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# STAR TREK™

## S.C.E.

### #46

## SPIN

J. Steven York & Christina F. York



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# Chapter 1

Commander Sonya Gomez rolled the small, egg-shaped alien artifact in her fingers. It was copper-colored, about the size of a hen's egg, and she had only the vaguest idea what it was.

It was a puzzle, the sort she enjoyed. Alone in the hololab of the S.C.E. shipda Vinci—currently set up as a straightforward engineering isolation lab of the type you'd find at the Utopia Planitia Yards on Mars—she could immerse herself in the search for an explanation. So far, she hadn't found one.

Okay, they weren't really her fingers. They were plastic, mechanical digits moved with artificial muscles, and covered with tactile sensors. The sensations were so realistic, the movements so natural, sometimes she forgot.

"It's a communicator," she said to the empty lab, "or maybe a smart identity tag." Or not.

The computer's voice interrupted her thoughts, making her start. "Incoming subspace communication for Commander Gomez from freighter Vulpecula."

She sighed. "Oh, Wayne, give it a rest."

"Command not understood," said the computer.

"Take a message."

Satisfied, the computer responded, "Recording message."

She turned her attention back to the object. Two minutes passed. She tried to focus, but her concentration wouldn't return.

"Computer, replay message."

A viewing window appeared on her console, with the image of an angular male face, handsome in an unconventional way. Most notable was the color of his skin: pistachio ice-cream green.

A shock of black hair hung casually over his forehead, and his eyes were the color of emeralds. Though it was not communicated by subspace, and though the thought made her uneasy, she also knew the man smelled good.

He was Wayne “Pappy” Omthon, former first officer, now owner and captain, of the private freighter *Vulpecula*. Mostly human, his grandmother had been a green Orion. Other humanoids found the pheromones of green Orions to be pleasant, even intoxicating, a characteristic that had caused them to be victimized by slavers for centuries.

Unconsciously, she straightened her jacket and tucked a strand of her wavy hair behind her ear. It was very hard for her to think straight when Wayne was around. But why was she still having trouble thinking straight when he was light-years away?

“Sonya,” he said, “I’ve been trying to contact you for weeks.” He smiled a little. “I’m beginning to think you’re avoiding me, and that is exactly not my intent. I’ve been waiting to ask you in person, but since I just keep talking to da Vinci’s computer and time is short, I’ll ask now. You must have some leave coming, and there’s a traveling exhibit of ancient Bajoran technology making the rounds. It’s going to be on Galor IV for the next month. It’s a long way, but I know a guy,” he grinned and waggled his heavy eyebrows playfully, “with a ship.” The smile faded, his expression puppy-dog hopeful. “Seriously, I’ve got some cargo to drop off there. I’d enjoy the company, and somebody to talk shop with. Uh, let me know.”

The screen blanked.

Talking shop? Is that really what this is about? No, I think not.

“Too soon,” she said to the empty room.

She looked at the alien artifact and sighed. It was late, she was getting nowhere with this, and the faint trace of ozone in the filtered air was giving her a headache. “Computer, secure and store artifact, containment level six.” A shower and a soft bunk sounded good.

She stepped into the corridor, then grabbed the doorway as a wave of dizziness made her stumble. Then she spotted a tiny windmill, a replica of the kind once common on pre-twentieth-century Earth, hanging upside down from the corridor ceiling. The sight was made stranger by the gaudy tracery of tiny lights around its spinning blades, undoubtedly an anachronism.

She turned and saw Cade Bennett, one of Nancy Conlon’s engineers, at the far end of the corridor with a golf club in his hand. He took three rapid steps, like a gymnast starting his routine, flipped forward into a somersault, and landed firmly on the ceiling. From his perch, he spotted Gomez and smiled sheepishly. “Evening, Commander. Working late, I see.”

She nodded. “And you’re standing on the ceiling, I see.”

“Yes, sir. Commander Tev complained the old miniature golf course blocked the corridor, so I—made some adjustments.”

She reached up and touched the spinning windmill, confirming her suspicion. It was a hologram that passed through her fingers with a flicker. Even though her feet remained planted on the deck, there was a gentle upward pull on her head and extended hand.

“You’re not violating any laws of physics, are you, Cade?” She smiled. “Because I won’t have that on my ship.”

“No, sir! No gravity up here. An adjustment of the inertial damper force fields mimics the pull. Makes the game a special challenge, because if the ball bounces, it travels in a sawtooth pattern rather than a series of parabolas.”

“I see,” she said, having only a vague idea how he’d pulled it off. She would find out later though, in detail. It amazed her how often these little “engineer games” later found valuable application in their real-world problems.

The thrum of the Vinci’s warp drive changed pitch. Reflexively, she reached out and brushed her fingertips against one of the corridor wall’s supports. It was a DX-1045 support, tied directly to the ship’s main space frame, and a good conductor. She opened her senses and smiled slightly as she thought of Vulcan mind-melds. Talk to me, da Vinci.

She felt the faint vibrations with her fingers, heard the timing of the plasma injectors, the cycling of the warp core. It was a trick Geordi La Forge had taught her on Enterprise a decade ago, though she suspected she was better at it than he ever was.

The ship had increased speed, warp five, and they were coming hard about. She couldn’t detect any extra load to indicate shields were up or weapons activated.

No threat, but something’s up. Why wait for it?

She tapped her combadge. “Gomez to Gold.”

“Gold here.”

“What’s the mission, Captain?”

“It took you four whole seconds to call the bridge, Gomez. In your old age, you’re losing your touch?” He chuckled, then said, “Meet me in my ready room, and I’ll tell you about it.”

## Chapter 2

“The mission is pretty routine,” David Gold said from behind the desk of his ready room. Gomez sat in one of the guest chairs, nursing the Earl Grey tea the captain had offered when she came in. “We had a call from the Lokak system. They’ve detected a derelict ship. It’s a navigation hazard and its course is headed for an inhabited world. Salvage is beyond the technical capability of the locals, so we’ve been asked to step in. We’ll need to either alter its course or destroy it.”

The intercom interrupted. “Captain,” said the voice of the beta-shift tactical officer, Joanne Piotrowski, “Ambassador Goveia’s standing by for you.”

Gold said to Gomez, “Goveia’s our representative to the Lokra people.” He looked up. “Put it through, Piotrowski.”

The screen on Gold's workstation lit up to show the Starfleet Diplomatic Corps seal. The seal was in turn replaced by the image of a slender, middle-aged man. His aristocratic bearing and stiff ceremonial uniform were at odds with his full red beard and the unruly mop of red curls atop his head.

Gomez presumed he was the ambassador.

"David, good to see you again. It's been a while."

"Years, Alfredo. Not since Vulcan."

"That was a while back."

"This is my first officer, Commander Sonya Gomez."

"Ambassador," Gomez said, nodding her head.

"A pleasure, Commander."

"What's this about, Alfredo?"

"The locals detected a derelict ship headed on an impact trajectory with their planet. It seems to have drifted in from deep space. It's big enough to devastate half a continent if it lands."

"The Lokra have warp drive. Why do they need us?"

"They barely have warp capability. Besides that, the whole system is metal poor. They have only a few ships, robot probes for prospecting and mining nearby systems. Staffed spacecraft don't go beyond the planet's moons. Without tractor beams, which they don't have, this would be a dangerous undertaking." He grinned. "At any rate, I'm eager to show them the Federation would be a valuable ally."

"This was a Breen base during the war, wasn't it?"

Goveia's face hardened, and his blue eyes turned icy. "The Breen violently occupied the planet. That was the Lokra's first contact: a military occupation. Now the Breen have withdrawn, and we're eager to establish a presence here. It could be a valuable buffer zone."

Gomez asked, "What information do you have on the derelict?"

"Not much, Commander. Trajectory, a size estimate, some crude sensor readings. I've transmitted them to you. Lokra sensors aren't very sophisticated, I'm afraid."

"We're headed your way at high warp," Gold said. "We'll reach your derelict in about eight hours. You sit tight and let the S.C.E. handle it."

"Thanks. This isn't an imminent threat, but the Lokra government is adamant it be dealt with immediately."

"Anything for good relations. We'll get back to you as soon as we are able to assess the situation. Da Vinci out."



Gomez tapped her combadge. “Gomez to Saldok.”

Theda Vinci’s beta-shift ops officer said, “Go ahead, Commander.”

“We should have just received some files from Ambassador Goveia on Lokra.”

“They just came in, actually.”

“Good. Transmit the files to the captain’s ready room, please.”

Moments later, the ambassador’s files were visible on Gold’s screen. Gomez peered forward and studied it intently. “Not very useful. Trajectory and velocity information. On the current heading, computers confirm planetary impact, with ninety-seven percent certainty.”

There were no visuals, but she pulled up a wire-frame diagram of the ship, based on the low resolution sensor data.

“It’s a disk about five hundred meters in diameter. Or—” She hesitated, refining the display. Some of the readings on the center of the object didn’t jibe with the rest. “It has a hole in it, or a window. There’s a section transparent to their scanning beam.” She pulled up an energy scan. “It’s giving off some infrared, some moderate particle radiation consistent with radioactive decay, but that’s it. The radiation suggests a pretty primitive power source. If I had to venture a guess, I’d say it’s the product of a civilization new to space travel.”

“Well, if it isn’t a Lokra ship, then it’s a long way from home. It’s twelve light-years from the nearest class-M planet.”

Convinced she’d seen all there was to see, Gomez closed the files. “Shall we gather the troops?” she asked with a smile.

Gold shook his head. “It can wait until morning. You look like you could use some rest.”

“I was headed for my bunk when you called.”

“Go with that, then. I intend to do the same.”

On the turbolift back to her quarters, Gomez sagged against the wall, fatigue pushing down on her.

The door to her quarters slid open, and the computer greeted her. “Incoming subspace communication.”

She groaned. No point in putting it off any longer. She had to talk to him. She tugged at her jacket and straightened her sagging posture, pulling her shoulders back.

“On screen.”

Her small viewscreen came to life, and Wayne “Pappy” Omthon’s face appeared. His face was expressionless, except for one raised eyebrow. She could see him only from the shoulders up, but she could imagine him, arms crossed over his broad chest, foot tapping impatiently. “Sonya. Glad I could finally catch you.”

She grimaced. “I’m sorry, Wayne. I’ve been busy.”

“Nobody calls me Wayne.”

“Well, I’m not calling you ‘Pappy.’”

“It’s just a nickname. Everybody calls me that.”

“It’s a stupid nickname. Why ‘Pappy?’”

“I’m younger than most of the crew under my command, so of course they started calling me ‘Pappy.’”

“I’m still sticking with my stupid assessment.”

“The best nicknames usually are.”

Gomez refrained from pointing out that there was nothing stupid about “Sonnie,” the nickname Duffy had had for her, but she really didn’t wish to go there. She sat down on the edge of her bunk, leaning forward to pull off her boots. “I was just coming in.”

“I know.”

She glanced sharply up at the screen. “How?”

“I spent a week on the *Vincia* after that holoship business, remember? I got to know people.”

“You called Corsi?” she guessed.

He nodded. “The security chief always can find out where people are.”

“And she ratted me out?”

“Absolutely and without hesitation. I like that lady.”

“Then ask her out.”

“She’s taken.”

So am I.

The thought came without warning, and her chest tightened with an ache she thought she had finally left behind. It had been months since Galvan VI. Months since Duffy proposed to her and she couldn’t answer—and then never got the chance to when he, along with half the crew, were killed.

She had moved past the grief, past the discomfort, past the lethargy. True, it took a near-death experience on Teneb to give her the kick she needed, but she thought she had finally gotten on with her life.

Wayne recognized her discomfort. “Look, this isn’t a week on Risa I’m talking about, Sonya. We’re friends. This is a friendly outing to a museum. We’ll look at eight-hundred-year-old spaceships. We’ll talk engineering shop talk—” He frowned, reached out past the edge of the screen and slapped something, so that the image shook. “—you can tell me how to keep this damned viewscreen from

glitching.”

She chuckled.

“It’ll be fun. I’m sure it will do you good to get you out of that uniform for a while.” He realized what he’d said, and blinked.

She grinned. “You know, you turn kind of blue when you blush.”

He grinned sheepishly. “Aquamarine, actually.”

To her own surprise, she didn’t say an immediate no. “We’ve got a navigation hazard to clean up in the Lokak system. It should be quick, but I don’t know. Let me think about it, and I’ll get back to you when I have a better idea how long our mission will take.”

“You’ll call back soon though? Promise?”

“We’ll be there in the morning. I’ll scope out the situation, then call you back as soon as I get time.” She stretched, feeling the pull of tired muscles across her shoulders and down her back. “Now I’m going to sleep. Good night.”

“Good night, Sonya.”

The screen went blissfully blank.

She lay back in her bunk and closed her eyes. Sleep, however, was not forthcoming.

\* \* \*

Domenica Corsi signed off her shift and headed for her quarters. She paused along the way and tapped her combadge. “Computer, locate Fabian Stevens.”

“Crewperson Stevens is in the mess hall.”

She turned back to the turbolift, rode up a deck, and emerged a few steps from the mess hall door.

The mess hall was deserted at this hour. No odor lingered from the evening meal, and chairs were squared neatly under the tables.

Fabian sat alone at a table near a window, his head silhouetted by the blue glow emitted by the port warp nacelle. He sat slumped in his chair, long legs stretched out and feet crossed in front of him. A half-eaten peanut butter and jelly sandwich sat neglected on his plate. His nose was buried in a padd.

He glanced up and waved at Corsi when she entered the room. She stopped at the replicator to pick up a cup of herbal tea, then strolled over and joined him. She leaned over and gave him a peck on the lips, enough to be fun, not enough to distract from his coming shift. “You’re up early,” she said.

“Pre-mission jitters. I’m anticipating blowing this thing up.” He glanced at her. “You’re working late.”

She sat down and sipped her tea. It was good, but had a faint replicated aftertaste. She dumped in two sugars and made a mental note to pick up some real tea on her next shore leave. “Powers is still in

sickbay after Phantas 61, so we had to juggle the shifts a bit. I did tell you about that.”

He stared at his padd and grunted. “I suppose you did.”

“Besides, I like the gamma shift when we’re cruising at warp. It’s usually quiet, like having the ship to yourself.” She reached over and pulled down the top of his padd, so she could see the screen. “What’re you reading?”

He shrugged. “A Starfleet Intelligence white paper on Breen tactical systems. Not very informative, and dry as a bone.”

“I’ve got gossip.”

He tossed the padd on the table and reached for his coffee cup. “Yeah?”

“I got a call tonight from that freighter captain. The one we rescued from the holographic ship? The green one?” She watched his face for a reaction, some trace of jealousy. She’d made no secret during his visit that she found “Pappy” Omthon very attractive.

Fabian looked at her with a perfect poker face, not rising to her tease. “He was a first officer, not a captain.”

“He’s a captain now. He bought the ship from his old captain.”

“Well. Good for him.”

She frowned. “That’s not the gossip. He called to ask about Commander Gomez. He’d been calling her, and she’d been avoiding him.”

“That’s her right.”

“With respect to a superior officer, she’s an idiot. Omthon is a great guy. It’s time she let herself have a life again.”

Fabian looked thoughtful. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He nodded.

“So, I totally abused my security clearances to help him ambush her when she returned to her quarters. I probably violated about a dozen regulations. I could be court-martialed. Proud of me?”

He gave her a sidelong glance. “She’s the first officer. You could be court-martialed.”

“She’ll thank me later.”

“Yeah, but she’ll court-martial you now. What,” he said in mock horror, “were you thinking?”

She frowned and stared into the teacup cradled in her hands. “I was thinking, life is too short to waste it.”

Fabian leaned forward, his face serious, his eyes troubled. “Is something bothering you?”

Corsi hesitated. It was one thing to talk about Gomez, and what she should do. Talking about herself

was another matter. “I’ve been thinking about our little talk in the turbolift after Phantas. And I’m wondering—what would you do if you knew it was the last day of your life?”

He grinned. “Kick Bart out of the cabin, tell you to cancel your shift, and come right over.”

“I’m serious.” She frowned at him.

Fabian’s grin faded, and he reached for her hand. “I am being serious.”

Her hand rested lightly in his, but Fabian could feel the tension in her fingers. She looked out the window, watching the star-streaks traveling by.

“It’s part of the job,” he said, stroking her fingers. “We live with it.” He tried another grin. “Hell, you shoot people for a living.”

Her mouth twisted into an approximation of a smile, and she sighed. “I suppose you’re right. I just worry that she’s going to completely close herself off, like—” She cut herself off.

Fabian put his finger against her lips. “I know.”

They sat in silence for a while after that.

## Chapter 3

Gomez arrived on the bridge as they were ready to drop out of warp. Stevens was at one of the aft stations. Lieutenant Commander Tev stood next to Captain Gold’s chair. “Good morning, Captain. Tev.”

Tev’s deep-set eyes gave her a sideways glance. His snout wrinkled slightly and the corner of his mouth twitched down a bit, all of which seemed to say, “I’ve been up for hours. Where have you been?”

She grinned slightly. She was learning to let the Tellarite’s natural arrogance roll off her. He seemed oblivious. She had to admit that, as his superior officer, it helped to know she could simply order him to behave himself. It wasn’t her style to actually do it, but knowing she could provided an escape valve.

Now, if she could just improve his relationships with the rest of the crew, she’d be getting somewhere. The only person with whom the Tellarite was in any way friendly was Bart Faulwell. Gomez wondered what the linguist’s secret was.

“Wong,” said Gold, “take us to impulse.”

The ship dropped out of warp, and the stars on the screen changed from moving streaks to diamondlike points.

“One quarter impulse, sir.”

“Haznedl, where’s our derelict?”

The alpha-shift ops officer’s strawberry blond hair was drawn into a tight bun, an imitation of Corsi’s

severe style, in an attempt to counter her youth and small stature. She tapped at her console. “I show it three hundred twenty kilometers ahead, sir.”

“Visual and magnify, on screen.”

“Aye.”

Gomez stared. The ship wasn't a disk at all, it was a dark-colored torus. Its surface was a complex pattern of gray and black, with glinting highlights of silver, and occasional splashes of caramel brown. Small projections spaced evenly around the rim might have been thrusters or emitters of some sort, and other small projections were even less identifiable. It was hard to make sense of it all because the whole thing was spinning, and quite rapidly.

She tried to fix her eye on one of the projections and count seconds as it spun. “That's what, about eight revolutions per minute?”

Tev leaned over the ops console, studying the sensor displays. “A fraction over seven RPM, actually.”

Gold grinned slightly. “It looks like a bagel.”

Gomez grinned back. “A five-hundred-meter bagel.”

“That,” he said, “would need a lot of lox.”

Tev snorted, a sound of disgust, at the casual banter between the captain and first officer.

“Captain,” said Haznedl, “scanners are having a hard time reading the interior. The ionizing radiation and some exotic alloys in the hull are interfering. I'm detecting no life-forms, but there is a pressurized space occupying about thirty percent of the interior volume. Helium, argon, various trace gases, including a heavy concentration of radon.” She tapped more controls. “Neither the atmosphere nor the technology matches anything in the Federation database. This is a total unknown.”

“Well,” said Gomez. “Looks like we have ourselves another puzzle. Tev, what's your analysis?”

“It's a ship or probe, probably unoccupied. There's no indication of warp capability. I suspect those projections on the rim are primitive impulse thrusters.”

She nodded. “I'd say you were right about everything except about its being unoccupied. There, you're dead wrong.”

Tev glared at her. “It doesn't have the characteristics of a ship designed to support life.”

“On the contrary, it has a characteristic that leads to no other conclusion. It's spinning.”

“I don't understand.”

“Maybe Tellarites don't suffer ill effects from prolonged exposure to microgravity, but many other species, including humans, do. Some of our early space station and spacecraft designs used centrifugal force to simulate gravity for long space voyages.”

Tev snorted. “How stunningly primitive.” He considered for a moment. “Clever though.”

“I suggest,” said the captain, “there will be plenty of time to study this thing. What say we save a planet first? This is your show, Gomez.”

She nodded. “Aye, sir.”

She pulled out a padd and checked her calculations. She’d plotted an orbit that would take the spinship safely past the Lokra homeworld, having adjusted for the mass, configuration, and now the rotation of the derelict ship, based on their more refined sensor readings. After double-checking her final check, she transferred the final results to the ops console.

“Susan, lock on tractor emitters two and three. Songmin, stand by thrusters. Full astern as soon as we have lock.”

Emitters two and three were among the many da Vinci upgrades that originated with Duffy’s “U.S.S. Roebling” S.C.E. dream ship, made when the ship was being repaired following Galvan VI. Located at the far edges of the saucer section, the long baseline separating them allowed for precision manipulation of objects at a distance. Their locations allowed them to connect directly into the same structural spar that tied the warp nacelles to the ship, and to hook directly into the ship’s main EPS power conduits.

“Aye,” said Haznedl, “we’ve got lock.”

On the main viewscreen, Gomez watched a pair of converging blue beams lock on to either side of the ring-shaped ship.

“Thrusters full astern,” said Wong. Even before he finished speaking, a note of hesitation crept into his voice. He frowned at his console. “Captain, I’m getting some anomalous firing of the attitude thrusters. The automatic systems are throwing in a roll component, but our attitude is stable.”

Gomez glanced at the viewscreen for the oldest kind of confirmation. The stars remained in fixed positions. But if the roll thrusters are firing—

Gomez reviewed her calculations. She’d compensated so there would be little or no coupling of the derelict’s spin back to the da Vinci. Maybe there was an unrelated malfunction in the automatic stability systems.

“Captain,” said Wong, tension creeping into his voice, “thruster quads one through four and eleven through fourteen are reaching maximum output. We can’t maintain thrust astern.”

Gomez stared at the screen. This couldn’t be happening, but this wasn’t the time to be guessing at what was going on. “Shut down the tractor beams! Back us away!”

Haznedl tapped the ops console, her voice thin with strain. “I’ve cut power, but the beams are still active.”

On screen the tractor beams were clearly visible. More disturbing, the stars were rotating, like the second hand of an antique clock, and they were getting faster.

Gomez ran to the engineering station and pulled up an EPS status panel. “The plasma relays may have fused. I’m going to cut the main EPS conduits feeding the system. We’ll lose phaser power too, but—”

Tev came and looked over her shoulder, staring at the master display as she located the master plasma cutouts and activated them. She glanced back at the screen. The damned tractor beams were still active!

“Where are they getting power?”

Wong tapped frantically at the helm. “I’ve lost attitude control. Thruster quads one, four, eleven, and fourteen are reaching critical overheat. I have to shut them down before they blow.”

“Wait as long as you can,” shouted Gomez, looking for any other way power could be reaching the tractor beams. The thrusters would slow their accelerating rotation and might buy them critical seconds to shut down the tractor beams. Plus, it was only a matter of time before the acceleration itself started to cause problems.

“Inertial dampers and structural integrity field systems are showing the strain,” said Haznedl.

“Our roll rate is fourteen RPM and accelerating,” Wong said. Their mass, relative to the derelict, was quickly accelerating their spin rate.

“The news just keeps getting better,” muttered Gomez. She could hear the ship groaning from the strain, feel a slight lean to the deck that the inertial dampers couldn’t compensate for.

She couldn’t understand it. The tractor beams were isolated from any power source, yet they kept operating. She triple checked the EPS schematic. The tractors and main phasers were isolated at the end of a major EPS feeder. There was no way they could be getting power, unless—

“It’s got to be some kind of feedback loop. The beam interaction with the derelict is generating power, not dissipating it. It’s feeding power back through the beams. That’s what threw my calculations off!”

She was suddenly aware Captain Gold was standing next to her. “How do we turn it off?”

“We can’t, unless we can get someone down to directly disable the emitters. And if we break the circuit, I don’t know where the energy will go. It could kill anyone near the emitter, even make them explode.”

“Roll is at twenty RPM,” said Wong. The stars whirled on the viewscreen like a child’s pinwheel.

“Warning,” said the computer, “inertial dampers in overload. Failure imminent. Warning, structural integrity field reaching critical load.”

“Damn, there just isn’t time!”

The ship moaned and shuddered as it tried to tear itself apart.

It was a race. If the SIF failed, the ship would break up. If the inertial dampers failed, they’d all be splattered against the nearest bulkhead.

Tev blinked. “Put the main phasers in overload.”

“That’ll blow up the ship,” said Gold.

“It’ll do nothing,” said Gomez. “The phasers don’t have power.”



“Just do it,” said Tev. “It’s the only way.”

Stevens, holding on to the tactical station for support, had a sudden look of revelation. “Captain, he’s right! It’s our only hope!”

Gomez scowled at the EPS diagram. She didn’t see what good it would do, but Captain Gold had once told her, “Trust your people.”

“Setting main phasers to overload.” She was leaning sideways in her chair now, struggling not to slide out of it.

“Warning,” said the computer, “phaser overload requires command authorization.”

“Authorization, Gold, alpha tango one!”

There was a noise, as though the phaser banks were about to fire, which turned abruptly into a dull thud that shuddered through the ship. A flash illuminated the derelict on the screen. By the time Gomez’s eyes adjusted, the tractor beams were gone.

The ship shook violently. The lights on the bridge flickered. Then things smoothed out. The rotating stars on the screen began to slow.

“Damage report,” said Captain Gold.

“Minor buckling in the hull and secondary structural members,” reported Anthony Shabalala from tactical. “Tractor beams and main phasers are offline. Damage to EPS conduits ten and thirty. Minor damage to structural integrity field systems and reaction control systems. No casualties.”

Gold stared at the object on the screen. “Well, that was exciting.” He turned and made eye contact with Gomez. His look made it clear he was trying not to be judgmental, but she knew she’d better have a damned good report ready for him ASAP.

First, though, she wanted to know how Tev pulled that rabbit out of his hat, and she gave him an expectant look.

To his credit, the Tellarite spoke up immediately. “The phasers were isolated on the same branch of the EPS system as the tractor beams.”

Stevens nodded. “Energy was flowing in through the emitters when it should have been going out, feeding that branch. Putting them in overload was like putting a dead short across the circuit. It shut the feedback down, and the excess energy was dissipated harmlessly through the phaser strips.”

Tev nodded, obviously a little annoyed at being cut off in his moment of glory. “In far too simple terms, that’s more or less what happened.”

“That was a close one,” said Gomez.

“Just for the record,” said Gold, annoyance slipping into his voice, “I donot like close calls. There will be a full S.C.E. briefing at 1100 hours. I’ll expect a complete report on this incident, and what we’re going to do about this—” He gestured at the screen. “—thing, now that we have no tractor beams or phasers.”

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go call the ambassador and explain why there’s still a killer ship heading toward his planet.”

\* \* \*

Gold stepped into his ready room and stood ramrod-straight until the doors closed behind him. Once they did, he relaxed his posture and breathed deep. That had been a close one.

When he’d taken this assignment, he’d imagined it would be beneficial and interesting. What he had not anticipated was that S.C.E. was perhaps the most hazardous duty he’d ever served. Not only did they face constant unknowns and first-contact situations, by definition they rolled up their sleeves and dived straight into the thick of them. Often they were deeply entangled in the guts of an alien technology or a derelict spacecraft before unknown hazards presented themselves.

As this mission showed, even the seemingly most routine missions could turn deadly. There had even been a few moments, especially following Galvan VI, when he resented that.

Yet now, even as he let his pounding heart settle down in his chest, he knew that it was necessary, it was good, it was how things were done in the S.C.E., and how they had to be done. Maybe that had been their mistake this time. They’d taken the situation for granted, handled it the same way as any other Federation ship would have.

In the shuttledock at S.C.E. headquarters, there was a colorful mural painted on a hangar wall. It portrayed a standard Federation Work-bee, a small yellow utility spacecraft frequently used by the S.C.E. for space construction and repair.

The little yellow spacecraft had been anthropomorphized, cartoon eyes glaring from its forward view-port, and a sneering mouth, teeth gritted in determination, on its nose. A pair of cartoon arms projected from its sides. One hand held a hammer, the other an old-fashioned open-end wrench. Below it was a simple motto: HANDS ON !

Maybe that was the problem. They had stood off at arm’s length, tried to work the problem by remote control. Have we gotten timid? He made a mental note to have a talk with Gomez on the subject. But for now, he had other business.

He sat at his desk and punched up a subspace link to the embassy on the Lokra homeworld. It took him a few moments to be routed to Ambassador Goveia’s office.

The ambassador smiled when he saw Gold, the corners of his beard lifting toward his pale eyes. “Captain Gold. You have good news for us, I hope.”

“I thought the Lokra sensors might have already told you what happened.”

The smile faded. “Is there a problem?”

“There have been—complications. We tried to put a tractor beam on the derelict ship, but there was a technical difficulty of some sort before we could appreciably alter its course. Our ship received minor damage. We’re currently reevaluating the situation, and we hope to have a new plan shortly.”

“A tractor beam?” The gravelly voice came from off-screen. “Why didn’t he destroy it? I thought your Federation ships had powerful weapons. I thought you would destroy it.”

The ambassador addressed the unseen speaker. “These are our finest engineers, Siletz. I’m sure they’ll have the situation under control shortly.”

“Let me speak to him. I want to speak to him.”

The ambassador looked apologetically at Gold. “Captain, this is Siletz, First Prime of the Lokra. First Prime, this is Captain Gold of the S.C.E. starship U.S.S. da Vinci.”

The view widened to include the speaker.

Siletz was a large, simian-looking humanoid. He was completely covered with bushy white hair, except for his face and hands. Gold couldn’t be sure if the color was normal for the Lokra, a special badge of office, or a sign of advanced age. Siletz wore no clothing, but on his left wrist was a bulky electronic device that could be a communicator or computer access device.

“Why, Captain, did you not destroy the ship when you had the chance? I was told you would destroy it.”

“Is that so, Ambassador?”

Goveia looked uncomfortable. “Not to contradict the First Prime, but I don’t believe those were my exact words. I said we could destroy the derelict, if necessary.”

“This is disturbing.” Siletz bared his rather sizable teeth at the screen, a gesture that could have been the equivalent of anything from a smile to a threat, as far as Gold knew. “We are told the Federation has powerful weapons, and they will defend us from this threat. We have no weapons of our own. After the Breen left we hoped to develop them. We were assured it would not be necessary—the Federation would see to our security—and once we joined your Federation, technology would be shared with us. Is this a lie, Captain? When the Breen first came, they told us lies as well, so we would not resist until it was too late. Are all out-worlders like this?”

“I assure you,” said Gold, “that we will see that your planet remains safe.”

“Then I insist you destroy the derelict at once!”

It was Gold’s turn to look embarrassed. “That may be difficult. Not only were our tractor beams damaged, but our phasers as well. If necessary, we can destroy the object using photon torpedoes, or even demolition charges, but it will require time for study—”

Siletz seemed outraged. “And until then, our planet must live under a death sentence? Unacceptable!” Siletz leaped to his feet and left the room.

The ambassador watched him go. “They’re a temperamental people, Captain, and very physical. They have all manner of social mechanisms for defusing tension before it turns into a fight. Leaving the room is one of them, and it happens a lot here.” He shrugged, the exaggerated shoulders of his uniform shifting up a fraction of an inch. “Captain, I can’t stress the importance of this. These people will not feel safe until that ship is destroyed, by whatever means. They are all quite insistent about it.”

Gold took a deep breath and forced himself to remain calm. There was a reason he was a starship captain, not a diplomat. And at the moment, it felt like he and Goveia were on opposing sides. “As I said,

Ambassador, that may be beyond our resources at the moment. At any rate, this spacecraft represents the work of a totally unknown species, and the technology is quite unusual. We hope to study the ship, and perhaps learn something about its point of origin.”

“Captain, I appreciate that, but there is a danger of panic here.” Goveia’s voice was as frosty as his ice-blue eyes. “A Galaxy-class starship, the U.S.S. Norman Scott, is on a mission just a dozen light-years from here. Perhaps a larger and more formidable vessel could make quick work of the problem.”

## Chapter 4

Gomez entered the observation lounge ready to get her ass chewed. She’d screwed up and put the ship in danger, and would be lucky not to be court-martialed. She’d had only a few hours to pull her team together and set them analyzing both what happened, and the spinning derelict that still floated off their bow.

Everyone was seated around the table when she arrived. Stevens and Tev, as well as language specialist Bart Faulwell, cultural specialist Carol Abramowitz, insectoid structural specialist P8 “Pattie” Blue, and Bynar computer specialist Soloman. Dr. Lense was also present.

Several of them greeted Gomez, but the air hummed with suppressed tension.

They’re all waiting for the hammer to fall.

Gomez nodded at Tev. “I didn’t have a chance to thank you for what happened on the bridge. Your quick thinking saved the ship.”

“It was nothing,” said Tev.

“It’s not like you to be modest,” she said.

He looked at her blankly. “No, it was really nothing. I can read an EPS schematic. I assumed the rest of you were simply too agitated.”

Gomez nodded and turned slowly away. Okay, I knew that was coming. She stiffened as she heard the doors open behind her. And this too.

She turned to face the music. “Captain Gold.”

“Gomez, I’d like the floor for a minute.”

Gold took his seat at the head of the table, Gomez sitting to his right. The derelict loomed behind her in the lounge’s window, as though mocking her.

The captain cleared his throat. “This matter has gotten somewhat complicated, and not just because our initial attempt to divert the derelict failed. There are diplomatic and political issues that make it necessary for me to stand over your shoulders from here on in. I’m under pressure to solve this situation, and solve it fast.”

Gomez quickly said, "That's hardly a problem, sir." Generally Gomez's autonomy over the S.C.E. team was a given, but the "separation of powers" between her and Gold was sometimes a problem, most recently on Rhaax III, where a diplomat named Gabriel Marshall had co-opted Gomez and forced her to act without informing Gold. It was not a situation that either captain or first officer was eager to repeat, and Gomez was wondering if that redheaded ambassador was going to pull something similar to what Marshall did.

Gold continued. "I can try to buy time, and I'm sure I'll need to do just that. But I need something to work with." He glanced at Gomez, one eyebrow raised. "There's also the matter of my ship very nearly being turned into cream cheese a few hours ago. I want to know what happened and what we're going to do about it."

Gomez let out a breath. "Captain, we've all been working on an analysis of the situation. The makeup of the alien ship's hull and the ionizing radiation it's emitting are interfering with our sensors. What we didn't know, when we tried to tractor the ship, was that the hull is wrapped with bands of high temperature superconducting cables. They could be some kind of EM field, a weapon, or even part of a communication device. All that matters is that they were there, and they were spinning. The fields of our tractor beams interacted with them like a generator, coils of wire moving through a field. In this case the energy fed back through the tractor beams, creating a self-powering reaction. Until Tev figured a creative way to use the phaser couplings to break the circuit, we were in real trouble."

Gold studied her. "So at the time there was no way you could have known about these cables?"

"They didn't register on our sensors until the energy from the tractor beams charged them up."

"And this wasn't caused by our new tractor array?"

"No. In fact, if the system hadn't been so robust, and if the emitters hadn't been tied in to the main spar, we likely would have had a major structural failure almost immediately."

"What do we know about this ship?"

"Well," said Gomez, "it has fusion impulse engines augmented with a time-space driver coil. They don't have warp drive, but were clearly close to developing it. Pattie has been studying their systems based on the limited data so far."

The Nasat waved her antennae. The attention-getting gesture was like a human making a polite cough. "This ship is most interesting in many ways. As Commander Gomez states, the people who built this appear to have advanced nearly to the point of developing warp drive. Their materials science is quite advanced, in terms of alloys and superconductors. They might possibly have a thing or two to teach us, but in other ways the ship is almost startlingly crude. To all indications, the ship was built entirely without standardized or prefabricated parts. Most of what we can see seems to have been handcrafted, with parts fabricated in position. It's more appropriate to compare it to nests made by insectoids using wax, paper, or webbing."

"Could this be a nest created by nonsentient life native to deep space?" Gold asked.

Bart Faulwell waved a hand. "I can answer that, Captain."

Pattie nodded to Faulwell, and settled back into her custom-fitted chair.

Faulwell said, “We’ve imaged over six hundred examples of glyphs on the hull. They appear to be warning or instruction placards. I can even make good guesses on what some of it means, based on the adjacent ports and mechanisms. Not enough to translate the language, but it’s a start.” He scratched his beard thoughtfully. “Every last bit of writing is oriented in one direction relative to the ring. It’s as though the ring was assembled in a gravity well, lying on its side, and the writing was intended only for use in that orientation.”

Gold turned to Lense. “Any signs of life?”

Lense shrugged. “Our sensors don’t pick up any life-forms, or any residue consistent with bodies, though that isn’t conclusive. We’re not even sure we know what we’re looking for. At floor level, the ship’s spin is creating an artificial equivalent of approximately fourteen standard gravities. There’s all kinds of radioactivity and free radon in the air, which would quickly be toxic to most carbon-based life-forms. The atmosphere is mostly inert gases at about three hundred kilopascals. It won’t support any respiratory process we understand. Or maybe they didn’t use it for respiration at all. It could be a fire-suppression mixture, or a coolant.”

“Exotic life-forms then?”

“Very. I worked on silicon-based life-forms at the Academy, and I’ve studied Horta anatomy. They all seem tame compared to whatever built that ship.”

Gold sighed. “I’m under a great deal of pressure to destroy this ship.”

Stevens sat up in his chair, as though this was the moment he’d been waiting for all day. “I’ve been working on that, sir. Phasers are down for at least two days, and I doubt we can destroy it with photon torpedoes. In an explosion, the ring will fragment before it can vaporize, and the energy stored in the spinning makes it highly unpredictable. We’ll send large chunks sailing off in random directions.

“Our best bet is multiple fusion detonation charges individually placed around the ring. To be most effective, they’ll need to be placed on the outside rim—”

Gold held up a hand. He looked at his first officer. “What do you have to say about this, Gomez?”

Gomez considered for a moment before answering, licking her lips, which suddenly felt as dry as her throat. “Pattie believes the ship is undamaged and operational, or nearly so. The crew may have died, or abandoned ship for some reason, but the ship itself seems sound.” She paused, choosing her words carefully. This was her opportunity to state her case. She had considered the options, and she knew what she had to say. “There’s an easy way to do this, and a right way. Blowing it up is the easy way. If we can get inside it, figure out the controls, power up the impulse engines, we can steer it away from the planet. That’s the right way.” She swallowed hard, her throat dry, and continued. “Then we can study it at our leisure, and it’s an artifact worth studying. We can retrace its course, or maybe even access its onboard computers. It might lead us to a first-contact situation. At the very least, this thing is a treasure trove of metals that are rare in this system. The Lokra might well want an opportunity to salvage it for themselves. That’s how I’d do it, sir. That’s the S.C.E. way.”

Gomez realized Gold was smiling at her, with that fatherly “that’s my girl” smile he sometimes got when he was especially pleased.

She blinked in surprise. What have I done now?

She was still wondering after Gold had excused himself and left. The dressing down she'd been expecting had never come, and she felt guilty about it. It left her even more determined to get things right this time. She focused her attention on her crew and the problem at hand.

“People, we’ve got a lot to do, and very little time to do it. I’m going to need two hundred percent effort. We need to board that ship, survive there, work there. We need to figure it out, fire it up, and move it. We don’t have time for a fully formed plan, so I’m counting on you to work it out as we go.”

“We could use the experimental gravity suits,” said Stevens.

Gomez shook her head. “No. This isn’t actual gravitons, it’s the illusion of gravity created by centrifugal force.”

“Vectored inertia,” said Pattie, her shell making a dry rattling sound as she shifted in her specially designed chair. “We need suits with their own inertial dampers, like—” Pattie hesitated. After a moment, Gomez knew why. Duffy had gone to his death in a suit modified with—among other things—an inertial damper. It wasn’t something the survivors of Galvan VI liked to talk about.

Tev, who replaced Duffy, grunted in blissful obliviousness. “There are miniature IDF generators used to stabilize antimatter containment in our photon torpedoes. They can be adapted. But the shape and interior volume of a pressure suit is in constant flux. It will be challenging.”

Gomez nodded, for once grateful for Tev’s obtuseness. “You’re on it, Tev. We need suits for Stevens and me immediately, and a backup suit in case we get into trouble and need help.”

She turned to Pattie. “I’d like you there first, but you don’t have a pressure suit we can adapt. So I’m tapping Fabian,” she glanced at the tactical specialist, “as your eyes, ears, and hands on the mission. Tev, you will adapt suits for team members until we have everyone over there, if necessary. The order they come over depends on who we need most.”

Tev frowned. “With respect, Commander, I would be more valuable on the away team.”

“I need you to modify the suits, Tev. It’ll be complex and challenging, and if it isn’t done right, we’re going to die over there.” She paused for effect. “However, if you don’t think you’re up to—”

Tev made a little noise of disgust. “You’re right, of course.”

She smiled, remembering the miniature golf course yesterday. “Tap Bennett to help you. Cade’s done some creative stuff with inertial dampers. Let me know the moment those first three suits are ready. Pattie, work with Fabian. Figure out how we can safely beam on board and what we should look for when we get there. Elizabeth, Bart, Carol, we’re working with limited information and secondhand data, but I’ll need ongoing analysis from you all. I need to understand the ship’s crew, to figure out how to tell the ship’s helm controls from the captain’s toilet, and decode the interface once I find it.”

She smiled. The challenge, the pressure, the thrill of discovery. This was why she joined the S.C.E.

\* \* \*

Captain Gold sat in his ready room studying the local planetary survey. Something about the First Prime didn’t feel right. Despite the danger, he was far too insistent the derelict ship be destroyed. Gold sensed the First Prime was hiding something, and he was determined to find out what.

Reconstructing the ship's trajectory didn't point them to any of the local stars. That meant it had maneuvered under power since leaving its origin system.

As he followed the ship's path, it was apparent it had probably braked and maneuvered after entering this system, which made its current status as a ghost ship even more mysterious. Where was the crew? Why would they abandon an undamaged ship?

He did have one useful fact, the gravity the ship's spin was designed to simulate. Their survey had turned up a close-orbiting giant with the same surface gravity. Even more interesting, it was less than two light-years away, and rich in metals. There wasn't much more in the survey. A detailed analysis of the system had never been performed.

Gold leaned back in his chair and rubbed his chin. The ambassador had been right about another thing. The U.S.S. Norman Scott was operating in the area, and as it happened, the captain was a big fan of his wife's cooking. "Computer, open a subspace channel to Captain Huxter on the Norman Scott." It was time to call in a favor.

## Chapter 5

Gomez grunted as Pattie cinched the environmental suit tighter. "We're putting the da Vinci where?"

"Hold still," said Pattie, tugging at the closure on the rigid torso section until she was satisfied.

A few feet away, Transporter Chief Poynter and Stevens—who was already suited up—watched with amusement.

"As for the da Vinci, I think the human phrase is 'threading the needle.' We're going to take up station inside the ring. It minimizes the transporter range, and the hull is thinnest on the inside of the ring. It will simplify transporter lock and make our sensors more effective as well."

Gomez sighed. "I'm trusting you on this one, Pattie."

"Unless you'd rather we beamed you onto the hull inside the ring and let you try to phaser your way in, it seems to be the only way. The only hatches we've been able to identify are on the outside of the ring, don't seem to have airlocks, and open inward, which is just an insane way to design such a ship."

"Unless," said Gomez, "you never intended to be outside it, except in a gravity well. Most ancient spinning designs include a hub, with an airlock or docking point, at the center. These builders didn't want to experience null gravity. Pass that idea on to Elizabeth, would you?"

"Certainly," said Pattie. She made one last inspection of Fabian's suit.

The suits were an awkward-looking affair, cobbled together using a type-4M extravehicular work garment already designed for heavy gravity missions, though nothing like what they were expecting today. The type-4M incorporated linear motors that enhanced and supported the joints, normally allowing work in up to two standard gravities. To this, hung externally to the backpack, had been added a fusion power source, a polarized gravity source, and a miniature IDF generator. Tubular field-wave guides snaked



across the exterior of the suit and down the arms and legs like veins. They were in constant communication with Pattie, as their controller.

Gomez raised the control panel on her left forearm to the visor of her suit, and activated the IDF system. Her head swam as the field engulfed her, but the feeling quickly passed. "Okay, how do we test these?"

"Tev didn't have time to come up with a formal diagnostic," said Pattie. "I suggest you throw yourself against a wall."

Gomez stared at her.

"I'm serious," said Pattie. "Throw your shoulder against a bulkhead, the harder the better. And be careful, your sense of balance will be thrown off by rapid movements."

Gomez took a few quick steps and staggered, tripping over her own boots. After the first step her inner ear told her she wasn't moving. Her impact with the bulkhead was accidental, and completely unavoidable. Her arm hit the wall, cushioned by the thick suit, but there was no sense of deceleration. The sensation made her stomach turn over.

Pattie looked at her. "You did take your motion sickness pills, didn't you? Human regurgitation is unpleasant enough under the best of circumstances, but in a pressure suit—"

"We took our pills," said Gomez. "And we're going to need them."

"I'm going to go join the rest of the 'Greek chorus' in the engineering lab. Elizabeth, Bart, Carol, and I will be monitoring your communications and helmet cameras at all times. Talk to you over there." Pattie dropped from her bipedal form and scuttled out of the transporter room on all eight legs.

They stepped onto the transporter platform. Turning to Poynter, Gomez said, "Energize."

They were briefly enveloped in the blue shimmer of the transporter effect, and then darkness.

Should have expected that. She stood motionless for a moment to make sure the IDF system in her suit was functioning, then turned on her suit lights. Fabian did likewise.

"We're fine over here. Tell Tev the IDF system is working. Radiation is high, but within suit limits." She slowly turned, taking in their surroundings. The ship looked more like some kind of nest than a technological artifact, as Pattie had suggested. There were no straight lines or right angles, nor even strongly contrasting areas of color. Just light, and lots of shadow.

The interior surfaces were a slightly translucent reddish brown. The surfaces looked polished, like marble or wax. What was really interesting was the variety of textures. Every surface was veined, webbed, rippled, spiked, or textured in some way, floor to ceiling.

"Da Vinci," she said, "are the cameras working?"

"We've had to boost the receiver gain to maximum," said Bart, "but we're getting a decent picture now. Ah, Pattie just joined us."

"Pattie," said Gomez, "does any of this make more sense to you than it does to me?"

Gomez turned slowly, trying to take in the larger space this time, and give Pattie a good look. The interior of the tunnel was about thirty meters wide and seven meters tall at the center of the curved ceiling. It was one continuous space as far as she could see, without bulkheads, doors, or rooms. It curved up into the darkness in either direction with no indication that what lay beyond was any different.

Breaking up the space were large irregular shapes. They might be consoles, or machinery, or who-knew-what. They were all the same shade of rusty brown.

“Could somebody take readings using one of the medical tricorders I provided,” Lense asked, “and relay them back to the ship?”

Gomez hefted the tricorder, one of two hanging from her suit. Outside the volume of the suit, it wasn't subject to the inertial damping field. The normally lightweight piece of equipment felt like it was made of lead, and took two hands to lift comfortably. She grunted as she lifted it. As she scanned the area, she said, “Elizabeth, remember how much of a pain it was to be in EVA suits for all that time on the Shmoam-ag ship? Right now, I wish I was that comfortable.”

However, Lense seemed to be more interested in the scan. “This is amazing. Sonya, can you turn about ninety degrees to your left?”

Gomez turned slowly, taking small steps, until she faced the outside wall of the ring. About three meters ahead of her was a large reddish lump, about the size of a shuttlepod. It differed from its surroundings because some of its surfaces were curved panels, relatively smooth and unmarked compared to most of the rest of the ship.

She stepped toward it. Her extended foot seemed to twist to the right, pulling her off balance. She nearly stumbled, and Fabian reached out to steady her.

“Thanks,” she said. “The IDF doesn't entirely compensate for the Coriolis effect. We need to be careful moving at right angles to the direction of spin. Take baby steps.”

Heeding her own advice, she shuffled toward the object, but she still felt dizzy.

“These suits still need a little work, Tev,” she muttered, reaching out and leaning against the object of Lense's interest. A large, tree-trunk-like projection emerged from the object, made a right angle turn, and met up with the floor. It made a convenient seat.

Fabian watched her with concern, but didn't rush to help, lest he have his own problems. Through the suit's speakers, she heard him ask, “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine. Just dizzy. I don't know if you've ever been sailing, but this is going to be like getting your sea legs, only worse. Okay, Elizabeth, what's so interesting?”

“The crew never left. There are bodies on the ship. I'm picking up twenty-three, and there may be more around the ring out of tricorder range. Their construction is silicon-based, but the metabolism isn't entirely chemically-based. I'm still figuring it out.”

Gomez looked around. She didn't see anything that looked like a sentient being. “Are any of these bodies close to us?”

“I think,” said the doctor, “that you're sitting on one.”

\* \* \*

Gold watched the ambassador's face on the screen, looking for any sign of deception. "Alfredo, are you sure the Lokra are being entirely truthful about this derelict?"

"What do you mean? How would they even know anything about it? It's an alien ship from outside their system."

"That's right, and we have a fair guess as to what planet it came from. The gravity and atmospheric pressure of a giant planet in a nearby system are consistent with the derelict. The Norman Scott scanned the planet. It's overrun with self-replicating mining machines, and those machines seem to have originated with the Lokra."

Goveia pursed his narrow lips and waved a long-fingered hand in dismissal. "Those mining machines were launched well before the Breen occupation. They were part of a long-term plan to establish a reliable metal supply. Once they've mined enough materials and duplicated themselves, they'll build cargo ships and send the metal back to the Lokra. It will take decades for the first metal to arrive, but once the flow starts, it won't stop."

"Don't you find that suspicious?"

"Did the Norman Scott find the civilization that sent the ship?"

"No, nor any ruins either. We're not entirely sure what we're looking for. The derelict was built by exotic, silicon-based life-forms of some sort."

"Who may have originated somewhere else. Maybe they were only exploring your giant planet, and moved on to this system, experiencing some mishap on the way."

Gold considered Goveia's argument. He was certain it was wrong, but he didn't want to provoke a confrontation. Not until he knew more. "That's possible, I suppose, but I have to rule out all the possibilities. Ambassador, are you sure the Lokra don't have any space-based weapons? Perhaps something left by the Breen?"

Goveia laughed, a harsh, brittle sound. "Captain, you already have the answer. The S.C.E. swept out all Breen weapons and military technology immediately after the Breen withdrew. All that's left is an orbiting subspace communications relay that we handed over to the Lokra. It has no weapons capability, and I assure you the Lokra have no weapons of their own. Whatever happened to that ship, they had nothing to do with it."

Goveia smiled with his mouth, but not his eyes. They had last encountered each other on Vulcan when Gold was captain of the U.S.S. Progress, and back then he had come across to Gold as a man who was confident of his assessments, and who disliked anyone who questioned his authority. The look on his face showed that that several-year-old assessment still held true.

Gold nodded reluctantly. "I'll take your word for that at the moment, Ambassador, but our investigation of the derelict is ongoing. My crew is making progress on powering up the impulse drive. We hope to divert it to a safe course shortly."

The ambassador frowned. "I certainly hope so. The First Prime is impatient with my assurances, and I

don't blame him after what's happened so far. Don't let scientific curiosity lead to the death of millions, Captain. Goveia out."

\* \* \*

Gomez found the spinship a much more agreeable place to work once they installed work lights. They were set every few meters along a seventy-meter section of tube they thought to be the control room, and along another forty-meter section they guessed corresponded to engineering.

When he saw the first images of the illuminated control room, Captain Gold described it as looking like "an exhibition of abstract art staged in the Holland Tunnel."

The tunnel analogy was somewhat lost on her, though she gathered it was a New York reference. Certainly the interior did look like a tunnel, razor straight and curving upward out of sight in either direction; and there was a gallery-like feel to the objects scattered there.

They were all massive. Some of them were control interfaces, consoles of sorts. Others were display devices. Lense assured them that one five-meter-wide, dome-shaped object was a food dispenser. Many more were mysteries, and would remain so unless they proved to be necessary in maneuvering the spinship.

Even the alien corpses, too large and massive to move, had a sculptural quality to them. Their surfaces were dry and rock-hard, seemingly unaffected by decay or mummification. Gomez had no idea what one of the living creatures looked like normally, but it was possible they had not deteriorated at all.

Their headless beetle bodies were belly-down on the floor, each set of eight massive, trunklike legs arrayed at the ready. They looked to Gomez as though they might at any moment stand up and scurry away. Their deaths were as mysterious as what happened to their ship.

Despite Gold's colorful metaphor, to those actually working there it was more like some sort of giant fun house, one of those "vortex spots" that sprung up as tourist attractions on every backwater planet, where sloping land, optical illusions, and ingeniously distorted architecture made people believe the laws of physics had somehow gone haywire.

The whole team was there now except Pattie, who, much to her frustration, was stuck on the *Vinci*, and Tev. Despite having a functional suit, he had been ordered to remain on the ship to coordinate the data and to act as their backup in case of an emergency.

They adapted quickly to working in their peculiar environment. Tiny, shuffling steps and long detours avoided the full force of the Coriolis effect. If there had been time to watch, the effect would have been comical.

Even moderate-size objects required heavy mechanical assistance to move. They'd brought along a variety of carts, jacks, and electric lifts to assist in their work, all crude but effective.

Gomez shuffled over to one of the consoles, a wedge-shaped structure four meters long and taller than her head, where Fabian and Bart were carrying on a heated three-way conversation with Pattie back on the ship. "How's it going? Any luck with the controls?"

Stevens frowned through his faceplate. "That's the problem. We've identified the key systems, but we can't access them in any but the crudest way. Near as Solomon can determine, there are no computers

of any real sophistication on the ship, nor are there controls in the typical sense. We're manually shorting circuits to activate things."

She pointed at the console. "Then what's this?"

"Think of it as an interface port," said Soloman. She turned to see him and Lense a few meters away, in front of the nearest alien corpse. "To understand the ship, we have to understand the crew. They don't just look like part of their ship's technology, they are part of it. The most important part."

Gomez shook her head in puzzlement. Alien biology wasn't her strong suit. "Explain."

Lense pointed at the front of the corpse. There was no head, but there was a flat area on the front of the body that seemed to be a face of sorts. There were three sets of eyes, stacked vertically, interspersed with pairs of translucent organs and small limbs that might have been external feeding organs, except the mouth was far below, almost on the bottom of the body.

"We've learned quite a lot about these guys. The bodies are made of silicon molecules, but it isn't a conventional silicon life-form, if that isn't an oxymoron. The metabolism is complex, and has chemical, electrical, and nuclear-thermal components. They don't breathe, but they need some atmospheric pressure for health, and helium is circulated through the body to provide cooling. Notice the horizontal banding all through the body? I'm calling the species 'Strata,' like rock strata. The bodies are built up in layers, like sedimentary rock, or for that matter, like isolinear chips."

"The ship," interjected Soloman, "doesn't have complex computers because the Strata are complex electro-chemical computers, though of natural origin. Each Strata is easily the equal of some of your early duotronic computers."

Lense pointed at the creature's black, lidless eyes, then the nearby console. "These lower two sets of eyes correspond to the four windows in the front of the console unit. They're visual input ports of some kind. These six patches on the console correspond to these feeler organs above the eyes." Lense ran her fingers over the translucent projections between the sets of eyes. "These 'feelers' are densely connected to the nervous system. They may have evolved to allow separate Strata to interface their brains, a kind of electronic mind-meld. But in this case, they allow the Strata's nervous system to connect directly to the ship's systems."

Gomez looked at the creature's face, then the console. Now that she knew what she was looking at, the connection was obvious. "Crud. So what you're saying is that to fly the ship, we're going to have to build an artificial Strata?"

"It's possible," said Soloman, gesturing at the computer implant grafted into the side of his bald head, "that we could design an interface that would allow me to control the ship through my own access port. It would be a complex task, though, and might entail some risk on my part. I'm willing to attempt it."

Gomez frowned. "I'm not so sure I am. Let's look for alternatives first." She turned to Lense. "Elizabeth, would it help if we tried beaming one of these corpses back to the ship for an autopsy?"

Lense glanced at Soloman and licked her lips. "I'm sure I could learn a lot, but I'm reluctant to do so."

"Why?"

"We—that is, Soloman and I—" She faltered. "It's about what happened to them. We believe there may

have been an electromagnetic pulse. It would instantly disrupt their electronic systems, the way an otherwise nonfatal electric shock can stop the human heart. They just stopped, you see—”

“Their memory,” said Soloman, “is very computer-like as well, nonvolatile computer memory.”

Gomez had an idea where this was going, and she wasn’t sure she liked it. “You’re saying their memories are intact, that we might be able to read their minds?”

“Yes,” said Lense, “I suppose that’s so, but what we really mean is that—”

“Every memory, every component of their personality, the very last thought they had before their ‘death,’ is in there, and presumably intact.” Soloman completed her sentence. “There are no decay organisms here to degrade the bodies, and their unique metabolism doesn’t cause the kind of breakdown you see in most organic species. They’re absolutely, perfectly preserved. They’re not dead so much as just—shut down.”

Gomez looked at Soloman. “Go ahead. Say it.”

And the little computer expert did. “They’ve crashed, and we think we can reboot them.”

## Chapter 6

Ambassador Goveia scowled, rubbing the narrow bridge of his nose. “You’re telling me, Captain, that there are survivors on this derelict?”

Gold sighed. “Not survivors, precisely. Their life processes have ceased. My crew believes they can be resuscitated.”

“Captain, these beings could have died years, even centuries ago. It seems unlikely even the famed S.C.E. can bring back the dead. It’s not even really your area of expertise. Besides, there are how many—”

“Forty-one.”

“Forty-one corpses on that ship. That has to be weighed against the lives of millions of Lokra.” Goveia’s voice wavered slightly, as though asking for understanding, or sympathy.

“If the crew can be revived, their ship is functional and can be flown to a safe trajectory that will bypass the planet. There’s ample time.”

“And if this madness fails?” There was no pleading this time.

“Then we’ll be forced to consider other options.”

Goveia frowned. “I suggest you not wait that long. I’m expecting a call back at any moment from your Captain Scott at Starfleet Command.” He somehow managed to look down his thin nose, without moving. “If I have to go over your head to resolve this situation, Captain, I will.”

The screen on Gold's desk blanked.

Gold's jaw tightened with frustration. His instincts told him the Lokra were hiding something. They also told him Goveia was a good but stubborn man who was too close to the situation to be objective.

If he was going to uncover the truth, it would require going around the ambassador, not through him.

Almost immediately there was another incoming subspace communication. It was Captain Huxter on the Norman Scott.

"David, I thought you should know I just heard from Ambassador Goveia."

"As it happens, I just talked with him myself."

Huxter frowned. "Then he told you we're on the way?"

"No. No, he left out that piece of information."

"Sorry, David. I just ran out of excuses." Then he grinned. "But at our current speed of warp one, we'll be there in about one and a half years."

Gold returned his grin. "It won't take the ambassador that long to start wondering where you are."

"I'm sure. But it will buy you a little time, and I'm starting to think your suspicions are justified. My science officer found something in the sensor logs from that giant planet."

Gold instantly sobered. "Something you didn't see during your initial sweep?"

Huxter's grin faded. "We didn't know what we were looking for. I'm sorry it took this long to find it. Those mining machines have messed up the surface pretty badly in spots. We found a planetwide network of crude roads designed for foot or possibly cart traffic, simple dwellings made of stone and metal, and what seem to be mines and quarries. Those are the sites most disturbed by the Lokra mining machines, though, so it's hard to be sure."

"But no signs of an advanced civilization?"

"That's where it gets strange. We found exactly one site with any signs of high technology, right on the equator. The miners nearly obliterated the site. We think there's a two-kilometer radio dish built into a natural depression, a radio telescope or a communications dish, or both. Right next to that is a large complex surrounded by primitive fortifications. There are quarries inside the fortifications; something big was built there that isn't there now. There's a ring-shaped scar about half a kilometer in diameter with radiation residue consistent with fusion rocket exhaust."

"That fits our spinship, but it doesn't make any sense."

"Yeah. How does a civilization barely out of the Stone Age build a large radio dish overnight, and then follow up with an interstellar spacecraft?"

"Perhaps," said Gold, "a better question is, why?"

\* \* \*

Gomez monitored the exchange between Stevens and Lense from a few meters away. She wondered if she would have to step in. They had worked round the clock for two days in the grueling conditions of the spinship, and tempers were short.

Fabian waved his arms. "You want me to start spinning the ship back up? It took Pattie and me a day and a half to figure out how to steer and fire the thruster nozzles to spin the ship down!"

"Well," Elizabeth replied, "I'm sure you learned a great deal. We may be able to apply it elsewhere, but I'd suggest you turn them back around now, and return the ship to its original spin. The artificial gravity is down to what, twelve standard gravities? We'll hardly notice the difference."

"That's not the point."

"That's exactly the point. These are high-gravity organisms, and they need that gravity to survive. It holds the layers of their bodies together. If I resuscitate them in anything less than ten g's, the pressure of their own circulatory system will blow them apart. Anything less than a full fourteen carries risk."

Fabian looked doubtful.

"Look," said Lense, "you've checked over every inch of this ship's structure. There are no airlocks, no docking hub, no pressure suits. The Strata knew if they left their ship in flight they'd die instantly. They didn't build parts they could never use."

Sighing and turning away, Fabian said, "You heard her, Pattie. Let's get to work. Have Laura beam me across the ship to the engineering section."

In a moment he disappeared in a blue shimmer of lights. Moving on the ship was so difficult, it was easier to beam point to point if you were traveling more than twenty meters or so.

Gomez shuffled over and examined the Strata body Lense and Soloman were working on. It was connected to a web of cables and wires that snaked off along the floor in both directions, and injection pumps marked with radiation warning symbols hung off the body at several points.

Lense saw her dismayed expression. "Did I give the impression that this was going to be simple?" She grinned slightly. "Okay, so maybe I did. A little. It isn't simple. It's not like applying a defibrillator to a humanoid heart or administering CPR. We have to restart both the body systems and the brain at the same time. I can electrically stimulate most of the body systems, and injections of radioactive isotopes will act like adrenaline in a human patient. But the brain is Soloman's bailiwick."

Soloman stood on a low work platform where he could reach a row of electrical connections along the Strata's body. "The Strata brain isn't centralized. It occupies a stack of sixteen thin body layers. Because it's physically distributed, it depends on timing pulses to keep the various processing and memory elements in sync. We need external pulses to restart the brain. It's a very delicate operation. If the procedure fails, this will probably be why."

"But if it doesn't work," said Gomez, "they're no worse off than they were before, right? We can try again?"

Soloman and Dr. Lense exchanged a glance that raised the hair at the back of Gomez's neck.



“What aren’t you telling me?”

Lense looked grim. “We decided our best odds are an all-or-nothing approach. That’s why the bodies are all connected with these wires. We’ve wired them in parallel. We plan to revive all forty-one Strata at the same time.”

Gomez blinked in surprise. “Why didn’t anyone run this by me first?”

Lense shrugged. “We’ve been working fast, and you’ve had a lot on your plate. We haven’t had time until now.” Lense hurried on, before Gomez could protest. “I know it sounds risky, but the Strata evolved to link electrically. This is our master for the circuit,” she gestured at the elephantine body they were working on. “If we get one brain started, it will provide the external pulses for the other forty, through the amplified connections we’ve made. If we bring this big guy back, the rest will follow. But if we do them individually, while we’d have forty-one chances to get it right, we’d also have forty-one chances for something to go wrong.”

Gomez looked at the cables snaking from this body to the next one, ten meters away. “And if it goes wrong?”

“Once we start the process,” said Soloman, “we won’t be able to stop. If things don’t go as planned, the Strata’s memories will be scrambled, even erased. We might be able to bring back their bodies, but their minds would be gone.”

Gomez sighed. The first things that came into her head was that Lense had recently assured a young boy that she could provide a cure for a vicious disease that was, in fact, beyond her means, and that Soloman’s consistent refrain since his bond-mate 111 had died last year was that he was in many ways inferior as a single Bynar.

But she banished those thoughts. Lense was tops in her field, and Gomez herself was the first to tell Soloman he was being silly whenever he decried his own abilities. Besides which, Soloman himself hadn’t been singing that refrain very much since their mission to Venus.

Trust your people.

On the other hand, the Strata didn’t quite fit in anyone’s field, engineering or medical. She could only hope for the best. “How long till you can do it?”

“Within the hour. As soon as Fabian and Pattie have the spinship back up to the proper rotation, we’ll be good to go.”

\* \* \*

Corsi stepped out of the security office into the corridor, and jumped as she nearly ran head-on into Fabian. He impulsively leaned over and gave her a quick kiss. She frowned and took a step back, looking around to make sure none of her security people had seen them. “Could we have a little professionalism here? I’m on duty.”

He grinned. His eyes looked red, and he needed a shave and a shower. “I thought you’d be glad to see me. I’ve hardly been off the spinship in days.” He stretched, hopped, and to her surprise, put out his arms and did a little pirouette in the hallway. “You’ve got no idea how good it feels to be out of that suit and back in a real gravity field, where you can move like a normal human being.”

“I am. I just wasn’t expecting you, is all. Should I see if I can get someone to cover for me for a while?”

“No time. I’ve got to go consult with Captain Gold. That’s why I’m back. The captain requested me, and Tev was more than happy to take my place for a while. He’s been dying to get over there. The captain’s taken a sudden interest in electromagnetic pulse weapons, in particular how to defend an unshielded, unhardened ship against them. Something about an ionized plasma shield. I’m going to have to recite from literature I haven’t even thought about in years.” He grinned. “It’ll be fun. You should come.”

“Pass. There must be something else I have to do.”

Fabian started walking away backward, still talking. “Sure you won’t come with me?”

“Sure,” she said. “I think I’ll go work out.” She wiggled her shoulders. “I’ve been sitting for far too long.”

\* \* \*

Tev beamed into the spinship’s control room, making a point-to-point transfer from the engineering section. “We are at seven-point-one RPM,” he reported, “and you have fourteen standard gravities at deck level. You may proceed when ready.”

A temporary Starfleet-issue console had been set up to control and monitor the revival process. It looked incongruous, tiny next to the massive Strata devices and the inert bodies of the Strata themselves. Lense and Soloman worked intently, as Gomez looked on.

Gomez turned to Tev. “I thought you would stay in engineering.”

“I didn’t want to miss this. Besides, if the doctor succeeds, the Strata should quickly be able to tend to their own ship.”

“Well,” said Lense, “here goes nothing. I’m starting the primary timing pulses—now—with a low-level current to preheat the circulatory system.”

Lense and Soloman tapped at the console. A small screen displayed a flat, wireframe grid. The image was labeled BRAIN ACTIVITY, but the grid wasn’t very active. One corner pulsed several times a second, with the timing impulse.

Then there was the smallest change. A slow rolling wave crossed the grid from one side to the other, taking several seconds in the process.

“We’re committed,” said Lense. “Bringing up nervous system base current two points. Soloman, let’s go for phase two.”

\* \* \*

Fabian sat in front of the captain’s desk in the ready room where he’d been for nearly an hour. Once again, the old man had surprised him, asking a series of insightful and probing questions about EMP defense strategies. Engineering might not have been Gold’s specialty, but he was a quick study. The man’s grand-fatherly demeanor made you forget the razor-sharp mind behind it.

Gold had found a reference in the Starfleet archives to a comet that had been vaporized by phaser fire and ionized to temporarily shield a space station against an EMP attack. It was a workable solution, except for the lack of a convenient comet.

“Begging your pardon, Captain, but I assume you don’t want this information just out of curiosity. Where are you expecting an EMP attack to come from?”

“I’m still trying to figure that out. I’m certain there was an intentional EMP attack on the spinship. If it happened once, it could happen again. Our shields can’t protect something as large as the spinship, so I’m looking for alternatives.”

The intercom beeped, followed by Shabalala’s voice. “Captain, you’ve got an incoming call from Ambassador Goveia.”

Gold scowled. “He’s probably figured out why the Norman Scott has been ‘delayed’ and plans to give me an earful.”

Stevens rose, but Gold motioned him back into his seat. “This shouldn’t take too long.”

He turned to face his desktop viewer. “Pipe it in here, Shabalala.”

But the man on the screen didn’t look angry to Fabian. He look contrite, and just a little frantic. “Captain, I just heard from the Second Prime. He didn’t support the action. There was great debate among the Lokra. I knew there was division in the government, but I assure you I had no idea—”

Gold stood, leaning forward on his desk. “Quickly,” he said. “What happened?”

“The Breen communications relay. They’re going to fire an electromagnetic pulse.”

“When?”

“They were already turning the array. It may have fired by now.”

Gold bolted through the bridge doors, with Fabian right on his heels. “Wong, full impulse!” He glanced at Fabian. “That array is six light-minutes away,” Gold said as he made for his chair. “We’ve got something less than that to create and deploy a plasma shield between it and the spinship. Find me the best spot, and we’ll figure the rest on the way.”

\* \* \*

Lense stared so intently at the brain activity monitor display, Gomez thought it might burst into flame from the power of her attention. Other than an occasional ripple and the artificial timing pulses, there was nothing.

The doctor ventured a sidelong glance through her faceplate at Gomez. “What’s the body temperature?”

Gomez checked the readings. “Up twenty degrees from the last reading.”

Lense grunted. “Which is either approaching normal, or a deadly fever, depending on which, if either, of my estimates of normal body temperature for the Strata is correct.”

“That’s strange,” said Tev.

“Please, not strange,” said Gomez. “Right now almost any ‘strange’ is bound to be bad.”

“I suspect so,” said Tev, who was scanning upward with his tricorder. “The da Vinci just left the ring at maximum impulse. No voice communications. I’m getting a low-speed data stream on the tricorder, probably all they could punch through the hull once they left position. It says,” he made an unhappy snuffle, “prepare for EMP. Going to intercept.”

Gomez pounded her fist against the console. “The captain was right! We were so close. We’re going to bring them back just so they can be killed again.”

“Well, good news, then,” said Lense, her voice grim, “this doesn’t seem to be working anyway.”

## Chapter

# 7

The da Vinci jumped to warp as soon as Stevens provided the coordinates, then dropped back to impulse after a few seconds. The bridge crew responded without question, executing the orders with precision.

“Tell me we have phasers,” Gold said to Shabalala. There had been no time to check. Without the phasers, the plan wouldn’t work.

“Engineering says they should be ready, but there wasn’t time for diagnostics or pressure testing. We could blow an EPS manifold or the coolant system.”

“No choice,” said Gold. “We’ll try it. Red alert.”

“Aye,” said Shabalala. “Red alert.”

The bridge went to emergency lighting, and the warning klaxon sounded.

“I’ve routed the deuterium tanks and life support reserves to the Bussard intakes,” said Stevens. “I’m blowing them out the purge vents. Just guessing about the mix, but—” On the main viewer, clouds of gas jetted forward from the da Vinci’s warp nacelles. Turning to Shabalala, Stevens said, “Tony, set phasers for widest dispersal, maximum power, and fire when ready.”

“Firing.”

The phasers lanced out, not in a beam, but in a broad fan that blanketed the expanding cloud of gas and caused it to explode violently outward.

Stevens watched the screen. Faster.

Then the failure warnings appeared on the phaser systems.

\* \* \*

Corsi had just stepped off the turbolift on deck three when the red alert sounded. She heard the main

phasers fire. She halted in her tracks, a few steps from the small bay that held the exercise equipment.

She stared up into nothingness, as though she could see through the hull and identify the unexpected threat. “What the hell is going on?”

“Warning,” said the computer, “phaser coolant leak. Manifold rupture imminent. Evacuate deck three immediately.”

T’Mandra, Makk Vinx, and Andrew Angelopoulos were on duty, and she trusted them to handle the evac.

Then she realized that the phasers were still firing. Why don’t they cease fire? That manifold is going to blow.

In theory, the safety systems should have already shut them down, which meant someone had overridden them. Only one person knew phasers well enough to do that during a live firing.

Fabian! He’d have a damned good reason, and she knew a way to help.

At the end of the corridor was a manual override panel for the coolant system. If she could vent the coolant into space, it would buy them a few more seconds of phaser fire before thermal shutdown. It might prevent the manifold rupture.

They’d be days getting the phasers back online, but Fabian had to know that already.

She opened an emergency panel and pulled a breathing hood over her head, then charged into the corrosive clouds of phaser coolant.

\* \* \*

Stevens studied the sensor readings. “Cloud diameter seven kilometers and expanding. Gas ionization looks good, but I don’t know if the density is high enough.” He shook his head. “This is all guesswork. If the phasers will just hold out a little longer.”

\* \* \*

The coolant burned Corsi’s ungloved hands and made the emergency vent handle slippery. She gritted her teeth, ignoring the pain, and yanked the handle with all her strength.

There was a shriek as gas began to vent into space. The flow of gas into the corridor stopped momentarily.

Metal groaned behind the panel. The entire assembly blew off the wall, and slammed Corsi against the far side of the corridor.

She lay on the deck, stunned. Her thoughts cleared, and she realized the manifold had ruptured. With the manual vent open, pressure rapidly equalized, then reversed.

Clouds of phaser coolant were sucked out through the damaged manifold into space. Good.

Her ears popped, and she realized the ship’s atmosphere was being sucked out as well. She struggled to move, her legs rubbery and weak.

T'Mandra appeared, grabbed her by the arm, and dragged her down the corridor. The Vulcan woman wasn't wearing a hood, but most of the coolant had been swept away already, along with much of the air.

She helped all she could, kicking her way along. They passed a corridor brace. T'Mandra pressed a button on the wall panel. An emergency force field sealed the corridor.

Corsi rolled over and struggled to her knees.

She tugged off the hood and looked up at T'Mandra. "Thanks for the assist."

\* \* \*

On the viewscreen, the cloud of gas flared for an instant.

Gold looked at Stevens. "Was that—?"

Stevens nodded. "The EMP. We reduced the intensity, but—" He studied the panel and shook his head. "The density wasn't high enough. We didn't stop it completely."

"Let's hope it was enough," said Gold. "It was all we could do."

\* \* \*

Lense's gloved hands clenched into fists. Gomez could see the tension in her straining muscles and hear it in her rapid breathing. Clearly, she was losing hope. "There's nothing else we can—"

The work lights flickered and all the displays on the console went momentarily haywire. "Damn," said Lense, "it must be the pulse."

Tev stepped up and tapped at the console. "Our equipment is shielded. The biosensors need a moment to reset." The brain monitor display had gone from a gentle wave to a brief dance of static, then back to flatline. "There," said Tev, "that should do it."

The sensor relays clicked over, and the monitor came back to life. Not with noise or the simple beat of the timing pulses, but with a clearly ordered pattern of activity.

Soloman pressed a control and a series of lights on the panel went dark. "I'm discontinuing the external timing pulses."

"We've got a steady rhythm! Respiration has started! Body temperature is stabilizing!" Lense's voice shook with relief.

"Timing pulses are being passed to the other Strata," said Soloman. "They're all coming back."

They all jumped, as a leg on the nearest Strata kicked, the torso's thick limb hammering against the deck. It was just as well helium didn't transmit sound well, or they'd all be deaf.

The six lidless eyes were already open, but the light-colored patches above each eye began to glow brightly, casting beams around the room.

“Strata,” said Gomez, “have built-in spotlights.”

The other legs began to move. The sound was like a slow motion rock slide as the Strata pulled its legs under its body and scrambled to its feet, its belly abruptly rising two meters off the deck.

The huge creature loomed over them for a moment, then began to spin in place. The motion yanked free all the cables and devices attached to its body.

It stopped, all six eyes suddenly intent, studying them.

They could hear more noise in the distance. The deck vibrated like an approaching stampede, which it might well be. The nearer Strata scuttled toward them and stopped just a few meters away.

“Elizabeth,” said Gomez, her heart racing, “what was your plan for dealing with forty-one multiton, radioactive rock creatures when they woke up, possibly disoriented, possibly pissed off?”

“I was going to beam us out until they had a chance to calm down and we could try to communicate.”

More Strata appeared from both directions, rumbling up until the four crewpeople were surrounded by a looming wall of rock creatures.

“What,” said Gomez, “was your backup plan?”

## Chapter 8

The damage control party, dressed in full protective clothing, stepped through the force fields to repair the leak. One—Corsi recognized the chief engineer, Lieutenant Nancy Conlon, through the faceplate of her protective suit—stopped to assist the injured.

Corsi’s hands were red and raw, and though her uniform had provided some protection, her whole body itched. She had a lump on the back of her head, and every muscle in her body ached, but nothing critical was damaged.

Dantas Falcão, the medical technician, approached with a tricorder, and Corsi tried to wave her away. All she wanted right now was to get back to her quarters and scrub every square inch of her skin.

Thanks to T’Mandra, today wasn’t the last day of her life. But it could have been. What regrets would she have had, in the few minutes she had left? And what should she do about it?

Fabian’s quick kiss outside the security office lingered in her memory. It was something she would have to think about.

\* \* \*

Gomez flinched as one of the Strata trotted past her at their usual breakneck speed. It took some getting used to, but the huge beings were amazingly coordinated, and completely aware of their surroundings. They never ran into each other, never bumped a wall or a console, and they hadn’t trampled any Starfleet personnel.

Yet.

Tev glanced over from the Starfleet console that still stood incongruously in the middle of the spinship's control room. "I can't believe what they've done in six hours. The ship is fully operational, they plotted a new course, learned my language, three human languages, and Bynar code. They are the most brilliant species I've ever encountered."

Gomez shook her head in amazement, as much at Tev's admission that someone other than himself was brilliant, as at the Strata's accomplishments. "Millennia of art, poetry, music, forms we can't even begin to understand. But no technology until the Lokra machines arrived, and they were forced to invent it."

One of the Strata charged straight at Gomez, stopping just a meter or so short of her.

"I'm sorry," Gomez said. "I haven't learned to tell individual Strata apart yet."

"I am Shipmaster Silverstreak, Commander Gomez. Our ship is now on course to fly around the Lokra sun and back into space. We have come far, but all we want is to go home."

"We could assist you, get you there more quickly. The Federation has technology..."

"During our long voyage, we came to understand, through thought and meditation, the mathematics of warp drive. We believe we could construct our own. But it is not necessary. Our lives are long. We do not experience time as you do. The trip back to our world will take as long as it will take." He was silent for a moment, feet moving just slightly, in a way that made the floor vibrate. "We are concerned, however. What will we find there?"

"We will remove the Lokra mining machines. But I'm afraid everything you left there is gone. Your towns and roads are destroyed, and we find no signs of other living Strata. I'm very sorry."

"They may be hidden deep underground," he said. "If not, we carry in our minds all that is needed to rebuild the Strata. We will gladly begin again. We need only our planet back."

"You seem very calm about it all, Shipmaster."

"I have talked with your Captain Gold. He was concerned we would be filled with an emotion you call anger. It is alien to us. He is concerned about a concept called revenge as well, but that too is alien to us. What is, is. The Strata will go on. It is our wish that the Lokra go on as well. They did not know what they were doing." He turned and shuffled away.

Tev stepped up next to Gomez. "Perhaps they didn't know in the beginning," said Tev, "but when they figured it out, they didn't correct the problem. And they tried to cover up their mistakes with murder. Twice. I would not be so forgiving."

"The Strata are good people, Tev."

He frowned at her. "And I'm not?"

\* \* \*

The conference room aboard the *Vinci* was empty of everyone but Gold and Goveia. Gold had summoned the ambassador to the ship, where they could speak privately.



Goveia was doing everything but making eye contact with Captain Gold. “Thank you for inviting me here to discuss our situation.” He sat on the edge of his chair, as though ready to flee at any moment.

Gold waited. It hadn’t been an invitation, but he would let that pass. For now.

“I’m deeply sorry, Captain. I wanted so badly to prepare the Lokra for Federation membership, I instilled all my hopes for the future in them. It clouded my judgment. Now it seems it will be a very long time before we’re ready to consider them, if ever.”

There was no arrogance in Goveia’s manner, and he appeared truly contrite. Gold nodded his understanding. “You only saw the good in them, Ambassador, and I’m sure there is good. Humans have a lot to atone for in our history too. Slavery, genocide, war, conquest. It wasn’t the mistakes in their past, it was their failure to admit their mistakes and try to correct them. Instead, they compounded the errors by trying to cover them up.”

Goveia shook his head. “All for nothing. The Strata just came to talk, just wanted peace and their world back. Such a waste.”

“Some good may yet come of this,” said Gold. “The Lokra may not be ready for Federation membership, but what about the Strata?”

Goveia made eye contact for the first time, and smiled sadly. “I have no doubt at this point that their application to join the Federation would be accepted. But from what you’ve told me, the greater question is, would they have us? The good news is, we’ll have the chance to ask. The Diplomatic Corps has transferred me from Lokra, effective immediately, and assigned me to talk to the Strata. And nobody’s scheduled to take my place here.”

\* \* \*

Gomez shuffled into her quarters, aching from days in an inertia suit, bone-tired. She wanted nothing more than to climb into her bunk and sleep for a week. “You have one recorded message waiting,” said the computer.

She groaned, made a right angle away from her bunk, and slumped into her desk chair. “Play message.”

Wayne Omthon’s face appeared on the viewer, but he didn’t look happy. “Look, Sonya, you don’t have to answer this. I knew you’d be busy. Maybe that’s why I called, knowing I could get away with a recording.” He smiled slightly. “I’m a terrible coward about rejection.” He glanced down and paused for a moment, apparently searching for words. “I just wanted to apologize. I’ve been coming across like some kind of space stalker, and I’ve put pressure on you. That was rude.” He looked back up, his pistachio-green face pale. “You’ll do things at your own pace, and I’ve got no right to have any expectations. But let me explain, and then I’ll give this up and move on.”

“Humans have this thing when somebody they love passes away. It creates issues. People talk about ‘getting over them,’ about ‘letting go.’ A new partner may resent the former relationship, even be jealous, while the survivor feels guilt for seeking a new relationship. These are aspects of my human heritage I don’t much care for. Green Orions have a philosophy I like better. They feel that true love, whether between friends or partners or life-mates—that’s forever. It doesn’t end because one partner dies. It doesn’t end because another partner comes along. It’s something to be respected and honored. And when a friend loves someone, and they die—to carry on those feelings, as lovers, or life-mates, or just as

friends, is to honor their memory. You're my friend, Sonya. Kieran was my friend, too. I want you to know that my feelings are honest, and everything I've done was with the greatest respect for both of you, and what you will always share." He shrugged. "That's all. I won't expect a reply, and I won't intrude again. But I hope that sometime, when you're ready, you'll give an old friend a call."

She stared at the blank viewer for a while. Suddenly she wasn't sleepy anymore. Almost of their own volition, her fingers called up a subspace link.

Wayne's face appeared on the screen, genuinely surprised. She smiled. It wasn't often she had him at a disadvantage.

"Hey, green guy," she said. "We've been busy saving the galaxy, and I've got some sleep to catch up on. But I just wanted you to know." She smiled. "You, me, someplace in the galaxy, real soon."

## About the Authors

J. STEVEN YORK & CHRISTINA F. YORK had nearly two decades of married life together before they dared to collaborate. When they—and the marriage—survived the experience, they decided it might be fun to do it again. Besides *Spin*, they have appeared together in *Mage Knight Collector's Guide #1* and the previous *S.C.E. eBook Enigma Ship*.

On his own, Steve has published multiple novels (most recently, *MechWarrior: Fortress of Lies*, Roc, 2004), novellas, short stories, and eBooks. He's written fiction for computer games and scripts for radio. He views his one nonfiction book as an aberration, as he considers himself first and foremost a storyteller, regardless of what form those stories take. He'd be happy scripting amusement park rides, as long as they had character and plot. He's also done collaborations with his friend Dean Wesley Smith.

Chris has published stories in three *Trek* anthologies (*Strange New Worlds*, *Strange New Worlds II*, and *New Frontier: No Limits*), and assorted other venues. Her second solo novel, *Dream House*, will be a hard-back release from Five Star in late 2004.

Chris has always lived on the West Coast, and Steve has lived most everywhere. The two met in Seattle, and eventually settled in a remote Federation outpost known as coastal Oregon. There they maintain their home and offices, under the supervision of two feline captains.

## Coming Next Month: **Star Trek™: S.C.E. #47** **Creative Couplings** **Book 1** **by Glenn Hauman** **& Aaron Rosenberg**

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