

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Coming Next Month: Star Trek™: S.C.E. #43](#)

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 2 by Michael A. Martin & Andy Mangels

#32: Buying Time by Robert Greenberger

#33: Collective Hindsight Book 1 by Aaron Rosenberg

#34: Collective Hindsight Book 2 by Aaron Rosenberg

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

#36: The Demon Book 2 by Loren L. Coleman & Randall N. Bills

#37: Ring Around the Sky by Allyn Gibson

#38: Orphans by Kevin Killiany

#39: Grand Designs by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#40: Failsafe by David Mack

#41: Bitter Medicine by Dave Galanter

#42: Sargasso Sector by Paul Kupperberg

COMING SOON:

#43: Paradise Interrupted by John S. Drew

#44: Where Time Stands Still by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore



SARGASSO SECTOR

Paul Kupperberg



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 © 2004 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: 0-7434-9367-2

First Pocket Books Ebooks Edition July 2004

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

“Odds are it’s right where you left it, David.”

David Gold could hear the familiar mix of amusement and exasperation in his wife Rachel’s voice as though she were in his cabin with him. How many times had she said those same words to him in the course of their marriage? How many misplaced socks, coffee mugs, padds, and combadges had elicited that very statement? Not, to David Gold’s mind, that they were particularly helpful words, even if she did locate, finally, the missing object. If he could remember where he had left it, he wouldn’t need to ask her. “It’s right where you left it” ranked up there with “it’s always in the last place you look” on the scale of Useless to Nonsense. But his forgetfulness seemed to amuse his wife, bring out the protective mother-hen in her during his all too infrequent stretches of time home.

For Rachel’s part, it had taken her a long time to understand how her husband, a solid and steady Starfleet officer, could possibly have attained such a level of domestic absentmindedness. Aboard the U.S.S. da Vinci, he was responsible for the safety and well-being of forty crew and the operation of a ship often tasked with missions of literally world-saving proportions. It was a job that required focus and concentration, the ability to keep a million ever-changing details in mind at once, to make split-second decisions based on often incomplete data, to see not just the trees for the forest, but every last leaf on every tree while simultaneously maintaining a detailed overview of the status of the entire forest.

Why then, could he not remember where he left his socks?

Gold smiled at the memory of Rachel sharing with him her theory on that very subject several years back, during one of their rare anniversary celebrations together. “I finally figured it out,” she had said. “It’s because you don’t have the luxury of forgetting on the da Vinci that you need to be able to just relax, to not have to remember every little thing when you’re home.”

“And,” he said, taking her hand across the table, “because I know if I do forget, I always have you there to remember for me.”

“And I always will,” Rachel said. She had remained true to her word.

Which was all well and good, Gold thought while down on his hands and knees to search the floor around his bunk. And for that reason alone, he wished he was indeed back home, because then all he would have to do was shout out, “Rachel, have you seen my wedding ring?” and she would shout back, “Odds are it’s right where you left it, David,” and then, with her lovely face alight with the aforementioned amusement/exasperation mixture, she would march into the room and walk straight, without a sign of hesitation, to the missing item.

Gold sat back on his heels and puffed out a breath. If asked to testify in a court of law, he would have had no choice but to swear that his ring was nowhere to be found in that room. As captain, he was assigned the largest cabin on the ship, which wasn’t saying much on a vessel the size of the *Vinci*. Its small size—not to mention a lifetime of discipline as a Starfleet officer—forced him to keep his cabin squared away. A place for everything and everything in its place, and before he had gone to sleep last night, the place for his wedding ring had been on the shelf where he left all his personal items every night. What were the chances he had defied the habit of a lifetime and put the ring somewhere else?

The captain glanced at the time and knew he should be getting to the bridge. With the ship gearing up for a new and protracted—albeit fascinating—mission, it would be bad form for the captain to schlep onto the bridge, late for alpha shift. The continuation of his search would have to wait until later, even as the fact of its disappearance would gnaw at the back of his mind for the rest of the day, driving him crazy.

Straightening his uniform tunic, Captain David Gold stepped through the sighing door of his cabin and into the corridor. Thanks to the futile search he was a few minutes behind in his morning routine, which usually included walking to the bridge with his first officer, Sonya Gomez. He just assumed the commander would have gone ahead, anxious, as he knew the ship’s senior engineer was, to sink her teeth into their new assignment. But, to Gold’s surprise, Gomez was herself just coming down the corridor, her forehead creased with frown lines as she juggled a steaming cup of tea and two padds in her hands.

“Good morning, Gomez,” Gold said.

Gomez stopped dead in her tracks, as though taken by surprise at the sound of his voice. “Captain,” she said, and blinked at him. “I thought I missed you this morning.”

“I thought the same of you,” Gold said. He nodded at the jumble in her hands. “Problems?”

“Nothing but this morning,” she said. “First thing off the bat, my padd experienced some sort of fatal error and crashed. It wiped everything.”

Gold shook his head. “Oh my,” he said with considerable sympathy, knowing that engineers kept half their lives and all their thoughts and ideas on their padds. The captain and commander continued on their way to the bridge.

“I didn’t think it was that big a deal at first since I back up my padd onto the mainframe every night. But when I tried to download the files to a new padd, the computer said they had been corrupted...not to mention my backup padd also went on the fritz.” Gomez shook her head. “I’ve done a considerable amount of preliminary work on this clean-up job and I need those notes. I just hope Soloman can talk some sense into the computer and help retrieve my files.”

“I don’t remember the last time I heard of a padd failing like that,” Gold said.

“I know. And I had two in a row go south on me. What are the odds?”

“It’s shaping up to be one of those mornings for me as well,” Gold agreed. “I hate to think of it as an omen of things to come.”

Gomez chuckled. “Why, Captain. I never knew you were superstitious.”

“Oh, I’ve been known to dabble in superstition,” he said. “Although I’m willing to concede that both our current situations are most likely random acts of capricious nature.”

“In other words, bad luck.”

“Exactly.”

Gold and Gomez exchanged smiles, then stepped onto the crowded bridge of the U.S.S. da Vinci. The captain noted a larger than usual complement of bridge, engineering, and S.C.E. crew present this morning. They were gathered in clusters around different monitoring stations, huddled over padds and tricorders, or simply watching the breathtaking scene spread before them on the ship’s viewscreen. The captain smiled, sharing as he did their excitement for the work that lay ahead. But his was not to stand and gawk in awe—much as he would have loved to join the justifiably flabbergasted observers. His was to keep his attention focused on the big picture so this diverse and brilliant crew could work their respective miracles.

“Good morning. A status report, please,” Gold said by way of announcing his presence.

Tactical Officer Lieutenant Anthony Shabalala seemed to be the only member of the crew to take note of Gold’s presence, snapping to attention and saying, “Holding steady, Captain, at half a parsec from the edge of the debris field. We’ve been scanning since our arrival three hours ago and, as expected, have so far found no life signs within range.”

Gold noted that Gomez had joined a cluster of her fellow S.C.E. crewmates around one of the science stations and was already deep in their animated discussion.

Right, Gold thought, holding up his hand to cut off Shabalala’s recitation. Time to give these leaf counters a bit of a look at my forest.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the captain said at a volume that cut through the ambient murmur of some two dozen voices. “Observation lounge. Thirty seconds, if you please.”

That, Gold noted with satisfaction, got their attention.

Chapter 2

Sonya Gomez was not the least bit surprised to see that everyone arrived at the morning briefing on time. It was a measure of the job that lay before them that this team of scientists and engineers, men and women, humanoid and otherwise, who had traveled the universe witnessing and accomplishing some pretty amazing things, were as excited as they were to get started. Who could blame them, considering what lay spread before the da Vinci across half a light-year of space?

Even as everyone settled in seats around the conference table, all eyes were glued to the monitor on the wall, glowing with the same image that had captivated the crew members on the bridge. Gomez could certainly understand their fascination and, in fact, shared their excitement. It was impossible not to as she looked upon the breathtaking expanse of hardware that blocked the *Vinci*'s way through space.

For as far as the eye could see and their sensors could scan, there was nothing but ships, hovering motionlessly in an endless band that looked as though it stretched to eternity. Starships. Interplanetary craft. Shuttles. Ships of comprehensible design and purpose. Ships whose purpose would likely take years to determine. Ships of every size and shape imaginable, of materials known and mysterious. Ships powered by solid fuels and solar sails and nuclear engines and warp drives and black hole technology and ships beyond the imaginings of any of the *Vinci*'s knowledgeable crew of engineers and scientists. Ancient ships carrying markings that identified them as belonging to races known to have disappeared tens or hundreds of thousands of years before humanity took to the stars. Others branded in languages lost to time and distance. Ships, some of which, preliminary scans showed, were millions—if not more—years old.

Literally millions of ships...and not clue one as to how they might have gotten here or why this little sector of space had become the repository for millions of years worth of derelicts and wrecks. A cosmic junk-yard whose very existence made the engineer in Sonya Gomez shiver with delighted anticipation of the secrets examination of them would yield.

Gomez reluctantly tore her eyes from the nearest screen at the sound of Captain Gold clearing his throat. The rest of the crew did the same, but she noticed it was only seconds before they began to cast surreptitious glances back at the silent vista.

Gold, she thought with a private smile, had also taken note of the crew's less than undivided attention. "I think it's safe to assume," the captain said from his seat at the head of the table, "that all hands are aware that the *Vinci* has reached its destination." He gestured in the direction of the screen, tacit approval for his mesmerized crew to resume looking for themselves. "As you also know, this sector has only recently been opened to travel by Federation vessels. Short of the mapping expedition that first discovered this Sargasso Sea of space, the *Vinci* is the first ship through."

"The realm was previously in the Breen's purview," Lieutenant Commander Mor glasch Tev added. "Once they scurried out of sight when the war ended, many of their claims, including this region, suddenly disappeared."

P8 Blue, the ship's Nasat structural systems specialist, made a clicking sound that Gomez had long ago learned indicated curiosity. "I beg your pardon, Captain," she said. "That term you used, Sargasso Sea? I'm not familiar with it."

Gomez saw Carol Abramowitz, the ship's cultural specialist, open her mouth to offer an explanation, but Tev spoke up first. As usual, she noted wryly to herself. But she had long since reconciled herself to the Tellarite's propensity for arrogance that went beyond even the societal norms of his rather blunt-minded species. His was a people who spoke the truth as it was on their minds, to whom such human social niceties as tact and courtesy were just fancy ways of lying, and Tev was way up on the obnoxious scale even by Tellarites' high standards.

"It is a Terran term," Tev said. "A reference to an area of Earth's North Atlantic Ocean, also known as the 'Bermuda Triangle,' a fabled sea of lost ships. Legends," and here he bit down on the word as if to let one and all know what he thought of unsubstantiated tales of undocumented phenomena, "abound of

ships entering this area and disappearing, some to reappear months or even years later, derelict, their crews gone, often with half-eaten meals still on their mess tables. Aircraft are also said to go missing in the so-called 'triangle.' It's interesting that you mention it, Captain, considering our current location."

"Yes indeed, Tev," said Gold. "I considered its relevancy when I chose it as a metaphor."

"Yes, sir, but I understood you to utilize the term in reference to the aggregation of derelict vessels, which is onemyth about the Sargasso Sea," Tev said. "Whereas I refer to a scientificexplanation for both the sea and the phenomenon we now face."

Gomez fought back the instinct to jump in and reprimand her subordinate for the tone he was taking with their superior officer. She knew Gold wasn't offended by Tev's arrogance. All the captain saw was a good officer who was damn good at his job, if a bit unorthodox in his approach to military courtesy.

"The Sargasso is a sea within a sea, if you will. It's a two-million-square-mile ellipse of becalmed sea, named after the sargassum, a species of seaweed that covers and is native to the area, several hundred miles off the east coast of the North American continent. The area is surrounded by the Florida, Gulf Stream, Canary, North Equatorial, Antilles, and Caribbean currents, some of the strongest ocean currents on Earth. They all meet and enclose this sea, separating it from the rest of the Atlantic Ocean and creating a stagnant sea. The Sargasso rotates slightly, changing position with the surrounding currents as a result of seasonal changes, but it is otherwise a calm area.

"Therefore, anything drifting into the surrounding currents will make its way, eventually, to the Sargasso Sea. Once caught there in the essentially still water, it is unlikely to ever drift out. Hence, one assumes, its reputation as an area from which sea craft might disappear, although I fail to understand how the sea currents would account for the disappearance of aircraft as—"

"Yes, Tev. That's all very fascinating," Gold said in an attempt to get his officer back on track.

"Of course, sir," Tev said smoothly. "My point is, our own Sargasso Sector came into being in essentially the same fashion as the one on Earth. That is, by surrounding 'currents'—in this case, of course, celestial forces—which have isolated this area and created a becalmed 'sea' out of which these trapped or abandoned ships cannot drift."

Tactical Systems Specialist Fabian Stevens whistled between his teeth. "This band of junk extends about half a light-year on the east-west axis and almost twelve AUs on the north-south. I won't even try to calculate how much area that covers. What kind of celestial forces are we talking about here?"

Tev shrugged. "It's a fairly unusual confluence of events," he said. "Ringing the Sargasso Sector are, in no particular order, one perfect binary black hole system, one system of unusually high magnetic activity, and no less than two quasars captured in some sort of complex mutual orbit, the result of which is a stasis zone, enclosed by the pull of the different gravitational and magnetic fields. This is a particularly ancient system, so such anomalies are to be expected."

"To havefour such anomalies arranged close enough to create this dead space," said Gomez, "but in such perfect balance so they don't interfere with one another. . . ." She looked over at Soloman, the Bynar computer specialist. Able to interface directly with computers, she knew she could always trust him with rapid calculations. "What are the odds, Soloman?"

Soloman smiled. "Depending on how you choose to view it, either some several trillion to one against. . . or fifty-fifty."

Tev shook the precisely groomed dark brown fringe around his neck. “That’s preposterous,” he snapped.

“Odds,” said Soloman, “really, are nothing more than a numeric representation of the probability of a certain event either happening or not happening. In a game of poker, you might need one specific card to fill your hand, say the ace of diamonds. You draw one card. The event you are calculating is whether or not the card you draw will be the ace of diamonds. Therefore, you either draw the ace of diamonds or you don’t draw the ace of diamonds. Fifty-fifty.”

Tev was scowling. “You’re playing with semantics. What if you need two cards, or three? Or if the variables are far more complex, on the cosmic scale of four balanced anomalous systems?”

“Depending, of course, on how complex a model you wish to construct, you can always introduce a wider set of variables, treating each bit of the equation as a separate piece and come up with a more comprehensive number. But at the lowest common denominator,” the Bynar said, “the equation will always reduce down to yes or no. Opened or closed. Binary. Can this happen? Yes, it can. No, it can’t. Fifty-fifty.”

Gomez tried to cover a smirk as Tev crunched Soloman’s numbers for himself. Everyone but the literal-minded Tellarite realized the Bynar was having a little fun at his expense. Still, while the captain might tolerate the tangents their discussions often wandered off on, it was time to get back to the business at hand.

“We’ll have plenty of time to study that,” Gomez said, taking back, at a nod from Gold, control of the discussion. “In fact, Tev, you’ll take the point on that. Pattie,” she said to P8 Blue, “you’ll lead up charting, cataloguing, and structural survey of the derelict ships. Bart and Carol, you two will catalogue what you can of language and culture as we go along. Likewise, Soloman, you’ll recover as much of their computer systems as time allows for later analysis. Dr. Lense will handle the examination of any biological remains we may find.”

Gomez nodded at Chief Engineer Nancy Conlon. “Your crew standing by for some heavy-duty demolition, consultation, and reverse engineering duties, Lieutenant?”

“We’re ready,” Conlon said, rubbing her hands together in anticipation. “I hear there are some pretty amazing propulsion systems waiting for us to get our spanners on.”

“Then,” said Gold, “it sounds like we all know what we need to do.” He tapped a tabletop switch and called to the bridge. “Wong, proceed to point alpha at half impulse. Shabalala,” the captain added, “warm up the proton-torpedo tubes. Demolition begins in precisely twelve hours. Let’s get to work, people.”

Chapter 3

Pattie hauled herself into the shuttlecraft’s copilot seat next to Soloman and, as it conformed itself to her insectoid body, buckled herself in.

“I have completed the checklist on the external sensor arrays,” she said. “Primary and backup systems

are running, all datastreams feeding to the Theda Vinci's mainframe."

"I'm ready here," Soloman said, tapping his combadge. "Shuttlecraft Shirley to Ensign McAvennie, we're set for bay doors to open."

"Roger, Shirley," came the reply from the shuttle control officer. "Doors opening. Have a safe trip."

Pattie clicked and buzzed with excitement as Soloman piloted the shuttle through the forcefield that held the vacuum of space at bay. "Some of these ships," she said, "are remarkable. One would need a lifetime to adequately investigate even a few of them."

"And we have," Soloman said with a glance at the time on the console, "less than ten hours to make a sweep of the first half dozen before the Theda Vinci begins to destroy them."

The Shirley drifted from the bay and Soloman lit the thrusters. Theda Vinci had settled into a stationary position less than a thousand kilometers from the edge of the debris field, a thin layer of wreckage and dismembered parts from countless vessels that swarmed around the conglomeration of derelict ships like the sargassum that covered the surface of the sector's earthly namesake.

Pattie clicked in regret. "Yes, it's a pity. Some will need to be destroyed to clear the way through the sector, but we'll try to move those we safely can. Either way, we can't risk doing anything to these ships until we've run an analysis on each and every one we propose to tamper with in order to determine the safety of such a move. At any rate, we've known from the start that our mission was to be as much about demolition as hard science."

"I understand," Soloman said, setting course for the closest of the derelict ships, a massive dark structure of many facets, an ill-defined smudge that blocked the stars. "A convoy of colonization ships are on course to pass right through the Sargasso Sector and the very conditions that hold these ships block any easy alternate route, preventing the convoy from altering course to go around the obstruction. But that doesn't mean I have to like the situation. These ships are an invaluable scientific and cultural find. To destroy so many without proper study merely to clear the way for navigation... well, it just feels wrong."

"I'm sure you won't find any onboard or in Starfleet who disagree with you," Pattie said. "But this colony's been in the planning stages for a year and a half. Those cargo ships are good for barely warp four for six or seven hours at a stretch. If they tried going around the Sargasso Sector, it would add nearly a year to the voyage, time their resources and changing conditions in their destination system don't give them. Like it or not, they will be passing through this system in less than one month and there better be a clear path for them to take."

The Bynar nodded and said, "Yes. We destroy them reluctantly." He looked at Pattie with sad eyes. "That doesn't make them any less gone."

"No," Pattie agreed and the two crewmates traveled several hundred clicks in silence. Finally, in an effort to lighten the mood, the Nasat said, "By the way, I enjoyed your joke on Tev. Last I saw him, his fringe was still ruffled trying to work out your theory on chance."

"Well," Soloman said modestly, "sometimes it's difficult to resist the temptation to put confusion in his path." Then the Bynar smiled. "Fabian told me I did a wonderful job of messing with his head."

"Absolutely. A clever simplification that makes just enough sense to be irrefutable. Sensor arrays are

coming online now,” Pattie said suddenly.

The view from the Shirley’s window was blocked by the looming blot of the black ship. Soloman deftly worked the controls. “Holding steady at optimum sensor range,” he said. “Scanning for a computer core. Yes, it is a simplification, but once I said it, I started to wonder if it was in fact nonsense.”

Pattie cast Soloman a skeptical look. “I have many more legs than Tev. It is far more difficult to make me stumble.”

“No, I am serious. Take the example of a flat two-faced object, such as a Ferengi betting coin. Chance says that in any given set of tosses, the coin will come up heads or tails in statistically equal numbers. It’s either/or, therefore fifty-fifty.”

Pattie said, “But that’s the case only in very simple systems. In the case of a poker game and the drawing of a specific card, there are not two choices involved, there are fifty-two, therefore increasing substantially the odds against drawing the necessary card.”

“Ah, but the choice isn’t between picking the hypothetical ace of diamonds against any other specific card in the deck. In any individual example of drawing a card, it comes down to yes, you will draw the ace, or no, you won’t draw the ace.”

Pattie waved four of her eight legs at Soloman and turned her attention to her sensors. “Now you’re messing with my head,” she said.

“Believe what you will,” Soloman said, but the Nasat was fairly certain she saw the whisper of a smile on his lips as he said it.

* * *

Lieutenant Commander Mor glasch Tev stood at the tactical station on the Vinci’s bridge, looking as sharp as a Starfleet recruiting poster. Fabian Stevens wouldn’t swear to it, but from the way the Tellarite was briskly keying his way through the weapons system checklist and snapping out comments and commands to engineering, Tev just might have been having fun. The reason Stevens wouldn’t swear this to be fact was that he didn’t think he had ever seen Tev having fun before and therefore didn’t know that he would recognize the phenomenon were he to actually witness it.

Nonetheless, ten hours before the demo was scheduled to commence the commander was on station, checking systems that both Stevens and Shabalala had, in fact, checked an hour earlier when coming on duty. And which would be checked again, later in the day, when Joanne Piotrowski came on duty for beta shift. If that wasn’t a party, what was?

“Everything in order, Commander?” Stevens inquired.

“Seems to be,” Tev muttered, distracted by information he was studying on one of the displays. “Has the targeting analysis been completed yet?”

“Yup. We’ve located an isolated pocket of derelicts that appear to be inert where we can start. No life, energy, or radiation signals from any of them,” Stevens said. “Six of the ships were giving off anomalous readings, which is probably some sort of ambient energy signature, but we’ve sent Soloman and Pattie aboard the Shirley to take a closer look before we commit.”

Tev nodded. He tapped the keypad, then nodded again at the targeting data scrolling across the screen.

“Odds are,” Stevens said, “they’ll check out just fine.”

Tev’s attention snapped from the console to Fabian. “What did you say, Mr. Stevens?”

Stevens said, “I said I’m sure the ships will check out fine.”

Tev narrowed his eyes. “Mm, yes.” Stevens allowed himself a quick grin as Tev turned his attention back to his work. Gotcha, the engineer thought, pleased with his little dig at the itch Soloman had planted in Tev’s mind. You definitely messed with his head, my Bynar friend. We’ll make a practical joker of you yet.

“Targeting is programmed into the firing system,” Tev announced a few moments later. “I’ll send them to the active buffer as soon as Soloman and Blue clear those last six ships.”

“Do you want me to isolate this console to preserve your settings?” Stevens asked as the commander completed his task.

Tev pondered the suggestion for a moment. “Yes, why not?”

“Sure,” said Stevens. “Doesn’t pay to take chances, does it?”

Stevens could feel Tev’s stare boring through his skull, heard the little rumble of a question caught deep in the Tellarite’s throat, but pretended as though he was unaware of either and went about his business.

Gotcha again, Stevens grinned to himself.

* * *

The Shirley skimmed past the dull black metal of the first ship, its sensor arrays reaching and probing into the deepest recesses of the massive derelict.

“Nothing,” said Pattie. “Not a blip from inside that thing. The outer hull is emitting low-level radiation, which would account for our preliminary anomalous readings, but everything else is flatline.”

“Negative on the computer core as well,” Soloman confirmed.

“Whatever powered this hulk was long ago depleted...not that I could locate a propulsion system, let alone any spent or residual materials. This one’s a thorough puzzle. Unless we find another like it somewhere else, we’ll never know what made her run.”

Soloman piloted the shuttle toward their second target, some two thousand kilometers from the starboard side of the first. “Then let’s move on. We’re down to less than nine hours, with five more ships to scan.”

A red light began flashing on the heads-up on the window before Soloman. An urgent beeping tone accompanied it.

Pattie looked over, clicking questioningly.

Soloman frowned at the display. “According to the instruments, the da Vinci’s weapons systems have just targeted the Shirley,” he said in a voice more confused than frightened. “We’re about to be fired upon.”

* * *

“Captain?” The urgency in Lieutenant Songmin Wong’s voice made David Gold stop short and tap his combadge in the corridor where he was on his way to engineering.

“Yes, Wong?”

“Ship’s computer has taken control of targeting and fire controls, sir,” the conn officer quickly reported. “Forward torpedo tubes are activated and locked on to the Shirley.”

Gold had begun running before Wong finished speaking. “Try manual shutdown. Override power to the weapons systems. How the hell did this happen?”

“Don’t know, sir. According to the conn, everything’s normal and weapons are offline.”

Gold had sprinted into the lift, standing impatiently while it delivered him to the bridge. “They’re obviously not. Keep trying the overrides. I’m on my way.”

* * *

“Shirley, da Vinci, come in, da Vinci,” Pattie buzzed urgently into her communicator. “We’re reading a weapons-lock on our position. Please advise.”

Soloman said in disbelief, “It’s no mistake. We’ve been targeted. I’m putting up maximum shields.”

“For all the good they’ll do against more than a few torpedo hits. This is madness,” Pattie said. “The da Vinci isn’t responding.”

“There might be trouble onboard,” he said. “Who knows what could have been lurking in one of these derelicts, waiting for a functioning vessel to come along?”

“What are the chances of that?” Pattie snapped as the urgent beeping turned to a continuous high-pitched whine. Both knew what that new alarm meant. . . that the da Vinci had fired.

“Perhaps better than we might think,” murmured Soloman and began what he knew to be an entirely futile evasive maneuver.

* * *

“I have torpedo away,” shouted Lieutenant Wong as Captain Gold raced onto the bridge.

Sonya Gomez was just moments behind him. “Captain. . .?”

Gold held up his hand, his eyes glued to the viewscreen in horror. The Shirley was visible, looping tightly around to dive down behind the massive black ship. He expected to see, in the next second, the brilliant white flash of a torpedo tracking it, but the moments ticked by and it did not come.

“Captain,” Anthony Shabalala said from tactical. “We didn’t fire.”

“Gold to Shuttlecraft Shirley,” the captain said. “You are in no danger, Shirley! We experienced a malfunction in the fire control that simulated targeting and locking, but it was only a simulation.”

“I’ve taken the entire weapons system offline and isolated them from the power grid,” Shabalala announced. “All systems responding normally now, Captain.”

“Shirley to da Vinci.”

“Yes, Blue,” Gold answered, in obvious relief. “Are you both all right?”

“Affirmative, sir,” she responded. “We were, needless to say, more than a little concerned there for a moment.”

“So were we,” said Gold. “I would understand if you wanted to return to the ship until we’ve located the problem.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Soloman’s voice came over the communicator. “We’re unhurt and undamaged. The cause of the malfunction is, I assume, being eliminated even as we speak.”

“Then by all means,” Gold said. “Proceed. Thank you. Da Vinci out.” He turned to Gomez, who had moved to a science station and was reviewing the ship’s internal log. Every action performed by ship’s computer was automatically recorded on a separate memory unit encased in materials designed to survive the most catastrophic deep space accident. “How did this happen?” he asked her.

Gomez’s eyebrow shot up in surprise. “According to the log, it didn’t.”

Chapter 4

Chief Engineer Nancy Conlon backed away from her latest handiwork in the da Vinci’s cramped engine room, carefully, as though afraid to take her eyes off the patchwork of connectors and relays lest it all fall apart.

“Okay,” she breathed at last. The petite brunette lieutenant turned to face the operations console, which was, at present, manned by her best junior engineer, Ensign Max Hammett. “Let her rip.”

Hammett reached out to play the controls. “Alrighty then,” he said. “Engaging impulse power.” He tapped more keys. “While that warms up, we can patch the new intermediary modular into the grid.” Conlon watched his fingers flash across the touch screen, her eyes flicking every few seconds to the new unit as though expecting to see smoke pour from it.

A green light flashed and Hammett turned to smile at Conlon. “Online and checking out at optimum, Lieutenant. Nice little patch job there.”

“Well, they’re going to need more tractor beam for the job ahead than the da Vinci’s rated for,” Conlon said. “Figured I should be able to reroute the power feed through the main impulse engines to amp her up to where we need it.”

“You figured right.”

“I’m clever that way.” She grinned. “Okay. So, let’s power down for now. We won’t be able to field test this contraption until they’ve cleared the first targets for removal anyway.”

Hammett gave her a thumbs-up and began to key in the shut down commands. After a few seconds he said, “This is weird.”

“What is?”

“The panel’s not responding. I can’t take the new module offline.”

Conlon squinted over at her suddenly troublesome creation. “Why not?”

“Good question. There’s nothing wrong with the interface. Scans are still reading optimum.” He paused and scratched at his chin before shrugging. “Must be a bug we missed.”

Conlon laughed without humor. “Oh, well, it was too much to expect it to work the first time around. I’ll pull the module and we’ll run a new diagnostic, maybe get lucky.”

Conlon and Hammett both found themselves lunging off balance as the *Vinci* surged suddenly forward, as though yanked by a pull on an invisible rope. The chief engineer grabbed on to an overhead hand-hold and looked sharply over at the ensign, who had caught himself on the operations console. “What the hell was that?” she demanded. “Did the engines just kick in?”

Hammett looked over his readouts. “Negative. Engines are offline and locked down. That wasn’t—” He gasped, his words breaking off in midsentence.

“What?” Conlon followed his astonished gaze to the console. “Who engaged the tractor beam?”

“Wasn’t me,” the ensign said, his voice tight as his fingers worked quickly over the controls. The tractor beam had targeted and locked on to one of the derelict ships at the edge of the Sargasso Sector, but without the *Vinci*’s engines to provide a counter-force to hold the Starfleet vessel stationary, it acted instead to drag the ship toward the targeted vessel, like a fish reeling in the fisherman.

“Cut it off,” Conlon instructed. “It’s dragging us on a collision course with that wreck.”

“Trying, Lieutenant. Damned thing’s not responding.”

Nancy Conlon swore under her breath and knew what she had to do. The souped-up tractor beam was functioning exactly as designed—except that no one had activated the thing and it was no longer responding to commands. But touching the module while it hummed with energy with a mind to disconnecting it was a short walk to suicide. She hefted a spanner and growled to Hammett, “Cover your eyes!”

And threw the tool at the module.

There was a brief flash of energy as the spanner knocked loose a series of interface adapters, severing the connection between the impulse engines and the tractor-beam generator. This was followed by a jolt and the stumbling backward of a couple of steps as the tractor beam released its hold on the distant wreck. The unit powered down.

“Engineering to bridge,” Conlon said, still breathing hard.

“Something you want to tell us, Conlon?” Captain Gold’s voice responded tightly.

“Eventually, sir. Soon as we figure out what just happened. Something went seriously wrong with the tractor-beam modification.”

“Do we still have impulse power to correct the da Vinci’s drift after our little unauthorized journey?”

Conlon looked over at Hammett for an answer. “According to the diagnostics, everything’s operating normally, sir.”

Sonya Gomez’s voice asked the next question. “Nancy, was your glitch human or computer error?”

Conlon shrugged. “I can’t say for sure till I run a few tests,” she said, “but I rigged that patch myself and I don’t screw up that big.”

“Not usually, no,” came back Gomez’s dry voice. “Keep us posted.”

Chapter 5

“Can anyone explain this to me?” David Gold asked. “Has the entire crew suddenly turned incompetent, or does this ship have a serious problem?”

Sonya Gomez, to the right of the captain in the observation lounge, could only frown in frustration. “I seriously doubt the former,” she said, “but can’t find any evidence to support or deny the latter.”

“How else do you explain it? Major failures in no less than three of our primary systems in only a couple of hours isn’t standard operating procedure.”

Soloman looked troubled, as though for a sick friend. But considering the Bynar’s near-psychoic connection to computers, his ability to communicate with them on an almost intimate level, perhaps humanoid and machine were close in ways his shipmates could never understand. “I have examined the ship’s computers thoroughly, down to her source code,” he said. “There’s nothing wrong that I can detect, certainly nothing of a magnitude that might explain the lock and fire simulation of the weapons system, the communications blackout between the Shirley and the da Vinci, and the unauthorized activation of the tractor beam.”

“And,” Gomez added, “let’s not forget the complete lack of a record of any of these events in the ship’s internal log.”

Stevens said, “That’s what I keep coming back to. I mean, the log records everything from the rate of dilithium crystal decay to the different varieties of tea requested of the replicator by the crew, so what are the odds it’s going to miss not one but three fairly substantial malfunctions?”

“On its own?” Soloman said. “I would venture to say the odds are so high as to be incalculable. But there is no sign of any outside influences on our systems. Whatever is happening is happening from within

theda Vinci.”

Gold rubbed a weary hand across his forehead and looked around the table at the concerned faces of his crew. This was supposed to have been an easy one, a simple—if not delicate and vastly fascinating—job of clearing alien wreckage from a newly opened space lane. Each and every member of this crew was among the very best in their fields. Alone and as a group, they had encountered and solved more life and death problems than he cared to even think about, saving many lives—his own included—in the process on more than one occasion. But here they now sat, stymied by what appeared to be a computer glitch. He had to again ask the question that Gomez had glossed over at the opening of the meeting. “So can we rule out human error?”

Tev, uncharacteristically silent up until now, said, “Absent any evidence to the contrary, I would tend to think we can, Captain.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Tev,” Stevens said, surprised to hear the Tellarite take anyone’s side but his own.

Tev looked at Stevens without expression. “It is no such thing, Specialist. I can merely conclude that since there has been a series of near calamitous events of which I was involved in but one, and knowing that all my actions were proper and by the book, that the others, too, must be the result of some other cause as well.”

Stevens winked at Conlon. “Nice to know our backs are covered, isn’t it?”

“All right,” Gold said. “Our priority remains, as always, the successful completion of our mission. We’ve still got a tight schedule to maintain, which means everybody will be working twice as hard to do that and find and correct this problem. Whatever it is.”

There were nods all around the table.

“Thank you, ladies and gentlemen,” the captain said, rising. “And in the process, let’s be careful, shall we?”

* * *

Carol Abramowitz was, she decided, as close to heaven as she had ever been...at least in terms of her professional life. Theda Vinci’s cultural specialist kept coming back to the phrase “as happy as a kid in a candy store” to describe herself as she brought each new alien vessel’s image up on her screen. Like the previous twenty or thirty ships—she had lost count—she had catalogued since beginning her shift on the second day in the Sargasso Sector, this one was unlike any she had ever encountered in any of her studies. Unlike any theda Vinci’s vast database of ships, comprised of records dating back to the dawn of human space flight, could match.

Her latest find lay four hundred meters long by three hundred meters wide...or, she thought with a smile, it could have been the other way around since the bizarre alien construction gave her human perspective no point of reference for top or bottom, fore or aft. To her eyes, it appeared to be made up of countless squares and rectangles of varying compositions, squished together into an angular whole that possessed a strange beauty all its own. Each boxy unit was marked with a different set of glyphs that might or might not have belonged to the same language.

“Fascinating,” she breathed, unaware that she had spoken out loud.

“I’ll say,” said Language and Cryptography Specialist Bart Faulwell from his station near Carol. “By the time we’re done here, the Federation’s database of dead and lost languages is probably going to increase by tenfold.”

“What I wouldn’t give for a look at the culture of even a fraction of the civilizations that created these ships,” Carol said.

“Soloman told me the older the ship, the less the chance of finding anything usable in their computer records. No matter how sophisticated their technology, a few million years is going to degrade just about any storage medium to uselessness, and, if it hasn’t, it’s not likely to be anything with which our technology can interface.”

Carol laughed but her eyes remained fixed on her screen. “It’s something, isn’t it? Here we are, hundreds of light-years from our planet of origin aboard a ship capable of traveling from one end of the quadrant to the other, and the stuff we’re finding here makes me feel like a chimp trying to understand the works of Shakespeare.”

“That’s a coincidence, your mentioning the Bard,” he said. “I was just thinking of the line from Hamlet, ‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’ ”

“ ‘O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!’ ”

Carol and Bart glanced up as Sonya Gomez walked into earshot, quoting the line that preceded Bart’s in Shakespeare’s famous work. “And never more appropriate than under these circumstances,” Sonya said.

“Hey, Sonya,” Carol said. “How goes the engineering survey?”

Sonya’s grin threatened to split her face. “Amazing. The range of ships we’re cataloguing are, literally, mind-boggling. There are vessels out there from races that must have gone extinct before humanity was even an evolutionary glimmer on Earth. Subwarp solid fuel rockets, nuclear powered ships, impulse drives, black hole drives. . . .” Her grin did not fade even as she shook her head in wonder and confusion. “. . . Including what may be at least a dozen variations on a transdimensional drive. There’s stuff going on out there that none of us can even guess at.

“Of course, there’s the rub,” she said with a grin as she quoted Hamlet again. “Without knowing what ninety-five percent of those ships are, or were, we’re faced with the possibility of disaster on a cosmic scale. All it takes is one energy source reacting adversely with another, or some previously unknown variety of particle or wave to be released and. . . boom! There goes the neighborhood, and maybe a solar system or two along with it.”

Carol shuddered. “Ugh! I hadn’t thought of that possibility. Good thing I’m too excited to sleep or that would keep me up at night.”

“Rest assured,” Sonya said, “we’re playing it extra safe. Anything we’ve moved we’ve been keeping in the same relative proximity to other vessels as it had been in the Sargasso. Anything we’re not one hundred percent sure of, we’re leaving where it is, and I’ve come up with what I think is a positively brilliant scheme to—”

Sonya Gomez’s explanation was cut short by an urgent chirping tone from Bart’s console. “Oh, for—”

he blurted out, biting off an expletive before it could pass his lips. “I don’t believe this!”

“Problem?” asked Carol.

“Looks like. Hold on a second.” His face clouded with anger. “Computer, what’s the problem with my file?”

Another chirp, and the soft, comforting feminine voice of the *Vinci*’s computer replied, “Please state the file name.”

“The one I’ve been working with for the last six hours,” he said. “Sargasso, day two, linguistics.”

“There is no file by that name,” the computer replied.

His eyes wide with disbelief, Bart stared at the console. “This isn’t possible,” he said. “Check again for file ‘Sargasso, day two, linguistics.’”

“There is no file by that name.”

During Bart’s exchange with the computer, Abramowitz quickly verified the safety of her own files, immediately dumping the contents onto her padd for backup and safekeeping.

“We’ve got serious computer issues, people,” Sonya said in a tight voice. “Right when we need to be able to count on it most.”

“Right now, I wouldn’t trust it to count to ten,” Bart said, slumping in his seat.

“Right now, I’m beginning to wonder if it even can,” said Carol.

Chapter 6

Sonya Gomez was nervous.

In general, things had been going seriously wrong every which way she turned. What she wasn’t forgetting she was losing and what she wasn’t losing was breaking. And it wasn’t just her, either. Everyone aboard the *Vinci* was feeling it, all of them quivering bundles of nerves forced to juggle eggs.

She and her crew had suffered a few near-misses and project failures since starting the clearing of the Sargasso Sector. Tools and machines weren’t working right. People weren’t working right. A few crew members had taken to carrying good luck charms, although they all kept them out of her sight since she chewed out an ensign for rubbing a laminated three-leaf clover for luck. She felt bad, really, taking out her own frustrations on the unfortunate man, but they were supposed to be scientists and there was no room for voodoo in their line of work. She’d already disproved the so-called “curse of Sarindar” during her solo mission to the Nalori Republic last year, she wasn’t about to succumb to this one.

So, yes, she was nervous, because here she was aboard the *Vinci* and there—some two thousand meters away—was the object of the very delicate operation Sonya was about to attempt.

During any other mission, on any other day of her career, she would have been eager and, at most, cautious. Today she was just plain nervous. She had devised a fast and, more importantly, safe way to clear a substantial area of wreckage using a found resource that was proving far more abundant than initially suspected: Black holes.

A total of thirty-one ships within sensor range were powered by some sort of singularity-based technology, all, to Pattie's experienced eye, the handiwork of the same culture, if across an expanse of time. At some point in the past, a civilization near or adjacent to these parts developed black-hole technology similar to that used by the Romulans, and this was all that was left of them.

Each ship was equipped with from one to three chunky chambers holding its infinity-massed cargo in what appeared to be a sophisticated antigravity web. The study of how the engines managed to extract energy from this source would have to wait, but the singularities themselves, well, they were about to be pressed into service in an entirely different function.

"Engineering. Status?" Sonya said.

"Conlon here. Standing by on main tractor beam."

"Thank you. Transporter room, are you go?"

"Coordinates locked and standing by, Commander," said Transporter Chief Poynter.

This was a tricky maneuver under the best of conditions. They were playing with a black hole, packed in a containment device constructed by unknown beings at least seven hundred and fifty thousand years ago. So many things could go wrong.

And lately, Murphy's Law—that everything that could go wrong would go wrong—had become the law of the land. Not that the law wasn't part and parcel of the S.C.E.'s daily existence, but this was going to new extremes. If something went wrong with the extraction, the *Vinci* and everyone on it would wind up with their mass stretched across infinity and devoured by the singularity. The only upside was that at this distance, given the limits of the tractor beam's effectiveness as a surgical instrument, it would all be over too fast for anyone to realize it was happening.

Which, she thought with bitter amusement, is a hell of a pitiful upside.

"Fabian?" she said to the crewperson temporarily taking Piotrowski's place at the bridge's tactical station.

Fabian Stevens, unusually serious, took a moment to crack his knuckles and shake out his right hand. "Ready," he said, taking hold of the joystick with which he was to direct a pencil-thin tractor beam.

"Very well, people," she said after one last deep breath, "let's begin. Transporter room, energize."

"Energizing."

The result of that order was played out on the ship's screen, on a strangely amorphous ship that seemed to undulate even though hanging motionless in space. Its pastel-streaked milky white surface looked more like cheap plastic than anything designed to survive the rigors of space. But here it was, by their dating techniques some three quarters of a million years after it had been built. Surviving.

Somewhere near the midpoint of the misshapen derelict, the transporter reached out and grabbed the molecules of a fifteen-foot-around section of hull. Unseen, it did the same thing to a series of bulkheads and decks, opening a tunnel for the tractor beam to follow to the containment unit. Transporting a singularity, even one as small as the nick of a pin contained in a null-gravitational state, was risky business at best, even if the vagaries of physics didn't make the amount of energy required to dismantle the singularity's near-infinite mass into transportable particles too great for the *Vinci* to provide. So they were instead transporting the derelict piece by piece out of the way of the tractor beam.

"Doing good, Laura. How much more to go?"

"Four more decks, and the containment unit should be free-floating."

"That's your cue, Fabian. You up for this?"

"I'm fine, Commander." Stevens's smile was tired. "A streak of bad luck is just a self-perpetuating cycle. The first bad thing throws you off your stride, the second rattles you, by the third you're convinced you're jinxed, and everything after that is just you tripping yourself up worrying that you'll trip up. Personally, I don't buy into it."

"So we're all just neurotic?" Gomez asked.

Stevens grinned. "Each in our own way."

"Bridge, we're through the last deck. Sensors show the containment unit is free and clear."

"I copy that, Chief," Gomez said. "Fabian, ready on the tractor beam."

"Going in," Stevens said and triggered the beam with a tap of his fingers. His eyes were fixed on a three-dimensional image of the alien ship on his screen that served as a visual guide for the path of the tractor beam.

"Just like threading a needle," Gomez said softly.

"Contact," Stevens said. "Gonna start to ease it back out now."

"Scan of the containment unit looks good," Gomez said. "Go for the extraction."

There was silence over the next few moments as Stevens drew the squat alloy container from the bowels of the ancient ship, up past decks that had last seen movement most of the way to a million years ago. Soon, the unit would be in open space and in position for the next phase of the operation.

"What'd I tell you?" Stevens said. "No such thing as bad luck." The containment unit slid into view from inside the gutted derelict.

Gomez smiled and said, "I never for a second doubted you. But, just to be on the safe side...." She held up her hands, showing crossed fingers on both.

Stevens laughed. "If you want to know the truth, with my hands being occupied I had my toes crossed."

Tapping her combadge, Gomez contacted the engineer in the cargo bay. "Ensign Lankford?"

“Yes, Commander?”

“You may launch the drone at your discretion.”

“Drone away, Commander. Through the cargo doors, locked on target and closing.”

A small drone vehicle, about the size of a duffel bag, glided onto the viewscreen, on course for rendezvous with the containment unit.

“Two thousand six hundred meters and closing.”

In just a few minutes the drone would ease up next to the containment unit and, on contact, would fire its main gas-propellant engine to push itself and the unit into the very heart of the field of wreckage.

“Two thousand three hundred.”

At a predetermined distance from the *Vinci*, the drone would detonate, shattering the containment unit and, of course, unleashing the black hole.

“One thousand nine hundred.”

The singularity would begin to do what it did best, drawing everything within its event horizon toward and into its influence. Ships unmoved since forever would race toward the black hole, expanding into infinite mass before disappearing inside the thing’s insatiable maw.

“One thousand two hundred.”

It would sweep its immediate area clean and, not too long after it had sucked in everything it could reach, it would begin to feed on and collapse in on itself. Even a black hole so small as this one could exert its gravitational mastery over several hundred million square kilometers, a significant dent in this particular pile.

“Nine hundred clicks and closing.”

There were risks, of course, but under controlled conditions, with the *Vinci* moved to a safe distance to observe the event, they were—If our luck holds, she thought—acceptable. And this method, in addition to being fast, also offered some fairly attractive safety features of its own, most specifically in the case of the accidental release of any unknown but potentially hazardous contents of any of the ships.

“Three hundred clicks. Sensors are locked on target. Two hundred...one hundred...”

Everything from inert organisms to uncontrolled chain reactions would get caught up in the singularity.

“Two hundred meters.”

Nothing unleashed could be more powerful than the gravitational pull of that tiny bundle of compacted matter. This would throw out not only the baby with the bathwater, but the bathtub and the whole bathroom as well.

“One hundred meters...ninety...eighty...”

If this worked, Gomez judged it would take a maximum of six strategically placed black-hole releases to open a lane wide enough for the approaching traffic through the Sargasso Sector. That would still leave several dozen lifetimes worth of intact derelict ships for future study.

“...Forty...thirty...”

At twenty-six meters, the drone’s main thruster ignited and sent it slamming into the containment unit at several thousand KPH, relative. The struck object spun off at a tangent, while the drone, its trajectory altered by the impact, went streaking toward the not too future rubble of another derelict.

“Dammit,” Gomez growled. “We’ve got a misfire. Get us out of here, Robin. Now!”

The bridge crew sprang into motion, their voices rising with the sudden whine of the *Vinci*’s surging engines.

“I have the drone impacting with the derelict in four minutes,” Stevens shouted.

“We’ll be at warp one,” Ensign Robin Rusconi said from the conn.

“The containment unit,” Gomez said heatedly as she scanned her console. “I’ve lost it in the clutter of the debris field.”

“The unit would’ve been built to survive impact,” Stevens said, but the look in his eyes was anything but confident.

“It’s three-quarters of a million years old, Fabian,” she reminded him. “Bet whoever built it didn’t expect it to be in service that long. If it gets loose before we’re out of range...”

He nodded, then pointed to his screen. “Got it! Plotting trajectory...it’s good! The unit has clear sailing for a good hour, plenty of time to retrieve it.”

“Warp one,” Ensign Rusconi announced.

As the *Vinci* pulled back from the Sargasso, Gomez and Stevens tracked the errant drone. By the time the little booster glanced off the side of the looming ship, they were well out of the danger zone. A misnomer, actually, as the result of the collision was almost nonexistent. The drone’s mass was insufficient to do anything more than dent the larger ship’s hull and cause it to begin to wobble slowly in its orbit.

Stevens looked over at Gomez and frowned. “Now, is what just happened bad luck or good luck?”

“Why do I think that luck had nothing to do with it?” Sonya said.

“’Cause,” Stevens said, “we’re scientists, not gamblers. We wouldn’t have played this hand if the odds hadn’t been in our favor.”

“We need,” Gomez said in agreement, “to find out just who the hell’s been dealing us these crappy cards.”

Chapter

7

The list of mishaps, accidents, and failures—both human and mechanical—was, Captain Gold noted sourly as he scanned the log, as prodigious as it was disturbing. As he had every right to be, Gold was extraordinarily proud of his crew and their record, but by the sixth day of operations in the Sargasso Sector, the crew of the *Vinci* felt as though they had been chosen to serve as the butt of one long, elaborately cruel joke, the punch line to which was a non-stop series of disasters, major and minor.

Gold rubbed absentmindedly at the still-bare ring finger of his biosynthetic left hand. Like the fact of his still missing wedding band, this mission seemed to be jinxed by some bizarre corruption of all laws of probability. To encounter the occasional mechanical mishap or work accident was to be expected. To encounter nothing but was way off the charts of anything Gold had ever heard of happening on a Starfleet vessel.

Soloman had checked the computers six ways from Sunday and could discover no source of corruption or malfunction that might explain its behavior. Dr. Lense had examined every crew member for any and all physical or psychological causes of chronic klutziness, but likewise came up empty-handed. The captain had even had the ship's environmental systems checked for abnormalities, anything that might be influencing the crew or ship to act as they were, but there was nothing, not in the air, not on any level of the spectrum, nothing amiss.

It was, from all appearances, just a run of incredibly bad luck.

Still, in the aftermath of the black-hole incident the engineers had decided to suspend such potentially disastrous exercises until they sorted out the problems.

And Bart Faulwell hadn't been the last to experience some form of computer malfunction. The worst such incident occurred in the early morning hours of the fifth day as Rusconi executed a maneuver ordered by Tev to reposition the ship in preparation for a round of demolition. Though having entered the correct coordinates, as witnessed by the meticulous Tev and attested to by the operations log, the *Vinci* had proceeded to spin, far in excess of programmed speed, into a near disastrous collision with one of the derelict ships before being brought back under control. The port nacelle had suffered serious damage, though no one, fortunately, had been hurt.

Another misfire had resulted in a grouping of thirteen derelicts that had not yet been scanned, examined, and cleared being demolished by torpedo. In this case, it turned out all right, but it could just as easily have gone the other way, ending in disaster.

But losses of data, environmental system failures, and strange malfunctions of the drives continued. Even the replicators had been acting up, churning out inexplicable creations in response to routine requests by members of the crew. Ensign Piotrowski had asked for a cup of coffee, regular, with three sugars. The replicator had supplied her with a three-tailed kkk'tukkiquith'quattkkk, a delicacy for whose molecular matrix it was not programmed.

Gold's own request for a snack of sliced vegetables had resulted in a platter of nugget-sized chunks of a thus-far unidentified isotope. Fortunately the sensors had instantly detected its powerful radioactive signature and alerted Gold before he had been exposed long enough for any harm to have been done.

But it wasn't just the physical dangers that seemed to be everywhere that were so draining. Worse was the constant petty annoyances, the lost tools, the misplaced personal effects, the wrong turns, the

misremembering, the misjudgments. It was endless and endlessly distracting. How could the ship's conn officers execute orders knowing they could trust neither the computer nor their own judgment? How was the chief engineer supposed to do her job when she couldn't count on the tool she had put next to her on the floor just seconds before to be there when she reached for it again?

"Odds are it's right where you left it, David."

Gold chuckled and shook his head. He knew he was letting it get him down, but he had seldom in his career felt so frustrated. Yes, sometimes the situation did seem helpless, all options explored, exploited, and failed, but there was always something, no matter how desperate, to try, to do. But there wasn't anything to be done for a run of lousy luck. He had been in enough poker games in his life to know that it was all up to the cards, and if the right ones didn't come to you there wasn't thing one that you could do to change it. The problem was, while you could fold on a crummy poker hand, you didn't have the same option in life.

Certainly not when you were in command.

And so, even if David Gold couldn't provide them with the answers to this dilemma, he would at least give them his leadership. Which made it time to stop moping over his pitiful captain's log and get himself up to the bridge and look like he didn't feel as though the sky were falling all around him.

"Thank you, that'll be all," he said to the computer in his quarters.

"Unidentified user. Please state name and access level," said the computer.

Gold didn't bother responding, leaving his room with its missing rings and recalcitrant computers, wishing—without hope—for a reprieve from the misery.

Proving him an optimist, if not a realist, the answer to that wish was a loud, pain-wracked scream that pierced the air. Gold took off at a run toward its source, the turbolift at midship.

What now? he thought, expecting, from the sound of the scream, the worst and finding nothing less. Bart Faulwell was sprawled, writhing in agony, across the turbolift's threshold, clutching at his throat, his scream dulled to a moan by painful gasps for breath. Two security guards, Krotine and Lauoc, had already reached the red-faced language specialist and were alerting sickbay, but Gold couldn't see any obvious source for Bart's distress.

"He can't breathe," Lauoc said.

"What happened?" the captain demanded.

"Don't know, sir," Krotine stammered. "He just started gasping, then he went down, screaming."

Dr. Elizabeth Lense came running down the corridor and the helpful crewmates scrambled to make room for her. She passed her tricorder over Faulwell, frowning at the readout.

"How the hell . . .?" the doctor muttered. She quickly shook off her surprise, then adjusted her hypo to deliver the proper medication. Administering the dose, she said, "Hold on, Bart. I've got you."

Faulwell's face had started to turn blue, his lungs unable to deliver oxygen to his starved blood despite his desperately heaving chest. Now, as the meds flowed through his system, his throat seemed to open

and air flowed in. His dry, pained heaves quieted to gasps, then diminished to a wheeze as the color slowly drained back into his face.

Dr. Lense's tricorder scanned Bart again, and this time she looked up, smiling and satisfied with the reading.

"Anaphylactic shock," she said to Gold in answer to the obvious question. "Bart's had a severe allergic reaction to something. I've administered antihistamine and stimulants to open up his breathing passages. He should be fine."

"What's he allergic to?" Gold asked.

"According to his file? Nothing. Hence my confusion."

"This wasn't nothing, Doctor."

"Of course it wasn't," she said. She looked back at Bart, tapping him lightly on the cheeks. "Bart? Bart, can you hear me?"

Without opening his eyes, Faulwell said, "Yeah, yeah. Man, what hit me?"

"Did you eat or drink anything in the last half hour, Bart?" the doctor asked.

Bart nodded, his head still a bit wobbly. "Umm, yeah. Had an energy bar..." he said, then laughed weakly. "Didn't work."

"What kind? What was in it?"

Faulwell managed to open his eyes and, when he answered, his voice was noticeably stronger. "Peanut butter. My favorite. Why?"

"Peanuts," she said to the captain as though that explained everything. "To those allergic to them, the reaction can be quick and, without immediate medical attention, even fatal."

"Except I'm not allergic to peanuts," Bart corrected her and took in a long, shuddering breath as he raised himself up on his elbows. "I eat peanut butter practically every day. You could use my blood to create avaccine for the stuff."

"Apparently not anymore," said Dr. Lense. "I'm sorry, Bart, but as of right now, I think you're officially off peanut butter."

"Aww," said Faulwell. He let his elbows slip out from under him and thudded back onto the floor.

"No need to be so dramatic, Faulwell," said the captain with a relieved smile.

Bart didn't answer.

"Bart?" said Dr. Lense, quickly activating the tricorder and taking a new reading.

But Bart Faulwell was dead.

Chapter

8

The captain's mouth had been dry for the past half hour. No matter how much water he drank, he couldn't seem to get enough moisture. Ever since Dr. Lense had been forced, after a nearly forty-five minute struggle, to accept reality and pronounce Bart Faulwell dead, David Gold had felt strangely drained of everything. One instant they had been talking, the next a man lay dead half inside a turbolift.

Nothing the finest care and technology could prevent.

It had gone beyond madness, Gold thought, getting himself a fresh glass of water from the replicator. He had lost crew before, lord knew. Salek and Okha during the war. 111 on the beast. And twenty-three people in one, horrible incident at Galvan VI. But there, as senseless as so much death ever was, there had at least been a visible cause. A situation against which steps might have been taken, measures tried.

But what did they have now? Peanut butter. Bad luck? He looked at his senior staff, gathered with him in the observation lounge. Did he seriously intend to put forth the theory that this was all on account of simple bad luck? Finishing his water, the captain decided he had better let the others have their say before he dropped that particularbubbemyseh on the table.

"Faulwell's death," Gold said, "comes as a shock to everyone. It was as random, as unlikely an event as anyone could have foreseen."

"So senseless," said Sonya Gomez, fiercely.

Tev nodded. "What are the chances of an adult with no prior history of a problem developing so severe an allergic reaction to a much-consumed food?"

Soloman said, "Not likely at all. Yet far more so than a replicator producing a kkk'tukkiquith'quattkkk or an unknown isotope."

"Or anything else that's been going wrong. Think of it, what are the oddseverything goes wrongall the time?" said Nancy Conlon. "This entire mission's been jinxed from the start."

"Jinxes do not exist," Tev said. "Bartholomew did not die from 'bad luck.' Luck is not intrinsically good or bad. It is just random chance. It is neither a cause nor an effect. It just is what it is."

"Besides," Soloman said, "it's not as though 'luck' or random chance possess physical qualities that can be quantified and manipulated."

"Bart is dead," Sonya Gomez said in a soft voice. "He was a dear man and a good friend and now he's dead because of something as ridiculous as snack food? I don't think so, people." She looked from face to face. "There's something wrong here. And itis bad luck, but something is helping it along. Maybe it's not anything we can measure, but you all feel it, don't you? I mean, we'rebetter than this. All the accidents, the lost and broken tools, the equipment failures. We don't make these kinds of mistakes, and we sure as hell don't make them with the recent alarming rate of frequency. Something is influencing events.Something killed Bart."

Gold said, "What's left that we haven't already checked? And with chance against us, how do we

propose to reverse our luck?”

“Really, Captain,” said Tev. “You’re not seriously suggesting that we proceed on the assumption of ‘bad luck’?”

“If you have a better suggestion, Tev, I’d like to hear it,” said Gold.

Tev opened his mouth to speak as the ready room door slid open.

Mor glasch Tev stepped into the room, saying, “My apologies for being late, Captain.”

Mor glasch Tev, seated at the conference table, stared in disbelief at himself. “This isn’t right,” he said. “I am never late for meetings.”

* * *

In the resultant uproar, the latecomer Tev appeared to slip, or otherwise disappear from the room, but no one could deny he had been present. If only for a moment.

“You, sharing the room with yourself is, without question, an impossibility,” declared Soloman. “What better proof do we need that the very essence of probability is being tampered with?”

The Bynar and Tellarite looked at each other. Tev nodded in agreement.

“Wait... that’s like saying because three plus three doesn’t equal eight, three plus threemust equal eight,” Gomez said.

“Not at all the same thing, Commander. When you’ve ruled out all that is possible,” said the Tellarite, “the only remaining possible answer is theimpossible.”

“To paraphrase Sherlock Holmes,” Conlon said.

“Its attribution to a fictitious character does little to diminish its fundamental truth,” said Tev.

* * *

Sonya paced the shuttle bay, deep in thought. She sometimes came down here, to the ship’s largest open space, for room to move when faced with the seemingly insurmountable. That, and it was the place where Elizabeth pronounced Kieran Duffy dead. Coming here made her remember him, and helped her move on from the grief. Her near-death experience on Teneb had done a great deal to help in the latter regard, but she still liked coming here.

Every now and then, as she walked the length of the bay, back and forth, she found herself stepping over things that shouldn’t be there. Chance had gone haywire, no doubt of that, she thought. Or been made to go haywire. Therefore, the odds of any event happening, no matter how unlikely under normal scientific law, had gone from one in numbers so large even the zeroes couldn’t be counted to pretty much dead even. Like the cartoon cat chasing the cartoon mouse under her feet and out the cargo doors, through the force field and into the vacuum of space to implode into smears of paint. What were the odds of such a thing ever happening?

As mad as it sounded, Tev was right. It seemed the only possible answer.

And yet, what could affect so intangible a something as chance? She couldn't imagine some Yridan Bad-Luck Ray or Romulan Gotcha Beam being responsible. She couldn't imagine any technology capable of influencing probability.

And yet, as Bart Faulwell himself had pointed out the day the computer ate his files, "There are more things in heaven and earth..."

Such things as the universe of tech they were investigating, some of which, no matter how hard she might study it, she would never even begin to wrap her mind around. The theories on which they were conceived and the very logic behind the engineering eluded her, the end product too alien for this culture to ever understand. Some, she believed, operated on transdimensional power, although whether they actually traveled between dimensions or siphoned energy from other-dimensional sources she couldn't quite determine. Others seemed to rely on tachyon streams or the Uncertainty Principle or, in one case, little more than mineral water.

But probability?

Still, what was the Uncertainty Principle but chance? "The more precisely the position is determined, the less precisely the momentum is known in this instant, and vice versa," Heisenberg had said. One increased the odds of determining a particle's position by lowering those on knowing its momentum.

Which, too, came back to Soloman's earlier playful proposition that all odds could be boiled down to fifty-fifty. The Uncertainty Principle: you know either a particle's position or its momentum. Fifty-fifty. The same with Schrödinger's Cat: was the cat inside the box alive or dead? Fifty-fifty. Maybe here, for whatever reason, that had become, somehow, fundamental truth. There was as much chance of a ship outfitted with a drive that altered probability existing as there was for it not to exist.

Fifty-fifty.

She was putting her money on it being out there. And against, appropriately enough, all odds, it had somehow been activated and was screwing with chance.

What were the odds she would be soaked in a brief rain shower while standing in the cargo bay of a Starfleet ship with a controlled atmosphere? Infinitesimal, and yet, as her wet hair and uniform attested, no longer impossible.

* * *

"What did you call it?" asked Nancy Conlon.

"An Uncertainty Drive," said Gomez. "There was a similar, albeit fictitious drive, put forth in a twentieth-century novel by Douglas Adams. It worked, as I recall, by manipulating the laws of probability to move from place to place. But it was a humorous work, not meant to be taken seriously."

"Nobody's laughing," said Fabian Stevens.

"And you're saying you think that's what we're up against here?" asked Captain Gold.

Gomez shrugged and said, "I've eliminated the possible. Look, we're all agreed that chance is, by its very nature, random but not capricious. What I mean is, there are rules. As Soloman said, flip a coin a set number of times and it will come out split evenly between heads and tails, every time. In a game of

five-card poker, you stand roughly one chance in thirty-one thousand of holding a royal flush. Head a ship in a specific direction under an established mode of propulsion and it will travel at x-speed toward a fixed destination.

“But bypass physical propulsion, establish a set of odds for your vessel to simply arrive at a specified destination in a set amount of time, then manipulate the odds to make that arrival a sure bet, and you’ve got—”

“An Uncertainty Drive,” said Soloman, a bit breathless at the very idea. “But it’s mathematical insanity, Commander Gomez. The amount of processing power is unimaginable, and how would it go about affecting the odds?”

“It may seem insane,” Gomez said, “but it’s possible. I even have evidence.” She touched a control on the table in front of her. The viewscreen on the far wall lit up with a half-sphere decorated with a moderately ornate panel.

“That looks familiar,” Stevens said.

“It should—it was discovered on Deep Space 9 when you were stationed there.”

Stevens snapped his fingers. “Right! That El-Aurian who opened the gambling joint on the Promenade!”

Gold looked at Gomez and Stevens. “You want to fill in for the rest of us, Gomez?”

“The El-Aurian Fabian’s talking about got his hands on a device that altered probabilities.”

Nodding, Stevens said, “It made all the neutrinos near the station spin the same way—and it made a pig’s ear out of ol’ Doc Bashir’s racquetball game.” He shook his head. “I lost a bundle betting on that game with the chief. . . .”

Abramowitz shook her head. “I don’t get it. How can a machine make the impossible possible?”

“Impossibilities are merely things we’ve not yet learned to do,” said Tev. “This very starship, its warp engines, were once thought impossible, as was creating artificial intelligence on par with biological sentience. How many of us come from worlds that once believed the evolution of life on other planets was a statistical impossibility? As one who has himself experienced time travel, another historic ‘impossibility,’ I am inclined to accept that everything we today might think of as impossible just hasn’t happened yet.”

A chimpanzee in a conservatively cut and particularly dignified military uniform paused in their midst, checked something on the clipboard he was carrying, and continued on his way.

“That was different,” said Stevens. He looked up and gave a helpless shrug. “Okay, so we buy the Uncertainty Drive. How do we go about finding it?”

“Already done,” said Gomez. “I ran a broad spectrum scan, tuned to hunt for frequencies similar to the ones given off by that little doodad from DS9.”

“And it worked?” asked Gold.

“What can I tell you?” Gomez smiled. “I got lucky.”

Chapter 9

From the exterior it didn't look like much.

Not much larger than the *Vinci*'s own length of one hundred and ninety meters, it was an elliptical tube of burnished silver alloy dotted with what appeared to be a random arrangement of portholes. It featured no openings for propulsion units or weapons pods, but then, Soloman thought, the Uncertainty Drive would alleviate the need for either. Simply increase the odds you will arrive at where you wish to be and, against all likelihood, there you will be. Or decrease the odds an assailant will be able to hit you, or increase them that an attacking vessel's propulsion or weapons system will self-destruct or malfunction, and you really have no need for defensive systems.

Ingenious and frightening.

"You're sure that's the ship?" the Bynar asked Sonya Gomez.

"No doubt about it," she said. "That's the one."

"Odds are," Tev added.

"Yes," Gomez agreed. "Odds are."

Captain Gold said, "We scanned this section of the debris field when we first arrived in the sector. How could we have missed it if...oh. Of course. Just bad luck."

"And it cost Bart his life," Gomez said. "If we'd only caught this ship in our initial scans, we might have known to stay clear of it and Bart wouldn't have had to die."

"The ship likely manipulates probability as much as a mode of protection as of propulsion," Tev pointed out. "No doubt it caused the odds against our sensors picking up its presence to fall to keep itself safe."

"Then why let us 'see' it now?" Gold said.

Soloman blinked as Captain Gold became momentarily, and against all odds, a six-foot marble Corinthian column. Sonya and Tev, their backs turned as they continued their scans, saw nothing.

"Soloman?" the captain said.

"Ah, yes. Well, perhaps it's determined that we're no longer a threat, that the odds have been reduced to such that nothing we do can possibly cause it harm."

"Even if that's true," Gold said, "why don't we simply quarantine this sector and just move a light-year or so down the line and create our pass through a section where there isn't an unlucky ship impeding our every move?"

Tev shook his head. "We can't just leave it as is, Captain. Now that we know what we're looking for it's plain to see that the area of ill-luck being generated by the Uncertainty Drive is an expanding field."

We can't be certain—if indeed we can be certain of anything while under its influence—where, if ever, the expansion will cease.”

“You mean this bad luck could engulf the entire sector?”

“With our luck, worse,” Gomez said.

“Then what are our options?” the captain asked.

“Who's to say?” Soloman absently tapped on the tabletop. “With probability so mutable, we stand as much chance of defeating it with a conventional attack as we do by firing spitballs or by doing absolutely nothing. We don't even know why or how the Drive, as ancient as it appears to be, became operational after all this time.”

Tev said, “I'm afraid I have to agree, Captain. When virtually anything is possible at any time, there's no way to predict anything with any degree of certainty.”

Gold, Gomez, Soloman, and Tev all fell silent. A glowing blue and red Sarindarian butterfly flitted through the observation lounge, which, for just the blink of an eye, became a smoky, crowded cantina on Intar.

“Yes, I see,” Gold said.

A four-hundred-year-old television program about a wacky red-headed housewife replaced the image of the Uncertainty Drive ship on the monitors.

“Gomez, have you been able to establish communications with the ship?” Gold asked suddenly.

“I've tried, but no luck.”

Gold smiled without humor. “What are the odds if you tried again, you'd get through this time?”

She shrugged. “Fifty-fifty, I suppose,” and activated the subspace comlink.

Soloman shook his head in disbelief and said, “You know, of course, I meant that in jest.”

Tev gave him a long, hard look. “I suppose, then, the joke is on you.”

“Captain!” Gomez called out, looking surprised.

“Greetings,U.S.S. da Vinci,” said a soft, plain voice over the comm.“This is the Minstrel's Whisper, flag-ship of the Khndak Empire.”

Gold smiled. “We have contact!”

* * *

“I am Captain David Gold in command of theU.S.S. da Vinci. We are a scientific expedition representing a Federation of allied planets,” Gold said, now seated in his chair on the bridge. “We come in peace,Minstrel's Whisper. ”

“Yours is a mission of destruction, da Vinci. Your vessel will be held in an infinite-probability field until you can be taken into custody by the Empire.”

Gomez looked up helplessly. “It’s misread our demolition efforts.”

“Who can blame it?” said Soloman. “What concerns me is that it plans on holding us until its creators come to take us into custody.”

“That ship’s a million years old if it’s a day,” said Gomez. “The race that built it, let alone the entire Empire, has probably been extinct for millennia.”

“It’s a computer,” Gold said. “Surely it must operate on a set logic system that we can speak to, reason with.”

“Look what it’s doing to us, Captain,” the slender Bynar said. “I couldn’t even begin to know how to reach it.”

“Chance,” said Tev. “It operates on the calculation and implementation of the laws of probability.”

“Yes, along with the manipulation thereof,” said Soloman. “Which makes it all the more difficult to approach when its ability to affect probability can change, from moment to moment, the very shape of reality.”

Sonya Gomez threw her hands up in surrender. “Then that’s it? We’ll never know how to communicate with the Drive because its very existence is forever changing how we perceive its communication? It’s Schrödinger’s Cat, all over again.”

Tev nodded slowly, then said, suddenly, “Yes. Yes, it is.”

Soloman peered at the Tellarite. “Something?”

“Yes,” Tev said, a sudden surge of strength returning to his voice. Soloman realized that the S.C.E. second-in-command, like everyone else aboard the da Vinci since being caught up in the influence of the Uncertainty Drive, had been acting somewhat out of character. For Tev that meant a certain hesitancy in his voice and his usually unshakable confidence. The Bynar had been surprised that Tev had so readily accepted the fantastic explanation of an Uncertainty Drive, but now he realized he likely had been desperate for any outside explanation of their situation. Better they were under the sway of some scientific conundrum than that Mor glasch Tev had somehow become fallible.

“Schrödinger’s Cat is a hypothetical expression of uncertainty,” Tev continued. “A cat is placed in a box with a radioactive atom, a vial of acid, and a Geiger counter. Should the atom decay and the Geiger counter detect an alpha particle, the acid vial will be broken and the cat will die. But before the observer opens the box and observes the cat’s fate—and, by extension, the state of the radioactive atom—they are in superpositions, that is the state of being both dead and alive, or decayed and undecayed, simultaneously. It takes the observer opening the box to ‘observe’ the cat and determine its fate and, again by extension, the fate of the radioactive particle.”

“And...?” prompted Gomez.

“And the one piece of the equation that remains unchanged,” said Tev with no hint of smugness, unaware that for several seconds, he had, most improbably, become totally naked, “is the box.”

Soloman blinked, averted his eyes and then smiled. "The box," he said, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Whatabout the box?" asked Gold.

"The Drive is the box, Captain," said Soloman. "Whatever else happens around it, the box remains the box: a six-sided cube with very definite and precisely definable characteristics."

Now it was Gomez's turn to smile. "So the Drive isn't affected by the skewering of probability."

"I don't see how it could be," said Soloman. "It would need to operate within a sphere of unaltered probability, if only to serve as a baseline for reestablishing normalcy."

"So however bizarre it is here," Gold said, "the Drive itself should be perfectly normal?"

"In theory, yes, it should be," said Soloman. "And that means there's a good chance I can reason with it."

And about as good a chance, he thought uneasily, that the Drive had completely taken leave of its senses.

* * *

Pattie and Soloman walked toward the shuttle Shirley sitting in wait on the docking bay.

"I'm sorry I can't go with you," Pattie said, rising up on her hind legs.

Soloman shook his head. "Two of us would double the chances of something going wrong."

"I understand," she said, clicking in concern. "I'm just worried, that's all."

"I doubt I'm in serious danger," Soloman said. "I'll just be trying to establish a dialogue with the Drive." As he spoke, the Shirley impossibly became a passenger shuttle that disgorged a host of bipedal beings before closing its doors and sliding down a magnetic track to its next stop.

"Well," said Pattie. "Your ship could disappear out from under you, or you might become a species that finds your environment poisonous, or—"

"Or any number of equally remote 'what-ifs.' Haven't you noticed, Pattie, that for all the strange things that are happening, it is all of a mostly innocuous, if not disconcerting nature? I don't think the Drive wishes us harm, just to render us harmless."

"What happened to Bart was not innocuous," Pattie said sadly.

"No, of course it wasn't," he quickly agreed. "But his death was certainly, even among a crew of forty individuals undergoing an extraordinary run of bad luck, an anomaly. However, if you consider all the many trillions of beings that exist in the universe, all the possible interactions, encounters, and outcomes... well, really, how unlikely is it that, even under normal probability, just about anything might happen at any given time?"

The Shirley returned to its original spot, waiting for Soloman to board.

“In fact,” said the Bynar, “you would no doubt find remarkable the case of elderly twentieth-century Earth twin brothers, both killed not two hours apart, hit by trucks while riding their bicycles on the same stretch of road.”

“Yes, that sounds fairly remarkable,” she agreed.

“Because they were brothers, dying so close together in so similar a manner?”

Pattie nodded. “Of course.”

“Except the fact of their relationship, though of great interest, is irrelevant to the equation. You would likely have found the story less remarkable had I told it this way: Two elderly men in the same hometown died within two hours of each other, each riding a bicycle along a busy motorway in a snowstorm.”

Pattie chittered. “Ah, I see what you mean.”

“The truly strange things—the impossible appearances of beings, the improbable transmutations of objects—those are without a doubt caused by the Drive. But, ignoring that Bart regularly consumed peanut butter, and considering only that allergic reactions in humans can, in some cases, strike without a prior history, it might just be that his death was, truly, a freak accident. Perhaps having nothing to do with our proximity to the Drive and more to do with the random universe we are accustomed to dealing with.”

“We’ll never know, will we?” Pattie said. A rivet popped from the bulkhead overhead and dropped down on the Nasat’s head with a dull thud against her exoskeleton. A second and third followed before she could scramble out of the way.

“Are you okay?” Soloman said.

“Concerned,” she said. “There are no rivets used in the construction of this ship.” Pattie’s antennae quivered and she said, “Go, Soloman. Go talk to that crazy computer before what little luck there is keeping us alive runs out.”

Chapter 10

Brightly colored party balloons adorned with the faces of cartoon characters flitted lazily past the Shirley’s forward window. Inside, a burly squat being in an antiquated and tattered space suit with a cracked visor seemed vaguely relieved when Soloman politely denied him permission to take the craft’s copilot seat and wandered, by chance, out of reality.

Soloman was concentrating very hard on piloting the shuttle, trying not to be distracted by the increasing density of strangeness, such as when his heads-up display became a VR game featuring fairy princesses chasing after winged unicorns. The Drive had said they were being held in an “infinite-probability field,” an area where there was every chance of anything happening. It no doubt had calculated such extreme odds as being necessary to prevent the da Vinci from doing anything it deemed a danger, but, as a winged creature of a species he could not identify wheeled overhead, screeching out its mating call, Soloman could only wonder how well the Drive was functioning. It was, after all, an ancient system, perhaps no longer able to properly calculate, control, or manipulate probability.

“This is the Shuttlecraft Shirley, of the U.S.S. da Vinci,” Soloman said into the communicator. “Requesting permission to dock with the Minstrel’s Whisper.”

There had been a brief debate on the da Vinci over whether Soloman should have transported over to the other ship, but the Bynar had not been thrilled with the odds of having his molecular structure scrambled and successfully reassembled under current conditions. He would take his chances in the shuttle... a decision he thought he might soon regret.

The response came in the form, Soloman was fairly certain, of Romulan light opera. The translator chose to convert it into a haiku in a Ferengi dialect. “Please repeat, Minstrel’s Whisper. Your transmission was... garbled.”

The ship itself was faring little better than its attempts to communicate. As Soloman approached in the slow-moving shuttle, the Whisper randomly changed position every time he looked at or attempted to get an instrument lock on it. The Uncertainty Principle, he thought. The observation of a particle changes how it acts. What were the chances he would ever get to witness this subatomic phenomenon on a macro level?

About fifty-fifty, he supposed.

“Shuttlecraft Shirley. Calculation of danger to Minstrel’s Whisper under current probability level: sixteen to the twenty-third power. Permission to dock granted. Please follow indicators.”

The Minstrel’s Whisper had apparently decided to once again occupy just a single place in the universe and stayed where it was as Soloman piloted the Shirley toward it. A line of blinking lights pulsed along the side of the silver craft, directing him toward the slowly opening maw of the cargo bay. And, in case he missed that, two unprotected dog-faced beings in greasy coveralls floated improbably in space on either side of the docking doors with brightly shining torches, pointing him to his destination.

Soloman found setting the Shirley down on a deck that couldn’t quite decide its position or density the most nerve-wracking experience of the brief journey, but soon he was down and shutting down the shuttle’s systems. Which, at the moment, apparently required the removal, from beside the thruster controls, of an old-fashioned key attached to a pair of large fuzzy, stuffed dice.

Soloman sighed. “Well,” he said out loud, to himself, “at least the dice are appropriate.”

The Bynar stepped from the shuttle onto a long red carpet that ran the length of the docking bay, flanked on either side by rows of formally attired footmen. Soloman tapped his combadge and said, “Soloman to da Vinci. I have arrived safely aboard the Minstrel’s Whisper.”

“The number you are calling is no longer in service,” replied a metallic, mechanical voice. “Please check the number and dial again.”

Soloman frowned. “Hello?”

“We read you, Soloman,” came Gomez’s response.

“Good,” he said. “I’d hate to feel like I was all alone in—”

Soloman’s next step sent him plummeting down a hole that appeared, impossibly, in the metal

deck-plate before him. He landed on his back in a twisting, slanted tube and proceeded to slide down this dizzying—and impossibly long—path, like a child caught on an amusement park ride.

“Soloman?”

Before he could catch his breath to answer, the slide leveled off and dumped him out into a plain, unmarked corridor lined with a series of short, round hatchways.

“Ow.”

“Are you okay, Soloman?”

Rubbing his posterior, the Bynar rose to his feet. “Yes. I just rode a rather improbable alternative to a lift.”

“I’m sure. Any sign of the Uncertainty Drive?”

One of the rounded hatches burped open and a giant green humanoid with a single eye where it’s nose should have been started trying to squeeze through it. Soloman stared in surprise as the fingers on his left hand were briefly replaced by sensor probes. A line of game fowl from Naftali honked in chorus as they waddled past him down the corridor, disappearing around the bend.

“No doubt I’m close,” Soloman said carefully. He looked around, brushing the web of an Arctyrrian narco-spider from his head. “Hello, Minstrel’s Whisper,” he called.

“Please enter.”

Soloman shrugged. “Enter where?”

“Probability of choosing correct portal: one hundred percent.”

He thought he understood now. Whichever door he chose to enter would be the one that lead to the Drive. The Drive itself had altered the odds to make it a certainty.

Soloman approached a door at random and, when it opened, he stooped to fit through it into the chamber housing the core of the Uncertainty Drive.

He could feel the world around him returning to normal. Creatures from other worlds and ancient times ceased scurrying and flapping around him. His limbs and digits no longer became something else, his uniform remained on his back, and things were no longer becoming other things for no reason other than probability allowed for it. Here, in the presence of the Uncertainty Drive, the odds ceased to conspire against sanity.

The Drive itself was hardly impressive. All that was visible in the low-ceilinged, ten-foot by ten-foot chamber—which, along with the evidence of the small portals, led Soloman to speculate that the creators of the Minstrel’s Whisper had been a race short in stature, if not long on scientific know-how—was a floor to ceiling tubular chamber, transparent and filled with a bubbling gold liquid. It took him only a moment to realize that the bubbles traveling up and down the chamber did so in patterns.

“A protein solution containing organic memory matter?” Soloman asked.

“Analysis correct. I am Minstrel.”

Soloman slowly circled the chamber. “I am Soloman.”

“Yes. I calculated a ninety-nine point seven-two-three probability that you would be the one sent to interface with me.”

The S.C.E. computer expert nodded, knowing he had to be careful until he had a sense of the Drive’s operating parameters. “Where is your crew, Minstrel?”

“Insufficient data. I was briefly offline and rebooted to find the crew gone.”

“Didn’t you find that...odd?” Soloman asked.

“Improbable,” the Drive corrected. “Minstrel’s Whisper’s log contains incomplete data; analysis of probability incomplete.”

“Do you know how long you were offline, Minstrel?”

“Insufficient data.”

“Do you know your current location?”

“Insufficient data.”

Soloman found it interesting that an artificial intelligence of this obvious sophistication and complexity had made no attempt to fill in the gaps in its data. It could have easily requested the information from the da Vinci’s computers, or even taken simple star readings to determine the time and its location, yet it was strangely content to do nothing.

“I’ve come to assure you that the da Vinci has no hostile intentions toward you and ask to be released from your infinite-probability field,” he said. “We wish only to remove obstacles blocking our space lanes.”

“Probability of hostile action by da Vinci: fifty point zero-zero-three percent. Da Vinci will remain in infinite-probability field until taken into custody by the Empire.”

On a mere three one-hundredths of a percentage point of chance, the Drive had determined the da Vinci to be a threat. Soloman wondered exactly what this intelligent computer that could not seem to figure out how to read a star chart to calculate its location or the passage of some million years of time was using to calibrate its determination of the odds.

“While we’re waiting for the Empire to take me into custody,” Soloman said, producing a deck of playing cards from his tunic, “might I interest you in a small game of chance?”

It was time he found out.

Chapter 11

Captain Gold waited.

Commanders of Starfleet vessels seldom had to endure the endless waits David Gold often found himself facing. True, he was the top man aboard the *da Vinci*, but aside from seeing to it that the ship got safely from point A to point B, much of his time was spent waiting for the various scientists and engineers under his command to finish their jobs before moving on to the next point on the map. Naturally, he took a great interest in what his people did and expected them to keep him fully apprised of their progress, but there really wasn't a whole lot for him to do while they built their gadgets and adjusted their gizmos. Absent an emergency, he was pretty much left to hang back and let his people do what they did best.

Which left him feeling, at times, very much like a third wheel. Sometimes that separation caused command issues, as happened at Rhaax a little while ago, but mostly it caused boredom. And sometimes, when an emergency did arise, the captain felt guilty that he might have brought it on by wishing for something to do to relieve the tedium.

If nothing else, the Uncertainty Drive was fast curing him of the desire for something to happen while he waited. At the moment, he would have given anything for some good old tedium in an environment that didn't make the impossible routine.

"Captain, look at this."

Gold looked. The viewscreen on the bridge showed a section of the Sargasso where the derelict ships were drifting into a new and very strangely recognizable pattern. "Is that...?" he asked.

Gomez nodded. "Yes. Those ships are rearranging themselves into a diagram of a sodium chloride molecule. Common table salt."

"But... why?" Gold said with a shake of his head.

"Because the odds are that they can," Gomez said. "The readings in the field of altered probability appear to be intensifying."

A muffled explosion that caused the *da Vinci* to shudder and alarms to go off punctuated Gomez's words. It was quickly determined that a newly installed convection tube in the recently repaired port nacelle had, against all odds, burst.

"Those tubes don't just burst," Gold said angrily.

"They do when there are even odds that they might," Gomez said. "We've been experiencing more and more improbable failures over the last hour. Most of them were relatively minor, but what are the odds they can continue that way? The longer we're held here, the more likely the chance we'll experience a catastrophic failure, a structural abnormality, or even human error that could destroy this ship."

"We're just an accident waiting to happen," he said.

"Bet on it," Gomez agreed.

The lift doors opened and, as a kangaroo hopped onto the bridge, the *da Vinci*'s sensors chose that moment to crash.

* * *

Soloman settled himself on the floor beside the Uncertainty Drive and began shuffling the cards.

“Define ‘game of chance’?” the Drive inquired.

“Divisions that are dependent on chance, such as the drawing of a specific card or the rolling of dice to achieve a specific number to determine victory or loss. Your civilization has no such games?” Soloman was surprised. Most civilizations across the universe had developed such games, and he would have guessed that a culture that developed this mode of travel would have such.

“The Khndak attained mastery of probability millennia ago. Games of chance, under such conditions, would contain no element of risk.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s so,” said Soloman. “Still, if you’re interested, I could teach one such game to you.”

“Explain.”

Soloman dealt two hands of five-card poker, all faceup, to demonstrate to the Drive how the game was played. He quickly explained the fifty-two card deck, the different suits contained therein, the various odds of achieving the desired hands, and the methods of betting. A single simulated hand and the Drive indicated its understanding of the fundamentals.

The Bynar gathered the cards back up, shuffled, cut the deck, then dealt, turning the Drive’s cards toward a visual sensor on the wall.

Soloman had drawn a pair of fours and three useless cards. In a real game, he would likely have folded his hand on such a pair, but there was more at stake here than winning a round of cards. “We each discard the cards that do not fit into our hands and draw an equal number of new cards in the hope of achieving a better hand.” This he did, finding himself little better off than he had been with his original cards. He asked the Drive, “How many cards do you want?”

“I will maintain the initial selection.”

“Really?” Soloman reached over and turned the Drive’s cards, unprepared for the shock of seeing a perfect royal flush, just as he had dealt it.

“Remarkable,” Soloman said. He gathered the cards, shuffled thoroughly, and dealt out another hand.

Even after drawing four new cards against an ace, he could not better the straight flush held by the Drive.

A third hand produced another royal flush for the Drive, followed by two full houses, a straight, two pairs (three times in a row), three of a kind, a third royal flush, and three more straights, all exactly the same. The best hand Soloman was able to achieve had been that initial pair of fours. After that, even the humblest pair of deuces had eluded him.

“Fifteen hands in which you’ve been dealt nothing less than three of a kind, including not just one but three royal flushes. In any individual hand the probability of a royal flush is some thirty-one thousand to one.”

“Probability of drawing the five necessary cards: fifty percent for each individual card.”

“But what of drawing all five necessary cards in every single hand? In fifteen consecutive hands,” Soloman said, “the odds are mind-boggling. Where exactly does probability currently stand for us?”

“Probability is normal.”

Soloman began dealing the newly reshuffled cards, one at a time, face up on the floor. They came out of the deck in sequential order, by suits.

“This, Minstrel,” he said, “is not normal.”

* * *

A loud, high-pitched screech filtered up to the bridge from belowdecks of the *Vinci*.

“What now?” Gold demanded.

Gomez signaled engineering and a stressed-sounding Nancy Conlon’s voice said, without any preamble, “You’re not going to believe this one!”

Gold closed his eyes and braced himself. “Try me.”

“The warp drive... it’s been replaced by steam engines, Captain,” she said. “That noise was a pressure valve venting excess steam.”

Gold shook his head. “Meshuggah,” he said. “The whole universe has gone meshuggah!”

“Just our corner of it,” said Gomez. “But the way the effects are spreading, the rest of the galaxy may not be far behind.”

* * *

Soloman produced a small, coin-sized medallion from his pocket and held it up for Minstrel’s visual sensor to inspect. The image of a starship was stamped on one side, the Starfleet insignia on the other.

“Maybe this will help,” the Bynar said. “What would you calculate the probability of this disk, flipped through the air and allowed to land without interference one hundred times, falling with the side picturing the starship facing up?”

“Probability states the result to be fifty of one hundred such throws.”

“That’s correct,” he said. “Each throw offers a fifty-fifty chance of landing on either side.” Soloman flicked the medallion into the air with his thumb and watched it rotate head over tails before clinking to the deck.

“Heads, or starship side,” Soloman announced. He picked up the medallion and prepared to toss it again. “There’s still a fifty-fifty chance it will land on either side, but since the first toss came up heads, there is a greater likelihood—a three in four chance—that the next will come up tails.”

Soloman flipped the medallion again, waiting for Minstrel to challenge his dubious statistical information, but the computer remained silent.

“Heads again.” He retrieved the medallion. “Meaning there’s now an even greater chance that the next flip must be tails.”

But it wasn’t. In fact, the medallion came up heads again and again. Sixty-two flips later and there was still nothing but the embossed starship’s image facing the Bynar and the computer.

“Minstrel, what is the probability of so many consecutive flips being the same?”

“Probability: fifty percent.”

“Excuse me?” Soloman said.

“Each toss of the coin offers an even chance of one side or the other coming up.”

“Yes, on the basis of each individual toss,” Soloman agreed, “but when taken as a set of tosses, the odds increase exponentially.”

Soloman tossed the coin for the sixty-third time and watched in surprise as it landed, this time, on its edge and stood there, perfectly balanced.

“And the odds of this?”

“Probability: fifty percent.”

An answer which convinced Soloman, finally, that he was dealing with a mechanism that had lost all reason.

* * *

Aboard the *theda Vinci*, Captain Gold and Sonya Gomez discovered that, improbably or not, the rest of the crew had gathered together in a three-foot by three-foot utility closet on the engineering deck. Which turned out well since the hull around the bridge deck had gone off somewhere, leaving the entire area exposed to the vacuum of space.

By the time the hull returned—minus all its electronics and decorated in a colorful but tasteful floral wall-covering—the starboard nacelle was showing fatal signs of metal fatigue and threatened to snap off at the slightest provocation.

Meanwhile, the CO₂ scrubbers responsible for recycling shipboard air had begun to spew lethal carbon monoxide rather than renewed and breathable air. A quick thinking, but improbable, Qwardian tree-slug with an engineering background shut down the environmental systems before the CO levels reached the danger point. Fortunately, a breeze blowing in from the mountains beyond the mess kept the *theda Vinci* supplied with fresh air.

* * *

Gold, Gomez, and Tev watched the *Minstrel’s Whisper* on the viewscreen in the captain’s ready room. It was just one derelict ship out of millions, but one which random chance had vested with the power to destroy the *theda Vinci*.

“Soloman is not answering any of our signals,” the Tellarite said.

“Odds are,” Gold said dryly, “his combadge isn’t working.”

“But Soloman is,” Gomez said. “We’ve got to trust he’s doing the best he can.”

Tev growled deep in his throat. “So you’re saying that the mind that conceived a statistical jest such as his ‘fifty-fifty’ theory is all that stands between this ship and its doom?”

“Well,” said Gold, “when you put it that way . . .”

Chapter 12

Reason, Soloman thought, should be left to the reasonable.

But seeing as there was precious little reason to be had there in the Uncertainty Drive’s den, he was best off taking another tact entirely.

When in Rome, he reminded himself before taking a deep breath and saying to the Drive, “Minstrel, do you know how long you were offline?”

“Query asked and answered. Insufficient data.”

“I have the necessary data, gathered by the instruments aboard the *Vinci*. You were offline for something in the vicinity of one million years.”

“Probability: zero.”

Soloman shook his head. “But you don’t even know what happened to your crew. Have any of your attempts to contact your Empire met with success?”

The Drive made no response, but Soloman noted that the flow of bubbles inside Minstrel’s chamber had increased. He pressed on. “You set the probability that a coin could come down heads in sixty-three consecutive tosses at fifty percent,” he said. “What chances would you give the *Vinci*, arriving at any random point along a one-half light-year-long stretch of space, coming to rest within visual distance of any particular ship, in this case the *Minstrel’s Whisper*?”

“Probability: fifty percent. The *Vinci* is either near the *Minstrel’s Whisper* or it is not.”

Soloman realized that when he had initially encountered the Drive, it had been capable of offering odds—whether correctly calculated or not—other than fifty-fifty. The cards and the coin, meant to allow Soloman to establish the computer’s concept of stable probability, seemed to have served only to confuse the device. That signaled to him a rapid deterioration of its processing abilities—and he doubted they would deteriorate in favor of the *Vinci*’s survival.

“And the probability of your being dealt nothing but winning hands sixteen straight times?”

“Probability: fifty percent. Either one will be dealt the high hand or one will not.”

“Then it stands to reason that there is a fifty percent chance that you were offline for one million years.”

The logic was, of course, completely specious. It was as though he had said because it's possible to ride a bicycle without hands, it's also possible to take an unprotected stroll across the surface of a gas giant. One had nothing to do with the other, but Soloman was placing his faith in the fact that he stood a fifty-fifty chance of Minstrel accepting his argument.

“Logic error...”

The golden liquid began bubbling ferociously.

Soloman held his breath, suddenly convinced he had gone too far, too fast.

“...Supposition irreconcilable with Minstrel's Whisper's two-thousand-year rating for organic memory matter.”

“Minstrel,” he said, exhaling and trying not to smile, “have you ever heard of Schrödinger's Cat?”

* * *

Torches lined the corridor of the *theda Vinci*, filling the air with oily smoke. The crew, clad in monks' robes of coarse gray material, walked slowly along in double-file, chanting dirges in a language that none of them recognized.

Captain Gold felt as though his head were about to burst from the constant shifting of reality and the impossibility of everything that was happening to him and his crew. It was his responsibility to see that these forty beings under his charge came to no harm, but he was just so damned helpless in the face of this ancient and overwhelming alien technology. He would have felt humiliated had he for a second believed what they were going through was being done deliberately, but he knew better.

It was all just chance, science gone amok. What had he called it that first morning when he and Gomez had discussed their respective runs of bad luck? “Random acts of capricious nature.” Only in this instance, technology was giving nature a helping hand.

Bart Faulwell had died because of it. His ship, this home to Gold and his crew, was, moment by moment, coming that much closer to destruction. Just before they all found themselves chanting in robes, the sensors had picked up an approaching and powerful electromagnetic pulse, apparently generated from the magnetic field that helped hold the *Sargasso* of derelicts in stasis. Of course, that was relatively minor compared to the kilometer-wide meteor hurtling on a collision course for the *theda Vinci*.

Or, he noted with renewed alarm, the gradual disintegration of the *theda Vinci*'s physical structure, as though the ship were made of spun sugar and had been dipped in a basin of water. The hull was melting away, inch by inch, exposing them all to the cold, unforgiving vacuum of space.

Gold tried to cry out, to warn his crew of the coming disaster, but all that came out of his mouth was the unintelligible dirge. Capricious nature couldn't even give him the comfort of prayer in this final moment.

But even had he been able to pray, the best he would have been able to summon would have been the kaddish.

Chapter 13

Captain David Gold opened his eyes and looked around the bridge of the U.S.S. da Vinci.

He sat, as was his custom, in the commander's chair in the center of the bridge. Wong, Shabalala, and Haznedl were at their respective stations, while Gomez and Tev were positioned at aft consoles, and other crew moved about in routines so blessedly familiar to the captain.

Gold knew, from the looks on the other faces around him, exactly what his expression must have been.

Shock.

A second ago, they had all been robed monks on a march to oblivion, singing a song to which no one knew the words.

A second ago, all hands had watched the slow, inexorable disintegration of their ship that promised to expose them to instant death in space.

A second ago...

And then, against all odds, their world had returned to normal.

"Soloman toda Vinci."

Sonya Gomez jumped, startled by the voice coming over the comm. She slapped spasmodically at the switch, her own words coming out in a surprised stutter. "Soloman? What, I mean, where are you?"

"Aboard the Minstrel's Whisper and ready to come home."

Tev leaned in and, trying to appear unruffled but failing miserably, said, "Has the situation been resolved?"

Gold was certain he heard Soloman chuckle. "Indeed it has."

Behind the captain, the lift hissed open and someone stepping from it said, "What situation?"

Gold sucked in a breath. Before he could turn to see if who he thought he had just heard was indeed who he believed it to be, one look at Gomez's face confirmed it.

"Bart!" she shouted and raced across the bridge, throwing her arms around his neck.

Bart Faulwell, hale and hearty as ever, staggered back under her affectionate assault. "Missed methat much between shifts?" he laughed.

Everyone on the bridge was staring at the language specialist in open disbelief. He looked from face to face, not sure what to make of their expressions and of the sniffling woman clinging to his neck.

"Uhm," he said, "have I missed something here?"

David Gold stepped toward the younger crewman and clasped his forearm in his hand. “No, Faulwell,” he said in a voice momentarily choked with emotion. “We’re the ones who have been missing something.”

* * *

The command crew were there to meet Soloman in the shuttle bay. He stepped from the shuttle, casually flipping and catching the starship medallion, a satisfied smile on his face. He looked at them, Captain Gold, Sonya Gomez, Tev...and Bart Faulwell?

“Everything has, I take it, returned to normal?” Soloman stammered.

Faulwell smiled, “Surprise!”

Soloman looked to Gold, then Gomez. “But he was—”

“Dead,” Bart said. “Done in by a peanut butter power bar, they tell me. Guess it was just too ridiculous a way to go for the powers that be to let it stick.”

“This,” Soloman said, “ismore than I could have hoped for.”

Gomez’s laugh was loud with her relief. “Yes,” she exclaimed. “Everything’s back, one hundred percent. How did you do it?”

Soloman shrugged. “In truth, the Drive did it to itself. I merely helped point it in the statistically correct direction.”

“Would you care to explainhow?” Tev said impatiently.

“Of course,” Soloman said. “As I suspected, the Drive, either because of age or,” and here he smiled, “because of random chance, was basing its probability calculations on corrupted data. How else could the odds for the frequent impossibilities we were confronting have become so skewered in favor of their happening? Apparently, my attempts to ascertain its baseline for so-called stable probability through demonstrations of chance served only to confuse it. I think it was the coin toss that did it, but before I was done, Minstrel was operating on the assumption that all odds for all things were fifty-fifty.”

“No!” exclaimed Tev in disbelief, glaring at his superior when Gomez failed to completely suppress a snort of laughter.

“Yes,” the Bynar replied modestly. “I recorded the entire confrontation on my tricorder if you would care to check it. Anyway, it expressed doubt when I tried to explain that it had been dormant for a million years and had only just, by random chance, come back online. It was composed of organic components which were only supposed to function for two thousand years before deteriorating, a fact it could not reconcile with my claims of the vast passage of time.

“All those factors pointed to the solution to our dilemma. The Drive itself had established that it was functioning on the assumption that the odds of all things were even, so I told it the story of Schrödinger’s Cat, reinforcing through the immutable laws of physics...”

“Some immutable laws, said the dead man,” Faulwell chuckled.

“Immutable, then, under normal circumstances. . . the state under which the Drive believed itself to be functioning, by the way. I explained how the hypothetical cat is in a superposition of both life and death until an observer opens the box to determine the cat’s fate. Alive or dead. Fifty-fifty.

“I explained that its great age was the cat and the vastly overdue life span of its materials was the radioactive particle.”

“And you,” said Sonya with sudden understanding, “were the observer!”

“That’s as preposterous as your theory on probability,” said Tev with unconcealed disdain.

“I couldn’t agree more, but the Uncertainty Drive didn’t know any better. As far as it could perceive, I had opened the box to see whether the cat was alive or dead. And, as it was programmed to function under the Uncertainty Principle, it instantly understood that the mere fact of my observing it altered it. And since it was operating under the principle that something either was or was not—fifty-fifty, remember—it had only two states, or two probabilities, to choose from: function or nonfunction. Since it had been functioning, my observation could only offer it the alternative of nonfunction.”

“You mean,” asked Gold, “it just shut down?”

“On or off. Yes or no,” Soloman said and directed his smile at Tev. “Fifty-fifty.”

“Preposterous,” the Tellarite grumbled and stalked out of the shuttle bay.

* * *

Bart Faulwell sat by himself in the forward observation deck, sipping a cup of coffee, staring out at the Sargasso Sector.

In the twenty-four hours since his. . . becoming not dead anymore (he felt silly using a word like resurrection, which was far too biblical for his tastes and, besides, didn’t really describe his situation), he had hardly found a moment for himself. Everyone had wanted time with him to express their sorrow over his death and their happiness at his. . . well, not-death. And while he appreciated their sentiments—and how many people, really, ever got the chance to hear their own eulogy and learn how their death had affected those around them—he needed time on his own to digest the situation for himself.

Not that he remembered dying, of course. Or undying either, for that matter. As far as he could tell, there had been no break in his life. It was as though he had taken a nap, nothing more.

But he hadn’t been napping. He had been dead. Dr. Lense hadn’t been mistaken. She had placed his body in a stasis chamber and his friends had mourned his sudden and senseless passing.

Except now he wasn’t dead.

He had been there, of course, when twenty-three of his colleagues had died at Galvan VI. He had ridden the very same emotional roller coaster theda Vinci’s crew had experienced in the wake of his death, but now, suddenly, hewasn’t dead and it was as though they had wasted all that sadness and emotion.

And how could they not resent him, on some level at any rate, for daring to cheat death when those

twenty-three others could not? Duffy, Feliciano, Barnak, McAllan, and the others—they had stayed dead. Of course. That's what dead was, a final, irrevocable state. But Bart had, quite literally, beaten the odds and, while he was naturally happy to learn that reports of his death had been greatly exaggerated, he was also saddened that his happiness and good fortune was no doubt causing pain for others.

“Hey.”

Bart heard Sonya Gomez's voice and, coming as it did on the tail of his particular train of thought, he winced. But he pretended not to and turned to her with a smile and waved her over to sit beside him.

“Sorry if I'm interrupting,” Gomez said.

“You're not,” he lied.

“I've just—” she said, then stopped herself. “I'm glad you're back, Bart.”

He smiled. “Me too. It's freaky, though. Soloman figured that since the probability of my, you know, dying by peanut butter was so astronomical, when normal probability started to reassert itself, it just kind of spit me back out as too impossible to be dead. Or maybe it was that the odds of my staying dead were the same as my having died in the first place, but to tell you the truth, I couldn't understand half of what he was saying with all those numbers and equations.”

“Me neither,” she said. She reached over and took his hand. “You've been hiding in here, haven't you?”

He nodded and shrugged. “Sort of.”

“Why?”

“Because,” he said, staring into his cup, “I can't quite figure out whether or not it's fair. Not being dead, I mean.”

“Now why in the world would you think that, Bart?”

He looked her in the eye, determined to get it off his chest, no matter how difficult it was. “Because of the others who died and didn't get a roll of the damned dice to bring them back. I mean, how the hell am I supposed to go blithely along with this fortuitous second chance of mine when I know every time you look at me you'll be thinking ‘Why Bart and not Duffy?’ ”

Sonya looked down. He could see she was fighting hard to hold back tears. She and Duffy had found something miraculous together, something that had been ripped from her, never to be returned.

“You are such an idiot,” she finally said.

Faulwell, taken aback, was forced to laugh. “Excuse me?”

“Yes, I loved Kieran and always will. Yes, I would give my left arm for five more minutes with him to tell him that. And, yes, I will miss him for as long as I live, but how shallow do you think I am, Bart?”

“I never said—”

“Listen, pal,” she said with heat, “you've been given a gift. My God, we've all been given a gift. We've

gotten back someone precious to us that we thought we had lost forever. It's a miracle, Uncertainty Drive or no Uncertainty Drive, and it just shows me that death doesn't have to be final, doesn't need to be the end. As long as we're alive, there's still a chance, still hope, no matter how infinitesimal."

Bart Faulwell could only sit and stare in wonder at his beautiful colleague. "I suddenly understand what Duffy saw in you, Commander."

"And don't you forget it, buster." Gomez released his hand and stood. "So, okay, I'll leave you alone now."

Faulwell stood with her. "Naw, I think I'm done here. Thanks."

Sonya Gomez smiled her most dazzling smile. "Don't mention it."

* * *

Two days later, Captain Gold logged off the computer after going over the day's reports. Since the finish of the Minstrel's Whisper, the opening of navigable lanes through the Sargasso Sector had proceeded without a hitch. The derelicts that could be safely moved were and those that were either of no interest for further study or deemed too dangerous to tamper with—including the now inert Minstrel's Whisper—were being disposed of under Gomez's black-hole demolition scheme.

Should their luck hold, the *Vinci* would complete this mission well ahead of the appearance of the first colony ship.

Of course, their ordeal under the influence of the Uncertainty Drive hadn't been entirely without repercussions. There were several of the crew who would no doubt jump in worry that it was back every time they stubbed a toe or lost a possession. And Tev could be seen stewing whenever he was reminded by Soloman's presence of the Bynar's ridiculous probability theory that had been proposed initially to mock the Tellarite but which wound up saving the life of everyone on board.

And then, of course, there was Soloman's luck at cards. Ever since his return from his encounter with the Uncertainty Drive, he had displayed the most uncanny run of luck. Well, Gold thought, he deserved every winning hand for what he had done.

And speaking of hand, the captain was reminded again of his missing wedding ring. He had chalked its disappearance up to the Uncertainty Drive, but even after the Drive had shut itself down he still had not found it.

Perhaps this was simply a case of his actually having lost it. No improbability field or alien technology to explain it, just a very human case of carelessness.

But still, there was Rachel's voice... "Odds are it's right where you left it, David."

He went over to that shelf again, sure he wasn't going to find it because hadn't he been over this room, the shelf included, a dozen times and come up empty-handed? But he had to look, just to satisfy Rachel.

And, of course, as usual, she was right. The simple gold band was right there, where he had left it.

David Gold smiled and picked it up and placed it immediately on his finger. Chance was, however it came to you, a funny thing.

About the Author

PAUL KUPPERBERG is a writer and an editor in DC Comics' Licensed Publishing department. In addition to some seven hundred comic book stories featuring such characters as Superman, Vigilante, Supergirl, the Doom Patrol, Conan, and characters from the Cartoon Network (to name but a few), as well as of his own creations, including Arion, Lord of Atlantis, Checkmate!, and Takion, he has also written the novels *Crime Campaign* and *Murdermoon*, the young adult novel *The Sirian Conspiracy* (with Michael Jan Friedman), numerous short stories, satire and parody for Marvel's *Crazy Magazine*, the syndicated *Superman* and *Tom & Jerry* newspaper strips, magazine articles, and nonfiction books on topics as diverse as the R.M.S. Titanic, John Glenn, and the Great Depression. *Sargasso Sector* is actually his third go at *Star Trek*, having scripted two issues of the original DC Comics run of the title in the 1980s. Paul lives in Connecticut with his wife, Robin, and their son, Max.

Coming Next Month: **Star Trek™: S.C.E. #43**

Paradise Interrupted by John S. Drew

For centuries, Risa has been the garden spot of the Alpha Quadrant, the place to go for rest, relaxation, and recreation. When the S.C.E. crew of the U.S.S. *da Vinci* learn their latest assignment is to Risa, they expect to find themselves in paradise.

But Paradise isn't what it used to be. Something is draining power from the complex weather systems that keep the planet pleasant, and if the S.C.E. doesn't determine the cause soon, Risa as they know it will cease to exist forever!

COMING IN AUGUST 2004 FROM POCKET BOOKS!