof, her hard carapace exposed to the worst Venus had to offer. Strapped to her back was a large duranium locker that contained—she hoped—everything she needed to rescue whomever she found here.

In addition to the oppressive, caustic air—which, fortunately, Project Ishtar’s force fields had thinned just enough for her to survive, at least temporarily—P8 could feel the intense heat from the magma that was surrounding the building. But she knew that as bad as it was for her, it would be far worse for anyone who lacked the advantage of her carapace. The natural membranes covering her eyes allowed her to see where she was going, and she wouldn’t need oxygen for quite some time. She ran to the edge of the roof, then scuttled over the side, her eight hands having to work harder than she expected to maintain a grip on the structure’s smooth polyduranium alloy.

As she came perilously close to the ground—and to the rising tide of detritus-speckled lava—she found the airlock’s hatch controls. It was a bit tricky entering the code from an upside-down orientation, but she managed, then crawled into the airlock as the door hissed open. Once inside she punched a button on a keypad, feeling greatly relieved once the hatch closed smoothly behind her.

The airlock’s fans had only begun pumping out the Venusian air, enabling the Nasat to speak. Fortunately, the tympanic membrane with which her body produced sound did not require her to exhale any of her precious oxygen. Tapping her combadge, P8 said, “I’ve entered the outer airlock. Can you read me?”

A moment of silence passed, then another, and finally a crackling voice came through. It was Gomez. “—es we re—you—”

“Your signal is weak, but at least we can communicate.” She saw the green light that indicated the outer airlock’s atmosphere was now breathable, as well as the air beyond the inner lock. She realized that at least some of the internal bulkheads must have closed in time to prevent a complete environmental compromise, like that suffered by Ground Station Hesperus. There might be survivors here after all. But with the Venusian atmosphere now cooking many of the station’s interior spaces as well as the external ablative shielding, it was only a matter of time before the interior bulkheads succumbed to the inevitable.

Just like the da Vincihull did at Galvan VI.

The ground rumbled, reminding P8 of the rising tide of lava outside, a danger that threatened to render all other hazards moot.

Putting thoughts of the *Vinci*'s all-too-recent mission in which they'd lost over half their crew to the back of her mind, she said into her combadge, "I'm going in," and opened the interior airlock and exited into a hallway. She found the air stale and ozone-laced, but at least marginally breathable. Life support must be down, she thought. Only a few of the lights were working. She passed what appeared to be someone's personal quarters. The doors were open, but she didn't see anyone inside.

"Hello? Is anyone here?" Her voice echoed in the corridor. Breaking a tricorder out of the sealed tool kit she carried, she activated the device. A smile came to her mandibles almost immediately. Tapping her combadge, she said. "I read eight life-signs, the entire station's complement. They're all grouped together. They seem to be stressed by failures in the air-recyclers and other life-support equipment."

"—opy that," Gomez's voice crackled.

P8 made her way into the main control room, but nobody was there. She noticed that anything that wasn't bolted down had been thrown about by the seismic disturbances. The groundquakes had obviously hit this place hard.

Up a short set of stairs, she saw movement through the broad window of what she assumed was an office. Squeezing her bulk up the stairs, she pounded on the door. Through the window, she saw a group of technicians clustered together in the dimly lit room. Four were fully conscious, two were a bit wobbly, one appeared delirious, and another was unconscious and bleeding from a laceration above his right eye.

When one of them opened the door, P8 entered and set her locker down on the floor. Opening it, she said, "We don't have much time. I need each of you to get into these EV suits, and quickly."

As the workers scrambled to don the lightweight emergency suits she pulled from the locker, P8 explained how to seal them. The first man to finish suiting up began pulling the unconscious man into a second suit, while a woman assisted her delirious coworker.

"How are we going to get out of here?" a woman asked, eyeing her suit skeptically. "These things won't last long outside, even if the air is a bit thinner now."

P8 wondered why it had taken so long for someone to point that out. But there was little time for explanations. She decided to keep it brief. "If I could get you outside, we might get a transporter lock on you all, if not for all the ionic distortions out there." To the skeptical woman, she added, "And you're right—you couldn't survive long outside, even in an EV suit."

"Then how—"

"Is that tank on top of the building what I think it is?" P8 interrupted, wishing the *Vinci*'s sensors had been working reliably enough to have already answered her question.

"It's water," said one of the men. "Mostly for equipment coolant and radiation protection."

P8 nodded, picking up a small tool kit and a phaser rifle from the locker's interior. She maglocked the tool kit to her belt and slung the weapon over her hard-carapaced shoulder. "Tank looks to be intact, too. But we'll need to test it, and quickly. Can you drain it from in here?"

The man looked puzzled, but answered in spite of that. "Yes."



“Then do it!” P8 couldn’t remember the last time she had pushed her tympanic membrane so hard. But her shout—or perhaps the phaser rifle on her shoulder—seemed to have the desired effect. One of the technicians immediately entered a command into a nearby computer terminal.

If this doesn’t work, we may all be dead very soon.

Another two minutes passed before everyone had completely suited up and checked all seals and connections. P8 then led the group out of the office, with two of them carrying their injured companion. On the main control floor, several inches of water had already accumulated on the deck, flowing down through a hatchway at the room’s far end. From the rush of sound coming from the room beyond, P8 gathered that the bulk of the drainage was headed elsewhere.

Let’s just hope the water inside that tank wasn’t the only thing keeping it from being flattened by the atmospheric pressure out there, she thought.

The group made its way through the hatch and into a room that reminded P8 of the engineering section from some low-tech, pre-Federation Earth starship. From the ceiling, a series of pipes dripped water—the remnants of the contents of the rooftop tank.

P8 shouldered the phaser rifle and trained it on the area around the pipes. The phaser beam cut through the structure, and a neatly circular section of roof about a meter and a half in diameter fell to the deck with a clatter and a splash.

“Get everybody up there,” P8 yelled. “Into the tank!”

One of the men protested, shouting from within his EV suit. “I still say this is crazy!”

P8 nodded. “Maybe. But it’s your best chance to stay alive.”

Using a set of wall-rungs and pipes, the first pair of workers reached the hole and climbed up. P8 could hear a hollow gong sound as they clambered within. Using the flashlight mounted on her middle right arm, P8 shined a light up into the hole. The first two men’s arms emerged from the aperture, and they began pulling up the others.

P8 slung the phaser rifle over her back and grabbed the unconscious scientist, then started to carry him up the walls, bringing up the rear of the party. Balancing carefully, P8 handed the man up to the others, then clung to the lip of the hole for a moment.

A fast search of her toolbox yielded a small magnetic grapnel, which she aimed down at the section of metal she had just cut away. She aimed, fired, and the flukes made contact. Pulling on the grapnel with four of her limbs, she quickly took possession of the metal disk.

Using the phaser to weld the disk back into place took barely another two minutes.

The building shook, as though the molten rock outside had grown tired of being ignored. The already sloping floor suddenly listed even more sharply. Tortured metal creaked and groaned, and P8 could hear a hard wind keening outside. The roof is going.

P8’s combadge crackled. The voice belonged to Commander Gomez. “—ting rough out there, Pattie. How’s it comi—”

Keying her combadge, P8 said, "We're out of time, sir. Please hit the switch." And hope my welds hold.

"—ou got it, Pat—" came Gomez's scratchy reply.

The tank suddenly rang as if something massive had struck it, and then a hum engulfed it, vibrating the polyalloy walls as the Kwolek's tractor beam—usually used for construction projects—separated the tank from its rooftop moorings.

But there was no inrush of hot carbon dioxide gas. The air was stale but remained breathable. The tank's seams—including the ones P8 had just created—were holding, at least for the moment. She hoped they wouldn't fail until after the Kwolek had lofted the tank to an altitude where the temperature and pressure would allow Ground Station Aphrodite's staff to rely on their environmental suits for survival.

The tank was buffeted from side to side by the increasingly powerful winds. Despite that, P8 Blue felt certain that her plan was going to work. As long as Corsi doesn't smack into the force fields at the wrong angle on her way back out of here.

• • •

"I'll be damned," Stevens said with a big grin, looking up from his instruments. "We just caught ourselves eight humans and a pillbug."

Gomez grinned back. "Tractor beam status?"

"Holding steady," Tev said.

"Headed for orbit," Corsi said, anticipating Gomez's next order. "Course laid in for Ishtar Station. Quarter impulse."

As they rose through the air, Gomez adjusted one of the console viewers to get an aft view. Below the Kwolek, Ground Station Aphrodite was crumbling and melting into nothingness, shaken apart by groundquakes and consumed by the molten mantle of Venus.

Corsi piloted the shuttle swiftly upward, passing the swirling ochre cloud bands, moving slowly but deftly through the force-field network, and finally grazing the edge of space, where Ishtar Station's crew managed to beam the people being ferried in the tank to safety.

Gomez keyed the companel and spoke. "Gomez to Captain Gold. We've just completed a rather...unorthodox rescue. All crew members of Aphrodite Station are out of danger."

"Good work, Gomez. Now we just have to save therestof the planet."

Gold's words struck her hard. As Tev beamed P8 Blue back aboard the Kwolek, Gomez's earlier jubilation had abruptly died. After all, not even both the da Vinci's shuttles could pull off Pattie's little trick at all the other ground stations, even if the Nasat engineer could be in two places at once. The planetary force-field network still remained dangerously stalled, geological upheavals threatened to engulf still more of the planet's crust in very short order, and the transporters remained unable to haul the people stranded elsewhere on the surface out of harm's way.

Gomez knew that solving those problems had to take priority now that the Aphrodite team was out of

immediate danger. Otherwise, she thought, what about the dozen other staffed stations down there? And what happens to Soloman?

She watched in silence as one of her instruments displayed a schematic of the intricately fluctuating nodes and energy lines that made up Project Ishtar's force-field network. Problem Number One, she decided, scowling at the image.

"You still there, Gomez?" said Gold over the still-open channel, his voice free of static now that the shuttle had made low orbit. Gomez realized with a start that she'd been woolgathering.

"Captain," she said, suddenly galvanized by a new idea. "I think we may have to try something really risky next...."

## Chapter

### 3

The columns of numbers that speed-scrolled across Soloman's screen were suddenly anything but understandable, logical, or predictable. The mathematical constraints of the force-field network were quickly taking on characteristics that reminded him of one of the chaoticdrad cacophonies to which Carol Abramowitz was so fond of listening. It took all the speed his hands could muster to continue feeding revised force-field parameters into the system in time to prevent a chain reaction of node failures that would have brought half the planet's dense atmosphere crashing down onto their heads with nearly meteoric force.

And the numbers continued to change at an ever-accelerating rate.

Soloman felt a hard, rolling shock radiating from somewhere beneath his chair. It wasn't unlike the jolt one might feel aboard a starship during a phaser attack. Groundquake! he thought, nearly falling out of the torrent of numbers that roared past his eyes.

A gabble of nearby voices engulfed him, those of the startled human team members mixing with the shriller-than-normal ultrarapid codespeech of the paired Bynars, who seemed to be struggling every bit as hard as Soloman was to make sense of the swiftly altering datastream.

Then he heard someone shouting above the din. The voice belonged to Adrienne Paulos, second only to the project's head, Dr. Pascal Saadya, who was frantically giving instructions to her technical staff. "Keep those equatorial force-field nodes stable! If the z-axis keeps drifting, we'll have another Hesperus on our hands."

Or any number of Hesperis, as Fabian might say. Soloman thought this was an odd time for the tactical specialist's wry sense of humor to start rubbing off on him.

The ground station rumbled and groaned, but stopped shaking within a few moments, at least for the time being. But the vocalizations of the other two Bynars remained shrill—almost panicked, to Soloman's sensitive ears—as the team continued concentrating on maintaining the wayward force fields.

"Incoming message from upstairs, Adrienne," someone said. The voice belonged to one of the human technicians, a male human who was working somewhere out of Soloman's field of vision.

The on-site team leader acknowledged by opening up a comm channel with an audible snap. “Ground Station Vesper here. Go ahead, Ishtar.”

A furious blast of static preceded Dr. Saadya’s reply. “Adrienne, are you and your team all right?”

“We’re all in one piece. But we’ve picked up some pretty severe seismic activity down here.”

“We’ve detected it, too. It’s centered around Alpha Regio, near Ground Station Aphrodite.”

His mind still shooting a numeric rapids, Soloman spared a moment to make a quick calculation. Alpha Regio lay over two thousand kilometers to the southwest of Ground Station Vesper. Whatever subterranean forces had been roused there must be powerful indeed.

“How close is Aphrodite to the epicenter?” Paulos wanted to know.

“Near enough to interfere with our transporter locks there.” Saadya’s voice was getting progressively more obscured and distorted by static, presumably from air that was being rapidly ionized by large-scale volcanic eruptions. “We can’t raise them at the moment. We can only hope they weren’t leveled outright.”

“Dear God,” said Paulos. “Don’t tell me we just happened to execute Project Ishtar on the same day the Big One finally decided to give the planet’s crust a complete pave-over.”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” Saadya said, an edge of barely contained panic in his voice. “Except that the da Vinci has sent a shuttle down to rescue the Aphrodite personnel before the station is inundated by the magma flow itself. In the meantime, you and your team have to do whatever it takes to keep the force-field network up and running.”

Soloman knew that without the force-field network, Aphrodite’s fate would be sealed, along with that of the rest of the ground stations. There was no way Vesper or any of the other surface facilities could outlast Aphrodite for very long. Should the force-field nodes collapse while still holding millions of cubic kilometers of atmosphere in high-altitude suspension, the abrupt release of kinetic energy as the atmosphere resettled would scour away every structure on the planet’s surface within minutes. The protective shielding would be pulverized and everyone inside would be reduced to vapor without leaving so much as a bone or a tooth to be buried. Soloman shuddered at the thought.

The numbers. Don’t lose your grip on the numbers.

“Understood,” Paulos said, replying to Saadya with an unsteady voice. She, too, must have worked out the consequences of failure. “Let’s hope that shuttle can do some good. In the meantime, it’s all we can do just to hold the force field in place, without either expanding or contracting it.”

The drift of the numbers racing past Soloman’s eyes quickly confirmed that any attempt to use the force-field network to continue moving the atmosphere outward would greatly increase the risk of causing a catastrophic collapse. And the team had never tried reversing the motion of the force fields to create a controlled settling of the atmosphere. Therefore the force fields had to be maintained right where they currently were, half-expanded, so near the fast-moving seventy-kilometer atmospheric layer that it took all of Soloman’s concentration just to continue following and reacting to the perpetually changing figures—figures that constituted an increasingly imprecise mathematical model of a complex system that was rapidly descending into chaos and entropy.

Soloman spared a quick look toward the console where his paired, data-efficient brethren worked, their strident voices keening in near-desperation.

Eventhe they are beginning to fall behind. How can a crippled singleton hope to do any better?

His head beginning to throb with the fruitless effort of following the figures, Soloman knew that he should not have allowed the bigotry of 1011 and 1110 to affect him to such a degree that he was thinking of himself with the slur “singleton.” He was also rapidly becoming convinced that if another single bit of data were to impinge on his consciousness, his head would surely explode.

His combadge chose that precise moment to speak. “Gold to Soloman.”

Please, not now. “Soloman here.”

“We’re monitoring your situation closely.”

For reasons that puzzled him, the captain’s remark struck Soloman as humorous. He made a mental note to ask Dr. Lense, or perhaps Fabian, about that later. Assuming, of course, that he would be alive later.

“Thank you, sir,” was all he could think of to say in response.

“I’ll give you the bad news first, Soloman,” Gold continued. “We can’t beam anybody back from any of the surface stations at the moment, and the orbital lab is in the same fix. The ‘holes’ in the force-field net that we beamed you through to get you down there are completely closed up now. And the volcanic activity at Alpha Regio is causing too much high-altitude ionization to risk using the transporter at long range anyway; the high-speed atmospheric layer is spreading it around like a yentarepeating gossip.”

Soloman nodded. The seventy-kilometer superrotational layer could blanket the entire planet in volcanic fallout in just four days—and that was without the extra heat-induced acceleration factor already introduced by the force-field network itself. The entire atmosphere was becoming thoroughly ionized by now. “I understand,” Soloman said. “May I infer that you also have some good news to deliver, Captain?”

Soloman thought he heard Gold chuckle, though he couldn’t be certain. “Gomez just evac’d Ground Station Aphrodite with the Kwolek.”

Someone from Ishtar Station must have just relayed the same news to Paulos’s team, since a brief cheer went up among the busy human technicians.

Gold continued: “Gomez thinks that the engineers might be able to reestablish transporter locks on the other ground stations, at least intermittently.”

“That would certainly be welcome, sir.” There was no trace of irony behind Soloman’s words. “But how can that be done without allowing the force-field network to collapse entirely?” Clearly that wasn’t desirable so long as maintaining the force fields remained essential for keeping all of the ground personnel alive.

“Nobody said this was going to be an easy job, Soloman.”

“Captain, we have our hands full just keeping the force fields from collapsing and swamping everyone

down here with an atmospheric deluge.”

Throughout this exchange, Soloman continued trying to maintain his grasp on the numbers as they ebbed and flowed across his monitor. His hands fluttered quickly across the keypad, feeding revised instructions to the network, the human technicians, and the other Bynars.

His head was pounding, as though it contained a small animal that was determined to escape. The Bynar pair’s tandem dataspeech had risen to an almost ear-splitting screech. The sound resonated across a gap in Soloman’s being, forcibly reminding him of the easy informational intimacy that had been forever ripped from him on the day 111 had died.

If only 111 were here now. I’m certain the four of us, working as paired pairs, could maintain some measure of control over these variables.

And he could feel that the datastream was eluding him. He was rapidly losing his hold on the numbers. He knew that soon he would input a parameter-change incorrectly, causing two or more of the wavering force-field nodes to fall into each other. A chain reaction would quickly ensue, probably faster than even the paired Bynars could react to it. Implosion would follow a fraction of a second later.

And minutes after that he and everyone else who remained on this planet would be reduced to their constituent atoms.

“Just hang in there for as long as you can, Soloman,” Captain Gold said. “Gomez is on her way with the cavalry. I’m sure you and her team will find a solution that everyone can live with. Gold out.”

The comm channel closed, but the cramped control room was anything but silent. The shrill elegance of the datasong the other Bynars sang as they interfaced directly with the linked networks of atmospheric probes and force-field node controls filled Soloman’s soul with melancholy and longing. He wanted desperately to join in their ululations.

Switching on his console’s voice interface, he opened his mouth, adding his voice to the piercing soprano chorus of the paired Bynars.

A Klaxon wailed as a force-field node suddenly collapsed. The first collapse was followed immediately by another. One of the human technicians yelped in terror. Soloman quieted, deactivating his voice interface. He resumed using his hands to input a series of lightning correction factors even as the Bynars altered their dataflow to counterbalance the ebb and flow of the field lines. Somehow, the three of them managed to transfer power in the correct amount, reconfiguring the remaining nodes to compensate for the rapidly accumulating errors. The network was holding steady.

At least until I make my next mistake, he mused sourly. Without a direct interface like that of 1011 and 1110, an otherwise easily avoidable error seemed all but inevitable.

It was intolerable. How can humans be content to dwell outside the flow of the numbers, merely looking in at them? How can they deal with streams of data without knowing the joy of swimming through them?

His skull felt as though it were expanding, until it seemed to him as big as all of space. He began to wonder whether he would suffer a brain hemorrhage before his processing incompetence cost everyone on the planet their lives. Dr. Lense’s stern warning returned to haunt him: There’s a sound physiological reason why your people aren’t called Trynars, Soloman.

A static-shredded voice spoke from his combadge. “Kwolekto Soloman.”

“Here,” he replied curtly, wary of splitting his concentration even by a small amount. The numbers continued to elude him until all he could follow was their general shapes and outlines. Useless.

He recognized the voice that responded as that of Fabian Stevens. “You don’t sound so hot, Soloman.”

“We’re . . . having some technical problems down here.”

Commander Gomez’s voice replaced that of Stevens. “You don’t say. How is the force-field network holding up?”

“Barely. But that could change at any moment. The force-field data is changing faster than the team can cope with it.”

“Even with three Bynars working the problem?” replied a chiming, static-distorted voice that Soloman recognized belatedly as belonging to P8 Blue.

Soloman glanced over at 1110, who happened to be looking his way at that exact moment. The other Bynar made no attempt to hide his revulsion.

“We work optimally in pairs rather than in odd-number groups,” Soloman said.

“As our captain might say, ‘optimal, schmoptimal,’” Gomez said.

“Excuse me?” Soloman said, trying to ignore the rhythmic throbbing in his temples.

“I mean we’re going to have to wing it, Soloman.”

“Wing it how, exactly, Commander Gomez? Has there been a change of plans?”

“We need to find a way to deactivate the force fields—safely—if we’re going to have any chance of getting everyone off the surface. But first we have to lower the volume of atmosphere that hasn’t been pushed high enough yet to be blown off into space.”

Ice slowly crept up the length of Soloman’s back. “I understand, Commander. But the force fields have distributed the atmosphere asymmetrically toward the sunlit side, and that makes running the process in reverse extremely complicated. We never ran any simulations of that procedure.”

“I hope Dr. Saadya recalls that I suggested he do just that before this fiasco started.” This time the voice belonged to Lieutenant Commander Corsi, who sounded extremely unhappy. Soloman was content not to be the target of the security chief’s clearly audible anger.

He noticed that the numbers had begun drifting again. His eyes felt as though they were about to launch from his head like a pair of photon torpedoes. “I’m not quite sure what I should be improvising, Commander Gomez.”

“If we all knew the outcome in advance, Soloman,” Stevens cut in, “then it wouldn’t be improvising, now, would it?”

Soloman knew that his people weren’t noted for their real-time improvisational skills. They were far

more comfortable with laying out and following carefully planned, methodically executed lines of code.

But he could also see that he was rapidly losing control of the numbers. He felt certain that even the basic mathematical shapes and outlines would soon elude him. At least two more critical force-field nodes were in imminent danger of becoming unstable, threatening a lethal chain reaction.

“So much detail,” he said as the numbers took wing. It took a moment for him to realize that he had spoken aloud.

“Don’t sweat the details, Soloman.”

Soloman’s head throbbed painfully as the numbers on the screen continued dancing away, seeming almost to mock him. “This entire project is details, Fabian.”

“No situation is completely about the details. There’s always a bigger picture, if you look carefully for it. Try to think outside the numbers.”

Hadn’t Lense told him nearly the same thing? But hearing Stevens repeat the doctor’s words made them no more comprehensible. His head pounding, Soloman glanced once more at the paired Bynars, who were immersed in the dataflow that seemed about to wash them both away.

He watched them from outside the digital stream, he realized, much as a human might.

Waves of pain coursed through his skull, making him wonder if his efforts to keep up with his paired brethren were finally beginning to kill him, as Dr. Lense had warned, even without an actual three-way organic datalink.

Ground Station Vesper shook and rumbled again, as incalculable pressures sought release from far beneath the Venusian crust.

Pressure, Soloman thought, kneading his crumpled brow. Somehow, I must release the pressure.

Seized by a sudden inspiration, Soloman released the specifics of the numbers from his attention, allowing them to sail away like ships passing over some abstract mathematical horizon. Think only of the bigger picture.

Closing his eyes, he stood, leaning forward across his console to maintain his balance as the planet continued its intermittent lurching and bucking. Then he fixed his gaze upon 1011 and 1110, whose attention had been attracted by his sudden movement. The Bynars looked askance at him, their dark eyes hooded beneath their smooth, pale brows. Soloman noticed then that even Paulos and the trio of human technicians had paused briefly in their labors to look in his direction, their curiosity and hope as evident as their fear.

“I believe I may have found a solution,” Soloman said, the pain in his skull still oscillating like a pulsar. It took all the effort he could muster to keep himself from resuming his fruitless chase of the force-field parameter figures.

The Bynar pair appeared to be about to make a tart response when Paulos chimed in, stepping on their words. “We’re listening, Soloman. We don’t seem to have many good alternatives left. Or a lot of time either.”



Soloman nodded, struggling to master his own rising fear. Tapping his combadge, he said, “Commander Gomez, I will require your assistance, as well as that of the *theda Vinci*. But everything will have to be done quickly....”

## Chapter

### 4

“Two of the equatorial force-field nodes just failed,” Stevens reported. “The rest of the network seems to be trying to compensate, but there’s a time-lag while the Bynars reinterpret the atmospheric models and decide which of the remaining active nodes to reinforce, and by how much.”

Great, thought Gomez, her knuckles white as she clung to the armrest of the seat directly behind the two pilot’s stations. The little shuttle lurched and bucked, and Gomez watched anxiously as Corsi piloted the *Kwolek* through swirls of dense, hot vapor while brief but intense cloudbursts of concentrated sulfuric acid sluiced the hull.

On its way planetward once again—following the same parabola whose upward arc had just enabled the orbiting *Ishtar Station* to beam the rescued *Aphrodite* personnel to safety—the *Kwolek* dived swiftly through Venus’s upper atmosphere. Normally, the Venusian air at this altitude—around eighty kilometers above the surface—would be somewhat calm, a relatively thin haze of carbon dioxide gas and the occasional minuscule sulfurous particle. But with the upward push that Project *Ishtar*’s force fields were imparting to the lower atmospheric levels, the air at this height was far denser than usual, and had been whipped into a frenzy of chaotic motion. The effect was only intensifying the deeper the shuttle dived toward the upper edge of the planet-girdling force-field network.

“Some stretch of weather we’re having, isn’t it?” Stevens said, glancing out through the forward viewport, whose transparent aluminum was already beginning to show signs of scoring from the increasingly caustic atmosphere. Stevens sat in the secondary cockpit chair, where he worked the console to Corsi’s immediate right.

Corsi said, “Better keep your eyes on the road, Fabe, or you’re walking back to the *theda Vinci*.”

“I may have to let you handle the driving by yourself, Dom,” Stevens replied, not sounding chastened in the least. “Say the word once we reach optimal distance from the field’s equator.”

“When we get there, you’ll be the second one to know,” Corsi said, apparently adjusting the sensors in an attempt to use the nearest free-floating atmospheric probes as navigational aids. “I just wonder why Soloman’s ‘optimal distance’ had to be the one place on this planet where winds are strongest.”

“Chalk it up to Finagle’s Laws,” Gomez said.

“We’re receiving more revised force-field specs from the Bynar,” Tev announced. His rotund body was wedged into one of the port-side chairs, his attention riveted to the console display before him. P8 Blue stood nearby, leaning forward to reach her own customized display. Gomez noticed that her tough, chitinous carapace was marred by sootlike streaks, apparently singed during the rescue of the Ground Station *Aphrodite* team. Fortunately, the *Nasat* seemed to be in no pain.

“Good,” Gomez said, refocusing her own attention on the small science console beside her. A new

stream of data was marching across the display, moving faster than she could read it, let alone interpret it.

The little ship lurched again, even harder this time. The external noise baffling did little to mitigate the howling of the corrosive Venusian winds.

“Full stop relative to the planet’s surface,” Corsi announced. “I’m keeping station nearly at the dead center of the superrotational layer, just like Soloman asked. I just hope he knows what he’s... what we’re doing.”

An alarm on Gomez’s console suddenly revealed three more key node failures, even as Soloman’s force-field reconfiguration data continued to appear. Soon the node collapses would spread uncontrollably throughout the system, leading to an irreversible planetwide collapse. With the data changing this quickly, if Soloman doesn’t know what he’s doing, then nobody does.

The whine of the shuttle’s overtaxed station-keeping thrusters soon drowned out the keening of the wind as the small vessel struggled to maintain its position. Normally, the winds at this altitude topped out at around three-hundred and fifty kilometers per hour, a respectable velocity. But thanks to Project Ishtar’s atmospheric “blowoff,” the air here was currently moving at perhaps four or five times that speed. As the shuttle jumped and bucked, Gomez began to wonder whether the engine nacelles would fall victim to shearing forces. If we still had the old shuttles, we wouldn’t have been able to pull this off, she thought grimly. Theda Vinci’s previous shuttlecraft, the Franklin and the Archimedes, were lost at Galvan VI, and were replaced during Theda Vinci’s recent overhaul with the Kwolek and the Shirley. Both were fresh out of the shipyards, with the most up-to-date shielding and toughest hull alloy Starfleet science had to offer—and, Gomez thought, much better able to withstand this mess.

“A pity we couldn’t keep station in the clear-air zone around twenty kilometers closer to the surface,” said Pattie, her vaguely crystalline voice sounding like the peal of a bell. “The temperature and pressure are greater down there, but the wind problem would be negligible.”

“Fantasizing about the impossible is no help,” Tev said, his porcine countenance sour. “If we were down that deep, we would be too far from the force-field network to do it any good.”

“We’d also be on the wrong side of those fields,” Corsi said. “Not a very good place to be if the whole thing really does come crashing down.”

The Kwolek rumbled, its various overtaxed systems shrieking in a chorus of technological agony. Gomez could only hope that the procedure they were about to undertake would be finished before even Starfleet science’s best gave in.

A burst of static issued from the comm system, followed by the voice of Soloman, evidently still doing his best to help Team Ishtar keep everything together down at Ground Station Vesper.

“Soloman to Kwolek. Have you received the new data?”

“Yup,” Stevens said. “Along with the targeting coordinates. We’re ready to tie our deflectors into the equatorial nodes you specified. Assuming we can spare the power, anyhow.”

Doing her own quick mental calculation, Gomez looked significantly at P8 Blue and Tev for their input.

“It will be close,” Pattie said, looking up from her console. “But I believe we can spare the required shield power with enough of a safety margin to avoid destroying the shuttle. At least until Theda Vinci

arrives to take over for us.”

It would have been nice to have the luxury of waiting until the da Vinci arrived before beginning the process of propping up the force-field network from the outside. But given the larger ship’s current position in its orbit, that simply wasn’t an option.

“What’s the da Vinci’s ETA?” Gomez asked Stevens.

“About one minute and thirty-eight seconds. With maximum output to the network and minimal shielding for us, our shield generators and thrusters ought to hold out for nearly twice that long.”

Tev snorted. “Shuttlecraft shield generators were not designed to take this sort of punishment. I don’t like this one bit.”

“Neither do I,” Corsi echoed, though she remained intent on her flying. “Any more than I like placing the da Vinci’s first and second officers both into harm’s way at the same time.”

“Not your call to make, Domenica,” Gomez said gently. “Especially when so many other people are still in danger.” I just hope you learned the true meaning of stubbornness when you tried to make Tev and me stay behind.

Soloman’s static-laden voice came over the comm channel once again. “There’s so much pressure. So much pressure. Kwolek, da Vinci, please help....” Soloman trailed off again into the ionized hash of subspace background noise.

Gomez recognized the fear and desperation in the Bynar’s voice. And though she wasn’t happy about having had no opportunity to check his figures before acting on them, she knew she could afford to deliberate no longer.

“Fabian,” she said, “hook our shield-generator output into the network grid, and give it every erg Soloman asked for.”

There. I’ve rolled the dice. If chance smiled upon their efforts here, the prize would be the lives of the dozens of people still trapped on the planet’s broiling surface.

If not...

Gomez watched as Stevens nodded, deliberately entered a brief command sequence into his console, then tapped the EXECUTE button.

Then the Kwolek lurched again, as though drop-kicked by a giant. Gomez heard the sickening sounds of rending metal competing against the noxious Venusian wind’s renewed fury.

## Chapter

# 5

“There’s so much pressure. So much pressure. Kwolek, da Vinci, please help....”

“Hang in there, Soloman,” said Captain Gold, leaning forward in his command chair. I shouldn’t have let them replace the whole seat after Galvan VI. I only use the edge of the damn thing anyway.

Gold watched the viewer like a raptor stalking its prey. The darkened limb of the planet gave way to the bright, crescent-shaped terminator. The ochre-and-black swirls of the uppermost cloudtops rose to greet the da Vinci’s prow. The ship shuddered as she entered a region of increasing atmospheric turbulence.

Gold turned his chair toward the aft section of the bridge, where Lieutenant Anthony Shabalala busied himself at the tactical station. “What’s our ETA, Shabalala?”

“We should be within visual range of the Kwolek any second.”

“There!” Lieutenant Wong cried out. Gold spun his chair forward in time to see his conn officer pointing at the viewer. Near dead center, the acid-scoured hull of the shuttlecraft was now intermittently visible through the endless churn of the harsh Venusian clouds.

“Her hull is buckling and they’re losing power,” Shabalala reported. “Their shield generator can no longer support the collapsing force-field nodes. But at least all the life signatures aboard the shuttle are holding strong.”

“Good. Wong, bring us to within five clicks of the Kwolek and hold our position there.”

“Aye, sir,” said Wong as he executed the order.

“Shabalala, inform Gomez that the cavalry has arrived.”

Shabalala scowled. “I’m having trouble raising them, Captain. Their comm system may have suffered some damage. Wait a minute, I’m getting something. . . . Dr. Saadya is hailing us from the orbital station.”

“On screen.”

The shuttlecraft’s intermittent image was abruptly replaced by the static-distorted visage of Pascal Saadya. The unsmiling planetologist seemed to have aged at least a decade during the past hour or so. Watching your life’s work circling the drain can do that to a man, Gold thought, feeling an intense surge of sympathy for his old friend.

Saadya wasted no time on pleasantries. “David, the force-field network is fluctuating so severely now that we’re having trouble maintaining contact with the ground stations. And we can no longer raise your shuttlecraft.”

Gold put on what he hoped was a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, Pas. Some of my best engineers are aboard the Kwolek, and I’m sure they’re still coordinating with Soloman and your ground teams to work the problem.”

“Captain, I believe I can establish a transporter lock at this range,” Shabalala said. “I recommend we beam the Kwolek’s crew to safety now.”

“No!” Saadya shouted, his voice nearly breaking. “Don’t you see? They’re working in real time with an extremely fluid and volatile data situation. You’ll drop the entire Venusian sky right on top of the ground stations if you interrupt what they’re doing!”

But I can't just let this planet eat my shuttle crew either, Gold thought, feeling miserable. He was grimly aware that neither Soloman nor anyone else on the surface could be beamed up unless and until the force-field network—along with the bulk of the atmosphere it had raised but not yet consigned to space—was brought down safely. As long as the force fields remained in a state of chaotic flux, they couldn't maintain the directed-energy-permeable "holes" necessary for safe operation of the transporters.

He also knew that he had been told precious little about the specifics of the ad hoc plan that Soloman and the shuttle crew were presently trying to carry out. There simply hadn't been enough time to go over it in detail. All he really knew about the scheme was that it was heavily dependent upon calculations made on the fly by Soloman, who was working under what might charitably be called less than ideal circumstances.

But Gold trusted his people and their talents implicitly. And he recognized that this was an occasion when it was best that he stay out of their way as much as possible—and to intervene only if circumstances made doing so absolutely necessary.

"Sir?" Shabalala said, dragging Gold harshly back into the here and now. "The Kwolek's hull—"

Coming to a decision, Gold interrupted the tactical officer. "Steady. Extend our shields and structural integrity field to cover the Kwolek, and use our tractor beam to help them maintain their position relative to the shield nodes they're feeding power into. And use the deflector dish to back the Kwolek up with as much power as they can safely take."

"Aye, sir," Shabalala said, and set about entering commands into the tactical station with impressive speed.

Let's just hope we can hold the shuttle together long enough to finish up whatever Gomez and Soloman have started.

"Thank you, David," Saadya said from the viewer, his image rolling and twisting before it broke up entirely. The atmospheric turbulence was obviously growing ever more intense. Not a good sign, Gold ruminated. This plan has gotta work.

He suddenly realized that he had no concrete idea of what success would actually look like. After all, not only had no one ever attempted a project quite like Saadya's, nobody had ever tried to force such a thing into an abrupt about-face right in the middle of the proceedings. Literally anything could happen now.

And my crew is still stuck out there, above it and below it.

\* \* \*

The pressure, Soloman thought as he cradled his head between his long-fingered hands. His cranium felt as though it had tripled in size. The figures on his screen no longer held any meaning whatsoever. He was beginning to see double, and had begun to wonder if he was dying.

Ground Station Vesper shook again. The lights failed, to be replaced moments later by the dim red illumination of the emergency backups. Someone screamed during the momentary darkness. Soloman thought it was one of the Bynars, bereft of even the cold comfort of the computer system. Soloman's own console appeared to be dead, even though the emergency power was functioning.

Soloman closed his eyes, desperately wishing for the ordeal to end, one way or another. The calculations were done, transmitted, and received, and there was no way to refine them further. Even if he could, he wasn't certain how many of the atmospheric probes—the source of the preponderance of the climate and force-field data—were still functioning, given the high-altitude ionization being caused by the volcanic surges. The force-field network would either behave as he had asked it to behave, or else it would wander further into the unpredictable provinces of mathematical chaos.

And kill everyone on the planet, probably including the shuttle crew as well.

The pressure. The people up on the shuttle should have all the data they need. It's up to them now to relieve the pressure.

## Chapter

### 6

No pressure, Soloman, Stevens thought, recalling one of the last intelligible words he'd heard the little Bynar utter before the storm-tossed atmosphere cut off communication between the Kwolek and Ground Station Vesper.

He hoped he hadn't misplaced his faith in Soloman's ability to improvise. Maybe the Bynar's facility with numbers was only an asset in situations that required one to go by the numbers.

This certainly wasn't one of those instances.

The sound of rending, shearing metal jolted Stevens out of his reverie.

"I told you this vessel couldn't stand up to this sort of punishment for long."

"Shut up, Tev," Gomez and Corsi said in a synchronized harmony that would have put a cadre of Borg drones to shame. Pattie's tinkling laughter was barely audible over the roar of the wind.

"Excuse me?" the Tellarite said, a now-familiar dudgeon inflecting his voice.

There was a loud bang, as though something had struck the hull. An alarm Klaxon sounded, and the readouts on Stevens's console suddenly changed. Numerous amber and orange warning lights suddenly shifted to a far friendlier green hue.

Stevens watched a grin spread slowly across Corsi's features like a Venusian sunrise. "Theda Vinci has just arrived. And they're supplying all the power we'll need to finish this."

"How can you tell—" Stevens interrupted himself, watching the rhythmic pulsation of the energy-intake readout that monitored the main power coupling. "Morse code. Our comm system must be down."

Stevens turned in his seat, hoping to share a triumphant smile with Gomez. He was surprised to see a dour expression clouding her face.

"That's great," she said. "But we're still out of contact with Vesper. We can only hope that those last figures Soloman gave us are still precise enough to get the job done safely."

“So do we maintain power for the full duration?” Stevens asked as he quickly rechecked the numbers. Soloman’s last batch of figures had required theKwolek to bolster several key force-field nodes for another eight minutes and twelve seconds.

Gomez sighed. “We don’t have any other choice. Not if we want to keep the sky from falling.”

Corsi’s sharp intake of breath caught Stevens’s attention. “What’s wrong, Dommie?”

For once, the security chief didn’t seem ready to summarily execute him for using her family nickname. A quick glance at his own scanner readout told him why.

A large portion of the force-field network was suddenly twisting itself into an entirely unexpected shape.

Stevens felt a sharp pang of regret at having encouraged Soloman to improvise.

• • •

“Captain!” Shabalala shouted from the tactical station.

Startled, Gold turned his chair around almost quickly enough to cause a whiplash. He saw at once that Shabalala’s dark skin had suddenly gone gray. “What is it?”

“The force-field network is...changing.”

Turning back toward the main viewer, Gold said, “Show me a schematic.”

The static-marbled image of theKwolek, held fast in the complex web of energy radiating from the da Vinci’s main deflector dish, vanished. It was replaced by a simple orange-and-black wire-frame representation of the planet and the constantly fluctuating force-field lattice that surrounded it. Gold looked to a position on the daylit side, about twenty degrees south of the equator, where concentric rings marked the epicenter of the volcanic activity that had already radiated out across the surface in every direction for several hundred kilometers. Noting that the late Ground Station Aphrodite now lay well within the still-spreading volcanic hell, he mouthed a silent prayer of thanks that his people had reached the Aphrodite team before the lava did.

Then he saw that several other ground stations still lay in harm’s way, the nearest of them perhaps another hour or two away from immolation.

Unless his people could find a way to work around the force-field network, all those people—Soloman included—were going to die. They would all expire, one small crew at a time, as each station slowly succumbed to the unleashed furies of the Venusian interior. The same way Galvan VI slowly ate away at my ship, killing people off one by one....

Gold cut off those thoughts and forced himself to study the lines that represented the field network itself, in response to Shabalala’s report. All across the schematic of the planet, the crisscrossing meshwork of field lines—the energetic meridians and parallels that connected hundreds of force-field generation nodes and covered the entire globe—appeared to have maintained a fairly stable, if lopsided, overall shape. The north-south field lines drew shapes that resembled overlapping slices of a strangely oblate orange, bulging out farthest across the planet’s sunward side, which was the only place from which the atmosphere could be successfully “blown off.”

But Gold saw a glaring exception to this general pattern: the portion of the force field that lay above the precise center of the volcanic eruption. Here, the lines of force were actively moving, twisting, and taking on a cylindrical shape that slowly rose above the rest of the world-girdling force field. It extended ever upward, like a tenacious plant determined to pierce the clouds and reach the sun.

“My God,” Shabalala said, his voice pitched scarcely above a whisper. “The network must be malfunctioning.”

From the forward ops station, Ensign Susan Haznedl said, “I don’t think it is, sir.” A lithe young human with strawberry blond hair, Haznedl had recently taken over as the primary operations officer. Two of theda Vinci’s ops personnel had died at Galvan VI, and the other transferred off, so Haznedl was new to the S.C.E. “The motions of those field lines are too—well, orderly, sir. I’ve never seen a failing deflector shield roll itself up into a funnel shape like that.”

Shabalala asked, “You’re saying somebody could be changing the field’s shape deliberately?”

“I think so, yes.”

Gold said nothing, focusing instead on the tale unfolding on the main viewer. As he watched, the single elongated tube of force split itself into two, then four, then eight and more progressively narrower tubes. He quickly lost count of the tubes, so quickly were they appearing, bringing to mind a sped-up recording of living cells dividing ad infinitum. He was, however, able to see that the bases of the force-tubules seemed to plunge themselves deeply beneath the planet’s surface—

—piercing the exact center of seismic and volcanic activity with almost surgical precision.

Gold smiled. “Haznedl, try to get me areal visual on what’s going on down there.”

Also smiling, the young woman turned back to her console and said, “Yes, sir.”

The tactical display vanished, replaced by a hash of static that slowly gave way to a grainy, computer-enhanced image of the Venusian dayside, no doubt relayed down either directly from Ishtar Station or from one of the many automated support satellites that ringed the planet. The resolution was poor, but understandably so given the current local weather.

Gold quickly found the spot where the force-field network had morphed itself into such peculiar shapes. Although the fields themselves were invisible, the material that was rising with projectile speed along the narrow, rapidly multiplying vertical tubes of force was quite noticeable. The material became white-hot as it shot through the cloudtops and into space, passing at least one hundred kilometers above the highest-altitude layers of the atmospheric “blowoff.”

The pitiless brightness of the sun made the nature of the ejected material immediately apparent. Recalling what Soloman had said about needing to relieve pressure, Gold looked around the bridge. He spent a moment watching the awestruck faces at each station as everyone present seemed to grasp the enormity of what they were witnessing.

The main mass of the lava flow was being diverted from the remaining ground stations and flung into a high orbit about Venus. No one seemed able to pry his eyes from the viewer as the molten material continued to be blasted hundreds of kilometers away from the greenhouse-desiccated world below.



The molten material continued trailing fire across the ochre sky, slowly turning dark as it exited the funnel-shaped, spaceward terminus of the reconfigured force-field network, gradually surrendering its heat to the airless void.

Haznedl finally broke the silence that had engulfed the bridge. “Somebody,” the ops officer said, “has obviously figured out how to turn the force-field network into a colossal mass driver.”

“Looks like the pressure may finally be off,” Shabalala said, still looking awed. “The lava’s being funneled off into space.”

Shaking her head, Haznedl said, “This is truly amazing. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Gold sat back in his chair. “Just another day at the office for the S.C.E., Haznedl.”

## Chapter

### 7

Pascal Saadya stood alone in his darkened office, staring down at the great yellow world through the wide transparent aluminum window. As he looked upon the daylight face of Venus, an old joke sprang to mind: What’s the difference between God and a terraformer?

He spoke the punch line aloud. “God doesn’t think he’s a terraformer.”

The bulk of the force-field network—along with more than eighty percent of Venus’s original hothouse atmosphere—had been carefully and safely lowered nearly an hour earlier. The vast majority of the atmospheric probes remained intact and functional. According to a quick report from the ever-busy Adrienne Paulos, all of the Project Ishtar ground crews, as well as the Vinci personnel who had provided emergency assistance, were finally out of immediate danger. However, all but a handful of the ground staff had been evacuated up to Ishtar Station, where they would remain pending a detailed appraisal of the damage sustained by the surface facilities arrayed across the Venusian surface.

Saadya was all too keenly aware that he owed an enormous debt to David Gold and his ingenious engineering team. As well as to one extremely insightful and courageous stray Bynar. Without their help, my ambition and haste would have killed dozens of good people. And laid waste to years of meticulous research.

Saadya watched silently as Soloman’s improvised force-field mass driver continued its work, helping the planet continue to disgorge copious amounts of its fiery insides upward past the limits of the atmosphere and into the infinite gulf of space.

The “Big One”—the global volcanic conflagration Venus experienced every half-billion years or so—had indeed come, thanks to the internal stresses Project Ishtar had unleashed. But unlike earlier occurrences, the current lava flows would not engulf the entire planet. The damage would remain localized around a Greenland-size area, where a pancake-dome volcano had arisen in response to Soloman’s inspiring job of force-field tailoring.

The door chime sounded. “Come,” Saadya said.

He remained facing the planetary fireworks display as the door hissed open, admitting a harsh shaft of artificial light from the outer corridor. From the shape of the trio of shadows that fell across the carpet, he guessed the identities of his visitors at once.

“Hello, David. Soloman. Adrienne. I’m glad you came. I think that watching the fires of creation all alone isn’t nearly so satisfying as sharing the experience with others.”

He expected Gold to make a characteristically acerbic remark. But when he turned to face his old friend, he saw only wonder on his face, which—like those of Soloman and Paulos—was turned toward the cosmic drama unfolding far below.

“It’s incredible, Pas,” Gold said. “And beautiful.”

Spread into long, thin strands that Saadya estimated each measured no more than a few meters across, the ejected Venusian mantle material was rapidly cooling as it arced over the western horizon toward the night side, encircling the planet in a great ellipse along its equator. Of course, these “strands” were nothing of the sort; they were assemblages of billions of separate congealing objects, many of them no larger than a human hand, some as small as dust grains. But aligned as they were in speed and direction, they presented the long-distance appearance of solidity, as did the various-size particles that composed Saturn’s voluminous system of rings.

Paulos must have been thinking along exactly the same lines. “It’s a ring system. Forming right before our eyes.”

Saadya squinted at the purple-and-ochre horizon of the nightward terminator. Was he seeing the telltale signs of uneven clumping of some of the ejected material?

“Perhaps,” he said. “But it might not remain in annular form for long.”

“What do you mean?” Gold asked.

“Just that we may have witnessed Venus in the throes of childbirth. She may have begun to spawn a moon of her own.”

“If that’s true,” Paulos said, looking thoughtful, “then we have a baby to name.”

“Eventually,” said Saadya. “It could take centuries for the accretion process to settle down on its own.” Unless we find a way to help it along. He dismissed the thought as soon as it occurred to him. Will I never tire of playing God?

“It’ll still need a name,” Gold said. “How about Venus Victrix, after the Roman bringer of victory?”

Shaking his head, Saadya resumed watching the planet. “I think a more appropriate name might be Venus Felix.”

“Who’s that?” asked Paulos, frowning. “The Roman bringer of housecats?”

“The bringer of good luck, not cats,” Gold corrected. “Though there are members of my family who might argue that there’s no real distinction between the two.” The captain turned toward Saadya. “There’s more to what you’ve done here than meremazel, my friend. Getting Project Ishtar to this point wasn’t dependent upon luck. To suggest that isn’t fair to you, Dr. Paulos, or the rest of your team, for

that matter.”

Saadya smiled grimly, then faced Gold again. “You’re right, David. But I’m being even more unfair to your crew.” His eyes lit on the diminutive Bynar, who so far had yet to utter a word. “Particularly you, Mr. Soloman. You stand astride the worlds of Bynars and humans. And because of that unique outlook, you accomplished what no one else could—you rescued everyone on Venus from my hubris. I thank you.”

Soloman nodded, though he seemed uncomfortable with the praise. “It would be wrong to completely discount random chance and contingency, Dr. Saadya. The unorthodox data-handling the situation forced upon me involved a good deal of guesswork.”

“Skillful estimates aren’t the same as lucky guesses,” Saadya said. Soloman looked skeptical, but didn’t seem inclined to argue the point.

Gold shrugged. “Call it luck, or skill, or even kismet if you have to. You’ve still had several very lucky outcomes here, even without completing the atmospheric ‘blowoff.’ ”

Saadya was speechless for a moment. “Lucky outcomes? Name one.”

“For one, no one’s dead, or even badly injured.”

Saadya drew scant comfort from that fact, then felt a paroxysm of guilt at his own callousness. “Including your shuttle crew?” He realized he’d been so focused on the specifics of Project Ishtar that he’d given little thought to the injuries David’s brave engineering staff might have suffered while flying through the atmosphere’s superrotational layer.

Gold made a dismissive gesture. “The shuttle took the worst of the beating. Dr. Paulos here has taken the liberty of letting us tow the Kwolek to one of your docking ports so Gomez and Tev can kludge a few quick repairs together before the Vinci shoves off. Tev says your shuttlebay has a smidge more elbow room than ours.”

“It seemed like the least we could do, since our own hardware apparently caused at least one of the shuttle’s hull breaches in the first place,” Paulos explained, holding a dark, lumpy, baseball-size metallic object out for inspection. “It seems the Kwolek ran over one of our little reinforced atmospheric probes. Looks like that’s what damaged her comm system when the Vinci arrived to bolster her power reserves.”

Saadya winced. That was yet another low-probability eventuality he hadn’t spent a lot of time considering. “My God,” he stammered.

“It’s just a scratch,” Gold said. “I’m sure Tev can buff it right out.”

But Saadya wasn’t buying Gold’s breezy denials. He understood only too well the peril of an untoward encounter with a projectile that was plated with a duranium/rodimium alloy. “Your shuttle crew nearly died trying to save this project. Only to see it fail in the end.”

“Quit punishing yourself, Pas,” Gold said. “It isn’t as though we didn’t know you were using atmospheric probes. It was ahftseloches.”

“Ahftseloches,” Saadya repeated, smiling fractionally. “Inevitable bad luck. I thought you said you didn’t

believe in that.”

“Inevitable bad luck is the only kind of luck I can usually rely on,” Gold said, staring at his left hand as he flexed and clenched the fingers. Saadya wondered if this was the hand that had been replaced after the recent shipboard accident he’d heard about.

Gold continued, “But bad luck, inevitable or otherwise, doesn’t always end up badly. For example, Project Ishtar might actually be on firmer footing now because of what happened today.”

Saadya could scarcely believe his ears. “That hardly seems likely, David.”

“Listen to him, Pas,” Paulos said, gesturing toward the window and the plumes of ejected material that continued streaming into space. “In just a few hours, we’ve relieved maybe a quarter of a billion years of seismic stress from the planet’s interior. We’ll be thankful for that little boon when the time comes to attach banks of impulse engines to the crust so we can spin this puppy up to a Terran-style diurnal cycle.”

“And if a spanking new moon really has just plotted itself up out of the belly of Venus,” Gold said, “then maybe you won’t have to tow Mercury out of its orbit after all. Scratch one more huge item off the ‘to-do-later’ list, Pas.”

“I imagine Captain Scott will be delighted to hear that particular detail,” said Saadya.

“There you go. Terraforming while you wait.”

Saadya chuckled, though his mood remained dour. “There’s still no denying the fact that this was a near-catastrophe. Or that I bear complete responsibility for it. I’m sure that’s how the Federation Council and your Captain Scott will interpret the day’s events. That was certainly how the Central Processor Pair on Bynaas reacted. They’ve decided that Project Ishtar is ‘a waste of their finite time and scarce resources.’ In fact, 1011 and 1110 have already been reassigned, and will return to Bynaas just as soon as the transportation arrangements are made.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Gold said. The little Bynar who stood beside him appeared anxious to speak, but held his tongue.

“You still have the rest of Team Ishtar,” Paulos said. “We’ve gathered a lot of good atmospheric data to guide us through the next ‘blowoff’ attempt. The Federation Council is sure to be interested in tha—”

Saadya interrupted her. “It’s possible that Bynaas is right about Ishtar, Adrienne. Perhaps what happened here today was a sign that my approach has been all wrong from the beginning.”

“With respect, Dr. Saadya,” Soloman said, finally interposing himself into the conversation, “I believe that Bynaas can be persuaded to resume its support for your efforts to remake this planet. My homeworld stands to learn a great deal from the geological information gathered by your ground stations during the crisis. Should you choose to share it with them, that is.”

Saadya suddenly realized that he’d been concentrating so intently on the Venusian sky that he hadn’t given adequate thought to whatever secrets still lay beneath its immobile, atectonic crust.

He resolved to review those data in detail as soon as possible—and discover precisely what it was he had to bargain with. There was so much to do....

“If you’re looking for signs and portents, Pas,” Gold said with a gentle smile, “maybe you should consider today’s events as a hint that only one major change needs to be made to Project Ishtar.”

“And what’s that?” Saadya asked.

“Slow it the helldown. Even God takes billions of years to cook up planets. And it’s not as though there’s been any sudden shortage of galactic real estate, the Dominion War cleanup efforts notwithstanding.”

Saadya mulled over Gold’s suggestion, and wondered what Dr. Seyetik would have said to such advice. Slow down. Not a bad idea, perhaps. I could start by not rushing to the holodeck so often for brow-beatings by Seyetik’s ghost.

Of course, without a pair of Bynars crunching numbers for Team Ishtar, a severe slowdown would be the project’s only option—other than closing up shop entirely. To his surprise, Saadya felt great reluctance to consider that final option. His gathering despair warred briefly with his omnipresent desire to tinker as the gods themselves might do.

The gods appeared to be winning. Gods, after all, could afford to be patient.

“Perhaps,” Saadya said, “I only need to make sure I’m headed forward. Regardless of the speed of my progress.”

He paused, turning to gaze once more upon the clump of coalescing, impact-heated matter that was now growing noticeably near the western horizon’s edge. He decided to indeed dub the nascent satellite Victrix-Felix, as a reminder that luck had prevented catastrophe today just as surely as had anyone’s skill. Even that of Soloman.

Gods and planetologists alike sometimes have to bend knee at the altars of chaos, luck, and even ahftseloches. As did starship captains, Saadya suspected.

When Saadya finally spoke, his voice was lowered nearly to a whisper. Gesturing toward the scene of primordial creation outside his window, he said, “Perhaps what happened here today is a sign that new beginnings are in order.”

• • •

After Captain Gold said his farewells to Saadya and Paulos, and beamed back to the *Vinci*, Soloman remained aboard Ishtar Station. He had busied himself alongside Paulos and her frantically busy staff ever since the careful lowering of the force-field grid had allowed the Ground Station Vesper crew to be beamed up to the station, along with many of the other surface-based personnel. As he walked the length of the orbital complex, heading toward the docking port where the *Kwolek* was moored, he realized he wasn’t entirely certain why he’d opted not to beam back to the *Vinci* with the captain.

Perhaps he was merely stalling. He knew, after all, that Dr. Lense would want to examine him—and interrogate him about his informational ordeal with the other Bynars—the moment he returned to the *Vinci*.

Soloman entered the corridor adjacent to the docking port. He saw 1011 and 1110 approaching from an adjoining corridor, as though summoned by his thoughts.

He saw in their hard, dark eyes that their contemptuous feelings for him had softened not at all.

“So you—”

“—are still—”

“—aboard—”

“—Ishtar Station.”

Soloman found their grasp of the obvious just as keen as ever. Trying to maintain a guarded expression, he said, “As are both of you, I see.”

“Only—”

“—temporarily.”

“Bynaus has—”

“—summoned us—”

“—home.”

Home. From the smug manner with which 1110 had delivered that word, Soloman knew it had been intended to wound. As long as he remained a singleton—an informational cripple and a social deviant in the eyes of his people—he knew he could never again use that word to describe Bynaus.

Then a completely unaccustomed feeling abruptly seized him. His facial muscles grew involuntarily tight and he heard a rhythmic, high-pitched, hiccup-like noise start up and repeat itself spasmodically.

Nearly three full seconds elapsed before Soloman realized that he was the source of the sound.

The other Bynars watched him in evident perplexity as he surrendered himself to the fit of laughter. Their disgust swiftly gave way to fear, and they quickly withdrew down the corridor as though certain that he had gone mad.

Perhaps I have.

Uncountable moments later, Soloman’s laughter faltered, slowed, and finally ceased. He felt limp and wrung out. But also strangely joyful.

Bynaus rejects me, even though I have accomplished things that linked Bynars clearly cannot. That new moon forming over Venus proves it.

But something more fundamental vexed him: Try as he might, he could feel no sorrow over having lost Bynaus. Especially a Bynaus that would embrace the likes of 1011 and 1110.

“Hey, what was that all about?” said Fabian Stevens, whom Soloman belatedly realized must have been standing for quite some time behind him in the open hatchway leading to the docked shuttle. The nearby sounds of Bynar conversation and hysterical laughter must have made him curious.

Soloman instinctively raised his shields. “I merely had to conclude some... unfinished business.”

The tactical specialist eyed him suspiciously for a moment, then shrugged in apparent resignation. “I understand. It’s a Bynar thing, so you probably don’t feel comfortable talking about it with any of your human friends.”

Soloman thought about that for a moment. Were he still bonded to 111—and had circumstances not forced him to improvise with Project Ishtar’s data in a most un-Bynar-like fashion—he would no doubt have agreed with Stevens’s assessment.

Now he wasn’t so sure. He only knew that the disapproval of Stevens and the rest of his shipmates suddenly mattered to him far more than any amount of opprobrium his fellow Bynars could heap upon him.

Just as Stevens was starting to turn back toward the hatchway, Soloman came to a decision. “Fabian...”

Turning back toward Soloman, Stevens asked, “Is something wrong, Soloman?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.”

Stevens smiled. “Well, only three choices. That narrows things down a bit. How can I help?”

“I would be very interested... in hearing your advice on some of my... unfinished business.”

Still smiling, Stevens gestured toward the waiting shuttle. “Well, the Kwolek is finally spaceworthy again. You can pour your heart out to me about whatever happened between you and your fellow infophiles while Gomez and Tev pilot this heap back to the Vinci.”

Soloman nodded, then followed Stevens through the docking bay and into the Kwolek’s narrow passenger compartment.

Stevens turned toward the cockpit, where Gomez and Tev were apparently going through their preflight checklist. The debris-ringed planet Venus loomed in the forward window.

“If you guys won’t be needing me for a while,” Stevens said, “I need to speak with Soloman back here for a bit.”

Tev grunted, sparing only enough of his attention to glare briefly at Stevens. Compared to 1011 and 1110, Tev’s casual belligerence seemed downright cuddly.

“We’re doing fine up here, Fabe,” Gomez said, pausing only briefly in her complex data-entering tasks. “You already performed your miracle on the tactical systems. And I think Tev and I won’t need any help getting us back home.”

Home.

Not Bynaus, but home nevertheless.

As he and Stevens took a pair of aft seats, Soloman realized he was no longer dreading his upcoming debriefing with Dr. Lense. In fact, he was beginning to feel great anticipation for it. He had a feeling it wouldn’t take very long at all.

I have come home, a solo man, but one with many friends, he thought. He decided that this was probably all he needed to say to her.

Ishtar Station's docking clamps released the shuttle with a muffled clunk. The Kwolek glided slowly forward on its thrusters.

Soloman noticed that Stevens was regarding him with an incredulous grin. "You're smiling, Soloman. Mind if I ask why?"

"Because we're going home," the Bynar said, and then proceeded to explain.

## About the Authors

MICHAEL A. MARTIN, whose short fiction has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, is coauthor of *Star Trek: The Next Generation: Section 31: Rogue*; *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine: Mission: Gamma Book 3: Cathedral*; and *Roswell: Skeletons in the Closet* (all cowritten with Andy Mangels). Martin was the regular cowriter (also with Andy) of Marvel Comics's monthly *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* comic-book series, and has generated heaps of copy for Atlas Editions' *Star Trek Universe* subscription card series. He has written for *Star Trek Monthly*, *Dreamwatch*, *Grolier Books*, *WildStorm*, *Platinum Studios*, and *Gareth Stevens, Inc.*, for whom he has penned several *World Almanac: Library of the States* nonfiction books. *Ishtar Rising* is the third prose *Star Trek* story to bear his name. Martin and Mangels currently have several more collaborative projects in the works, including two *Star Trek* novels involving the crew of the *U.S.S. Excelsior* (including *The Sundered*, the first volume in the forthcoming *Star Trek The Lost Era* series), a couple of short stories for the *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine: Prophecy and Change* and *Star Trek: Tales of the Dominion War* anthologies, and a pair of *Roswell* novels (titled *Pursuit* and *Turnabout*; both are set after the conclusion of that late, lamented television series). When not hunkered over a keyboard in his night-windowless basement, Martin reads voraciously, plots the revolution, and plays with his two wee bairns, James and William. He lives in Portland, Oregon, with his wife, Jennifer J. Dottery, their aforementioned children, and a mortgage of galactic proportions.

ANDY MANGELS is the coauthor (with Michael A. Martin) of *Star Trek: The Next Generation: Section 31: Rogue*; *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine: Mission: Gamma Book 3: Cathedral*; *Roswell: Skeletons in the Closet*; and several more future *Star Trek* and *Roswell* projects. Flying solo, he is also the author of *Animation on DVD: The Ultimate Guide*, as well as the best-selling book *Star Wars: The Essential Guide to Characters*, plus *Beyond Mulder & Scully: The Mysterious Characters of The X-Files* and *From Scream to Dawson's Creek: The Phenomenal Career of Kevin Williamson*. Mangels has written for *The Hollywood Reporter*, *The Advocate*, *Just Out*, *Cinescape*, *Gauntlet*, *Dreamwatch*, *Sci-Fi Universe*, *SFX*, *Anime Invasion*, *Outweek*, *Frontiers*, *Portland Mercury*, *Comics Buyer's Guide*, and scores of other entertainment and lifestyle magazines. He has also written licensed material based on properties of Lucasfilm, Paramount, New Line Cinema, Universal Studios, Warner Bros., Microsoft, Abrams-Gentile, and Platinum Studios. His comic-book work has been published by DC Comics, Marvel Comics, Dark Horse, WildStorm, Image, Innovation, WaRP Graphics, Topps, and others, and he was the editor of the award-winning *Gay Comics* anthology for eight years. He will be editing a new comic anthology, *GAY, INK.*, in 2003. In what little spare time he has, he likes to country dance and collect uniforms and Wonder Woman memorabilia. He lives in Portland, Oregon, with his longtime partner, Don Hood. Visit his Web site at [www.andymangels.com](http://www.andymangels.com).



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