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COLLECTIVE HINDSIGHT
BOOK 2

Aaron Rosenberg



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Chapter

1

Stardate 53852.1—First Officer’s Log, Commander Sonya Gomez, U.S.S. da Vinci. We have encountered a ship known as the Dancing Star, an alien vessel that runs on solar radiation. During the Dominion War, the ship entered the Randall system and suffered a catastrophic buildup of its engines. Had the buildup run its course, it would have caused Randall’s sun to go nova. Rather than endanger Federation outpost R5-3791, which was hidden in one of the system’s asteroids, the alien ship’s captain contained the buildup within the vessel, instantly vaporizing the entire crew. Shortly afterward, the da Vinci was sent to investigate the ship. Commander Salek—my predecessor as first officer and head of the S.C.E. team on the da Vinci under Captain Gold—sacrificed his life in order to save the system from a second catastrophic buildup, and also to keep the knowledge of both the Dancing Star and the outpost from the enemy. After that, the S.C.E. piloted the ship into the sun, which should have destroyed it.

However, the vessel has turned up in interstellar space, over a hundred light-years from the Randall system. Having familiarized ourselves with the da Vinci’s previous encounter with the Dancing Star, we are now considering what to do next.

* * *

“Clearly, the situation was more than they could handle.”

Fabian Stevens glared at Tev across the table in the da Vinci’s observation lounge, but the Tellarite ignored him. Sonya Gomez couldn’t stop herself from sighing. The three of them sat along with Captain Gold and P8 Blue, the former at the head of the table, the latter in her specially modified chair at the other end.

“It’s not that simple, Tev,” she said, wondering if her second would ever learn. “The original team did a fine job completing their mission, which was to remove the Dancing Star before it endangered the outpost or drew Cardassian attention to its system.”

“With all due respect, Commander, I disagree.” Tev always managed to make phrases like that condescending, and to turn her title into an honorific rather than something she had earned. “They were

sent to analyze that vessel, determine its origins and nature, and render it harmless. The fact that it is here now, hurtling rapidly toward a planet, proves they failed.”

“And I suppose you would have done better,” Fabian shot back.

“Of course, Specialist.”

“Well, now’s your chance to prove it.” Both of them stopped to look at her, which was something, anyway. “The bottom line is that we need to figure this ship out, and fast. And since Salek apparently missed something, we can’t just rely upon his observations.”

“He did figure out how the ship worked,” Pattie offered, and Sonya nodded.

“At least well enough to get it operational, and to vent its fuel cells, yes. But he must have missed something. That doesn’t mean he did a bad job—he didn’t have a lot of time to study the ship fully. But we don’t have to worry about giving away someone’s position, and we don’t have the distractions of a major interstellar war. Our job is to stop this ship completely, once and for all.”

Gold leaned forward. “So how do you plan to do that, Gomez?”

“I’m not sure yet, sir. But I think, to start with, that we need a fresh look at this ship. Tev and I are the only two who weren’t on the team the first time around, so we’re going to beam over. I want to examine it fully, and build our own theories, based only upon what we find. We can compare that to Salek’s data later.” She glanced at the rest of her team. “While we’re doing that, I want the three of you to go back over the original material. Look for anything you might have missed the first time, about where this ship came from and how it works. Find out why it was out here, who the captain was—anything you didn’t feel was crucial to the mission then. Any bit of information could be the key we need.”

Gold nodded. “Fresh perspectives, and a resifting of old material. Sounds like a plan. We should be within transporter range now.”

“Pattie, how much time do we have before the ship hits something?”

The Nasat checked her padd. “Twenty-three hours, Commander. Then it slams into Riallon IX, which has a population of twenty-one million.”

“Right. So we have twenty-two hours to figure this thing out and shut it down.” She stood up. “Let’s get to work. Tev, you’re with me.”

* * *

“I just don’t like him,” Fabian grouched as he and Pattie headed back to engineering. “Sure, he’s smart, but he acts like he’s the only one with any brains, and the rest of us are all morons.”

“He does have an ego, but that’s mainly because he won’t lie or conceal anything, including his pride in his own abilities.” Pattie’s antennae wobbled in the equivalent of a shrug. “If we put aside our modesty and talked about how good we really were at our jobs, don’t you think everyone would call us arrogant too?”

“Maybe,” he admitted as they passed through the door. “But it’s not just that he thinks he’s so good. It’s

that he thinks the rest of us suck. I know I'm good, but I know you and Commander Gomez and Soloman and Bart and Carol are too, and I'd never put you guys down or claim you were incompetent."

Pattie made a tinkling noise that was her equivalent of laughter. "Gee, thanks."

"No, I mean it. We're a team, right? And Tev isn't part of that, because he doesn't want to be. He's not willing to work with anybody else, because he's convinced that he's better than the rest of us and that we only slow him down."

"Well then, be glad that the commander is the one working with him, and not us."

He chuckled. "Oh, believe me, I am."

* * *

"It is unnecessary for both of us to do this, Commander." Tev's voice sounded in Sonya's ear as the pair of them, clad in space suits, started walking through the Dancing Star's corridors. "I can analyze this ship while you attend to other matters on the da Vinci."

Sonya glanced over at him, saw her own helmeted face reflected in his faceplate. "I appreciate your confidence, Tev, but I disagree. You and I have different approaches, which means two different perspectives. I'd hate to think that we'd missed something here, and jeopardized our mission, because we were relying on a single viewpoint with all of its limitations and biases."

Her second drew himself up to his full height and thrust out his chin, which had the unfortunate result of making his beard jut out against his faceplate like a stiff brush. "I do not miss anything, Commander, and I resent the suggestion."

"Do you?" She resisted the urge to snap back at him, but also refused to coddle his ego any longer. Enough was enough. "Fine, then. Tell me what you see here." She waved her hand, and they both glanced along the hallway.

"A single corridor," her second replied immediately. "Cylindrical, though flattened at the bottom for easier passage. Indirect lighting. Doors spaced along each side, inset and with manual releases. Temperature of fifty degrees Celsius. No atmosphere."

She nodded. "And what does all that tell you?"

"Clearly this is the main corridor. The atmosphere has never been restored after it was ignited at Randall V, which indicates that the computers are either not fully operational or not programmed to provide air automatically." He glanced back at her.

"And?"

The hint of a frown appeared. "And? There is nothing else to be gained thus far."

"Not true, Tev. For example, you noted that the doors have manual releases. Judging from their shape, the crew must have hands and fingers like ours."

He sniffed. "We know they did. The autopsy reports—"

“But I didn’t ask you what we knew from other data. I asked what we knew from what we could see right now. That’s why we’re doing this. Ignore everything you knew about this ship before we beamed aboard.” She ran one hand along the wall. “This isn’t metal, though it feels metallic. Looks more like ceramic, which would fit with the heightened temperature. Good heat resistance. The lights are actually tiny bulbs along a shelf just below the ceiling, with a lip that hides them but lets their light shine out. There’s no carpeting—the floors are the same material as the walls and ceiling—and no decoration. This wasn’t a luxury ship, or even a home. More like a science vessel or a military ship. Nothing here that wouldn’t be useful. No time or energy for frivolities.” She met his gaze and held it, and after a moment he shrugged.

“Point taken, Commander. Two views are more effective than one.” For the first time since she’d met him, he said her title with a hint of respect, and she nodded back.

“Right. So let’s get back to our viewing, shall we?”

Chapter 2

When the call came, Overseer Caldon was in his quarters. The message was patched through to him despite his orders to hold all messages while he slept, which meant that it must be important. The crew knew better than to disobey him without good reason.

The minute he heard the caller’s voice, Caldon admitted that the crew’s actions had been correct. He would discipline them for disobeying him, of course, but the punishment for withholding this call would have been far worse.

“I have a commission for you,” his sponsor informed him.

“Of course, sir—I am at your disposal.”

“Sensors in Quadrant Ten-Fifteen, Space Nine-Beta have detected a ship. Its configuration is unknown, though it is large—nearly of a size with your own vessel. I wish to obtain it.”

Caldon’s mind was already considering the problem. “Have other ships been sighted in that area?”

“Not recently, but Federation ships have been known to pass through there.”

“Of course.” He stood, knowing his sponsor could not see the movement. “I will depart at once.” He hesitated—should he mention it, or wait for his sponsor to do so? The former could be considered presumptuous.

“Excellent.” After a brief pause, his sponsor spoke again. “You will, of course, be compensated at your usual rates, plus a bonus for a speedy resolution.”

Ah. He had been right to wait. “Thank you, sir.” The call ended, and Overseer Caldon headed toward the bridge, to inform his crew of their new mission. And to punish them for disturbing his rest.

* * *

Soloman sat and stared at his screen.

“Something wrong, Soloman?”

He glanced up at Pattie, and shook his head. “No, I’m just accessing the data from the older files.”

She glanced at his console. “Is that what you and 111 recorded from its computers?”

“Yes.” He stared at it again, and felt as much as saw the Nasat crouch down next to him.

“What’s going on? You can talk to me.”

He thought back to their last mission, dealing with that strange time-travel device in the Ludugian system. He and Pattie had been sent to analyze the device while Commander Gomez, Lt. Commander Tev, Lt. Commander Corsi, and Carol Abramowitz had gone after the Ferengi they’d found taking advantage of it. While the two of them had worked, they had struck up a conversation, and both of them had revealed things they’d never mentioned to their other teammates. It had certainly brought them closer.

“I—I’m afraid,” he finally admitted quietly.

“Afraid? Of what? The ship?”

“No, not physically afraid.” He tried to put his thoughts into words—it was so much easier with numbers! “The last time we studied the Dancing Star, we had Commander Salek, and Lt. Commander Duffy—and 111.” It still hurt just to say her name. “I was part of a bonded pair then.”

“Ah.” His teammate’s antennae quivered with sympathy. “And you’re afraid of reopening old wounds by looking at the data again?”

“It’s more than that.” He glanced over at her, then back at the screen. “It does hurt, of course, but I’ve learned to accept that. Though it’s more painful than usual, reliving something we did together. But I’m also worried. I’m not 110 anymore—I’m Soloman now. I’m not part of a pair. I’m less than a pair.”

All of them had gotten fairly good at reading Pattie’s expressions, and he recognized this one with surprise. It was rage. “Is this about those two idiots on Venus?” The Bynar pair assigned to the Venus terraforming project, 1011 and 1110, had treated Soloman with contempt during the da Vinci’s mission to aid the terraformers, calling him a singleton, one of their race’s worst insults. But he shook his head.

“No, I’m not worried about what they think of me. Nor about what any of my race think. But I am not as capable as 111 and I were together—that’s a fact. I cannot process as well alone as we could united. And I worry that I may not be able to access the information as well now as we did then. What if I miss something because I can no longer read it as clearly?”

Pattie nodded and straightened to her full height again, which only put her level with him while he sat. “I know what you mean, actually. Fabian and I feel it, too. What if we’ve lost our edge now? What if we’ve forgotten something important, and are no longer sharp enough to catch it again?” She shrugged. “But I figure whatever we’ve lost in youth and eagerness we’ve more than made up for in experience. We’re smarter than we were, and that includes you, Soloman. You may be less than the two of you were

together, but you're a lot more than you were alone. You'll catch the important details. We all will."

She walked back to her own station, and Soloman glanced over at his screen again. He hoped she was right. But all he could do was his best, and that would have to be enough.

* * *

"Okay, how does this system work?"

Tev turned away from the collection array to glance at his superior. Was Gomez really so dense that she could not figure out the system herself? Then he noticed the look on her face. Ah, it was another test. No, he corrected himself. Not a test—a desire to compare data and conclusions. She was posing the question half-rhetorically and half as an invitation for him to share his own discoveries thus far. It was an odd approach, and not one he would have taken himself, but he had to admit that it was proving to be effective.

"This is the ship's sole power source," he replied, and wondered why she bothered to nod. He already knew he was right, or else he would not have mentioned it. Ah, but perhaps it was her way of verifying that she also knew this, and that they were in concurrence. Odd. "Stellar energy is gathered through the collection array on the exterior, funneled through these cables, and then stored in these panels." He glanced at the panels, which shimmered slightly. "I do not recognize the material, though it resembles both glass and oil."

"That's because it's oil that's been fused into glass." She showed him her own tricorder reading. "Very clever—it's comparable to our transparent aluminum, taking the best qualities of two different materials and combining them into a new structure."

"Of course. The energy is then drawn from these panels as necessary, either for fuel or to power other systems." He traced a conduit with one hand, following it back to the thick column at the center of the room, and tapped one of the crystals embedded within it. "This is the ship's actual engine. Power is pumped into these crystals, which magnify it and emit it through the thrusters placed along the hull. The tubes just beyond this store hydrogen and helium, which is ignited by the heat from the crystals. The sudden ejection of supercharged gases provides velocity, and smaller thrusts allow for course corrections."

"Right." Gomez tapped a few equations into her tricorder. "But there's a problem. If I'm right"—she showed him her calculations and he was forced to admit that she was—"these crystals should only enable the ship to accelerate to warp one. Maybe warp two, if the ship was running at maximum power and drained itself completely. But according to the logs from R5-3791, the Dancing Star was doing warp three when it entered Randall V's system."

"Impossible, given this data." Tev tapped one of the crystals again. "Nor has the engine been altered since its original discovery."

His superior met his gaze, and they both nodded. Something didn't add up.

"Let's get back to the da Vinci," she told him, "and tell the others. Maybe together we can figure out why this ship was going faster than its engines could possibly manage."

As they waited to beam back, Tev was surprised to realize that he did not begrudge sharing the puzzle

with his teammates. Oh, he knew he could solve it on his own, given enough time, but he found himself curious to see what conclusions the others would suggest.

* * *

Gold shook his head as Gomez sat back down. The entire S.C.E. team—Gomez, Tev, Blue, Stevens, and Soloman, as well as security chief Domenica Corsi, linguist Bart Faulwell, and cultural specialist Carol Abramowitz—was gathered in the observation lounge.

“So you’re telling me that this thing couldn’t have been traveling at those speeds?”

“No, it clearly was—the outpost’s data is very detailed, and their information on later events matches perfectly with our own logs, so we know their equipment was working properly. But those engines cannot produce that much acceleration.” Sonya glanced at the rest of her team. “So, any ideas on how it managed that trick?”

“Could it have had a second engine?” Faulwell asked, but Stevens and Blue both shook their heads.

“We went over that thing top to bottom,” Stevens told his roommate. “Nothing else even remotely like an engine. And nothing in the thrusters themselves that could have amplified the output to that degree.”

“What about outside help?” Abramowitz said. “I know some races use delivery or launch systems for their ships—they have a much larger external engine that drops away after launch, or they have two ships linked together to increase initial velocity.”

“A workable system,” Tev said, and Gold kept the shock off his face. Had his second officer just indirectly complimented someone?

“The Dancing Star could have used such a system on its initial launch,” Gomez added. “And it’s currently moving at warp one-point-five, which suggests that whatever it used before wasn’t available for extra speed this time around. We didn’t find anything on the hull to suggest that extra engines were there, but that doesn’t mean they weren’t either.” She glanced around again. “Good suggestion, Carol. Any other ideas?”

Gold nodded to himself. That was one of the things he liked most about his first officer. She was good with her team, she acknowledged contributions by her staff, and she kept her options open. This time it was Corsi who spoke up.

“Since we’re talking about its initial launch system, do we know where this thing came from?”

Tev frowned. “I have computed its path, based upon its position within the Randall V system, its angle of trajectory, its speed, and an estimation of its travel time based upon the fatigue of its hull.” He tapped a command into his padd, and the conference room screen displayed a star map. Randall V was circled, and a gold line ran from that off to one edge of the chart.

“That’s the Delta Quadrant,” Blue said, leaning forward to get a better look.

“Correct.” If anything, Tev’s frown deepened, which surprised Gold. Usually the Tellarite was smug about his discoveries. Why did he look almost displeased now? But that was quickly answered. “I have cross-referenced the location with the logs Starfleet has received from the U.S.S. Voyager, however, and

have discovered a problem.” Another command, and that portion of the map expanded. The line was now much thicker, and could be easily followed—as it ran right to a circle of absolute black.

“A black hole?” Stevens glanced at the chart, then back at Tev. “You’re telling me this ship came from a black hole?”

“No, of course not.” Now Gold knew why Tev was so unhappy—he’d been wrong. “Clearly it could not have originated there. But that is what the data suggests.”

“What if it came from even farther away?” Faulwell asked.

“Then it would have been traveling for a longer period of time,” Tev replied, “and it was not.”

“Not if it was going even faster originally.” They all turned to look at the slight, bearded linguist, who shrugged. “Since it was already going faster than it should have when it reached the system, what’s to say it wasn’t going even faster before that?”

“Makes sense,” Gomez said. “Tev, extend the line farther out and let’s see what we get.” A moment later, the gold line projected past the black hole and off the far edge of the chart.

“Say, what’s that over there, anyway?” Stevens pointed to a spot past the black hole, and Tev obligingly expanded that section—Gold was pleased to see that he didn’t object or insult Stevens in the process. Maybe the man was learning, after all. With that portion enlarged, they could see a gold circle not far from the path, with a designation beside it. “That’s a supernova.”

“It’s not on the path, though,” Blue pointed out.

“Not right now,” Fabian replied. “But if this ship really did pass that black hole, it would have been thrown off course by the gravity well.” He worked with his padd for a moment, then beamed the information to Tev. “Does that look right to you?”

Tev glanced at it, then nodded. “Yes,” was all he said, but even that was a step in the right direction, and Gold exchanged a smile with Gomez. Tev input the new information and the gold line shifted—it still ran straight from the black hole to Randall V, but now it angled as it passed the black hole. And ran right across the supernova.

“So you’re saying this thing came from a supernova?” Gold asked.

“I don’t think that was its point of origin, no,” Stevens admitted. “But it did pass by this one. In fact”—he tapped a finger on the table absently—“what if it used the supernova for the energy boost Carol suggested?”

“You mean a slingshot?” Blue asked, and Stevens nodded. Tev had already begun typing commands into his padd, but Gold was lost.

“Hold on a second,” he said. “Indulge an old man—slingshot?”

“It’s a way to use the gravity of a sun or planet for momentum,” Gomez explained. “The ship circles the object, entering its gravity well and gaining speed from the added force, then whips around it fast enough to break free of orbit. Cut it too close and you’re trapped in orbit for good, too wide and you don’t actually gain much, but do it right and you boost your velocity significantly, and with no real fuel cost.”

Tev looked up and nodded. “I have calculated the effects of the Dancing Star slingshotting around the supernova, and believe that Mr. Stevens is correct.” Gold was fairly sure that was the first time Tev hadn’t referred to Fabian as “Specialist” or “Technician.” “I have put the new information on the screen.” The image had changed—now it showed the line starting a little past the supernova. “The ship’s initial speed would have been warp one-point-three, well inside its capabilities. After circling the supernova, it would have reached a speed of warp nine-point-eight. It would have reduced that to three-point-one by the time it reached Randall V.”

“Good work, everyone,” Gomez stated, and Gold admired the way she had carefully included all of them in the praise—a subtle reminder that they could do more together than alone. “Now we know where it came from, and we’ve solved the riddle of its excessive speed. Let’s keep doing what we’re doing, reevaluating and reexamining, and see what else we can figure out.”

She stood to go, and Gold watched them all file out of the room, sparing one last glance at the screen before he exited as well. A part of him was horrified by the notion that this runaway ship could move so fast, but the explorer side of him just thought, Oh, to fly so far, so fast.

Chapter 3

“Look at this input capacitor,” Sonya muttered. She and Tev were back in the Dancing Star’s engine room, examining more of its equipment, and the more she saw the more impressed she became. “It’s got a cascading valve structure—brilliant design. How much would you say this could take before overloading, Tev? Twelve gigawatts?”

He stepped over to examine it, then nodded. “Twelve-point-one, possibly twelve-point-two. Impressive design.”

She gestured around them. “And this is just one of fifty like it. That’s over six hundred gigawatts this ship can absorb at once. Amazing. Most cities can’t accommodate that much energy!” She ran one finger lightly over the capacitor. “This ship could have slingshotted through the supernova instead of around it.”

Tev glanced at his tricorder. “Yes, it could have. Within the corona, certainly—it would have been able to absorb more energy that way, and still been far enough from the core to escape.”

She nodded, thinking that one over. A ship that literally dove into a supernova for energy and acceleration! Amazing! The more she saw of this ship, the more it impressed her.

Another thought occurred to her, then. Salek’s report hadn’t mentioned the capacitors at all, or estimated the ship’s absorption rate. He had noted that it used stellar energy for fuel, of course, but had suggested a more passive approach. Still, Salek’s main concern hadn’t been the ship’s operating specs, just what it was doing there and how to get rid of it quickly.

As they continued their investigation, Sonya let herself wonder about the Vulcan she had replaced. She had never met Salek, of course, but she had read his files and his record, and had heard stories about him from Fabian, Carol, Pattie, and of course Tev’s predecessor, Kieran Duffy. Salek had been a good commander, and his handling of the situation at Randall V had been exemplary, sacrificing himself to save everyone else.

Instinctively, she thought, Just like Kieran did at Galvan. She banished that thought quickly.

But Sonya found herself wondering about how Salek's mind had worked, particularly as an engineer.

She thought back over the re-creation she'd watched about the original encounter with the Dancing Star. Salek and Fabian had examined the engine room, just as she and Tev were doing now. He'd announced that Carol had been right about the ship running on solar energy, and had then told Kieran that he thought the crew had been killed by an internal energy release. But how had he known that so quickly?

"Fabian," she called out, tapping her combadge. His reply came immediately.

"What's up, Commander?"

"You were here with Salek during that first sweep of the engine room, right?"

"Yeah, he and I went that way and Duff and Pattie went forward, to the bridge."

"How did he figure out the ship's system so quickly? In the re-creation it seemed like he knew almost immediately how it worked."

"Well, that's just the way Salek was," Fabian replied. "Actually, Carol had already suggested that it was solar-powered, so he was already thinking that way."

"So he'd made up his mind beforehand?"

"No, but he had a theory already. Duff told me once that that's how Salek worked. He'd come up with a theory to fit the situation, and then see if it held up. Every time he got new data, he'd plug it into the theory. If it broke, he'd come up with a new theory. If it almost fit, he'd figure out where to bend the theory so they matched. And if everything fit: voilà!"

Tev nodded. "A sensible approach."

Sonya nodded as well. "So he always had a theory, for every situation?"

"Not instantly, no," Fabian replied. "He'd listen to the initial data. Then he'd come up with a theory based on that, and he'd test it as he went."

"Okay, thanks." Sonya thought about that. It did make sense. It was inductive reasoning, she realized. Salek had formed theories and then tested them against the data to see if they held true. A good, solid method, and excellent for an engineer. Any time he had to create an item, he could figure out what the device had to do and then break that down into specifics. If the first method he thought of wouldn't do the trick he'd try a different one until he found a method that would provide the necessary results.

That just wasn't how she thought, was all. She had a tendency to wait until she'd gathered all the data she could possibly get, and then try to piece together a theory from that. Deductive reasoning—from small to large, rather than the other way around. Her way didn't work as well for straight engineering—she got hung up on details too easily, and if she missed even one element she couldn't see the bigger picture, like trying to build a puzzle whose image you didn't know beforehand, while missing some of the pieces. But it was a perfect fit for most S.C.E. missions, because they involved reverse-engineering instead. And by not jumping to conclusions, by waiting until she had all the data,

Sonya could be sure that she had everything necessary to reach the right conclusion.

Which gave her the advantage here, she realized. The problem with inductive reasoning was that, if all the data fit your established hypothesis, you assumed it was right—if you had already decided that the hole was square, and all the pieces fit through that hole, you would believe that the square was the answer. But if you looked at all the pieces first, and saw that they were all triangles, you'd know that the correct answer was the triangle. The square was the wrong answer because it didn't match, but it seemed to work because none of the triangles were too big to fit through it. So Salek's theory had seemed right because nothing had contradicted it, but he hadn't had all the facts beforehand. If he had been completely right the Dancing Star would not be active again, and they wouldn't be here. They had more facts now, more to work with, and were more likely to come up with the real answer, especially if they let the details form the answer rather than the other way around.

Hindsight, Sonya thought ruefully. Looking back now, they could see the things that the team had missed the first time around, and where they'd gone wrong. She just hoped that catching those past errors would let them find the real solution and make the right decision this time. It was unlikely that they'd get a third try at it.

* * *

Numbers scrolled across the screen, and Soloman lost himself among them. As was always the case when he worked with code like this, a part of him felt free, able to soar again—no more restriction to words or emotions, just pure logic and computation. But another part of him wept, because the numbers were trapped behind the monitor's glass while he was trapped within his own body. If he were standing at the actual computer access port on the Dancing Star, he could have switched on his belt unit and simply spoken directly to the computer, the code flowing between them with no barrier. And, when 111 had been alive, the three of them would have formed a perfect trinity, the numbers dancing back and forth in a rhythm he still ached to recapture.

But Commander Gomez had ordered him and Fabian and Pattie to go through their old files first, which meant he only had the data he and 111 had downloaded that first time.

While doing so, he noticed a line of code—he and 111 had found it before, obviously, or it wouldn't be in the recording now. But they hadn't paid much attention to it—it had not been relevant at the time. The commands embedded in it were so simple, so direct, and so restricted in their conditional trigger that it had been easy to dismiss them as unimportant. But conditions had changed, and they were all too applicable now.

Soloman's face burned, and his fingers almost twitched, which could have been disastrous—a single wrong keystroke and the entire recording might have been altered, or even purged. He had to pause to collect himself, which had the unfortunate result of leaving those particular lines of code sitting on the screen, staring back at him accusingly. He'd been so worried that he would not be able to perform as well now, as Soloman, as he and 111 had done before as a pair. He'd asked Pattie what would happen if he missed something now, or couldn't decipher something again, because of that lack. But it had never occurred to him that the opposite might be the case. That he might find something he and 111 had missed.

It scared him, making him wonder what else they might have missed, here and on other missions. Now that he knew that they had not been infallible, he found himself questioning all of the decisions they had made together, all of the data they thought they'd decoded. But another part of him, a part he was

frightened to admit existed, was thrilled by the prospect. Ever since 111's death he had tormented himself with the conviction that they had been perfect together in every way, and thus by himself he could never hope to match that perfection. But they hadn't been perfect. And, while it might diminish his pride in what they'd had, it offered him hope that he could perform just as well by himself as they had together. Perhaps better—he had sacrificed speed, and the ability to have his computations double-checked instantly, but perhaps he had gained a bit more insight, and a bit more care in his work.

Pushing these notions away for later examination, Soloman rose from his chair. Time enough to consider such things later. For now, he had to bring this data to the commander.

* * *

“Okay,” Sonya began. They were all gathered around the conference table again, several hours after their last meeting. Carol Abramowitz had spent the time studying the data, trying to figure out what kind of people they were dealing with, but it was difficult, given the lack of any indication of personal items. Of course, it was possible that any personal items were vaporized along with the crew back at Randall V, but that still left her with precious little to work with. She did know that these people had been honorable, and they'd valued all life. They'd also been more tolerant of heat, and had found new and impressive ways to harness solar energy. And they'd made a ship strong enough to dive right into a sun.

“So, what have we learned?” Sonya asked.

“Well, we know the ship's based on solar energy,” Fabian said. “Not just propulsion but lighting, heating, circulation, everything. Its sensors actually operate mostly in the infrared spectrum, picking up heat signatures and translating those into three-dimensional image maps.”

“Its shielding is mostly absorption,” Pattie added. “The Dancing Star didn't have any weapons when we first encountered it, or any shielding against energy weapons. Instead it had a strong hull and a collection array to protect it from solar energy and then absorb that energy for its own purposes. That's why it could dive into a sun without harm, because the energy around it was siphoned off for the ship's use.”

“The computer systems are efficient,” Soloman said. “Not overly complicated, but very solid. Particularly resistant to heat and to vibration, even more than in most starships. The coding is not the most sophisticated, but it's very clean.”

“The ship routinely used stars for both energy and acceleration,” Tev said. “And the capacitors are built to handle exactly that type of massive input.”

“It also went into a sun—all the way into one—and came out unscathed,” Carol commented. She didn't get all of the technical details the others were sharing, but that fact had impressed itself on her.

Sonya nodded at her. “Good point. We also know that Pattie and Kieran disconnected the collector arrays after Salek's death and before launching the ship into the sun. Yet it has power now, and is approaching overload levels again.” She tapped the table. “What does that tell us?”

“Was the array reconnected?”

Tev shook his head. “No, it is still isolated.”

“So the ship was drawing power in some other way.”

“Right. But what?”

Carol watched them all thinking. She wished that she could contribute more, sometimes. Then something occurred to her. “Um, Pattie said most of the ship’s protection when it entered a sun was in its collection array, right?”

The others looked up at her, and Pattie wiggled her antennae in agreement. “Yes. There’s some shielding material between the hull and the interior walls, to keep the energy from leaking through fully, but mostly it was the array that siphoned off energy before it could prove dangerous.”

“But, with the array disconnected, how did the ship survive being inside Randall V’s sun?” She leaned forward. “I mean, never mind its powering back up—why wasn’t it incinerated?”

The engineers all looked at each other. Then Bart, her fellow nonengineer, spoke up.

“I’ve got a question, too. Pattie, did you just say that the ship has shielding between the hull and the inner walls?”

The Nasat nodded. “Yes. The hull is unusually conductive, and the shielding keeps energy from penetrating into the ship proper.”

“But why make a hull conductive at all?” Fabian wondered out loud. “I mean, why not just put the shielding on the outside and be done with it?”

Sonya gasped, and everyone turned toward her. “That’s it! Carol, you’re a genius! The hull’s an energy conductor! The entire ship is one giant absorption array!”

Everyone stared, then started nodding. It always amazed Carol that, even at times like this, they didn’t just all start talking over each other. Instead, someone spoke and the others listened, with occasional interjections. This time it was Pattie who commented first.

“It all makes sense,” she said. “The collection array was a supplemental power source, not the primary. So when we disconnected it, we thought we’d prevented the ship from powering up but all we’d done was slow the process down.”

“And, with the entire hull absorbing energy,” Fabian cut in, “the ship can easily withstand diving into a sun. It’s absorbing power from all sides, and all that energy gets sent through the capacitors and into the collection plates. The shielding makes sure none of it goes into the rest of the ship instead, and funnels it all toward the engine room.”

“So when it was sent into the sun,” Sonya finished, “it just used that to power up again.”

“That still leaves one problem,” Gold pointed out. “Duffy and Stevens programmed the Dancing Star to fly itself into Randall V’s sun. They didn’t give it any instructions past that. So what’s it doing all the way out here? Even with its power restored, something made it leave that sun and launch itself in a straight line.”

“I may have an answer to that,” Soloman said. “Many of its computer files had been wiped before we found it that first time, but not everything was lost. I have been going back over it, and I think I’ve found the relevant command.” He glanced down at his padd as if for confirmation. “Each internal vent knocked

the computer systems offline, but they rebooted after a suitable period. An emergency protocol demands that if the ship's systems shut down twice within roughly one Federation week, the ship will immediately start a preprogrammed course. Most likely back to their homeworld, for repairs." He looked embarrassed, the first time Carol could remember seeing that expression on his face. "The commands were hardwired into the system, which may be why we missed it before."

Gold nodded. "Makes sense—if it's broken down twice in one week something's wrong, so it's recalled for servicing. And, between its crew's sacrifice and then Salek's, that was twice in a single day. So once it was online again, and had enough power, it headed home."

"Why is it close to overloading again, then?" Corsi asked. "Isn't it burning off the energy as it goes?"

"Not enough, apparently." Fabian thought about it for a minute. "Actually, I think I know why. And it's our own fault." He shook his head. "Salek disconnected the safety protocols so that he could vent internally that second time. I'll bet some of those protocols included commands for automatically venting energy to prevent an overload. Plus, I did retask some of its vents for use as guns—so it can't use those vents unless someone engages them from the weapons console I added."

"You had no way of knowing that it would reemerge," Sonya reminded him. "Why bother to reactivate those protocols if it's just going to sit in a sun forever?"

Gold glanced at everyone. "Well, I'm impressed, as usual. So now you know how it works, and why it's moving, and why it's overheating. What's next?"

"Now we deactivate it properly," Sonya replied. "We—" Whatever she was about to say was cut off by a call from Shabalala on the bridge.

"Captain, a ship just dropped out of warp and is heading right for us."

"On my way," Gold replied, standing up. The others followed suit. "Good work, people. Gomez, Tev, you'd better come with me."

As they all headed out, Bart leaned in toward Carol and whispered, "Genius?"

Carol just grinned back at him and, very maturely, stuck out her tongue.

Chapter 4

"All right, Shabalala, what've we got?" Gold settled immediately into his command chair, Gomez and Tev stepping to either side of him. To Wong, watching from his conn station, the move looked perfectly synchronized, as if they'd practiced it. He suppressed a grin at the image of the three of them blocking the move out late at night and turned back to his station instead.

"Single ship, sir," Shabalala said. "Configuration matches the Androssi."

"Oh, great," Wong heard Commander Gomez mutter. "Tell me it's not Overseer Biron again, at least."

"No, Commander, this ship isn't one we've seen before."

“Well, that’s something,” she said, but Shabalala wasn’t finished.

“For one thing,” he continued, “it’s at least twice the size of Biron’s.”

“Me and my big mouth,” Gomez moaned. “What else?”

“I’m picking up multiple energy readings, Commander. Each one matches the signature of an Androssi engine, but I’ve got three separate locations for it.”

“Clearly they have installed multiple engines for increased thrust,” Tev declared. Wong didn’t much care for his tone, the “any idiot could see that” way he talked to everyone. Come to think of it, nobody on the bridge liked him much. But at least he was usually right.

“I’ve got something, too, Captain,” Haznedl added from the ops console next to Wong. “Multiple communications readings as well. Also three of them, and they seem to be aimed—at each other.”

“What?” Gold leaned forward in his chair—the crew liked to joke that they could remove the rest of the seat and he’d never notice. “Three engines, three comm signals? You’re telling me—”

“Faugh!” Tev snarled, having stepped over to one of the aft science consoles. He tapped in a few commands, and an enlarged image of the Androssi ship appeared on one of the side screens. The multiple engines and comm signals were highlighted, as were the multiple weapons systems Shabalala had noticed but had not yet had the chance to point out. Then, at another command from the Tellarite, the image split into three separate components. Three equal components—each one with all the makings of a full ship.

“Captain, it’s splitting!” Shabalala called out, and they watched as the image on the forward screen changed to match the one Tev had just created off to the side. “Now we’ve got three Androssi ships, each one roughly three-fourths the size of Overseer Biron’s. And all three of them still making a beeline for us.”

“How much time do we have, Shabalala?” It always amazed Wong that the captain could stay so calm at a time like this. He was perched on the edge of his seat, of course, but his voice didn’t waver at all, and his hands were resting on the armrests instead of clenching them. I doubt I could be that calm, with three Androssi gunning for me, Wong admitted to himself with a shudder.

“At current speed they’ll be within weapons range in three hours, sir.”

“Fine. Gomez, you’ve got two hours to figure something out. I suggest you get to it.”

“Yes, sir.” Gomez and Tev left the bridge, again moving together as if they’d practiced it. Wong just hoped that wasn’t the only thing their team had been practicing.

* * *

“Okay, we’ve got a problem,” Sonya told the team as she and Tev entered the observation lounge. “The ship is Androssi, and it turns out it’s some new modular design. It’s split into three separate ships now, and all three of them are headed for us.”

“If their sensors picked up the Dancing Star before this,” Pattie said, “they would have known it was enormous. Maybe they figured they’d need three ships to deal with it.”

“Could be,” Sonya said. “But why they sent them isn’t important right now. In two hours we’re going to have all three in our face. What are we going to do about it?”

She turned toward Fabian, and he managed not to grin or sigh. It was nice being the team’s tactical expert, and knowing they looked to him at a time like this. At the same time, he sometimes wished those expectant stares were focused on someone else.

“How big are these three, compared to Biron’s ship?” That was the one they were most familiar with, having encountered it twice already.

“Seventy-five percent,” Tev replied. Fabian wasn’t surprised that the Tellarite would know the size of Biron’s ship—he’d already demonstrated that he loved research, and that he’d read up on the S.C.E.’s previous missions, including the encounters with Biron at Maeglin and Empok Nor.

“Okay, so we’ve got three ships, each three-fourths of that size.” Fabian got up and paced while he thought out loud. “No way we can take them ourselves—the da Vinci might be able to handle one, though we’d come away in bad shape ourselves.”

“The Dancing Star dealt with that Cardassian ship, the Grach’noyl,” Soloman commented.

“True, and it could probably handle at least one of these. But I doubt it could take two, and that’d still leave one for us.” Fabian shook his head. “Sorry, Commander, but this is a fight we can’t win.”

“We can run,” Tev said, and glared back at them when they all turned toward him. “Valor in the face of overwhelming odds is simple foolishness.”

“No argument there,” Sonya admitted. “But I don’t think running would work. They’ve got three ships—they could send one or even two after us, while the remaining one or two lay claim to the Dancing Star. And we cannot let this technology fall into the Androssi’s hands.”

“Hell, they could focus all three on us,” Fabian replied, “blow us away, then come back and pick over it at their leisure. A quick scan will show them that the Dancing Star is unmanned, so they’ll know it’s not a threat.”

“What if we just scuttle it and go?” Pattie asked. “Toss it into the nearest sun and take off? They’ll stop to see if they can retrieve it, which should give us the time we need to get away safely.”

But Fabian shook his head again. “No good. They’re too practical for that, and there are three of them. They’ll leave one ship behind to watch the sun, and the other two will pursue us. Keep in mind that the Androssi would love to get their hands on Starfleet tech, too, and they’ve no compunctions about killing us to get it.” He stopped pacing and glanced up. “I do have one idea, though. It’s a bit crazy, but I think it’ll work—and it’ll keep both us and the Dancing Star out of their hands.”

* * *

“You want me to do what?” Gold wasn’t sure he’d heard her right, but Gomez repeated herself, with Stevens behind her nodding in agreement.

“We want you to move the *Vinci* into the hold of the *Dancing Star*. ”

“So that you can then—”

“Dive into the nearest sun, yes.”

“Are you insane, Gomez?” He leveled a finger at Stevens. “You, I already know the answer. But you want me to take my ship into a sun? We’ll be incinerated in an instant!”

“No, we won’t, sir.” Stevens had that mad gleam in his eyes, the same one he got every time he played a practical joke—or came up with an amazing engineering trick. “The *Dancing Star* is built for this—it can dive into a star without being damaged.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, son, this isn’t the *Dancing Star*. ”

“No, but that is.” Stevens stabbed his finger toward the viewscreen, which showed the *Dancing Star* sailing along beside them. “And its hold is big enough to fit this entire ship. Its shielding is designed to keep the heat and energy from bleeding into the inner compartments. Its crew survived sailing through a supernova, sir! We’ll be fine in there.”

Gold glanced at Gomez. “And you agree with this?”

She didn’t hesitate, which convinced him that either she was right or that she’d also gone mad. “Yes sir, I do. We can’t fight three *Androssi* at once, even with that ship, and we can’t outrun them without leaving the *Dancing Star* behind—and possibly being cut down anyway. This is our only option.”

He sighed. “You know, in the old days, I never had to worry about this kind of thing. I’d be sent to fight this ship or that one, or to carry this device from here to there, or to explore that area. No one ever asked me to fly into suns or through unstable rifts.”

“That’s true, sir,” Stevens replied, and the gleam intensified, “but you probably didn’t have nearly as much fun.”

Chapter 5

“How are we doing with the *Dancing Star*, Tev?”

The *Tellarite* glanced over at his superior as she and Stevens entered engineering. “Computer systems online, Commander. We’ve reactivated the safety protocols, and have vented enough energy to prevent overload for another fifteen hours. We have also set its thrusters to begin braking—the ship is currently at warp one-point-two and decelerating.”

“Nice work. Now, where are we going to put it?”

“I don’t know,” Stevens replied. “It won’t fit in the living room.” Tev stopped himself from rolling his eyes. What was it with humans that they always thought they were funny?

But Gomez, Stevens, and Blue had stepped over to study a map of the immediate area. Tev joined them.

“We’ve already passed through Sandion,” Blue was saying, one antenna tapping a spot on the chart. “And we’d have to turn around to get back to its sun. The next system in our current path is Franjean,” she tapped the chart again, a little higher up, “but we won’t hit that for another four hours at current speed.”

“We don’t have four hours,” Tev reminded them. “The Androssi will reach us in two-point-five.”

“What about this one?” Stevens tapped the map. “Cardienne? We can reach that in...” he started to type into his padd, then glanced at Tev instead. At least he now recognized his inferior abilities!

“Two-point-three hours at present speed,” Tev informed him. Stevens nodded at that—perhaps it was meant as an acknowledgment of his skill? Even after weeks of working together, he still found these people difficult to read.

“That’s not in our path, though,” Blue said. “We’d have to turn toward it.”

“It’s our best bet.” Gomez spoke authoritatively—Tev was pleased to notice that she was finally making decisions the way a team leader should, instead of letting others make them for her as she had when they had first met. “Let’s take a look at the Dancing Star’s thrusters and see if we can make this work.”

* * *

Ten minutes later, all of them were frustrated.

“Faugh!” Tev announced, and Pattie nodded her antennae in agreement. The equations were clear.

“Steers like a cow,” Fabian muttered. Pattie did not get the reference, but she agreed with the sentiment. The Dancing Star was too large to turn that sharply, particularly at its current speed.

“Well, what other option do we have?” Sonya demanded. “We can’t leave it here, we can’t fight, we can’t run. We need to get to the nearest star, and that’s the only one we can reach in time. So how do we turn something that doesn’t want to turn?”

“The original crew used gravity wells,” Pattie pointed out. “If we had a planet or even a large moon nearby, we might be able to use that to alter our course.”

“Nothing within range is large enough to provide sufficient gravity,” Tev informed her. Despite his brusqueness, Pattie was glad he was there—she might have been able to figure that out as quickly, but this way she didn’t have to.

“So it can’t turn on its own,” Fabian mused, “and we don’t have anything heavy enough to make it turn. But maybe we can bootleg it.”

The others turned to look at him.

“Bootleg it?” Tev asked.

Fabian shrugged. “It’s an old Earth term. Used to be bootleggers—people who illegally brewed their own alcohol, or moonshine, and then sold it to others. The cops would chase them all the time, and they got pretty good at making fast getaways. One of their techniques was called a bootlegger turn.” He grinned. “Basically they’d throw a rope around a tree and use that to spin the car into a tighter turn.”

“Like wheeling around a gravity well, but using a physical tether.” Tev nodded with understanding. Pattie was momentarily overcome by an image of Tev, wearing overalls and carrying a shotgun, riding in an old Earth car as it spun around a tree with police cars in hot pursuit. Her tinkle of laughter was fortunately overlooked by the others.

“What could we use for the tree?” Sonya demanded, and they all scanned the charts.

“There,” Pattie pointed out finally, enlarging a section and highlighting one spot. “It’s an asteroid, twice the size of the Dancing Star and filled with heavy metals. Not enough to produce a gravity well, but with its mass the ship shouldn’t be able to budge it. And it’s between our present course and Cardienne.”

“Right. So what do we use for the rope?”

“It’s got to be a tractor beam,” Fabian said. “Nothing else could withstand that kind of stress.”

“But the Dancing Star doesn’t have a tractor beam.”

Pattie tinkled in laughter again. “No, but we do.”

* * *

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” Gold muttered as he and Sonya watched Shabalala steer the da Vinci into the hold of the Dancing Star.

“I didn’t talk you into anything, sir,” she replied with a grin. “You agreed that this is the best course of action.”

“Being swallowed by a whale, which then hides within in a bonfire? What was I thinking?”

Sonya didn’t bother to reply. Instead, she tapped her combadge. “Tev, how’s the tractor beam coming?”

“Final attachments almost completed, Commander,” came the reply. “We will be ready in ten minutes.”

“Good. Report to the Dancing Star’s bridge as soon as you’re done.”

“And that’s another thing,” Gold told her. “We just got that new tractor beam, and now you’re ripping it off and sticking it on some other ship. And it’ll get turned to ash when we dive!”

Sonya shrugged. “Sorry, Captain. But it’s either the tractor beam or us, and I’d rather give up the tractor beam.”

He didn’t have an answer for that, so he simply turned back to the viewscreen. It really did look like his mental picture of Jonah and the whale—the da Vinci sailed through the Dancing Star’s cargo doors without a problem, ample room on both sides thanks to Wong’s deft handling, and settled into the middle

of its hold. The ceiling soared above them, lost in the darkness, and the walls were so far away that they were also swallowed up. If not for the floor, it would have been easy to imagine that the *Vinci* was still out in space, albeit in an area without any stars.

“All right, Gomez,” Gold sighed as the thud of the closing cargo door echoed across the ship. “We’re in. Now I expect you to handle the rest. I’ll be here in my little minnow if you need me.”

“Not to worry, sir,” she called back as she headed for the door. “This whale’s friendly. It’s those three sharks I’m worried about.”

* * *

“Everybody ready?” Sonya settled herself in the command chair, and Fabian had to suppress a wince. The last time a Starfleet officer sat in that chair, it was Salek. Fabian still remembered the sight of the Vulcan’s ashes piled on the cushion before he and Duffy piloted the *Dancing Star* into Randall V’s sun.

“All set here,” he replied from the tactical station.

“Ready, Commander,” Soloman called from the computer console.

“Good to go,” Pattie chimed in from navigation.

“Of course,” was Tev’s only reply from ops.

“Then let’s move some moonshine,” Sonya said with a smile. “Distance to firing point, Tev?”

“Point-zero-seven light-years,” came the immediate response.

“Current speed?”

“Warp one-point-one-five,” Pattie said.

“Time to Androssi arrival?”

Fabian checked his monitors. “Point-eight-nine hours.”

“Time to Cardienne, at estimated speed?”

“Point-eight-seven hours.”

Sonya sighed. “It’s going to be close. Tev, prepare to engage tractor beam, on my mark.”

“Ready, Commander.” It amazed Fabian that the Tellarite hadn’t insulted anyone all day. Maybe it’s his time of month, he thought wryly—and was glad he hadn’t said it out loud.

“And, three, two, one—mark.”

“Tractor beam engaged.”

“Changing course,” Pattie called out. “Speed dropping to warp one-point-zero-nine.”

“Release tractor beam—now!”

“Tractor beam released.”

“Now on course for Cardienne,” Pattie announced, antennae waving. “Speed at warp one-point-three-nine!”

“Congratulations, people,” Sonya said, leaning back in her chair. “It worked!”

“Yeah,” Fabian couldn’t resist adding, “those cops’ll never catch us now.”

Chapter 6

Overseer Caldon still could not accept what he had just seen. Upon dropping out of FTL, they had immediately detected not only the unfamiliar ship but also a Federation Starfleet vessel near it. Additional scans had identified it as the U.S.S. *da Vinci*, NCC-81623, a vessel that Caldon’s fellow overseer Biron had encountered twice—and failed to dispose of each time. Caldon had been looking forward to correcting his rival’s error when the U.S.S. *da Vinci* had moved inside the target vessel. Then this—

He stared at the screen, replaying the image in his mind. The vessel had been heading toward them, and had suddenly turned sharply to one side and accelerated. Given its size, such a turn should have been impossible, and the ship gave no indication that its engines had provided additional thrust to account for the change in velocity. Yet now it was moving more quickly, and on a completely different flight path.

Caldon frowned. Perhaps Biron was not a fool after all, and these Federation individuals were more clever than expected. No matter. His crew had already calculated their new path, and it led directly toward an uninhabited system—in fact, directly toward that system’s sun. It was a simple matter for him to spread out his ship sections, one on either side and his main section approaching from behind. With the sun before them, the mystery ship was boxed in, and would be easy to capture. And the *da Vinci* had trapped itself within, which would prove to be their undoing.

Yet, even as he gave orders for the new vessel’s acquisition and retrieval, Caldon could not help but think about that strange turn again—and wonder what else the crew of the U.S.S. *da Vinci* might do.

* * *

“He’s right behind us, Commander.”

Sonya glanced at the screen—half of it showed Cardienne’s sun, whose outer edge they had almost reached, while the other half showed the view behind them. Two of the Androssi ships had moved to flank them, while the third traced their own path behind them. He thinks he’s got us trapped, she thought. Well, he’s in for a surprise.

“Distance to the sun,” she called out, and Tev answered quickly.

“Ten minutes, Commander.”

“All right—everybody get ready.” She tapped her combadge. “Captain, we’re entering the sun in ten minutes.”

“Roger that, Gomez,” came Gold’s reply. “We’ve got the marshmallows and hot dogs ready.”

“Don’t forget the sunscreen,” she said, then switched off and returned her attention to the screen. The sun filled the forward view completely, and a few minutes later it swallowed them up. The screen went white for a moment, then shifted into grays.

“What just happened?”

“The monitors operate on infrared,” Soloman explained from his computer console. “Within the sun, that’s useless—it’s all hot. The systems have shunted to a different viewing method as a result. It’s standard protocol for the ship.”

“Ah. Okay.” She forced her hands to release the armrests, and tried to convince herself that she was only sweating from anxiety and not from actual heat. She prided herself on being able to face any situation, but was willing to admit that deliberately diving into a sun wasn’t the safest thing they’d ever done.

“What’s our status, Tev?” she asked, and was pleased to see her second standing as calmly as ever. If something had been wrong, she had no doubt he’d be the first to tell her.

“All systems operating normally, Commander,” he said instead. “Internal temperature has risen one-point-two degrees, and is holding steady. Hull intact, with no signs of damage.” He frowned. “The tractor beam, however, has been demolished.”

Sonya laughed. “Well, I did warn Captain Gold about that. Guess we’ll have to put in at a starbase for a new one, once we get out of this. Which reminds me”—she glanced at the other half of the viewscreen again—“I wonder what our new friends think of our immolation?”

* * *

“Well, this is unexpected,” Caldon muttered, standing beside his sub-overseer and watching the activity on the main screen. All of the reports he had seen of encounters with the Federation had indicated the same major weakness—a foolish overvaluation of all life, to the extent that Starfleet officers would not even dispatch a fallen opponent who would happily kill them if the situation were reversed. This behavior had proven useful in outmaneuvering them in the past—Biron had reported that they even valued workers, and would surrender rather than see one hurt! But clearly either Biron had been mistaken, or that behavior had been anomalous, or they had adopted a new strategy.

In a way, Caldon could not fault their decision. Clearly his own ships had outmatched them, and would defeat them in battle. Thus, the unfamiliar vessel would fall into his hands unless it was destroyed. He had not expected them to fly into a sun, especially with themselves still onboard, but it did prevent him from accessing the ship and its information.

“Scan for life signs,” he ordered, and one of the workers did so quickly.

“Negative, Overseer,” the worker reported a moment later. “We are not reading anything beyond the

sun's energies itself. No evidence of the ship's engines or shields, or of any life-forms within."

Caldon considered. It was possible, of course, that this strange ship could survive such an experience, and that the Starfleet crew had known this. But they had not been present when the ship had first been sighted, less than a day ago, and to have discovered so much about it in so short a time was unlikely. They could have hoped it would survive, and gambled upon that, but all the evidence suggested that the Federation did not gamble with lives. Thus they must have resigned themselves to death in order to keep the ship from his hands. A valid decision, and one he himself might have chosen in their place. As it was, only quick handling by his sub-overseers had prevented them from following the ship into the sun, and even so their shields had sustained damage from its heat. A direct encounter would easily incinerate them.

"Sub-Overseer Rando, report," he ordered over the communications system, and received an immediate response from the officer in charge of the second vessel module.

"No sign of the ship, Overseer. It has not emerged from the other side, and we have no readings of it. It must have been destroyed."

"Most likely, yes. But you will remain here in case it somehow reemerges. I will expect daily reports. If the ship has not appeared again by the end of one week, you will return to base."

"Yes, Overseer."

"Sub-Overseer Mudat, report." Again, the reply was immediate—as expected. Caldton would tolerate nothing less.

"No sign of the ship here either, Overseer."

"Initiate linkage at once." There was no reason to leave the remaining two ships separate at this point.

"Yes, Overseer."

Caldton then turned his attention to his own sub-overseer. "As soon as the linkage is restored, we will depart. Set return course 36381. Set FTL at 15." At least he could tell Biron that he had disposed of the da Vinci for him. He might even be able to profit from that—surely Biron's sponsor would pay for the removal of such a persistent foe. And the fact that Biron had not accomplished the task himself would make it all the more satisfying.

* * *

"Okay, tell me the good news." Gold had finally given in to temptation and wandered up to the Dancing Star's bridge, though he'd refused the command chair from Gomez—his was down in the hold, and sitting on this one wouldn't have felt right. Besides, she'd earned it.

"Two of the Androssi ships have left," Gomez replied.

"And the Dancing Star is holding up just fine," Stevens added from his station. Gold acknowledged that with a brief nod. It was true—the da Vinci was not experiencing any problems from the heat or radiation, and walking the corridors of this ship it had been a little warm but no worse than a spring day in San Francisco.

“And the bad news?”

Gomez glanced away, and Tev took the opportunity to respond. “The third Androssi ship has remained behind, and has taken up a guard position just beyond the sun’s outer corona.” At least he didn’t seem to be crowing about it—several times before the Tellarite had taken great pleasure in pointing out other people’s mistakes. This time it seemed like he was just reporting the facts.

“Okay, so we’ve got one out of three left. That’s not too bad. This ship can take him out, can’t it?”

“Definitely,” Stevens said. “But we can’t risk it.”

“Why not?” But he already knew the answer to that one, and held up a hand. “Let me guess—they’ve got an open comm line with the other two. So if we emerge and go after them, they’ll have enough time to call it in before we can wipe them out.”

“Right,” Gomez said. “And those first two will come running back here. Plus, once they know this ship can survive in a sun, they won’t be fooled twice. They’ll just wait us out.”

“How long can we stay in here?”

“Three-point-seven days,” Tev said. “After that, the engines will suffer another overload and we will be forced to vent—a process that will incinerate all life within the Dancing Star.”

Gold nodded. “Okay, so we’ve got one guy guarding us, he can call in reinforcements, and we can only sit here for a few days before we get deep-fat fried. Any more good news?”

“Well,” Blue said, “at least power isn’t a problem.”

He considered glaring at her, but knew it wouldn’t be worth it. Instead he turned back to Gomez and folded his arms. “All right, Gomez. You got us into the mess—get us out of it.” He did smile a little to let her know that he wasn’t really angry at her, but at the same time he wasn’t going to let her off the hook here. Besides, if past experience was any indication, he knew she and her crew would think of something.

* * *

“What are we going to do, exactly?” Fabian tried to keep that from sounding like a complaint. He actually wasn’t all that worried—they’d gotten out of situations worse than this before. Then he thought about the situation again, and decided that maybe they hadn’t. But he was sure they’d find a way out again, as usual.

“We could take off when they aren’t looking,” Pattie said, but Tev shook his head.

“Their scanners have sufficient range to cover this sun completely,” he said. “Any movement would be spotted.”

“And even if we could get clear without their seeing us,” Sonya added, “without a slingshot this ship can only do warp two, max. They’d catch us.”

“We could destroy them, though.” Fabian waved aside Tev’s look of scorn. “I know, I know—they’d

call their buddies the minute they saw us move. Can we jam their signal?"

Soloman spoke up from his console. "Androssi systems are highly resistant to our interference, and with each new encounter they've upgraded to prevent previous methods from working."

"Right, hence Corsi's Androssi Protocols One, Two, and now Three," Sonya agreed. "Actually, that's not a bad idea." She tapped her combadge. "Corsi, can you beam up to the bridge, please?"

An instant later, the air next to Sonya shimmered, and Corsi appeared. Fabian was amused but not surprised to see that she was carrying a phaser rifle in addition to her usual type-1 phaser—even though the Androssi had never had a chance at getting onto this ship, their security chief believed in being prepared. He filed away a mental reminder to tease her about that later, when they were alone.

"Yes, Commander?" As usual, Corsi looked calm, collected, and ready to commit violence.

"We have a situation, Domenica, and I was hoping for your input." Sonya gestured at the forward screen—it was no longer split in half, and now showed a graph of the area around the star, including the red dot that was the Androssi ship. "That is the Androssi ship that's guarding us. We can't go after it because it'll just call its friends back. We can't run or it'll chase us—and call its friends back. And we can't just sit here, because the engines will overload eventually."

"In three-point-six-five days," Tev added. Sonya ignored him, a trick Fabian was still hoping to learn someday. Then again, it was easier for Sonya—she was Tev's commanding officer.

"So we need to take him out before he can send a message," Corsi said, and the others all nodded.

"Any ideas?"

Corsi smiled and sighted down her warp rifle, aiming it at the blip on the screen. "Of course, Commander. Taking out the bad guy is one of the things I do best."

* * *

Sub-Overseer Rando sat at the helm of his ship, watching the viewscreen. He was pleased that Caldon had given him this assignment instead of Mudat. Of course, circling a star in the hopes that some unknown ship had somehow survived diving into it was a waste of time. But that was Overseer Caldon's call, not his. If nothing had occurred by the end of a week, Rando would return and report, as ordered. If something did happen, he would be waiting and ready. Either way, he had done his job properly, and that would be reflected in his next promotion.

A brief flicker on the screen drew his attention. The surface of the sun was bubbling slightly, and a flicker shot out from it. On the screen it looked like a mere flame, but the computer showed the truth—that was a solar flare, easily a mile long and half that in width. It was impressive, certainly, but Rando had parked his ship five miles beyond the sun's corona, safely out of flare range.

"Any change?" he asked his crew, just to be thorough. They shook their heads.

"Still no life signs, Sub-Overseer," one of them reported. "And no activity not consistent with that of a star of this type."

“Very good.” Rando sat back in his seat again and smiled. This would be an easy assignment. And when it was over, and he was back home, he—

Another bubbling occurred, and then grew. Even as Rando watched, still half-distracted, the bubbling erupted, and a massive tongue of flame shot forth. This was easily three times the size of the previous flare, and as he watched it, covered the screen—

—and Rando’s last thought, as the solar flare engulfed his ship, was that perhaps Mudat had gotten the better assignment, after all.

* * *

“Nice shot, Corsi!”

Corsi nodded back and stepped away from the console. “Thank you, Commander.”

Just then Gomez’s combadge beeped, and they all heard Gold’s voice. “Gomez, report. What was the rumble we just felt?”

Sonya smiled and tapped her badge to respond. “Good news, Captain. We’ve eliminated the Androssi ship. Coast is clear.”

“Good. How did you do it?”

Sonya glanced over at Corsi, who was hefting her warp rifle again. “I asked Corsi for aid, sir. And she figured it out.”

Gold’s laugh came through clearly. “Well, leave it to her to think of a way to shoot somebody while holed up in a sun. So, are you going to tell me the rest, or are you going to make me lie awake trying to figure it out?”

Sonya gestured at Corsi, who shrugged and hit her own badge. “It was simple, Captain. This ship is built to absorb solar energy. We’re inside a sun. So we’re effectively invisible—their sensors would simply show solar activity while we were here. That meant we could move right up near the sun’s surface and they still couldn’t see us.”

“Okay, but that’s still a few miles from them. Even the guns Stevens rigged for this monster can’t reach that far.”

“No sir.” Corsi smiled. “But its main engine can. We turned around and used the engine as a giant rifle. The blast looked just like a solar flare—which it basically is—and had more than enough range to destroy their ship. And it all happened too fast for them to react, much less send any messages.”

“Nice work, Corsi. Now, Gomez, if we’re all done here, let’s take care of this ship once and for all. And I’d like to get theda Vinciback where we can see the stars, if you don’t mind.”

* * *

Shabalala glanced down at the command chair from the tactical station on theda Vinci bridge. “The

Dancing Star has cleared the corona, Captain.”

“Opening cargo bay doors,” Haznedl added.

“Good.” Gold leaned forward. “Wong, take us out of this beast, please.”

“Yes, sir.”

Theda Vinci’s engines fired up, and the ship moved out of the hold and back into space. Gold couldn’t help but sigh in relief. He wasn’t normally claustrophobic, but having his entire ship inside another ship, and that ship inside a sun, had been a bit much. Being back out among the stars, where he could see their lights twinkling against the darkness, made him feel a lot better.

He tapped the comm unit on his chair. “Gomez, do you read me?”

Sonya replied quickly. “Yes, Captain?”

“Theda Vinci is clear. How are you and your team doing down there?”

“Almost done, sir. Another ten minutes or so.”

“Fine—let us know when you’re ready.”

Gold sat back and waited, and enjoyed the view. In what seemed like less than ten minutes—and, knowing this team, probably was—Gomez requested that she and her team be beamed up. Chief Poynter responded immediately, and reported to Gold a moment later that the full S.C.E. team was now back on board.

“Good. Mr. Wong, get us out of here, please. Set a course for Starbase 222.”

“Yes, sir.” And with that Theda Vinci was moving again.

Chapter

7

“So it’s all taken care of?” Gold asked as they gathered around the conference table again. Pattie thought he looked relieved, and it occurred to her that, for a starship captain, being confined and unable to see the stars was particularly torturous.

“Done deal,” Fabian said, and the others nodded. “This time it won’t be coming back.”

Sonya explained further. “We disconnected the Dancing Star’s entire conductor array. All of the capacitors, the conduits, the crystals—everything. We couldn’t take the hull off, since we were still floating along the corona’s outer edge, but we did everything short of that.”

“Which means it cannot power up again,” Pattie added. “Then we vented all the energy in its cells, so the ship is now completely without power.”

“I purged the computer systems,” Soloman said. “Nothing is left to start up again. I even removed the

hardwired commands, like its directive to return home.”

“And then we just beamed out and left it there.” Gold glanced over at Fabian, and it occurred to Pattie that he might think Fabian was kidding. But one look at his face revealed what she already knew, that he was serious. This time.

“Wait a second, you left it there? Sitting on the outer edge of the sun, where anyone could beam on to it?” But the captain calmed down a moment later—perhaps because several of them were smiling.

“The sun’s gravity has pulled the ship into its core,” Tev said, even though Gold was already shaking his head. Of course, Pattie thought. He knows how gravity wells work—he just wasn’t thinking about that at the moment.

“Has it been destroyed, then?”

Everyone glanced around, but no one answered. Finally, since no one had volunteered, Pattie spoke up. “We don’t know, Captain. The Dancing Star was built to withstand the heat and energy of a sun. And even though we disconnected everything, its hull is intact. It could still be in there.”

“It might always be in there,” Fabian said. “Or at least as long as that sun survives.”

“But it’s definitely not going anywhere this time,” Sonya added. “And nobody can get to it, unless they can already dive into a sun and survive—in which case they won’t gain much from finding it.”

“Well, at least it’s not a threat anymore.” Gold leaned back and looked around. “Did you bring back any of the pieces for study?”

Pattie couldn’t help wriggling her antennae in excitement. “Of course. We have one of the crystals from the engine, and one of the capacitors, and one of the energy panes it used. Plus a sample of the hull, and the recording Soloman made of the computer systems.”

Gold laughed. “Well, that ought to keep you all pretty busy, then.” He stood to go. “Good work, team. I’ll let Captain Scott know that the universe is safe from at least one runaway star.”

* * *

“Penny for your thoughts, Commander?” Most of the others had filed out, but Sonya looked up to discover Fabian, Pattie, and Soloman standing before her.

“Sorry, Fabe, just lost in thought.” She smiled a little. “I was just thinking about—well, about how funny life is.”

“You don’t seem to be laughing.” Pattie’s observation did make Sonya laugh, at least a little.

“No, not funny that way. More funny-odd. I mean, here is this ship, this amazing ship, and what do we do with it? We send it into a sun where no one can touch it.” She sighed. “Plus it’s a ship we’ve already seen once before, and now we’re dealing with it again.”

Fabian and Pattie exchanged glances. “Actually, Commander, we were thinking about that too, Pattie and I.” Fabian sat down next to her. “The three of us”—he included Pattie and Soloman with a wave of

his hand”—were on the original team. We thought we’d figured this ship out and shut it down, and now here it comes all over again. We couldn’t help feeling like it was a ghost from our past.”

“An old mistake, come back to haunt us,” Pattie said. “And we wondered if, since we got it wrong the first time, we had any hope of figuring it out the second time.”

“Especially since... we aren’t who we were then.” Soloman looked sad, and Sonya knew that this mission had hurt him at least as much as it had her. She’d been reminded of Kieran, but he had been reminded of 111, and they had actually been on this mission together, whereas she had not even been part of the team yet.

“But we couldn’t have fixed this one without any of you.” She looked at each of them in turn. “All of you contributed to this, and came up with things Tev and I didn’t. We needed the fresh perspective, yes, but we also needed your ability to look back at it and see it again with more experienced eyes.”

“I... was embarrassed,” Soloman admitted quietly. “Embarrassed that 111 and I had missed that emergency protocol before. And I felt that I was tainting her memory by revealing that she and I had made a mistake.” He lifted his head and met her gaze, and Sonya saw a strength there that she’d seen slowly growing since Venus. “But her memory is still there. We made a mistake, but now we’ve corrected it. And I don’t think we, she and I together, would have caught the mistake this time, either. I think I caught it because I am no longer 110. I am Soloman. I have changed—grown—and that’s made a difference.”

“Pattie and I may not have changed so profoundly,” Fabian said with a smile, “but we feel the same way. We were less experienced, less crafty. It’s not that we were fools, just that we may not have had the tools we needed back then. Now we do. We’re all better than we were before.”

“And part of that,” Pattie added, antennae waving gently, “is because we’re part of this team. The old group was strong, but this one—this one is stronger.”

“I know,” Sonya said softly. “And it bothers me a little. As much as I hate to admit it, Kieran couldn’t have done the things Tev did. Not that Kieran wasn’t wonderful, and a great engineer, but his mind worked differently. We needed Tev for this.”

“And we needed you,” Pattie said. “You looked at the problem from a different perspective than Salek did, and saw what he missed.”

Sonya stood, and Fabian did as well, the four of them clustering together. Like a group—like a family. “I think,” she said slowly, discovering it as she spoke, “that I could see it because Salek had laid the groundwork for me. Because all of you had. He set things up, and that let me come in now and figure it out from there.”

Fabian laughed, “You know, hindsight usually only works if it’s your own.”

Sonya met his laugh with one of her own. “Well, maybe, but on this team we share so much anyway, what’s one more thing?” Then she shook her head and smiled. “I do feel good about it, though. I feel like this was a chapter in this crew’s history, and we helped close it properly. And maybe now Salek”—she felt her eyes tearing up slightly, and this time chose not to fight it—“and Kieran and 111 and McAllan and Feliciano and Drew and Barnak and all the others who have gone before can finally rest properly, knowing that we’ve put it all to rights.”

“Well,” Pattie replied with a tinkle, “I don’t know about all of it. What have we left to work on, then?”

“Not to worry, Pattie,” Fabian told her as the four of them headed toward engineering. “I’m sure we’ll find something.”

END

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). 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.

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Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Coming Next Month:
Star Trek™: S.C.E. #35](#)