

# **Other eBooks in the Star Trek™: Starfleet Corps of Engineers series from Pocket Books:**

#1: The Belly of the Beast by Dean Wesley Smith

#2: Fatal Error by Keith R.A. DeCandido

#3: Hard Crash by Christie Golden

#4: Interphase Book 1 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#5: Interphase Book 2 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#6: Cold Fusion by Keith R.A. DeCandido

#7: Invincible Book 1 by David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido

#8: Invincible Book 2 by David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido

#9: The Riddled Post by Aaron Rosenberg

#10: Gateways Epilogue: Here There Be Monsters by Keith R.A. DeCandido

#11: Ambush by Dave Galanter & Greg Brodeur

#12: Some Assembly Required by Scott Ciencin & Dan Jolley

#13: No Surrender by Jeff Mariotte

#14: Caveat Emptor by Ian Edginton & Mike Collins

#15: Past Life by Robert Greenberger

#16: Oaths by Glenn Hauman

#17: Foundations Book 1 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#18: Foundations Book 2 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#19: Foundations Book 3 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#20: Enigma Ship by J. Steven York & Christina F. York

#21: War Stories Book 1 by Keith R.A. DeCandido

#22: War Stories Book 2 by Keith R.A. DeCandido

#23:Wildfire Book 1 by David Mack

#24:Wildfire Book 2 by David Mack

#25:Home Fires by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#26:Age of Unreason by Scott Ciencin

#27:Balance of Nature by Heather Jarman

#28:Breakdowns by Keith R.A. DeCandido

#29:Aftermath by Christopher L. Bennett

#30:Ishtar Rising Book 1 by Michael A. Martin & Andy Mangels

#31:Ishtar Rising Book 2 by Michael A. Martin & Andy Mangels

#32:Buying Time by Robert Greenberger

#33:Collective Hindsight Book 1 by Aaron Rosenberg

## **Coming Soon:**

#34:Collective Hindsight Book 2 by Aaron Rosenberg

#35:The Demon Book 1 by Loren L. Coleman & Randall N. Bills



COLLECTIVE HINDSIGHT  
BOOK I

Aaron Rosenberg



POCKET BOOKS  
New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

An Original Publication of POCKET BOOKS



POCKET BOOKS, a division of Simon &  
Schuster, Inc.  
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY  
10020

Copyright © 2003 by Paramount Pictures. All Rights Reserved.



STAR TREK is a Registered Trademark of  
Paramount Pictures.

This book is published by Pocket Books, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., under exclusive license from Paramount Pictures.

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information address Pocket Books, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

ISBN: 0-7434-8083-X

First Pocket Books Ebooks Edition October 2003

POCKET and colophon are registered trademarks of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Visit us on the World Wide Web:

<http://www.SimonSays.com/st>

<http://www.startrek.com>

# Chapter 1

Stardate 53851.3

“Great, a runaway train.”

Sonya Gomez found herself going through several emotional states at once. The part of her that was the first officer of the *Vinci* thought Fabian’s finally getting his sense of humor back. He’s starting to recover. But the part of her that was Sonya Gomez, the lover of the now-deceased Kieran Duffy, wanted to snarl, How could you? Your best friend is dead! How can you joke about anything?

She managed to put both halves aside and focus on what Fabian Stevens was talking about.

Captain Gold nodded his agreement. “That’s a pretty apt description, Stevens. It’s large, heavy, and moving at an alarming rate—in a perfectly straight line.” He gestured at the viewscreen, which showed an image of the runaway ship. The image had been captured by a long-range sensor array as the vessel has hurtled past a Federation colony, and was too small to make out many details beyond the basic shape.

Sonya studied the image as best she could. The ship resembled an old Earth bullet-train, flat on the bottom and the back half of the top but curving down in front. Along the side stretched a long mirrored expanse, most likely a fuel nacelle. The entire shape emitted a soft glow, more orange and red than white and gold—almost like a wreath of fire.

“Well, I don’t know that this means much, but I don’t recognize it,” Bart Faulwell said. He glanced at the dark-haired woman next to him. “How about you, Carol?” But Carol Abramowitz just shook her head.

“I don’t either,” Sonya admitted. “Not that I’m surprised—we’ve certainly seen our share of new ships, and new species for that matter, on this ship.”

“One of the advantages to this job,” Gold pointed out gently. “Always something new to see.”

“We need to know what’s in its path,” Domenica Corsi pointed out.

P8 Blue waved an antenna. “Already on it. We’ve plotted its trajectory—easy enough, since it seems perfectly straight.” She touched her padd, and a map of the quadrant appeared on the conference room’s secondary screen. “Unless the ship changes direction, at least a dozen worlds lie directly in its path, three of them Federation members. And that’s just the most immediate area—we have no idea how far this ship might go if it isn’t intercepted.”

“Then there’s your job, people,” Gold announced. “Intercept it. As quickly as possible. I’ll get us near this thing, match its speed so you can study it. Just don’t take too long.”

At that cue, Sonya forced the S.C.E. leader portion of herself to take control. “All right, people. Tev, check our files—see if we have any data on this thing. Pattie, dissect that trajectory—we need to know how much time we have before it hits an inhabited world, or something near one. Fabian, start thinking of ways we might slow down this train. That’s it, people—let’s get to it.”



“Okay, the train’s a wreck.”

Sonya walked over to the science station on the bridge where Fabian had taken up residence. She saw the long-range sensor display, which was now showing their runaway train. “A wreck?” she prompted.

“Yeah, it’s taken a lot of damage. Worse, it’s putting out a ton of energy. Way more than anything that size should—except for maybe a bomb.”

“We’re looking at a bomb?” Sonya shook her head. “That doesn’t make any sense. Why fire a bomb this far from any possible target? And why make a bomb that big? More likely it’s something on severe overload.”

“Sure, but that doesn’t make it any less dangerous.” Fabian levered himself back to his feet. “Oh, and the energy—it’s nuclear. Hydrogen and helium, most likely, though that’s just a guess for now.”

“Great, so now we have a runaway star instead of a train.” Sonya sighed. “Okay, keep at it.”



Tev was puzzled—and he hated the feeling. He liked to know what was going on, and usually did, but something was happening with this mysterious ship and he did not yet know what it was. During the briefing, he had been sitting across from Stevens and Blue, and had seen their reaction when Gold had put the image onscreen. The tactical specialist had paled and clenched his jaw, and the structural systems specialist’s antennae had begun to quiver. Something about that ship had prompted a reaction. And they were not alone. Abramowitz had avoided Faulwell’s question, nodding instead of speaking, which was uncharacteristic. Perhaps she was hiding something. Even the captain had seemed a bit more terse than usual. It was as if all four of them were in on some conspiracy.

The problem was, Tev couldn’t find anything in the library computer for them to conspire about. The

search for matches on that ship had come up empty. He had checked the files for that particular ship configuration, and found nothing. Then he had looked for anything resembling it. Also nothing. Next he had searched for ships known to have shields of that distinctive color and design. Nothing. He had even looked for vessels that traveled by way of straight lines alone, and drawn a blank.

No one knew anything about that ship. Or at least, no one was admitting to it.

Tev turned his formidable intellect to the problem of the conspiracy. If he could solve that riddle, it would lead him to the actual information he sought.

Oddly, though the captain, Stevens, Blue, and Abramowitz seemed to be involved, Commander Gomez and Faulwell had looked as puzzled as Tev was. As for Corsi and Soloman, they were more difficult to read; if they also shared the hidden knowledge, their faces had not revealed it. But if he assumed that they did, it provided an easy connection, for all of those involved had been on the *da Vinci* since before even Gomez had joined. In fact, they had all been here during...

Turning back to his console, Tev opened and launched a particular subroutine he had created some time ago, more for academic purposes than for real use. He had crafted the program with his usual efficiency, however, and it performed exactly as requested. A moment later a small smile crossed his face, and he transferred the information into his padd before rising to his feet. So much for being puzzled. But now came one of his favorite parts—the presentation. This promised to be...interesting.



“I’ve identified the ship.”

Sonya glanced up at Tev’s comment. She and Fabian had been going over the sensor data, along with Pattie. Tev waited until he’d received a nod before he continued.

“I scanned our files and got a match.” Tev gestured toward the wall monitor with his padd, and the information he’d sent appeared on the larger screen. “The ship is called *Dancing Star*. I found its specifications in S.C.E. mission entry DV30193.”

“Wait a second.” Sonya looked back at Fabian, who was looking oddly sheepish. “DV30193? That’s a *da Vinci* file! We’ve seen this thing before?”

“Well, not you,” Fabian replied slowly. “It was back before you’d joined—just before, actually. It was—” He hesitated.

“—the last mission of Commander Salek,” Pattie finished for him.

“Oh, great.” Sonya leaned back in her chair and rubbed her forehead. Salek had been Gomez’s predecessor as first officer of the *da Vinci* and head of the ship’s S.C.E. complement. “So now we’ve got a runaway sun that’s already killed one member of this crew. This gets better all the time.” She looked back at Fabian. “During the briefing, neither of you mentioned this. Neither did Soloman or Corsi or the captain—and Carol out-and-out lied to Bart.”

Fabian at least had the good grace to flush and glance at his feet. “We were under orders, Commander.”

“Orders? What are you talking about?”

“What they mean is that the mission was classified.” All four of them turned toward the ready-room door as Gold entered the bridge. “It was during the Dominion War, and all of those events are classified for security reasons.” He glared at Tev. “I’d be very interested to know how you accessed those files.”

Tev simply shrugged. “I performed a standard search. I did design the search engine myself—it must have simply bypassed the security measures. Starfleet might want to work on that.”

Sonya reminded herself yet again to speak to Tev. The man was an excellent engineer, and an asset to the team, but his utter disregard for certain strictures and his contempt for anyone he did not consider an intellectual equal had already earned him several enemies. If not for his undeniable skill he never would have achieved his current rank—and if he didn’t learn to behave with a little more respect, or at least circumspection, he’d never rise any higher.

The captain continued to glare at him for a moment, and Sonya knew he wasn’t fooled. Not much slipped past Gold. But finally he shrugged and walked over to the console.

“Actually, the reason I came in was to give you access to those files. I’ve cleared it with Starfleet Command—nothing in that mission is a security risk anymore, and you definitely have a need to know about Dancing Star.” He tapped a command into the console, followed by a security code, and the files appeared onscreen. Initially they bore the black band across the front that indicated they were sealed, but after Gold entered the code, the band disappeared. Sonya couldn’t help but notice that Tev looked a little annoyed at this—it stole some of the importance from his accomplishment for Gold to simply hand her the materials a moment later.

But she’d deal with wounded pride later. For now she turned to Pattie. “Tell me about this thing.”

Her Nasat crewmate nodded, antennae wobbling. “As the captain mentioned, it was during the Dominion War. There’s a Federation outpost near Randall V, strictly surveillance, and they put out a distress call. A ship had appeared in their system, and it wasn’t one of ours. Not one of the Dominion’s either, but it was putting out an alarming amount of energy. We were sent in to investigate and get the new ship out of there before it could endanger the outpost. We also had a time issue—if the Dominion noticed the ship’s energy output, they’d come investigate themselves, and that could expose the outpost.”

Fabian took over. “We did disable it, ultimately, and the outpost was kept secure. But Salek was killed in the process.”

Sonya nodded. She could see why the files had been classified—the outpost’s existence and location would have been critical information during the war. The best way to keep that data from falling into the wrong hands was to simply seal the materials from everyone, and swear those involved to silence.

“Are we sure it’s the same ship?”

“Would I mention it otherwise?” Tev tapped out a command on his padd. The wall monitor switched to an image of the runaway vessel, and a second image alongside it. “On the left is our current objective. On the right is an image from that earlier mission. The two are identical, including several distinct points of damage.” Circles appeared on both images, highlighting several of those areas, which were then magnified and overlapped. They were a perfect match.

“Good work, Tev—you and your search engine. Okay, so it’s the Dancing Star. But you guys disabled it

once before. And Randall V is”—she called up a star chart and located the system—“well over a hundred light-years from here. What happened?”

Fabian shrugged. “I don’t know. It was too big and too tough to dismantle the hull, and we were in a rush, so we disconnected the power supply. Then we tossed it into the sun. No way it should be here now.”

“Well, it is, so find out why. Go back over your old mission files. Then reconstruct the mission for me. I need to know exactly what happened with this thing the last time we met it, so that I can deal with it this time.”

“Time may be an issue, too.” Gold had stayed quiet during the discussion about the ship, and Sonya had almost forgotten that he was still there. Now she turned toward him.

“What do you mean, sir?”

Gold frowned. “I’ve had a look at the charts for the area, and the mission logs of captains who’ve passed through here. One of them mentioned a strange ship at the extreme edge of sensor range. Unfamiliar design, somewhat boxy but not Borg, energy emissions of an unfamiliar kind. But not to us.” He tapped a command into the console, and a new picture appeared over the twinned runaway. This one was an ugly squared ship, and one they all recognized instantly, for all that it was blurred from digital extrapolation.

“The Androssi are here?”

“Not necessarily right now,” Gold corrected Fabian, “but they have been, yes. And that means they know this area. Which means they could be back.”

“And this ship has an unusual energy system,” Pattie supplied, “which I’m sure the Androssi would want to study and exploit.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Gold agreed. “And I’d rather not fight one of them if I can avoid it. So I’m afraid we need to solve this thing sooner rather than later. But that’s par for the course, isn’t it?” He moved to sit in his command chair.

Sonya turned back to her team. “Okay, this changes nothing. We need to figure this out sooner than soon, but we weren’t going to dawdle anyway. Tev, I want you looking at options. Pattie, Fabian, start work on that reconstruction. Get Soloman to help you—he was here too, so he’s another perspective. Plus, I want to know as much about this ship’s operating system and data files as he can remember. Get going.”

It wasn’t until they’d walked out that she realized why Fabian had looked so sad about her order. Salek had been in command then, yes—Sonya had never met him, but she’d heard good things about the Vulcan commander. But Kieran had been his second-in-command. He would have been heavily involved in the mission, and she was setting herself up to relive that portion of his life. A portion she hadn’t shared, just like all the portions she’d hoped to share and now never would.

She grimaced at herself. This was no time to break down. She had work to do. She could break down later, when the mission was over. Until then, she would just have to get through it.





“Okay, that should do it,” Fabian said two hours later in the observation lounge. “We’ve collated all of our old materials on the mission—the official reports, side-notes, personal entries in diaries and letters, everything we could find, plus our own recollections of anything we didn’t include back then. If we’d had a little more time I probably could have set things up in the hololab, but...”

Sonya nodded. That might have been ideal, since it would have provided her with an actual visual replay of events, except for two things. First, they had a definite time factor. As it was, they’d reach the ship within a few hours, and by that point she needed to be up to speed. Even though the holo wouldn’t have taken any longer to run, they’d have needed more time to program all the parameters into the systems.

The second reason, which Fabian knew as well as she did, was that listening to and mentally picturing Kieran would be bad enough. Actually having to watch him again would be far worse. She’d heard of people who had programmed their lost loved ones into holodecks, so that they could visit them at any time. But to her that sounded like sheer torture, the notion of watching Kieran and talking to him but knowing that it wasn’t really him, that it was just a program. With a shudder she pushed the thought away. This option was definitely easier to handle.

“How long will it take?”

“Two hours if you let it run without pause,” Pattie said from behind Fabian. “We condensed some of the less important elements so you’d get the basics first, and then could go back and call up the peripheral details if you needed them.”

“Good thinking. Hopefully it won’t come to that.” Sonya blushed the minute she’d said that. Here she was, implying that their previous commander might have been so stupid he’d missed something obvious, and that they’d all been too dumb to catch it themselves. She saw from their faces that neither Fabian nor Pattie had taken it that way, but cursed under her breath anyway. She should know better than that, but lately she’d been saying a lot of things she shouldn’t have.

Rather than risk insulting her friends and teammates again, Sonya just nodded to them and swiveled her chair to face the observation lounge’s main screen. The swish of a door told her they’d left the room, but Sonya had already turned her attention to the monitors.

“Computer, engage program,” she called out, and settled herself more comfortably. As the first report began, she winced but forced herself to listen past the sound of Kieran’s voice. She tried thinking of the others on the mission, but that didn’t help much. Based on the stardate, it was after Chan Okha was killed in action, but before he’d been succeeded by Bart. Replacing the ship’s linguist wasn’t a priority in the heat of battle, after all. It was also when 111 was still alive and working in tandem with 110, before the former died on the Beast and 110 became a literal Solomon. A Bolian named Tydoan was the ship’s chief medical officer, not having retired yet. Drew, Barnak, McAllan... They were all still alive, too.

And so was Kieran...

Again, she forced herself not to think about it, put all the deaths behind her, and was eventually able to let her eyes lose focus and drift into the events, reliving them as if she herself had been there.

# Chapter

## 2

Stardate 52698.1

“What do we know about this place?” Kieran asked, leaning forward to glance at Gold and Salek. “Randall V—I’ve never heard of it.”

“Good,” Gold replied. “If you had, I’d have to shoot you.” The half-smile said he was kidding—mostly. “Randall V is classified, and what I’m about to tell you doesn’t leave this room.” He looked around, and everyone nodded their agreement. “Fine. It’s not an important system, in and of itself—no habitable planets, no valuable ores or other substances on any of the rocks floating around that bloated sun. But it’s strategic as all hell. On the far side of it is Cardassian space, and on this side is us. Most of the other systems around here are inhabited, and we’ve got bases or at least allies in half of them.” He frowned. “They have the rest.”

“So this one is the free zone, where anybody can pass through because nobody’s looking,” Fabian volunteered, and Gold nodded.

“Precisely. And both sides have agreed—without openly saying anything—that neither side will block this one system. It’s the open channel, in case they want to negotiate or surrender.” He didn’t bother to mention the reverse option.

“But we can’t just leave it like that,” Fabian mentioned, half to himself, and once again Kieran admired his friend’s perceptiveness. Fabe might not be the fanciest guy around, but very little slipped by him, especially if it had to do with tactics. “We’ve got to keep an eye on what they’re doing, just like they’d want to keep an eye on us.”

“Of course. Their method is to send a patrol ship through here every few days, just to make sure the system is still clean and safe.” Gold grinned. “Ours is a little more subtle. Commander?”

At Gold’s prompt, the dark-skinned Vulcan typed in a command, and an image appeared on the room’s main screen. It looked like nothing so much as the stylized image of a large, pitted rock. “The official designation of this asteroid is R5-3791. It’s one of over a hundred small asteroids in the system, composed of iron, lead, silicon, and carbon, with bubbles of nitrogen, hydrogen, and oxygen inside.”

Kieran glanced over at Fabian, who’d started grinning. “What’s so funny? It’s a damn space rock!”

His friend shook his head. “You’ve got to start reading something other than those pirate stories, Duff. Sure, it’s a rock—with exactly the right elements to hide a staffed base inside.”

Silently Kieran cursed himself. Damn, he should have caught that! The air bubbles were the real giveaway, and he noticed Pattie’s antennae waving in good-natured laughter at his expense. At least Salek wasn’t laughing—not that he ever did.

“Okay, okay—so I missed it. We’re talking about a hidden outpost.” Gold nodded for him to continue. “So we set up a station inside that rock, their sensors only see the chemicals already present, and we can watch them come and go. Nice. I take it something’s wrong with the outpost?”

“The outpost itself is fully functional,” Salek put in, “as are all of its crew. The problem lies beyond it, but within the system.” He tapped his padd, and a new image appeared on the room screen. “Specifically, it lies here.”

“Okay, now I’m stumped,” Carol volunteered from farther down the table. “I’ve never seen a ship like that before.” And Carol knew every major race’s vessels, and a lot of the minor ones.

“No one has, as near as we can ascertain,” Salek informed her. “The vessel does not match any record, nor even partial accounts. It is a complete unknown.”

“Well, it doesn’t look Cardassian, anyway,” Pattie commented. “They’d never build anything without their typical nacelle configuration—it’s too ingrained in their design philosophy.”

“It’s not one of theirs,” Gold agreed. “And it’s not one of ours. We don’t know whose it is. But it’s taken up residence there, and that’s bad news. So your job,” he glanced at Salek, then around at the others, “is to figure out whose it is, what it’s doing there, and then make it go away. All before the Cardassian patrol comes back, sees it, and starts getting suspicious. Our number-one priority is to protect the secret of that outpost.”

“We will arrive in approximately two point seven-five hours,” Salek informed them. “During this approach, Duffy will scan the vessel repeatedly, compiling information as our sensors pull in more details. Stevens will assist me in analyzing the data and creating as detailed a schematic as possible; 110 and 111 will scan the data for any transmissions, and will also institute a blocking protocol to prevent it from sending out any distress signals or other information. Blue will consider methods for contacting the outpost.”

“What do you mean, contacting them?” Carol asked. “Can’t we just open a channel?”

“We could,” Salek agreed. “But if anyone else is within sensor range, that will pinpoint the outpost’s location.”

“Actually,” Gold corrected him, “we can’t do that even if we wanted to. The whole point to R5-3791 is that it can’t be found. Not even by us. We don’t know which of those asteroids it’s in, and it’s been designed to foil passive and even most active scans.”

“Precisely.” Salek tapped one long finger on the table. “But the outpost’s own sensor array is exemplary, and will be able to provide a host of useful data on this vessel. Thus, when we arrive in the system, we must make contact with them, without knowing their location and without attracting undue attention. Blue, that will be your job.” He glanced at his team. “In roughly two hours we will reconvene here to examine what we have discovered and plan the next phase.”

Salek turned to go, and Kieran exchanged a grin with Fabian. In the months they’d been working together, no one had been able to convince their Vulcan team commander that the words “approximate” and “rough” did not go with precise time measurements. But since Salek was willing to put up with their little peculiarities, they suffered his as well.



Two hours later, the team met back in the conference room. A model of the unfamiliar ship rotated on

the screen while they shared their findings. Next to it was the image of a small, cylindrical object. Fabian looked at it with admiration as Pattie finished her explanation of the changes she had made to the device in order to communicate with the base.

“...so these radio beacons are now set up to send and receive short-range bursts in their immediate area. We’ll deploy a bunch of them when we arrive, and they’ll have overlapping coverage—we’ll be able to hear the outpost’s signal no matter where they are in the system. But the real key is this one.” She tapped her padd and a section of the beacon enlarged, with a schematic beside it. “This links all of the beacons together, and any signal one receives is immediately echoed by all the others. They all broadcast on a low-level radio frequency that the Dominion isn’t likely to pick up.”

Kieran nodded. “So it’s a mirror trick—with each beacon echoing the messages from the outpost, no one can tell which of them got the original data and which are just repeating it. That way they can’t use the beacons to narrow down the location.”

“Very efficient,” Salek said, and Pattie sat back down, antennae vibrating with pride. “Now we can communicate with R5-3791 and share data with them. Stevens, please tell the others what we have determined about the vessel itself.”

“It’s big,” Fabian said, and the others nodded.

In the year he’d been serving on the *Vinci* he’d learned not to gloss over the things he thought were self-evident. Salek had told him early on: “Do not omit any detail, no matter how obvious or trivial. It may prove useful.” So now he made sure to include everything, even something no one could possibly miss.

“About the size of a Cardassian battle cruiser, a little narrower but a little longer.” Everyone nodded again as a battle cruiser appeared on the screen next to the model. It was an impressive display—one cruiser could carry two destroyers within its bay, and a destroyer could easily fit two Sabre-class ships within its own hangars.

Kieran took over. “The metals are a strange composition, though the elements are all familiar. Some type of titanium alloy, apparently, with a particularly high conductivity. Good for channeling weapons or shields, definitely. But the way the energy inside there is being damped out, it’s got some pretty strong shielding as well.”

“I’ve ruled out every race I can think of,” Carol added. “This is somebody new.” Fabian again admired the logic of whoever had first suggested a cultural specialist be assigned to the S.C.E.—along with a linguist, though they had yet to replace Chan Okha for that position. Both their insights into other races had proven invaluable more than once.

“No life signs are evident,” Salek pointed out. “Though with a ship this size we would certainly expect crew. Docking bays and airlocks are visible along the exterior, indicating that it was built for entry, if not for sustained occupancy.”

“The computers—” one of the Bynars began.

“—are active within—” the other added.

“—but are neither broadcasting data nor scanning the area.”

Fabian shook his head. The way the pairing finished each other's sentences had taken a long time to get used to. It wasn't like with a long-term human couple, where one might anticipate the other's thoughts and finish what they'd been about to say. No, this was a case where the two Bynars were so linked that they basically had one mind. Neither possessed the sentence, and neither stole it—they shared it, with no sense of ownership beyond "us."

"So it's not looking or talking, but it is doing something?" Pattie asked, and the Bynars nodded.

"Not just—"

"—something. Its signal—"

"—is increasing in strength and frequency."

"So it's revving up," Fabian said, and they both nodded at him this time. "Okay, it's getting ready to do something. We just don't know what."

"Two other elements we must consider," Salek said. "First, the vessel shows no signs of damage. Its hull is structurally intact, with no more than the minor scrapes one might expect while floating within an asteroid-strewn system such as this one. Second, its energy signature is unique." A signal appeared beneath the model, with notations alongside indicating various benchmarks along the known spectra.

"That's not an antimatter signature," Kieran pointed out. "The pulse is all wrong, and it's at the wrong wavelengths. If anything, I'd say it was closer to a sun."

Salek nodded to him. "An excellent deduction. Yes, the closest match to the ship's energy type is that of a sun. Nuclear forces, caused by the fusion of hydrogen and helium particles."

"So this thing is harnessing a small sun as its power source?" Carol scratched her chin. "Isn't that kind of impossible?"

"As far as we know, yes," Pattie said. "A sun that small would have collapsed long ago, forming a singularity."

"But it could be solar-powered," Kieran pointed out. "Just absorbing stellar radiation and using that for power. Free fuel, essentially—and plentiful."

"That is the most likely possibility," Salek said. "But we will not know for certain until we have examined the vessel more closely."

He started to say something else, but Fabian held up a hand. "Hang on a sec. I know we need to find out what's going on here, and that will probably mean boarding it, but what if it's a trap? What if it's a bomb? High energy levels, active computer signals, strong shielding, no sign of a crew, no attempt to send out a distress signal, and it's sitting in the only free zone within ten systems during an interstellar war. That sounds like a trap to me."

Again, Salek nodded. "An excellent point. How do you suggest we proceed?"

Fabian sat back and thought about it for a second. "Well, we have to assume that it's a bomb, and prepare ourselves accordingly. The question with any bomb is, what's the trigger? If this thing is rigged to a timer, we're screwed—there's nothing we can do about it, short of getting in there fast and disarming

or deactivating it before it counts down to zero. If it's got a stimulus trigger—it goes off if the air pressure changes, or the temperature, or the noise level, or if something is moved—we've got to make sure we don't affect anything.”

“Easier said than done,” Kieran muttered. “How can we get in there and look around if we can't touch anything? And if our own body heat could be the thing that sets it off?”

Fabian shrugged. “Nothing's perfect, but there are a few tricks we can pull. We should beam over in space suits—that'll help mask our body heat and will also keep us from altering the ship's atmosphere. We'll be breathing bottled air rather than touching and possibly shifting whatever's floating around in there. But ideally we'd have some way to hide our visible presence as well.”

Pattie raised a pincer. “I can rig small holoprojectors to each suit. They won't run for long, but while active they can take whatever appears behind the suit and project it on the front, and do the same with whatever's ahead on the suit back. So it'll look like you aren't there. We'll have to move slowly, but I think it'll fool a ship's sensors.”

“Great. That should take care of anything like lighting, shadows, colors, etc. It will also fool lasers, which used to be one of the best ways to rig a bomb—link it to a low-intensity laser, and the minute the beam is broken the bomb goes off.”

“Very well,” Salek said. “Upon entering the Randall system, we will begin deploying Blue's modified radio beacons. That will put us in contact with R5-3791, so that we may receive and examine their data on the ship. Once we have collated that material with our own findings, Captain Gold will bring the *Vinci* within transporter range. Blue will be beamed aboard the other vessel—her shell makes her more durable, and thus the most likely team member to survive an explosion. She will sweep the ship for any sign of danger. Stevens, you will monitor the situation, and alert us to any change in the ship's activity, and particularly in its energy levels. Be prepared for an emergency beam-out if you do detect an energy increase that might indicate an approaching detonation. If nothing is detected, Blue will locate a computer junction, and the Bynars will beam to her coordinates and interface with the ship's system. That should tell us whether we are facing a trap, a bomb, or a derelict. Duffy, you will begin developing scenarios for deactivating the ship's power source and disposing of it in some manner that will not call attention to this system.” He stood. “We will enter the system in roughly twenty minutes. Blue, please begin preparing the holoprojectors and attaching them to our suits. Everyone else, prepare to release and sync the beacons.” He turned and headed toward the door, leaving his crew to stand and follow him out.

Fabian caught Kieran's eye and pantomimed wiping sweat from his forehead, and Kieran nodded back. At least this time it wasn't the two of them walking into the proverbial fire like back on Lamenda Prime....



“We've analyzed the data from R5-3791,” Kieran reported an hour later. “The ship entered the system at warp three, then braked to a stop. At the time, the outpost registered over two dozen life signs on board, as well as an energy level of dangerous proportions. The ship began an active scan of the area. Immediately after that, its energy level spiked, and then dropped down to barely subsistence level. The life signs all vanished at the time of the spike. Since then, the energy has begun building again. No signs of life since, though.”

“It is no longer a bomb, then,” Salek commented.

Fabian, however, shook his head.

Salek’s eyebrow rose. “You do not agree? The vessel had a much higher energy level, and then it rose suddenly before falling off again. If it was a bomb, it has clearly already been detonated.”

“Not necessarily,” Fabian said. “Sure, it did something, but that may not have been detonation. Some bombs have smaller explosions leading up to a larger one. They use the initial releases to catalyze elements, altering materials so that the final explosion will trigger a cascade effect from the now-radioactive surroundings. There’s also the subterfuge factor. If I knew someone might be watching a bomb, I’d make it look like the thing had gone off prematurely by setting up a smaller explosion beforehand. Then, after letting it sit dormant for a while, they’d figure the danger was past and would wander in to get a better look. And that’s when I’d detonate the real thing.”

Kieran stared at his friend. “Y’know, Fabe, sometimes you scare me.”

Fabian grinned at him. “What can I say, Duff? I’m twisted—it’s what makes me such a good tactician.”

Their commander nodded. “The ability to think like the enemy is a valuable one. You are correct that it is a possibility. We will proceed as planned.” He gestured to Pattie and the Bynars. “Blue, 110, 111, suit up and meet me in the transporter room. Stevens, Duffy, please take your stations.”

“Got it.” Kieran watched him walk out, then turned back to Fabian. “Do you really think it’s a bomb like that, with all those levels and safeguards and tricks?”

Fabian shrugged. “Honestly? No. But it’s better to be safe, and survive, than get careless and die.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

“Fine.” His friend slapped him on the shoulder. “If we survive, you’re buying.”

## Chapter 3

And, once again, having a shell gets me into trouble.

Pattie adjusted her suit, checked again to make sure the holoprojector was online, and then signaled Salek. He tapped a button, and vanished from sight as she was transported onto the alien ship.

Normally, the Nasat did not require a space suit—she could survive for prolonged periods in the vacuum of space. In fact, her first mission for the Vinci involved repairing a communications relay by crawling across its outer surface. But there were other occasions when even her chitinous exterior needed protection—for example, the time they had to retrieve some equipment from the acidic atmosphere of Eridas IX—so Commander Salek had commissioned a specially modified suit to be fabricated for her.

Her first impression upon materializing was cleanliness. The corridor was spotless—gleaming walls of some sort, curving outward slightly so that the corridor was basically a tube with one side flattened for

the floor, and a soft glow from the ceiling and walls providing light. No pictures, panels, or protrusions.

She checked her suit display. If it was right, the projector was working perfectly, and the corridor still looked empty. The suit had also shifted its temperature to match the area, which she noticed was near the upper threshold for human capacity.

“I’m in,” she reported. “Hallway of some sort, completely empty. Be warned, guys—it’s pretty warm in here. Not quite boiling point, but not too far off.” She glanced around. “No sign of trip wires, lasers, or pressure plates. Also, there’s no atmosphere in here.”

Duffy’s voice came through her communicator. “We’re not reading a hull breach.”

She checked her tricorder. “Neither am I. There’s no pressure, and it’s hot rather than cold. But there’s no air—like somebody dumped it or purged it. Might have to do with the energy spike the outpost registered.”

“We’re not getting anything funny here, either. The energy buildup’s continuing, but at the same slow rate. Your arrival doesn’t look like it’s had any effect. I guess Fabe’s bomb theory may be a bust.”

“And I’m happy to be wrong, too,” Stevens chimed in. “But it pays to be sure. And we won’t know until the Bynars get a crack at the computer system.”

“Already on it,” Pattie responded, moving slowly and carefully down the hall. She’d just rounded the first bend when she came across the corpse and cursed out a series of chirps.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m okay. Just surprised, is all. I’ve found one of the ship’s crew.” She bent down for a closer look. “Dead, definitely. Humanoid, carbon-based—and extra crispy.” She scanned the body with her tricorder. “No known match, but that’s not really a surprise.”

“Keep moving, Blue,” Salek said. “The primary goal is to reach the computer core.”

“Yes, sir.” Pattie stepped around the body and continued on her way. A few paces later, she found what she was looking for. “I’ve got an access port, sir. Beam the Bynars a meter to my left.”

An instant later, the Bynars materialized, their dataports clinging to the belts on the outside of their suits. The pair immediately opened the port and began speaking to the computer in that strange high-pitched singsong of theirs. Pattie settled back to watch—she knew that, at their speed, it wouldn’t take too long.

Nor did it. She’d only been sitting for a minute or two, studying the material of the wall—some sort of ceramic, or ceramic-metal compound, she guessed—when 110 spoke up.

“We have gained access—”

“—to the ship’s computer systems. This ship is known as—”

“—theNal’q’far, orDancing Star. Sensors confirm that—”

“—the ship has not been rigged with explosives, or otherwise—”



“—set to trap or harm visitors.”

Pattie wiggled in relief. True, her shell could protect her from a certain degree of harm, but whatever had killed that crew member would have cooked her as well.

“Understood,” Salek replied. “Duffy, Stevens, and I will beam over momentarily.”

“Got it.” Pattie left the Bynars to continue their talk with the computer, and began analyzing the wall while she waited.



Salek materialized on the Dancing Star, and immediately took in his surroundings. Duffy and Stevens beamed in safely next to him. Blue was examining the wall with her tricorder, and 110 and 111 continued to inspect the computer core. Leaving the Bynars to their work, he approached Blue and asked after her scans.

“The wall’s part metal and part ceramic,” she said. “At a guess, I’d say it was built to handle intense heat.”

“That would explain why this guy was roasted but the walls weren’t even singed,” Stevens commented, kneeling down by the body. “Whatever killed him struck hard and fast.”

Salek was surprised at this pronouncement, since Stevens had not opened his tricorder. “Explain.”

“Just common sense and a general understanding of how people work.” He gestured at the body, which was blackened and shriveled. “The burns—and that’s exactly what they are, burns from a massive heat source—are slightly worse in front. This guy was facing whatever hit him. But his face and chest are just as burnt as his arms. If he’d seen it coming, he’d have raised his hands to shield his face—it’s a natural reaction, trying to protect yourself from danger. He didn’t do that, which means he never got the chance.”

“A sound deduction,” Salek said. “Though it is merely conjecture, assuming this race would react in a way similar to your own, it is plausible. For now, we will consider it a working hypothesis.”

“Sir, we have—”

“—accessed more of the ship’s data,” the Bynars reported.

Salek once again admired the way their thoughts intertwined, allowing them to alternate speaking without any hesitation. It was an impressive display of symbiosis. But they were still reporting.

“Much of the older data, including—”

“—the ship’s origin point, have been purged.”

“To keep the info out of the wrong hands, probably,” Duffy commented. “That’s what you’d expect from a military ship, certainly.”

111 shook her head. “Except that this ship—”

“—has no weapons.”

“No weapons?” Fabian straightened up from the body and stepped over to join them. “What about those funnels along the sides?”

“According to the ship schematics, those—”

“—are exhaust vents,” the Bynars explained. “They also function as—”

“—maneuvering jets.”

“An efficient use of excess energy,” Salek said. “We will survey the ship quickly. Stevens and I will proceed aft. Duffy, you and Blue will head to the fore; 110 and 111, remain here and continue to analyze the ship’s data. Have theda Vinci beam that body up to sickbay, so that Dr. Tydoan may examine it. Report in every five minutes.” He set off down the hall, and a moment later Stevens caught up with him.

“I think the atmosphere got burned away,” Stevens said. “The heat in here must have been pretty intense, judging from that body, and the fact that it’s still pretty warm. I’m guessing it vaporized whatever air the ship contained, and that simply helped fuel the explosion.”

“A valid conjecture,” he agreed. “Given the scan of that body, Dr. Tydoan will most likely confirm that the crew breathed an atmosphere similar to our own. Such elements would contribute to any fire, and be consumed by it.”

They continued to follow the corridor, and Salek let part of his mind drift. This ship intrigued him in its sense of focus. No weapons, no security, energy vents that doubled as thrusters—it had been developed to use available materials to their fullest, and only for necessary purposes. If their mission had not been urgent, he would have been interested to study the vessel further and perhaps discover the builder’s original intent.

Doors opened off the corridor, leading to small sleeping chambers, possible offices, and even what resembled a medical bay. Several of the rooms contained bodies, and a few were found farther along the hall as well. All of them matched the first corpse in general shape and in cause of death. Judging from Duffy’s intermittent reports, the rest of the ship was much the same, which suggested a force not only powerful enough to char a body to the bone in an instant, but also one fast enough to sweep the entire ship in that same brief moment.

The corridor finally ended in a wide archway. Salek paused just beyond it, to take in the sight before him. It was a single vast chamber, easily large enough to contain theda Vinci itself. Lining the two side walls and the ceiling were flat panels covered in a slight sheen. More panels rested in flat racks that ran the depth of the room in neat rows. Conduits from the panels led to a fat column in the center, whose sides were inset with crystals. The crystals, for their part, were visibly throbbing, and the glow radiating from them lit the entire room easily. They also provided noticeable warmth that could be felt even through the cooling systems of the suits, making this room even hotter than the corridors beyond. Salek, who came from Vulcan’s desert environment, actually found it comfortable, though he suspected the humans were not having as easy a time of it.

“The engine room, without a doubt,” Salek commented, stepping inside and examining the objects all around him. He had begun to form a theory on how this vessel worked, after the initial scans, and now he

applied the evidence against his theory to see if it held. It did.

“It would seem that Duffy’s conjecture was correct,” he announced. “This ship does use solar radiation for its power source. These are the storage units, and undoubtedly the larger panels we noticed along the hull, which we initially suspected were nacelles, are in fact the collectors.”

“An entire ship powered by solar energy? Amazing.” Stevens spoke in an awed whisper. Salek understood the sentiment. It was an impressive feat. But right now that was of no concern.

“I’m on the bridge,” Duffy announced. “We’ve got more dead aliens here, most of them sitting in what look a lot like our own command chairs. I’ve yet to find anyone who wasn’t killed the same way.”

“Nor will you,” Salek replied. “I believe the entire ship’s crew died simultaneously as the result of an internal energy release.”

“The ship vented excess solar radiation?” Stevens asked, and he nodded. “That would account for the burns and the lack of air, definitely, and if it had enough pressure built up the release would have flooded the entire ship in seconds. It fits.”

“We will reconvene on the ship’s bridge,” Salek informed him and the others. “Now that we have more information, we can make sense of the larger picture.”

Stevens followed as they left the engine room and moved down the hall, trying not to notice the charred corpses littering their path.



“Okay, so the ship runs on solar radiation, as your brilliant second officer deduced.” Duffy smiled wryly from his perch on the edge of a console. He had not touched any of the corpses yet, and had no desire to move one just to gain a proper seat. No one else did, either. “It takes in too much energy, vents it internally, and kills its own crew. Anyone else see any problems with that?”

“Of course,” Salek replied. “This ship was designed to handle such radiation—hence the conductivity of its hull and the shielding just behind that. A ship made to use stellar energies would have safeties preventing such an overload. Yet the cause of death and the internal damage”—for they had found some evidence of charring in side rooms, where anything not metal had been burnt away—“confirms that the energy was released in this manner.”

“I don’t think the lieutenant commander’s arguing the what,” Pattie chimed in, “more the why. Clearly whatever did this was extremely hot, and given the ship’s power source, stellar energy makes sense. But the idea of an accidental overload seems odd.”

Duffy nodded. “Exactly. We’ve got countless safety protocols for the warp core—why wouldn’t they have the same sort of thing for their engines?”

“They do,” one of the Bynars—Duffy thought it was 110—replied. “We have sorted through much of the—”

“—remaining computer data. This ship had—”

“—extensive safety protocols, including automatic cutoffs.”

“Such an explosion should—”

“—never have occurred.”

“Okay, so it couldn’t have happened by accident,” Stevens said. “What about on purpose?” The others all turned to look at him, and he held up his hands. “Hey, can I help it if I see the ugly possibilities?”

“You are suggesting sabotage,” Salek said. “That is possible—certainly the safety protocols could be disengaged, and that would allow for the energies to be vented internally. A ship of this nature might even have some protocol for such an internal release, to flush away intruders or dangerous particles, and thus all that would be required is removing safety overrides and activating such a protocol.”

“But if there was a saboteur,” Duffy pointed out, “they’d have been killed along with everyone else. As near as we can tell, the energy poured through this entire ship in an instant. Nobody could hide from that.”

“Could someone have set things up, then escaped beforehand?”

Duffy shook his head. “Not without being noticed. I’ve gone over the data from the outpost. They didn’t see any other ships near it, no escape pods or the like, and no life signs outside it. So unless it was rigged before it ever hit this system, that’s not what happened.”

“What if the purpose was not to kill the crew?” Pattie pondered out loud. “We’re assuming that it was either an accident or murder, but what if it was deliberate and the deaths were a necessary cost, not the end goal?”

Stevens paced about, hands gesturing. “So somebody on this ship decides to flush the energy from the ship’s systems and does it internally, killing himself and everyone else on board. Why? Why not just flush it externally, and not hurt anyone?” He paused. “What if somebody was going to get hurt either way? And the choice wasn’t to hurt or not, but who would get injured? If these people valued other lives over their own, they might have sacrificed themselves to save the others.”

“Which others?” Duffy asked him, and in response his friend stabbed a finger toward the front viewscreen, which showed the rocks floating beyond the ship.

“How about R5-3791?”

“They killed themselves to save the outpost?” Duffy was finding that one hard to believe, but the Bynars were both nodding, and speaking to the ship computers in that high-pitched series of whines and beeps. After a moment they switched back to more normal language.

“The computer logs indicate that—”

“—life-forms were detected somewhere nearby. The crew—”

“—knew that they were not alone in this system.”

“Their engines can only handle so much energy at once,” Salek surmised calmly. “From the brief glimpse

Stevens and I had, the containment systems are limited, and are already close to capacity again. The ship must need to keep moving in order to bleed off what it has absorbed. It reached this system, and stopped for whatever reason, intending to vent excess energy. But then the crew detected life nearby, and knew that, if they followed normal protocols, they would endanger those others. Instead they chose to vent internally, killing themselves but protecting the outpost from harm. It is logical.”

“Yeah, except for one thing.” Duffy tapped a few equations into his padd, then showed the others the results. “The energy released in here wouldn’t have covered the distance to most of these asteroids. Some of it, sure, but not enough to put the people on R5-3791 at risk, especially if they’re holed up in one of the rocks along the system’s outer edge. And we can assume this crew knew a lot more about solar energy than we do, since they worked with it constantly—they’d have known that the release wouldn’t have extended far enough to hurt anyone that far away. So they killed themselves for no reason.”

But Salek was not convinced. Duffy had noticed before that once his commander had settled on a hypothesis, he followed it until he was absolutely sure it was wrong. Often that meant he found something they might have overlooked otherwise but that proved the theory correct. Like now.

“You are partially correct,” the Vulcan finally stated. “The outpost would not have been damaged by the energy’s release. But that was not the true danger.” He tapped a command onto the control console, and the viewscreen’s image changed to show the area behind the ship instead—more rocks of various sizes, overshadowed by the system’s massive sun. “That was the real concern.” Salek typed in more commands, and beneath the sun an energy output graph appeared—even as they watched, the levels fluctuated wildly. “Captain Gold described the sun as ‘bloated’ earlier. He was correct. This sun is unstable, and most likely in the first stages of collapse. A release of energy such as this ship possesses could easily have hastened that process and caused the sun to go nova. Everything in this system would have been destroyed, including both the ship and the outpost. The crew knew this, and recognized that they would be dead either way. By internalizing the energy, they minimized the destruction, killing themselves but protecting their surroundings and sparing the people on the outpost.”

Duffy considered that. It made sense. Once the ship had stopped here, the crew was as good as dead, and it was just a question of going out alone or taking the rest of the Randall system with them. They’d opted for the former, just as a Starfleet vessel would. Whoever they’d been, the people on this ship had shown a comparable respect for other life.

“We have more information now,” 111 mentioned—she and 110 had continued speaking with the computer while the others had conversed, though Duffy knew they were also paying attention to the conversation. “The systems are rebooting as we speak. Apparently the—”

“—energy discharge knocked the computers offline, but—”

“—did no lasting damage. We have located—”

“—the command log, and can verify that—”

“—the captain disengaged the safety mechanisms and—”

“—vented the energy internally on purpose.”

Stevens nodded. “So they saw the outpost, recognized what it was, realized the danger, and acted accordingly.”

Salek looked pleased, almost a little smug, and Duffy didn't blame him. He'd been right about the ship's crew being killed by their own power supply.

"Now that we have solved that question," the commander announced, "we may proceed to the next matter. Duffy, Blue, examine the engine room more carefully. This ship is far too large for the *Vinci* to tow, and it must be moved under its own power. I will expect a report on the engine's current condition, and on estimated time to restore it to operation. Stevens"—Salek seemed to straighten up slightly, if that was possible—"you and I will dispose of the crew."

"Dispose of them?"

"Correct." Salek glanced down at the figure in the command chair. "These people gave their lives to protect others. Despite the fact that we do not recognize their race, and thus cannot thank them properly, we will respect their integrity and courage. It is unfitting to leave them in such a condition. You and I will use our phasers to reduce the bodies to ash, which can then be released into space. It is a fitting end for noble starfarers."

Duffy was a bit surprised to hear his commander express such sentiments, but then reminded himself that Salek was not as rigid as most Vulcans. Sometimes he seemed almost human—though Duffy would never presume to mention that. Instead he sighed and levered himself off his perch. "Okay, Pattie," he told his *Nasat* teammate, "let's get to work."



"This material has me stumped," Duffy admitted an hour later. He and Pattie were in the engine room, examining every element both visually and with their tricorders. "It looks like oil, really, especially with that surface sheen. The chemical composition seems similar to oil, too, though not identical. But what I don't get is why it doesn't move at all. It's almost like an oil that's been solidified."

"How about fused?" Pattie suggested, checking her own tricorder. "Take a look—its chemical bonds are similar to glass, and these people are all about using heat. What if they found a way to make glass out of oil?"

Duffy slapped his forehead. "That's it! Glass is good for holding heat anyway, especially if you're using something like volcanic glass. They took an oil with high heat-retention properties, and then subjected it to such intense heat it fused into a glass. All the retention of the original oil, plus the added retention of glass itself, in an easy-to-use form. Nice job, Pattie."

She wriggled her antennae. "Just trying to look at it from their perspective."

Now that they knew how the containment grid worked, it was easier to trace the energy conduits and figure out the rest of the system.

"Solar energy is distributed throughout the ship," Duffy reported over his communicator. "They use it for warmth, for light, and to power all their systems."

"So this ship literally runs on starlight?" That was Stevens, finishing the last of the cleanup.

“You got it. The panels on the collection array absorb heat and light, and transfer that thermal energy to the containment system. It’s designed to retain those elements for long periods, and the heat is then bled off as necessary.”

“That matches what we just heard from Dr. Tydoan,” Fabian said. “The crew members definitely died from sudden heat—roughly five hundred degrees Celsius. That’s more than enough to turn any of us to ash, but they apparently had a higher tolerance for heat—the doc guesses they came from a world much closer to their sun. But actual plasma from the sun would be ten times hotter than that, so they weren’t actually scooping up bits of suns, or capturing solar flares. They used the passive heat and light instead—much less energy, but a lot safer.”

“What is the engine’s status?” Salek asked. Pattie glanced at Duffy, who nodded for her to answer.

“Looks like we can have it up and running in another hour, sir. Not for long-range travel, maybe, but certainly enough to get it to the nearest Federation system.”

“Good. The Bynars have confirmed that the controls are also near restoration, so that we can direct the ship from the bridge. By the time you have the engines back online, we may also be able to program in a flight path. We will—”

“Gold to away team,” the captain’s voice interrupted. “Salek, get your people out of there! The outpost’s long-range scanners have picked up Cardassian energy traces. It’s got to be their patrol ship, coming back early.”

“They may have seen that energy spike,” Pattie pointed out. “And now they’re coming to check it out.”

“Whatever the reason, we need to get out of here,” Gold replied. “I want all of you to beam back now.”

“I strongly recommend against that course of action, Captain,” Salek replied, and Pattie stared at Duffy, who looked back at her in shock. “If we leave now, this ship will fall into the hands of the Cardassians. Not only can they try to adapt its technology for their own military efforts, but the computer registered the presence of the outpost. In addition, a detailed active scan by the Cardassians might reveal the outpost on its own. We cannot risk that.”

They could hear Gold sigh over the link. “Damn. You’re right, we can’t let the Cardassians find it. But we can’t fight them off, either.”

Fabian chimed in. “Actually, maybe we can.”

## Chapter

# 4

“Stevens, report.”

Fabian hit his suit’s communicator to respond to Salek. “I’ve got the weapons array online.” It had been simple enough, really. He’d mistaken the ship’s exterior vents for guns, because they were clearly designed both to swivel about and to release bursts of energy. All he’d had to do was install a targeting system on the ship’s computer, and then slave the vents to that program. It wouldn’t have pinpoint accuracy, but it was good enough to lock onto and hit a ship the size of the *Vinci*, and anything larger

would be even easier. Plus, with the amount of energy the vents could release, it might only need to connect once.

“You have capped the release?”

“Affirmative.” Fabian checked the displays again, just to be sure. “It won’t vent enough to destabilize the sun.” Part of him wondered why the original crew hadn’t done the same thing—they could have limited the vent’s capacity and bled off a little energy at a time. But maybe they hadn’t thought of it, or hadn’t had the time to let it vent in stages.

“Good work, Stevens. Report to the engine room to assist Duffy and Blue.”

“Roger that.” Fabian clambered to the nearest airlock and swung himself back inside. Then he shucked off his space suit and trotted down the hallway to where Pattie and Kieran were moving among the racks of collectors.

“Hey, need a hand?”

Kieran glanced up and grinned. “Back from your walk already? Sure, pick up a tool. We’ve got most of it running, actually—this ship really was built to with-stand just this sort of radiation, so most of the important stuff wasn’t too badly damaged. A few bypasses and some new components and the engine’s back online.”

“Great. Well, I’ve got the guns working, such as they are.”

“The shields are up, too,” Kieran admitted, then shook his head. “Sad, really. Here’s this great ship, built without any need for attack or defense. And we come along and, in less than an hour, turn it into a warship.” It was true—the shields had also been modifications from the ship’s original design, taking smaller vents all along the exterior and syncing them together to provide a cohesive bubble of protective fire. The little vents had actually been designed to function as smaller thrusters, for fine-tuning the ship’s movement.

Fabian shrugged. “It’s a shame we have to do that to this baby, sure. And that we can so easily turn anything into a weapon. But better that than let the Cardassians do it. And definitely better than letting them hurt us, or the people on that outpost.”

They worked silently for a few minutes, each of them going over an area of the engine room before moving to the next location. Finally, they met back near the central column.

“And here we come to the heart of the matter,” Kieran muttered, and Fabian smacked him lightly on the shoulder. Even with Cardassians heading their way there was no call for a joke that bad. “Sorry. But it is.” Kieran showed him and Pattie his padd. “Do you see what I see?”

Pattie nodded. “Definitely.” She hit her communicator. “Commander, we have a problem.”

“It’s the engine, sir, she’s gonna blow!”

Salek, having joined the team in the engine room, ignored Duffy’s passable impersonation of Captain Scott and studied the tricorder instead. “Yes, I see.” Then he spoke into his own communicator. “Captain, the team’s estimates are correct. This ship is powering back up, and will reach danger levels again in approximately two-point-four hours. We had failed to realize that the exterior collection array



was still active, and that Randall V's sun produces an unusually high amount of energy due to its own instabilities."

"So you're saying we have less than three hours before we've got the same problem that killed its first crew?"

"Affirmative, sir." Salek closed his eyes to concentrate. Two-point-four hours there, point-four hours until the Cardassians arrived, plus volume squared...yes, it would work. He opened his eyes and stood, tapping several new commands into the padd before returning it to Duffy.

"Captain, I have formulated a plan. Blue, you will disconnect the collector array immediately. Stevens, you will assist her; 110 and 111, you will return to the *Vinci* and stand by the communications systems. Once the Cardassian vessel is in range, record their communications and decode their ship's identification signal. Duffy, you will accompany them. I have sent a series of commands into your tricorder, which you will relay to the transporter room. Then report to the *Vinci*'s bridge. Set our systems to broadcast the message I have included, using the Cardassian signal once the Bynars have isolated it. I will be on the bridge of this vessel."

"Wait a second, what are you going to do?" Duffy demanded, and Salek repressed the urge to reprimand him for speaking back to a superior. This was not the time or the place for that.

"I will do my job, Lieutenant Commander, as you will do yours. If my plan is successful, we will be able to deal with the approaching ship and protect the outpost from discovery. But only if we all do our part." With that he turned away, and waited until Duffy had beamed back to the *Vinci* before glancing around again.

The humans are so—emotional, his sister had told him once. Salek occasionally wondered if his long association with them had in some way infected him with such irrational behavior. His sister's concern was, he believed, over that very thing, though Salek had dismissed it at the time. Certainly his current plan might seem irrational to some. But it was not. He had weighed the various factors, and selected the course most likely to succeed with the least risk to the smallest number of people. It was eminently logical.

He just hoped Captain Gold and the others would someday recognize that.



"What the hell is going on here?" Gold demanded as Duffy stepped onto the bridge. "What does he think he's doing?"

"Wish I could say, sir," Duffy replied, taking his place at one of the aft science posts. "I know Salek has something in mind, but he didn't bother to tell me what it was beyond my own part. He even encoded his instructions for the transporter room so that I couldn't read them. I do trust him, though."

"That's not the issue," Gold clenched the sides of his chair, trying to force himself to calm down. Duffy was too young to understand, even with the recent war. But Gold had seen a lot of battles, and he'd seen a lot of people throw themselves away, sometimes needlessly. Something in Salek's voice when he'd announced that he had a plan had reminded Gold of those others, and the chill it caused was still sliding down his spine.

But now was not the time.

“Cardassian vessel approaching, warp one and slowing,” Ina Mar reported from ops. “Should be within visual range any second.”

“Onscreen when it is,” Gold ordered, and an instant later the warship appeared on the viewscreen. It was a Galor -class, as expected—far too big for the da Vinci to handle on its own.

“Salek, you picking this up?”

“Affirmative, sir.” The Dancing Star angled slightly, facing the approaching Cardassian. “This ship is operational, and I am prepared.”

Out of the corner of his eye Gold saw Duffy grimace. What was that all about? Well, he’d find out later—if there was a later.

“Fine, Salek. How do you want to play this? You’ve obviously got something in mind.”

“Yes, sir. First we wait for the Cardassians to—”

“Sir, incoming from the warship,” McAllan reported from tactical, and Gold nodded. An instant later the message was heard across the bridge.

“Unidentified vessels, this is the warship Grach’noyl. You will power down weapons and shields, and remain in position until we can come alongside and board. Any attempt to do otherwise will result in our opening fire. You have one minute to comply.”

“Wong, prepare for evasive maneuvers,” Gold ordered quietly. “McAllan, prepare torpedoes.”

Exactly one minute later, the Cardassians opened fire. But their primary target was the larger Dancing Star, which was a good thing—judging from what he’d heard in the briefings, Gold figured it had stronger shielding than they did. Let them pound on the vessel he wanted destroyed anyway. In the meantime, the da Vinci was free to act.

“Wong, bring us around on its flank. McAllan, open fire.”

The first salvo of torpedoes was launched, and at the same time Dancing Star released an attack of its own. Gold watched, awed, as a stream of fire lanced from the alien ship to flare along one entire side of the attacking Cardassian. It looked like nothing so much as a directed miniature solar flare, lighting the entire area with its brilliance, and they could almost see the warship shudder from the intense heat. Their own torpedoes hit the opposite side and did far less damage.

“Sir, the Cardassians’ shields are down sixty percent,” McAllan reported.

“Good,” he replied, never taking his eyes from the screen. “He’ll have to redistribute power, bolstering the area in front of Salek. As soon as the shields on our side drop, fire the second salvo.” Then he glanced back at Duffy, whose fingers were dancing over the console. “Duffy, you know what you’re doing?”

Duffy nodded absently. “Yes, sir. We needed that Cardassian message. Now I just have to wait

until”—his console chimed, and he grinned—“the Bynars crack its ID code. And then we program our system to broadcast that ID.” He glanced up. “You might want to warn the outpost not to get too alarmed if they suddenly hear the Cardassians again.”

“Fine.” Gold nodded to Ina, who sent a quick warning to the outpost via the radio beacon. Even if they hadn’t been otherwise occupied, the Cardassians probably wouldn’t have noticed. As it was, the warship was busy unleashing its full fury on the Dancing Star, with little to no visible effect. The jury-rigged shields on the large vessel proved more than adequate to melt the torpedoes and absorb the phaser fire before anything could reach the ship’s hull.

“Sir,” Salek reported, “I have programmed this ship’s systems according to my plan. Whatever happens next, please do not interfere. Instead, when the Cardassians’ shields drop, remove the da Vinci with all due speed.”

“Salek, what—” Gold stopped as McAllan shook his head. The Vulcan had severed their connection. “Wong, you heard the man. Prepare to retreat at all possible speed, on my mark. McAllan, be ready with that second volley.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sir,” Ina reported, “I’m registering a third-party transporter lock. Someone has overridden our system and is redirecting the transporters for their own use.”

“Don’t fret, Ina,” Gold assured her. “That would be Salek. Part of this farkochte plan, I’m sure.”

An instant later, McAllan announced, “Cardassian shields reallocated, sir. Torpedoes away.” They saw the torpedoes strike, and Gold could hear the excitement in McAllan’s voice as he reported further, “Direct hit, sir! Significant damage!”

But what happened next made their attack pale by comparison.

First the Dancing Star unleashed its second attack. As with its previous strike, the funnel of flame struck the Cardassian ship full along the side, and they could actually see the ship’s hull glow even through the shields. Then McAllan announced that the Cardassian shields were down.

“Sir,” Ina announced, “transporters have engaged.”

At the same time, Duffy shouted.

“Spike from the Dancing Star! No!”

The alien vessel seemed to glow from within—and then Gold realized that it was doing exactly that. Light was pouring from every seam in the ship, and illuminating every portal. They were looking at a small, metal-encased star, and Gold resisted the urge to look away.

It was a good thing he didn’t, or he would have missed what happened next.

The Cardassian ship had also begun to glow, only its brilliance was more pronounced, as the section where the Dancing Star had struck it twice collapsed, pouring energy out from its side. Fortunately, the energy trailed off almost immediately, as the flames found nothing else to burn and so extinguished themselves in the cold of space. Even so, Gold understood why Salek had told him to move the da Vinci.

If they had been too close, that release could have cooked them as well.

“I’m not registering any life signs, sir,” Ina reported quietly.

“What about the Dancing Star?” Duffy demanded. “What about Salek?”

Ina glanced at Gold when she responded. “That was what I meant, sir. No life signs.”

“Dammit!” Duffy slammed his hand down on his console, making several of the others jump. Gold had half expected it, and kept his seat. “He planned this all along! That’s why he ordered us off the ship! That’s why—”

“Duffy!” Gold let his own anger leak out, to give his voice the edge necessary to snap the younger man to attention. “Time enough for recriminations later. For now, finish the job your superior gave you.”

“Yes, sir.” The glance Duffy shot him could have come from the Dancing Star’s gun, but Gold didn’t mind. Duffy would appreciate the need for focus later—for now it was enough to have him working again, and making sure Salek’s sacrifice had not been in vain.

“Prepare to broadcast message along the requested frequency,” Duffy muttered a few minutes later, and at Gold’s nod McAllan set the comm systems to suit. A moment later, the Cardassian was heard once again on the bridge.

“Grach’noyl to Cardassian Central Command. Anomalous energy reading identified as solar flare. The star is reading as unstable, and could prove dangerous. Ships are advised to exercise caution when—” the message suddenly ended in static.

“That’s it?” Gold asked despite himself, glancing over his shoulder. Duffy just shrugged.

“Yes, Captain. That’s what Salek instructed us to send. Now the Cardassians will think the Grach’noyl got hit by a solar flare, and they’ll chalk it up to a sloppy gul. No reason to suspect the presence of an outpost, although Randall V may not see as much traffic in the future.”

“True enough, but not really our problem.” Gold gestured to the screen, and the two ships floating life-lessly before them. “Those, however, are.”



It was a subdued group that met in the conference room, and all of them avoided looking at Salek’s empty chair.

“We need to get rid of both ships now,” Stevens pointed out. “Not just the Dancing Star.”

“Yes, and we still have the same problem there as before,” Pattie agreed. “That ship is too large for the da Vinci to tow. So is the Grach’noyl. And we can’t wait for help—the Cardassians could decide to send a second ship, just to make sure that last message wasn’t a fake.”

Duffy shook his head. “They’ll buy the message. It had the Grach’noyl’s ID stamp on it, and was in their gul’s own voice. But you’re right, they might still send someone—if for no other reason than to salvage

anything left on the warship. So, any suggestions?”

Surprisingly, it was one of the Bynars who raised a hand.

“Go ahead, 110,” Duffy told him.

“The Cardassian ship is badly damaged,” the little Bynar commented, “but—”

“—theDancing Star is not. Its systems—”

“—are offline again, but can be rebooted quickly, now that—”

“—we are familiar with the codes.”

“Okay, so we’ve got one working ship and one that’s been turned to slag.” Duffy sighed. “Too bad we didn’t find anything like a tractor beam on theDancing Star, or we could use it to tow theGrach’noyl.” He knew there had to be a way, but his brain just didn’t seem to be working right now. He was still too shocked by what had happened.

Fortunately, the rest of the team—nowhis team—was able to take up the slack.

“The Cardassians have tractor beams,” Pattie pointed out. “We’ve seen them in use before. And that warship is big enough to tow theDancing Star.”

Stevens nodded. “Right! And we can repair any damage to the tractor with our own parts. A lot of it’s external anyway, so it might have escaped the brunt of the blow. If we can get it up and running—”

“—we can use that to hitch the two together,” Duffy finished for him, “and then pilot theDancing Star out of here, with theGrach’noyl trailing behind. Good call, people. The only question is, what do we do with them?”

He glanced at the conference room viewscreen, which showed the two ships floating in space—and the sun looming behind them.



“All set, Fabe?”

Fabian nodded from the console on theDancing Star. “Just one more bit here, and—got it.” He slapped the console shut and stepped away. “We’re good.”

“Right. Duffy toda Vinci. Diego, prepare to beam two back.”

“Roger that, Commander,” said Chief Feliciano.

“Standing ready.”

Kieran then said, “Pattie, how are you doing over there?”

Fabian watched his friend, and wished there was something he could do to help. Salek's death had shocked him, of course, but he'd only been on the *Vinci* for a little under a year. Kieran had been here much longer, and so had worked with the Vulcan a lot more closely. The death had hit him a good deal harder because of it. But Fabian suspected that what had really upset Kieran was being left out. Salek hadn't bothered to reveal his plan to him, or to anyone, and Kieran felt betrayed by that. It was understandable, but that didn't make it feel any better.

"We're good here, sir," Pattie replied over the communicator from the Cardassian vessel. "Activating tractor beam—now!"

A wide beam of dull yellow-green energy struck the *Dancing Star*, and Fabian felt the ship lurch slightly as the two vessels became linked together.

"Got it, Pattie. Good work. Now beam back. We'll meet you in a minute." Kieran glanced over at him, and Fabian tried not to let his own face show how awful his friend looked. "Ready to send this ship off on its final voyage?"

"Let's do it." They tapped in the commands, and the *Dancing Star*'s engines powered up. Without the collectors, and with all the energy it had recently released, the ship had little power left, but it would be enough. It wasn't going very far.

"That's it, then," Kieran muttered, and turned away. "Let's head back." He tapped his communicator. "Beam us back, Diego."

As the transporter took them, Fabian couldn't help a final glance back, at the spot he and Kieran had both avoided on the bridge. The captain's chair—and the small pile of ash resting upon it.

## Chapter 5

Stardate 53851.9

Sonya blinked and stretched, not surprised to realize that her back had gone stiff. Her eyes burned, partially from the strain of watching the screens so closely and partially from the tears she'd angrily brushed away. Those last few moments of the battle, when Kieran's anger and sorrow had come through so clearly—when he'd been both grieved at Salek's death and also furious that his commander had made such a momentous decision without him—had been too much for her. She'd had to pause the program for a moment and let her own feelings pour out, weeping uncontrollably and cursing the universe's sense of irony. But at last she'd gotten herself back under control, and had been able to watch the final portion of the reports with little more than a subdued sob.

Before her, the viewscreen still showed several panels of information—the last words of Kieran's official report, the schematics of the *Dancing Star*, and some theories on how the engines worked. But all she could see in her mind's eye was that gout of flame leaping from ship to ship, and the way both the *Dancing Star* and the *Grach'noyl* had glowed from within, like massive beacons in the night.

Salek had done the right thing, of course—the only thing he could have done, really. The ship had been powering up again, and in another two hours it would have overloaded, taking the whole star system. He'd needed to vent that energy a second time, and it had to be internal to protect the *Vinci* and the

outpost. So he'd made the choice to do it himself. He could have programmed the ship to vent, of course, but that would have left the *Vinci* to face the Cardassians, and they would have been destroyed. So first he had used some of the ship's power supplies to weaken the Cardassians and knock down their shields. Then he'd set the *Vinci*'s transporters to beam the contents of the *Dancing Star*, minus himself and any physical architecture, onto the *Grach'noyl*. And then he'd let the energy loose.

A lot of it had been beamed into the Cardassian ship, enough to kill everyone on board and to fry all of the ship's systems. But transporting energy wasn't an exact science, and a fair bit had still flooded the *Dancing Star*. Salek had known that it probably would, and that most likely the remaining amount would still be lethal. But it was still the best course of action. He'd died instantly, too fast to feel any pain, and had saved the rest of his team, the *Vinci*'s crew, and the outpost.

The irony of it was that the *Dancing Star* itself had barely been damaged from the blast—it had already weathered one internal vent, and the S.C.E. crew had brought the ship back to full activity before the Cardassians had arrived. If they'd had more time they could have analyzed it more fully, perhaps, and tried to mimic the ship's energy collection system. But, since they needed to vacate the area as soon as possible, Kieran had led the team in sending the *Dancing Star* into the sun, where no one would ever find it again.

So what was it doing here now?



“Okay, I've been over the reports,” she told the others a few minutes later, as they gathered around her. “Good work on the reconstruction, by the way.” She'd been pleased to notice afterward that, once she'd gotten absorbed in the events, she had stopped realizing that it was Kieran speaking. Focusing on the details really did help ease the pain—or at least push it to the background. It had only been Salek's death, and Kieran's response to it, that had pulled the pain back to the fore. “But now we've got another problem.”

“The thing is,” she pushed her chair back from the table and stretched, “that Salek did a good job. No surprise there—from everything I've heard and read, he was an excellent engineer and a good commander. He considered the situation carefully, and based his decisions on the information everyone had collected. It all makes perfect sense, and I'm not sure I would have done anything any different.”

“So why is that a problem?” Abramowitz asked. “It should be a good thing, shouldn't it, to know that you agree with his actions?”

“Yes, but clearly something was wrong. If not, the *Dancing Star* would still be floating in the heart of Randall V's sun, unreachable even if it wasn't simply reduced to molten metal. Instead, here it is, light-years away and without a scratch on it.”

“Which makes this thing even more valuable than before,” Stevens pointed out. “Not only does it harness the energy of the stars, but it can dive into a sun and come back out none the worse for wear. The Androssi would kill to get their hands on it.”

“Exactly.” Gomez scrubbed at her forehead with one hand. “Which leads to another question. If you guys disconnected the collection array, why is it registering an energy buildup again? We know how powerful this thing can get, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let anyone here immolate themselves just to

drain it off, but if we can't figure out why it's got more juice now we won't be able to stop this from happening again."

She sighed and resisted the urge to put her head down on the table. The S.C.E. had already been up against this vessel once before, and though at the time they thought they'd succeeded in disarming it, clearly in retrospect they had failed. So why should she think that she'd have any better luck this time around?



TO BE CONTINUED...

## About the Author

AARON ROSENBERG was born in New Jersey, grew up in New Orleans, graduated high school and college in Kansas, and now lives in New York. He has published short stories, poems, essays, articles, reviews, and nonfiction books, but for the last ten years the majority of his writing has been in role-playing. Aaron has written for more than ten game systems (including *Lord of the Rings*, *Vampire*, *DC Universe*, *EverQuest*, and *Star Trek*) and is the president of his own game company, *Clockworks* ([www.clockworksgames.com](http://www.clockworksgames.com)). He has two degrees in English, and misses teaching college English, which he did for several years. His other fiction includes the previous S.C.E. eBook *The Riddled Post* and the novelette "Inescapable Justice" in *Imaginings: An Anthology of Long Short Fiction*. He is currently hard at work on more S.C.E. fiction.

## Coming Next Month: **Star Trek™: S.C.E. #34**

### **Collective Hindsight Book 2**

by Aaron Rosenberg

During the Dominion War, Commander Salek and Lt. Commander Duffy of the S.C.E. dealt with a runaway vessel that was endangering a star system—a mission from which Salek did not return. Now, a year later, Salek's and Duffy's replacements—Commander Gomez and Lt. Commander Tev—are faced with the same runaway ship.

Facing more than one ghost from the past, can Gomez and Tev succeed where their predecessors failed?

COMING IN NOVEMBER FROM POCKET BOOKS!



# Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Coming Next Month: Star Trek™: S.C.E. #34](#)