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#48:Creative Couplings Book 2 by Glenn Hauman & Aaron Rosenberg

#49:Small World by David Mack



## CREATIVE COUPLINGS

### Book 1

Glenn Hauman & Aaron Rosenberg



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# Chapter

## 1

U.S.S. Hyperion, main engineering

“Warning. Warp core failure imminent.”

The four engineers in the room glanced up from their routine tasks, startled. For an instant, no one moved as they stared at the flashing lights atop each console. Then they leapt into action.

“Taking the warp core offline,” one of them shouted, fingers dancing across the keyboard.

“Venting antimatter,” a second announced, activating a manual release lever and tugging it down.

“Running diagnostics on warp core,” the third called out, not even glancing up from his screen.

“Pulling the plug,” the fourth declared, tapping in a quick series of commands. When one of the others glanced at him, he grinned. “I mean, switching to backup power.” The lights flickered for an instant, then stabilized. “And killing the alarm.” The sirens and lights suddenly ended, restoring the previous quiet bustle.

“Not bad,” a fifth voice announced. It seemed to emanate from the warp core itself, as if that item had somehow developed sentience. “Good response time, reasonable reactions, though the diagnostics shouldn’t have been run until after the backup power took over. That way you can make sure a power spike won’t skew your results.”

“So we passed?” the third engineer asked, looking up at last.

The disembodied voice chuckled. “Passed? Hey kids, we’re just getting started—consider this a warm-up. Computer, continue program.”

The voice fell silent, and the four engineers glanced at one another.

“This could be tough,” one of them said, leaning back in her chair.

“Sure,” one of her colleagues said, “but isn’t that the point?”

The others nodded, and they all returned to their work, chatting occasionally without pausing in their tasks.

\* \* \*

“So, what do you think?”

Fabian Stevens glanced up from his padd, just in time to see one of the four engineers heading right toward him. He flinched involuntarily even as she unconsciously detoured around him. Grimacing at his own foolishness, he looked up at the man standing beside him. He hadn’t met Alex Sparks before yesterday, but the man certainly seemed competent, friendly—and almost as humorless as a Vulcan. He also seemed committed to his students, something Fabian wished his own teachers had felt toward him, all those years ago.

“Too early to tell much, really,” he replied finally. “The girl, what’s her name?”

“That’s Tanya, Tanya Sturtze.”

“Right, Tanya. She was the first to react, and taking the core offline was definitely the right move.”

“Tanya’s very focused,” Alex agreed.

“The other three did fine, though,” Fabian went on, continuing to type notes as he spoke. “The Vulcan—?”

“Santar.”

“Santar, he saw that the core was already being handled and went for the next item, the antimatter. The other two, the tiny blond girl and the tall young man—”

“Zoe and Malcolm.”

“—they took a second longer to react, but they still got the job done. Malcolm’s a little flippant, but as long as he does the work and his superiors don’t mind, it’s no big deal.” Fabian grinned. “I’ve been known to flip ants myself, from time to time.” His companion didn’t even crack a smile. Tough room, Fabian thought. He looked around again, watching the four students as they roamed engineering, or more accurately, the part of the holosuite that had been set aside as the engine room. They were oblivious to his and Alex’s presence, of course, and would be for the duration of the exam; the holodeck had been told to keep them invisible unless they specifically wanted to appear, and would reroute people and objects around them to maintain that illusion.

What are the others up to right now? Fabian found himself wondering. He thought about the rest of the crew, Gomez and Pattie and Soloman up on the *Vinci*, and envied them a little. This was a lot of fun, but the three of them were just kicking back and relaxing while the ship was in port.

Then he thought about what the captain was doing, and grinned. Anything was better than dealing with

that.

# Chapter

## 2

Captain Gold contemplated the phaser.

A marvelous invention, the handheld phaser. What sort of engineering wizardry could produce an item that could generate a nonthermal stunner that worked on almost any life-form with no major aftereffects and a thermal beam, useful for heating up rocks or cups of coffee when set on low and hot enough to cut through starship hulls on high and a deathray, leaving an unscorched corpse for relatives to weep over and a no-mess no-fuss hygieno-disintegrator, causing its victims to glow red and simply vanish, leaving behind no searing-hot clouds of remains, organic or otherwise?

He supposed that it had been created for occurrences just like this, when he had to efficiently deal with multiple annoyances in a variety of ways. His only question was whether he was going to be able to adjust settings fast enough before he was overcome.

First, there was the Klingon behind the wooden desk that sat at the center of the large room on the top floor of the Klingon embassy on Earth: Ambassador Lantar, charming as a shaved targ, and not all that dissimilar in appearance. He was not so much pushy as most Klingons were, but more oily, more solicitous. For some reason, this got under Gold's skin more. He was going on about the proper forms of protocol involved for a Klingon wedding, and how it was particularly crucial to follow all the parts of the ceremony, especially with such important people involved.

Gold was wondering how Lantar came to all his good press as a diplomat. He had come to the conclusion that all of his so-called confidence and firm hand in negotiations was actually pomposity; he simply expected to be heeded without question. How the Klingon Empire chose someone with an ego like a black hole to be ambassador to the Federation was beyond him. Gold desperately wanted to put the phaser on disintegrate for him, but he'd content himself with the scorchless corpse option. There would have to be a state funeral after all.

Standing to Lantar's left behind the desk was his son Khor. He was looking even more uncomfortable than usual for someone who was about to be married. He spent at least half of his time looking at his father, hoping to get some form of response out of him. Lantar studiously avoided looking at him, an act wholly in keeping with a diplomat trying to avoid any show of favoritism and completely wrong for a caring father. Gold thought that stunning him would be a mercy, but then he remembered that it was Khor's suggestion that a military wedding would satisfy the necessary honor involved, and that Captain Gold should perform it. He'd use the heat setting on him, make him suffer a bit.

Khor was spending much of the rest of his time trying to catch the eye of Esther Silver, his intended and Captain Gold's granddaughter, seated on the other side of Lantar's desk on Gold's right. Esther was having no part of Khor's ocular pleading. She was being the most argumentative with Lantar, compensating for her small stature with enough volume to be heard from orbit, astroacoustics be damned. She was insisting that she have a nice Jewish wedding. Moreover, that the wedding would be performed by Captain Gold's wife, Rabbi Rachel Gilman. Stun setting for her.

And then, seated to Gold's left, there was Rachel. Love of his life, fire of his loins, meaning of his very existence, quietly and firmly insisting that if she was going to be involved with the ceremony, the canons of

Jewish law had to be followed to the letter. Stun setting for her. Maybe. Then he'd have to change settings to fight his way out of the Klingon embassy, and then the court-martial for attacking Federation allies, and then—

“Captain Gold, are we boring you?”

The direct address snapped him out of his reverie. “No, Ambassador. I'm sorry—I was thinking on a matter of weaponry that's been giving meagita for some time, and I suddenly had an inspiration on how to deal with the problem, but it probably won't work.” Using the heat setting to cut a hole in the floor to escape wasn't going to work either, if Lantar had already noticed his attention wandering a bit.

“Captain, I must insist that you take this matter seriously! After all, you are being honored by Khor's request that you perform this ceremony, but you must perform the appropriate rituals to properly—”

“Just a moment, Lantar,” Esther said. “I keep telling you that some of the elements of a traditional Klingon wedding conflict with Jewish law—”

Khor snorted at just the wrong time.

“And what are you sniffing at, you big lummoX?” Esther fixed him with a stare that could shut down a warp core.

“How dare you speak to my son that way?”

“Father! I can—”

“Can what?” Lantar, Rachel, and Esther spoke almost simultaneously, and glared at one another even more viciously.

Oy, Gold thought. If they knocked heads any harder, the resulting implosion would suck all the air out of the room.

“The dignity of my House and the honor of the Klingon Empire must be maintained!” Lantar's skin was beginning to darken.

“I still don't see how having ice sculptures at the reception is a violation of your dignity,” Rachel said.

Lantar glared at Rachel. “If you think such frivolity has a place in a wedding, then clearly you do not understand the Klingon heart.”

“She understands the Klingon heart, Father. At least, she understands mine.”

Esther, in turn, glared at her fiancé. “Khor, if you think that trying to sweet-talk me is going to get me to reduce the number of bridesmaids I'm bringing, it's not going to work.”

No, I'm just not as fast as I used to be. He'd never be able to switch settings fast enough. He supposed he could try stunning them all, then disintegrate as needed.

He remembered that one could also set a hand phaser to overload, which would cause it to explode in about ten seconds, killing everybody within a few meters. He was concerned about leaving the *Vinci* without a captain, then realized that Starfleet could do far worse than to leave the ship in the hands of



Sonya Gomez, and was comforted.

## Chapter 3

“Knock knock.”

Sonya Gomez looked up from her book at the entry-way to the mess hall and laughed. “You don’t have to knock, Pattie. Door’s open.”

“I know,” her Nasat teammate replied, “but you were lost in your book, and it was either that or throw something at you.”

“Sorry.” Sonya set the book down. “I’ve been meaning to read it since my mom gave it to me, last time we were back, and just never had the time. Figured I might as well start it now.”

“Is it any good?”

“It is, actually. It’s all about this group that meets for lunch once a week, and the silly things that happen to them. It’s fluff but fun—just what I need.”

“What you need is to get off this ship,” Pattie corrected her, antennae twitching. “Even I’m starting to go a little nuts here, and I’m used to being trapped in a shell.” She tapped her own exoskeleton as proof. “Beam down with me. We’ll get some food, shop a bit, and just enjoy walking on solid ground again.”

“Thanks for the invite, but I think I’ll just stay here.” Sonya frowned. “To be honest, what with Risa, Vemlar, and the Strata, I’ve been off-ship so much lately I’ve forgotten what theda Vinci looks like. I don’t mind being onboard, especially with everyone else gone—tons of elbow room.” She waved her arms around to demonstrate. “Besides, Soloman and I are going to take advantage of the downtime. He’s got those new diagnostics he wants to run, and I’ve got a list of repairs the ship needs—from the damage we took at Lokra.”

Pattie peered at her. “Is that the real reason?”

Sonya laughed. “Remind me not to play poker with you. Okay, the real reason is—I feel like being lazy, holing up here, and ignoring the outside world for a bit.”

Pattie’s antennae waved in her equivalent of a laugh. “Now that I can appreciate. Okay, have fun.” She walked back out of the mess hall, leaving Sonya alone with her book.

Sonya watched her go, feeling a little bad even though she knew Pattie hadn’t taken it personally. That last answer had been the truth, though. She just didn’t feel like going anywhere. She looked around, stretched her arms out, then tilted her chair back and swung her legs up so that both feet rested on the table. Ah, much better. She picked up the book again and flipped it to the page she’d been reading. This is the life.

## Chapter

# 4

“Computer, display response times of students thus far.”

Alex and Fabian both watched as a square pane materialized in front of them, numbers listed across its translucent surface. Fabian read the numbers, made sure they were copied to his padd, and sighed. These kids were sharp, no question, which meant that he’d have to revise the tests to make them a bit harder. And that meant more work on his part. How did I get myself into this? he wondered. Ah, yes, that’s right—it’s all Kendra’s fault.

He remembered how, three weeks ago, Gold had announced that they were heading back to Earth.

“I have a family matter to handle,” the captain had told them, “and I’ve arranged for the *Vinci* to dock at Starfleet Headquarters. You’ll all have the week off—I trust you’ll all be sober again by the time we head back out?”

After the meeting, Fabian had called one of the only people he still knew on Earth, his old friend Kendra Dolby. He and Kendra had gone to the Rigel Polytechnic Institute—“Go, Dominars!”—together, and had stayed in touch ever since. She still looked the same when she answered his call, though her hair was a bit shorter than it had been last time, and was that a silver hair he saw along one temple?

“Fabe!” Kendra’s dark eyes had lit up when she saw his face on her viewscreen. “How are you?”

“I’m good, how are you? And, more important, what are you going to be doing in a few weeks’ time?”

“Are you coming to visit? That’s great!” She grimaced. “I’m not sure I’ll be much company, though. Not at the rate things are going.”

“Problems in R&D?” Kendra had landed a dream job with Starfleet’s Research and Development unit. But right now she looked anything but thrilled.

“Yeah, you could say that. I finished the *Hyperion*.”

“Ken, that’s great!” She’d told him about it in previous conversations, of course. The *Hyperion* was meant to be a new class of Starfleet vessel—larger than a scoutship, smaller than a *Saber* - or *Defiant* -class ship, but with full warp capability and an impressive weapons system. The ship was meant to be both a fighter and a courier, and made for speed and maneuverability. Starfleet had actually wanted something like it for a while now, as the next step after the *Defiant*, but no one had been able to create something strong enough to travel dangerous areas alone but small enough to slip through security nets undetected. Kendra had been wrestling with it for over a year, and if Starfleet approved her design it would make her career. “So why don’t you look happy about it?”

She shook her head. “Because *Felder*’nar waited until yesterday to tell me that he hadn’t submitted the testing request—‘I couldn’t in good conscience file the paperwork until I knew the schematics would be completed on time’—which means it goes to the back of the line. And since he filed the request for his own design a week ago, the wait’s up to two years now.”

“Wow. That bites.”

She sighed. “Tell me about it. I wouldn’t mind so much if it wasn’t such a blatant attempt to cut me out of

the running—and if his Roverdesign wasn't such junk.”

“Isn't there some other way to test the design?” Fabian thought about it for a minute. “Wait, couldn't you input the schematics into a holodeck and test it out there?”

Kendra smiled. “Still got it, Fabe—took you a minute to figure out what I needed two hours to stumble upon. Yes, a holodeck can do it, if it's got enough memory to handle that much complexity and run full diagnostics at the same time. The only place around here that fits the bill is—”

“Starfleet Academy.”

“Right. I talked to them about it, and they love the idea. Their holodecks can handle the load without a problem, and they want to use it as a final exam—take the top students of the current engineering class and have them test everything out, including simulated crises. Remember Crawford Pressman?”

“Old Crawfish?” They both laughed as they thought about the classmate they had teased so many times.

“Well, he's a senior instructor at the Academy now—I know, I know, but he loved the idea, and helped champion it to the board. So they've agreed to do it. And Starfleet likes the idea, because it lets us run a full test on the ship without draining any of our own resources. They've agreed to let a full-fledged holosuite test stand in for the normal testing procedure.”

“Great, so what's the problem?”

She sighed. “Politics, what else? The Academy insists that they be the ones to run the test—their students, their suite. Starfleet says it has to be one of us, since it's our ship design. And the only time the Academy can do it is a few weeks from now, because it needs to be during their exam period, which is right when we've got our annual presentation to the budget oversight committee. I can't get out of that, which means I can't be there for the exam, and I don't trust anyone at the Academy or elsewhere in Starfleet to handle it without me.” Then she paused and looked at Fabian with that slow smile he'd learned to fear years ago. “Wait, when did you say you were visiting?”

“Three weeks. Why—? Wait a second!”

Kendra, damn her, pulled her winsome look on him, knowing full well that it was unfair. “Please, Fabe? I trust you completely, you know that. And you'll understand the design better than anyone else could—hell, half of it came out of those late-night doughnut runs we used to make, when we'd blue-sky ship designs. Plus you're Starfleet, so I'm sure they'd be fine with you stepping in—if R&D can't run an engineering simulation, S.C.E. would be the other logical choice. And you'd be doing me a huge favor. What do you say?”

He'd pretended to think it over, but actually he'd loved the idea. It was a chance for him to teach the next generation of Starfleet engineers, some of whom might even join S.C.E. someday. And it helped Kendra out. Plus it looked like fun.

Kendra had called him back the next day.

“Starfleet loves it,” she told him. “They're thrilled with the idea of S.C.E. testing both the ship and the graduating class. And the Academy is happy about it, because they want to see if their kids can handle whatever the S.C.E. throws at them. The one catch is, they insist that one of their own faculty supervise and assist.”

“Not Crawfish,” Fabian said, but she was already shaking her head.

“Fabe, would I do that to you? Actually, he didn’t even ask for it—probably afraid to be in a room with you again. No, it’s going to be one of their other instructors, an Alex Sparks. I’ve met him once or twice, and he seems pretty decent.”

“Well, that’s fine, then.” Then Fabian had another thought. “Hey, do you need anyone else involved? Like a second S.C.E. officer?”

His old friend shrugged. “If you want to bring in one of the others, I’m sure it’d be okay.”

“Good, because I think it’ll make things easier—he can stay onstage while Sparks and I work behind the scenes.” They’d made the final arrangements, and Fabian had talked to Tev later that day. He’d known exactly which buttons to push, and the Tellarite had agreed immediately to assist in the exam. Which is why, Fabian thought, I’m now babysitting a bunch of kids in a holodeck when I could be out partying. Kendra owes me for this.

## Chapter 5

“No self-respecting Klingon would allow such a thing! It would be a disgrace!” Lantar cried.

“So would looking like you’ve never even heard of a bath, much less taken one,” Rachel shot back. Then she smiled at him—the smile Gold knew meant to stand well clear, and to hide any edged weapons. “You have heard of baths, haven’t you?”

“Are you disputing the honor of my House?” Lantar thundered. His face was darkening with rage, which, unfortunately, Esther seemed to find funny. She was fighting a losing battle not to giggle.

Captain Gold quietly placed his thumb on his phaser and changed the settings.

“Stop laughing, human! If you were Klingon, I would teach you the meaning of respect!” Lantar raised his voice even more. It was almost pure melodrama, of course, but that didn’t make it any quieter.

“Father, calm down,” Khor said in an almost-hiss. “You are making a fool of yourself!”

Captain Gold, very calmly, pulled out his phaser. He aimed vaguely upward.

“I’d like to see you try and earn respect, you swaggering—”

“How dare—”

“Don’t you—”

“Get your—”

**BZZZZZZZZZOUNT!**

The ceiling light exploded. Captain Gold lowered his phaser, idly thumbing the setting to stun. The room fell silent for just a moment, then the doors flew open and two Klingon guards burst into the room, disruptors drawn and pointed at the Gold family.

“Ambassador, is everything all right?”

“Not a problem,” Captain Gold started, before Lantar could speak. “Looks like the overhead lighting suffered some kind of overload, and chose an—interesting time to let go. Wouldn’t you say that, Lantar?”

The guards kept their phasers on the humans, and looked to Lantar. Lantar looked at Captain Gold, then up at the damaged light, and finally back at the guards with a big smile on his face. “Yes, I suspect things got a bit overheated in here. No serious harm done. Go back to your posts, and notify maintenance that I’ll want this repaired before the end of the day.”

The guards looked a bit disappointed that they didn’t get to shoot anything, but quickly replied, “Yes, Ambassador,” and left the room.

When the doors slid shut, Lantar turned to Gold. “I defer to your direct—if somewhat destructive—solution.”

“I apologize for the damages caused. Please feel free to bill Starfleet.”

“No need, Captain. We realize that occasionally negotiations can get heated.” He spoke with such a tone in his voice that Gold thought Lantar should have become a used-hovercraft salesman.

Gold turned to address everybody else in the room. “Now then. We are going to handle this in a calm, orderly fashion. Esther, Khor, Lantar, and Rachel. I want each of you to go into separate rooms and write down the ten things you most want in this ceremony. Now. This minute. Without talking to one another.”

“Wait a minute,” Esther said. “What about—?”

Gold stared at his granddaughter, and she closed her mouth and made a little “hmp” noise. Thank God, he thought, it worked. I’m going to have to remember this for the next time she comes over for the High Holy Days.

“When you’re done, I’ll look your lists over and see what I can do about reconciling them.”

“And what about your list?” asked Khor.

“I’m not making a list. Starfleet weddings have a lot of leeway, so I’m not really invested in any one method—which is why I’m playing mediator.” Everyone looked thoughtful, but no one immediately spoke up, so Gold took that as assent and went on before anyone could find a reason to object. “Lantar, could I impose upon you for a few unoccupied rooms here in the embassy, so everyone can retire to neutral corners?”

“That could be arranged. In fact, why don’t you stay here in my office? I’d like someplace quiet to gather my own thoughts, and someone should stay here while the repairs take place.”

“That sounds quite reasonable.”

“Then let me show the rest of your family to separate quarters. Khor, you can find your own way out. There is still enough Klingon in you to find your way to the mess hall, I hope. Ladies?” Lantar exited the room, trying to ooze charm all the way. Rachel and Esther followed him.

Khor walked over to the debris of the light fixture that had fallen to the floor. He bent over and picked up a piece of metal about the size of his fist, then stood up. And stayed there silently. After ten seconds, Gold was about to say something when Khor suddenly threw the remnant straight up into the hole, causing another small explosion. When Gold looked back at Khor, he was already storming out the door.

Maybe I can just pronounce them married and be done with this mishegoss, Gold thought. No, to do that I'd have to get everybody back to the da Vinci. Property damage is one thing, kidnapping is quite another. Khor owes me for this. For that matter, so do Esther and Rachel.

## Chapter 6

Fabian's reverie was broken by a high-pitched siren somewhere nearby.

“That's the Hyperion's warning klaxon,” Sparks said. “Something's wrong with the ship.”

“I certainly hope so,” Fabian said. “After all the trouble I went through programming glitches into its systems, and crises for the holosuite, if nothing was wrong we'd have a problem.” Still not the slightest smile from Sparks—maybe he was a robot? Fabian remembered a few professors who, based upon their lecturing style, would have qualified as such. “Well, let's go take a look.”

They stepped out of the area they'd marked off as their office—a small space that did not appear on the Hyperion and contained only a pair of desks and a pair of chairs—and passed through a wall and into the simulated spaceship. Alarms were still blaring throughout the corridors, and the two men walked quickly down one hallway, searching for any hint of trouble. When they turned a corner, they found it.

“Whoa!” Fabian windmilled his arms, trying to regain his balance, but it was Alex's hand on his shoulder that pulled him back from the brink. Literally, since he found himself staring down at an irregular hole in the floor, and into the deck below. What the hell?

Crouching down, he saw that the edges of the hole weren't burnt, nor had they been cut. Instead, the ceramic alloy sagged around the edges, in much the way that hot wax dripped around the sides of a candle.

“I don't understand,” Alex said, running one hand along a wall and then inspecting the thin film that now coated his palm and fingers. “The walls are—melting?”

“Looks that way.” Fabian rose to his feet again. “Come on, let's see what the kids make of all this.”

\* \* \*

Not surprisingly, they found the students clustered in engineering again, all except the one assigned to the bridge. The rest were stationed at the consoles around the room, or using padds they had plugged into ports along the walls.

“I’m reading a marked increase in ferric acids across the entire ship,” one of them called out. He was short and slight, with a shock of brown hair over pinched features, and Sparks supplied the name “Ben Martin” when Fabian turned toward him.

“Shields are at one hundred percent,” the tiny blond girl Fabian recognized as Zoe Wilson added from a console.

“Is it just me, or are these kids getting younger every year? She looks too young to be in the Academy,” he said, and Alex nodded.

“That’s because she’s thirteen.”

“Thirteen?”

“Yes—she’s a prodigy.”

“She’d have to be,” Fabian muttered, turning back to watch them again.

“No spatial anomalies,” someone else, Tanya, was commenting. “We’re all alone out here, and the space around us reads as normal.”

“Okay, so it’s not coming from without—it must be from within,” a slender Bajoran woman mused out loud. “Anybody picking up anything strange?”

“You mean, besides the fact that the floors look like ice cream at a picnic?” Malcolm asked. “Nothing.”

“Ferric acid would indicate corrosion,” Santar said. “We are dealing with corrosive acids, and they are eating through the ship.”

“But where did they start?” a stocky, olive-skinned man demanded. “It had to start somewhere, right?”

Sparks whispered, “Tomas delFuego,” even though the students couldn’t hear him.

“Sensors show the corrosion is consistent all around the outside,” a tall, stocky young man said.

“That’s Ian Gymis,” Alex said.

“The next layer has its own level,” Gymis continued, “and it’s got less corrosion, but what it has is uniform throughout the level.”

“So it began from the outside, and is working its way in,” the Bajoran, Latha Meru, mused. “And it hit every side at once.”

“But the shields should have—the shields!” Tanya turned back to her panel and rapidly typed several commands. “Got it! The shields are the problem! Something’s altered their composition, so they’re producing ferric acids. They’re corroding the ship!”

“Killing the shields,” Malcolm called out, and suited his action to the statement.

“Corrosion no longer spreading,” Ben said a few seconds later.

“I’ve got emergency force fields around the bulkhead,” Zoe said. “So we’ve still got hull integrity—for now.”

“We’ve got to repair the damage,” Tomas said, and looked around. “Any ideas?”

“Computer,” Santar called out, “reverse gravity field throughout the ship.” Several other students looked confused, but a few nodded. So did both Fabian and Alex. “The corroded material was essentially liquefied, and falling inward,” he explained in the way that so many Vulcans did, assuming that everyone else was kindergarten age. “With the gravity reversed, any remaining liquid material should flow back out.”

Tanya took the lead next. “Computer, purge all air in the rooms along the outer bulkhead, unless a room is occupied. Drop temperature in those same rooms to minus ten degrees.”

“Purging, temperature approaching requested level,” the computer reported an instant later. Tanya waited almost a full minute before telling it to pump fresh air into the rooms again.

“Nice,” Sparks said, and Fabian nodded his agreement. Corrosion involved ferrous oxide, or rust, and its reaction to open air. Oxygen fed the reaction, just as it fed the flames of a fire. By removing the air from those rooms, Tanya had halted the process, making sure nothing else would melt. The cold also slowed chemical processes, and between that and the lack of air, the acid would have become inert. Now it was just a matter of repairing the damage that had already occurred.

“Cute,” Tomas muttered, spinning in a circle. “Professor Sparks, Mr. Stevens, can you hear me? That was cute—making the shields corrosive.”

“Oh yeah,” Malcolm added, nodding. “The ship was eating itself, man. Get it? The ship was eating itself!”

“That was a nice idea,” Sparks said as he and Fabian stepped back out into the hall. “I’m surprised they figured it out so quickly.”

“So am I,” Fabian said. “We’re so used to thinking that shields are always our best defense, and this turned that notion on its ear. Their inexperience was actually an advantage this time—they haven’t been conditioned to always trust their ship’s shields, so they actually checked on the shields first, and really looked at the data on them.” He glanced around. “There’s one problem, though.”

“What’s that?”

Fabian frowned. “I didn’t come up with that one, and I sure as hell didn’t program it in.” He eyed his companion. “What about you?”

But Alex held both hands up in surrender. “Don’t look at me,” he replied. “I’m here to make sure everything runs smoothly—you’re the man with the tests. I’ve left you to come up with details on what we should do to them, and to the ship.” He gestured behind him as they reached their office and sank into the two desk chairs.

Fabian leaned back, the back of his head brushing the wall. “Well, if I didn’t program that one, and you didn’t…”



“The students?” Alex asked, and Fabian nodded.

“It’s got to be. Nobody else has such immediate access, besides us. And this sounds like a typical prank.” He saw that Alex was frowning, and waved a hand at him. “Don’t worry about it. Most engineers play pranks on each other or on the rest of the crew as a way to pass the time. And this one didn’t really put anybody at risk. Sure, someone could have fallen through the floor into the rooms below, but that was the only real danger. The holosuite safeties would kick in anyhow.”

“So what do we do now?”

Fabian shrugged. “Same thing we’d do if it had been one of ours, I guess. We log it in, and score everyone on how they handled it.” He scratched his temple absently. “Actually, we can do that later. Maybe we should stop by and see the captain first, check in with him.” His companion nodded, and together they set out for the bridge.

## Chapter

# 7

“Cadet, what is our present speed?”

“Warp one-point-five, Captain.”

“Very good. Continue at present speed and course.”

“Aye, sir.”

Tev leaned back in his chair, hands resting comfortably on the armrests, and cast a proprietary eye over the bridge. His bridge. The room had been designed to maximize its small space, and felt far larger than it was, despite the consoles arranged around it and the crew members stationed at each one. The floor was clean, the walls spotless, and the instrument panels practically sparkled. And his crew was obedient, well-mannered, and quiet. All was right with the world.

“Having fun?”

The voice belonged to Specialist Stevens, who materialized right next to the captain’s chair. This wasn’t a transporter beam, however—Stevens simply winked into existence. Standing slightly behind him and to one side was that instructor, Sparks, who was idly stroking his beard with one hand.

“Actually, yes,” Tev admitted. “Leadership suits me, and I’m sure it comes as no surprise that I am very good at it.”

His colleague grinned at him, and Tev reminded himself that, after all, Stevens was the one who had gotten him involved in this project. That had come as a bit of a surprise, actually. The two of them had settled their differences, based primarily on Stevens’s inappropriate friendship with Tev’s predecessor, and they now made a fairly good team—with Tev taking the lead, of course—but they were hardly friends. So he had been unprepared when Stevens had caught up with him outside the engine room on the *Vinci*, thirty-four hours after Captain Gold’s announcement of their impending leave.

“Tev, what are you going to do when we’re on Earth?” Stevens had asked him. For a moment Tev had

considered saying that it was none of the specialist's business, but his time on the *Vinci* had taught him that such a reaction was unnecessary, and counterproductive. The question was most likely an innocent one, and answering it so tersely was an overreaction.

Instead, he told the truth. "I had planned to visit several former colleagues, and make sure I was current on the latest engineering techniques and discoveries."

"Well, how would you like to do something else instead?"

Tev sighed. "I just told you what I was planning to do. Since obviously I am the one who selected that activity, it must be exactly what I wanted to do."

"Ah, but that's because you haven't had a better offer." Stevens grinned. He leaned in more closely. "How would you like to captain a starship?"

That had piqued his interest. After all, Tev knew himself to be extremely capable, and fully intended to become a captain someday. But these things normally took time—years or even decades of proving oneself. Stevens was suggesting that he could help circumvent that delay.

"I'm listening," Tev had said, crossing his arms.

"Okay, there's this friend of mine, and she's designed this ship..." Tev had listened, and then considered. It was not a real ship, of course. But it would seem like a real one, and that meant that being its captain would also seem real. If nothing else, it would give him some idea of what sitting in that captain's chair would feel like someday.

"What about crew?" he'd asked. "I will need a bridge crew."

"We'll rotate which student handles the operations console," Stevens had assured him. "The rest will be holograms, but they'll act like a real crew."

That had made Tev realize something else. "I assume, since these are merely holograms, that we can program the crew to be anyone we want?" Now, he looked past his S.C.E. teammate's shoulder, watching as his detested third cousin Renn and his tiresome primary education provider, Strenya, handled the monotonous tasks of maintaining proper air mixtures throughout the ship and monitoring their immediate area for any signs of radio chatter or subspace communication. Oh yes, he was definitely enjoying this.

"The students are doing a fine job," Sparks commented from the side. "They've been responding quickly to each new situation, and handling it with maximum efficiency and minimal damage or personal risk."

"We do have a small glitch, though," Stevens said. "Looks like one of the students has hacked the holosuite and inserted a few pranks of his own." The specialist filled him in on the recent crisis.

"An excellent jest," Tev said after he had heard the details. "We were informed of the change in structural integrity, of course, but I have not yet received a proper status report from engineering. In fact—" he held up one hand, then stabbed a button on the chair's left arm. "Engineering, this is the captain."

"Engineering here," came the reply. Whoever was speaking was young, female, and, judging from the

tone, irritable.

“I have not yet received a status report on the ship’s recent difficulty. I will expect one within the hour.”

The girl on the other end made a rude noise. “Sir, all due respect but we’re a bit busy here. We’ve got to reconstitute those hull portions that melted completely, and we still need to—”

Tev cut her off. “Cadet, this is not a request. You will follow proper procedure, and submit a full report of the incident.”

“Why should we?” A different voice—a male one—spoke. “Professor Sparks and Mr. Stevens probably saw what happened. Just ask them.”

Tev repressed a growl. “Cadet, because you are new I will explain this to you this one time. I already know what happened. That is not the point. Starfleet continues to exist because it has rules and regulations, and because every Starfleet member follows those codes. One such stricture states that, when an incident occurs on a starship, those responsible for identifying and handling the matter file a full report with their commanding officer, who then enters it into the ship’s log. This is part of your duty. If you are incapable of handling the report, you will never rise above the level of third technician, no matter how brilliant your deductions or how clever your repairs. And while you are taking part in this exercise, you will behave as a full Starfleet engineer aboard a true Starfleet vessel. Which means that you will have that incident report to me within the hour. Have I made myself clear?”

“Very clear, sir,” came a third voice, this one also female. “We’ll have that report to you within the hour, sir.”

“Very good. Captain out.” Tev turned back to Stevens and Sparks, noting that the specialist was trying to hide a smile. “Sometimes it is necessary to remind them of their place.”

“Actually, you made a good point.” Stevens looked as surprised as Tev felt at that admission. “They’ve got to learn that, no matter how smart they are, they still have to follow the rules. Even the dumb ones, like filing an incident report.”

“Precisely.” Tev leaned back in his chair again. Haranguing that cadet had been a great deal of fun, and he was debating the merit of making a surprise inspection of engineering at some point, and verbally dressing down the students for anything he found amiss. But perhaps later. Work came first.

“The ship itself is handling well,” he informed Stevens. “All systems are performing at well above adequate levels. We have noticed a few small flaws in the shipboard systems, primarily in navigation and internal security, and I have already designed and applied corrective measures in those areas. But overall, the Hyperion is handling quite well. It is more maneuverable than any other vessel this size, and has more acceleration than most larger ships, plus its shielding has proven more than sufficient for the spatial anomalies we’ve encountered thus far. Of course, we have yet to test its weapons capabilities, but I have every confidence that it can hold its own against anything short of a full warship.”

“Thanks for the update.” Stevens looked genuinely grateful. Tev reminded himself that the ship designer was a friend of the human’s. During this experiment, Stevens’s primary responsibility was to supervise the students, to see how they handled themselves during each crisis. Tev was in charge of monitoring the ship and analyzing its design. That made far more sense than having one person handle both tasks simultaneously, of course, and it was why Stevens had asked him to participate in the first place. For his part, Tev had agreed because it gave him the chance to try his hand as captain, he got to be the first

person to test a new class of ship, and he approved of the logic of having two S.C.E. members conducting the exercise.

The fact that it was so much fun was simply an added bonus.

\* \* \*

T'nok watched from the operations console as the Tellarite S.C.E. officer conducted his one-sided conversation. Judging from his mannerisms, he was speaking with two others, which suggested that both Mr. Stevens and Professor Sparks were present on the bridge. Clearly, however, they had instructed the holosuite computer to maintain their cloak except in regard to their fellow supervisor, and so she could neither see nor hear them.

Not that it mattered. T'nok maintained her casual inspection of the console, assuring herself that the ship was rapidly returning to pristine order. As the student currently assigned to the bridge, her job was merely to monitor the instrumentation, and to alert the captain of any problems. She did not need to know what the other instructors were telling him. Of course, that did not mean she could not listen to his half of the conversation—indeed, on such a small bridge it was difficult not to overhear everything—or try to guess at what the others were saying in response. T'nok saw nothing wrong with such behavior—she was determined to do the best job possible on this examination, and that meant acquiring as much information as she could, from every available source. Just now, for example, “Captain” Tev’s pause after stating that it was necessary to remind people of their place suggested that he might be considering additional opportunities to rebuke her and her fellow students for some perceived lack of discipline. Perhaps a surprise inspection. T'nok would simply make sure that her workspace was kept spotless, and that all of her notes and files were in proper order. She also saw no reason to inform the others of this possibility—let them discover it on their own.

Her musings were cut short by a strange fluctuation on one of the monitors. It vanished almost immediately, but she was sure she had seen it, and focused on tracking down the cause. Then the captain’s combadge beeped, and T'nok listened intently, already sure that the incoming hail would somehow connect to that same reading.

\* \* \*

“Captain,” Ian called over the comlink, distracting Alex from the conversation with Tev and Fabian, “we’ve got a problem with the galley.”

“What sort of problem, Cadet?” Tev said, and Alex had to admit that he looked every bit the starship captain—completely at ease in his command chair, and more than a little bit arrogant about it. The arrogance was replaced by confusion a second later, however, when Ian replied.

“It—it’s missing, sir.”

“What?”

“Yeah, we lost the cafeteria,” Tomas chimed in. “Guess we should have brought our own lunches, huh?”

Tev was already glancing at T'nok, who shook her head. As always, Alex admired her calm—she was Vulcan through and through, with all of their usual logic and composure, tempered by personal ambition and a desire for knowledge that matched anything the other students could muster. She had apparently been listening to the calls, and had already guessed Tev’s question.

“I’m not showing anything wrong with the galley, Captain,” she said. “The ship’s structure is unaltered. I did, however, detect a brief pulse of energy in that vicinity, just seconds before the first call.”

As Tev gave T’nok instructions on rescanning the area, Fabian turned to Alex. “Come on, let’s take a look at this wandering café.”

Alex shook his head but followed Fabian off the bridge anyway. What was it with most engineers that they needed to handle every situation by joking about it? He’d never understood that attitude, even back in school. Which could have been the reason why he’d wound up as an instructor rather than serving on a starship himself—perhaps you were supposed to make jokes when things looked bad. He just didn’t have that knack, though, and he generally didn’t find such jokes amusing.

Still, Fabian wasn’t a bad fellow, Alex mused as they took the lift down. He certainly knew his job, and he was doing a very good job of creating obstacles for the students. He’d have made a fine instructor, Alex thought. And, with his casual attitude and his constant quips, the students would probably like him a good deal more than they do me. At least they’d feel more comfortable with him.

The lift doors opened, and the two of them stepped out into the hall, almost running into Ian, Tomas, and Ben. Several more of the students were milling about in the hallway, and Alex was glad that the computer made them swerve around him automatically—otherwise he and Fabian would have had a tough time squeezing past. As it was, they navigated a path down to the point where the corridor turned right toward the galley or ran straight toward storage, and headed right—only to find themselves at the storeroom instead.

“That’s strange,” Fabian muttered, and turned back toward the galley. Alex mimicked him, and an instant later they both found themselves facing the storeroom again.

While Fabian studied the storeroom door in case it was somehow masking the galley entrance, Alex turned to his left, to glance down the corridor again. The students were still there, and were also acting strange. Even as he watched, he saw Latha Meru turn away from him, apparently retreating to the lift—but wind up facing him again anyway, as if she had done a full circle rather than a simple quarter-turn. And Ian, who had his back against the right side wall, turned his head to continue speaking to Meru, but wound up looking at the lift instead.

“No right turns,” Alex whispered, and repeated himself when Fabian glanced up at him. “There are no right turns! That’s why we can’t get to the galley—it’s a right turn down the corridor, and we can only turn left!”

Even he thought it sounded insane, but Fabian straightened up and considered it. Alex also told him what he’d seen the students do, and his companion finally nodded.

“Let’s test it,” he said. “I’ve got my back to the storage room now, right?” He grinned. “I mean, correct?” Alex nodded. “Okay, I’m going to turn to the right so that I’m facing it again.” And then Fabian turned left, looking down the corridor toward the lift. “Hm. I told my body ‘right’ and it went ‘left’ instead. Interesting.” He turned left again, and said, “Aha! And here’s the galley! From this end of the corridor we need to turn left to get to it, so we can actually reach it.”

Even as they watched, the students came to the same conclusion. They had been going around in circles near the middle of the corridor, but Meru finally walked down to their end, and by turning left several times, wound up facing the right-hand side, and the galley door. She called out to her classmates, and they all repeated her trick. But that told them why they hadn’t been able to locate the galley—it didn’t

explain why they couldn't turn right.

"Clever," Fabian admitted to Alex as they watched the students struggle with it. "The ship's untouched, which is why T'nok's scans didn't show any problems. It's messing with the people directly instead." He tapped his combadge. "Computer, has anyone accessed the program today besides myself, Lieutenant Commander Tev, and Professor Sparks?"

"Negative," the computer replied, and Fabian shrugged. But Alex had a question of his own.

"Computer, has anyone replicated hallucinogenic gas within the ship?" Again the reply was negative, but Fabian nodded.

"Nice. You're right—whoever did this could have done it by using the ship's own replicators, without ever touching the main program. And gas would certainly make us see things, though to make everyone have exactly the same problem might be too sophisticated. But what do I know—I'm an engineer, not an alchemist."

Alex didn't bother to respond to that. Instead he turned to see what his students were up to now.

"—nothing wrong with the ship itself," Santar was reporting, "so something is affecting our perceptions instead. Convincing us that we cannot turn to the right."

"Gas?" Ian asked, but Meru shook her head.

"Too specific for a gas," she pointed out, and Alex nodded. Good girl. But then, Meru had always been clever. Perhaps too clever—she never seemed to struggle with anything, or even to work too hard, and he suspected her classmates resented that.

"Well, what could make us all lose a direction?" Malcolm demanded.

"T'nok," Zoe called over her combadge, "can you turn to the right?"

"Excuse me?" T'nok replied. "Are you requesting that the Hyperion make a course change?"

"No, I'm asking you to turn to your right and tell me what you see."

"Very well." T'nok sounded confused by this request but apparently complied, because a moment later she stated, "I am facing Captain Tev."

The other students nodded—given the layout of the bridge, if T'nok was at the operations console the captain's chair would be on her right side.

"Okay, so it's not affecting the bridge," Tomas said. "T'nok, are you picking up anything strange on this level?"

"Negative," she replied, "but I did notice a brief signal burst a moment before your first call to the captain. I am rescanning now, trying to pinpoint its origin."

"Great, let us know when you do," Tomas told her. Alex noted that he had once again taken charge of the group—Tanya's frown showed that she had noticed it as well, but most of the others were willing to follow Tomas's lead. "So we're dealing with some kind of signal," he repeated to the others. "What

signal could make us lose all sense of ‘left?’”

“The brain stores such information as electrical impulses,” Santar said. “Perhaps something is blocking that particular signal?”

“A scrambler!” Malcolm exclaimed. “It’s frying our direction senses, so that every time we want to turn left we go right instead!”

“No way!” Ian said. “It would have to figure out what each person’s brain signals were for ‘right’ and ‘left,’ and then swap them. Without studying us beforehand, it’d have no way to know those, and no system could handle maintaining that for all of us at once.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Tanya snapped at him, and Ian turned red. “If a device were scanning your brain when you went to turn right, all it’d have to do is isolate that signal. Then it could reverse it, and that would probably be ‘left.’ And once it had the signal for a particular person, it could just automatically replace it with the reversed signal each time.”

Ian wasn’t too happy at being shown up, Alex noticed, particularly by Tanya. But then, Ian often assumed he knew more than he really did, or could do less work than required, and got belligerent when he was proven wrong.

“T’nok,” Meru called into her combadge, “have you isolated that location yet?”

“Affirmative,” their Vulcan classmate replied. “It originated at the galley door.”

Zoe, Meru, and Santar had started walking in that direction even before T’nok’s reply came—obviously they had already figured it out, and had simply wanted confirmation from her. The others followed behind them. Fabian had been studying the door frame himself, and Alex knew from the look on his face that the S.C.E. technician had also guessed the device’s location.

“I don’t see anything,” Zoe remarked as they all clustered around the door.

“Me either,” Ben agreed, studying his tricorder, “but there’s a small hologram field right above the center of the door.”

Ian, who was the tallest, reached up and the others watched as his hand seemed to pass through the wall. He grimaced and yanked his arm back, and a small metal box came with it, trailing several wires.

Tomas then turned in a circle—starting to his right. “That was it,” he reported. “I’ll bet one of those wires tapped into the ship’s power, and when Ian pulled it loose he disconnected it.”

“All I care about,” Malcolm announced, “is that we can get into the galley without going the long way around. Let’s eat!”

Alex waited until the students had all shuffled into the cafeteria, then turned to Fabian.

“So, was that one of yours?”

Fabian grimaced at him. “Nope. I wouldn’t mess with their minds like that—this is a test of their engineering abilities, not their willpower or their senses. Another prank.”

“Well, at least that one wasn’t dangerous.”

“We could have starved to death” Fabian grinned, and Alex stopped just short of rolling his eyes.

## Chapter 8

Captain Gold was getting very, very hungry.

He couldn’t help it. He’d been here for much longer than he had expected, and, try as he might, he just didn’t like Klingon food. He wasn’t a stickler for kosher meals, but he did prefer that his meat actually be dead before he ate it. And of course he couldn’t exactly snub his hosts by calling out for a delivery of human food.

He tried very hard to ignore his rumbling stomach and the ruckus that was coming from the two repairmen fixing the overhead light, and endeavored to give all of his attention to the list Khor had given him. Khor looked at him with the expression of one eager to please, one who expected a pat on the back for a job well done.

And for the most part, it was a job well done.

“This list is exceedingly reasonable, Khor. Thank you.”

“No, thank you, Captain. I appreciate all the work that you have done.”

“Although, to be honest, the last item is just a bit over the top.”

“It is a point I don’t expect to compromise on, sir.”

“Yes, but saying ‘to be marrying a wonderful woman’ just sounds like you’re trying to butter up your grandfather-to-be.”

Khor simply smiled.

“The diplomacy of my father is not a style I’m accustomed to, Captain. I’m trying to shift paradigms here, but I’m a few cents short.”

Captain Gold looked at Khor with a bit of puzzlement on his face.

“Did I get the translation of that idiom wrong?”

“No, I don’t think so. I think it was just a weak joke in the first place. Don’t worry about it.”

“I don’t worry about anything,” Khor said, just as something came down from the ceiling, making him jump a bit.

“We lost our grip on the overhead panel,” one of the technicians said.

“No problem,” Gold said.



“There is no need to inform the ambassador of our—clumsiness,” the other technician said slowly.

“Absolutely not,” Gold replied with a smile.

“No, why should he hear anything that conflicts with his view of the universe?” Khor muttered.

Gold paused. “Is there something you wish to add to the list, Khor? Something you aren’t telling me about?”

“Not at all.”

“Khor, we don’t know each other really well yet. But I think I’ve gotten enough from the three or four times we’ve been together that I know when something is bothering you.”

“I am merely irritated that I have to be going through all of this. I had made compromises, and I expected that it would be the end of the matter. But no.” He stood up abruptly. “I am done with being diplomatic. You have my list of demands.”

“Demands?”

Khor considered. “Requests, then. I expect them to be included. Now if you will pardon me, I have other preparations to attend to.” Khor turned and left, nearly colliding with the technicians bringing in a new light fixture.

Gold exhaled. The hell of it was, there really wasn’t anything here that seemed that unreasonable; in fact, Khor had probably been the most reasonable one so far. Esther had always wanted her dream wedding, and her visions never included being attacked by the ushers at the conclusion of it, like in a Klingon wedding. Khor had had the inspiration of having a military wedding performed by Esther’s grandfather in the first place, which he thought would satisfy his father’s side of the equation. There was a tacit agreement to the entire arrangement in principle weeks ago. So why was everybody yelling at each other now?

“Hello, dear one. Having a problem?” Rachel said as she entered.

Gold put his fingers to his temples. “I just finished talking with Khor.”

“Yes, I know. I heard the door slam.”

Gold looked up. “How do you hear an automatic sliding door slam?”

“I hear these things. It didn’t go well?”

“As well as can be expected. He’s irritated as hell, a condition that seems to be going around. There’s an undercurrent of something going on here, but I don’t know what—” Gold stopped, and sniffed the air. “What is that wonderful smell?”

“Guess.” She presented a small plate covered with a cloth napkin over it, hiding the contents—but Gold knew that smell.

“You madelatkes? For me?”

“Well, I was feeling a bit fidgety. And there’s fresh applesauce too, with just the right amount of cinnamon.” She placed the plate down in front of him, and pulled off the napkin with a flourish. “Ta-dah!” She produced some cutlery out of nowhere, and laid it next to the napkin.

“Glory be! A feast for the senses!” He reached for the fork and knife, mouth watering as if a bell had been rung, and began to cut off a mouthful of the nearestlatke. “What did I ever do to deserve such a...” Captain Gold’s voice trailed off. He eyed his blushing bride, the light of his life, who gazed at him with the sweet adoration that he had seen many times before. He placed the fork down and started to drum his fingers on the tabletop.

“What?” she asked. “What is it?”

“You’re playing me.”

“What do you mean?” She just looked more adorable. If he didn’t know better, he’d swear she was manipulating the lighting in the room to make her look saintly.

“Don’t try that little routine with me, Atalanta, it’s not gonna work. This is a bribe.” He picked up the fork and waved it at her for emphasis.

“What, this?” She had stiffened for a moment at the mention of that nickname, but covered it very smoothly. No one else would have noticed it. Of course, no one else would have used that nickname.

“Yes, this. You sure didn’t make these here; you must have gone home to make these.”

“So maybe I did. What would I be trying to bribe you for?”

“I don’t know yet, but I have a suspicion. Why don’t you tell me?”

“Well, it’s just that Jessica—”

“Jessica. Naturally.” Of course she would want a say in her daughter’s wedding. He marveled how someone who could be such a pain in the posterior could also be at least fifty percent responsible for such a delightful granddaughter. Must be excellent genetics showing through, he thought, though he wondered from which of her parents Esther got the stubbornness chromosome.

He heard Rachel go on, despite his closed eyes and the beginning of his headache. “She’s hurt that you’re not considering her feelings.”

“Rachel, what does she have to do with this?”

“She’s Esther’s mother! She should be involved with her daughter’s wedding.”

“Oh yes, silly me. I remember how much your mother was involved in ours.”

“That’s not fair.”

“She can learn to deal with that in this case. Lord knows I certainly indulge her in just about everything else.”

“Were you not strapped in during warp drive or something on your way back to Earth? Your body is here but your heart seems to be orbiting Bajor.”

“This is a wedding between two people. She can’t—”

“She can.”

“Pardon me. I meant to say that she shouldn’t have a say in this.”

“Khor’s father has a say.”

“That’s different.”

“Well, that’s nice, but Jessica doesn’t see it that way.”

“Khor’s father is the Klingon ambassador, for crying out loud! His feelings have to be considered in this matter.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. He is representing the Klingon side, just as you are representing the Jewish side. You want Jessica to have a say? Fine—then you don’t get one.”

“Then who do you think is going to perform the wedding?”

“I’m performing the wedding, not you—” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he knew that he had said something very, very wrong. Rachel said nothing, and merely looked at him. It was a look that told him he was going to be sleeping on the da Vinci tonight, and yet a part of him was determined to press on, hoping to salvage something from this.

“Rachel, having Jessica involved in the planning of this thing adds yet another layer of complexity to something that’s taking as long to resolve as the Sheliak peace treaty.”

“Don’t get pompous with me.”

“I’m not pompous, I’m pedantic. There’s a difference. Speaking of which, where’s your list of items?”

“I don’t have a list.”

“No list.” Gold quietly counted to ten in Yiddish, and then said, “I can’t tell if you have an ace up your sleeve or if it’s missing from your deck altogether. Why didn’t you make up a list, dear?”

“Because all my items are nonnegotiable.”

“Could you have done me the favor of writing them down, at least?”

“I’m willing to be incredibly flexible on most matters. My few points you should already know.”

Gold probably did know them, or he thought he could make a few reasonable guesses. But if he didn’t match precisely what she was thinking, she’d blame him for not being telepathic. “Honey, of course I know them. But I’m juggling the demands of multiple parties here, and I want to make sure I don’t forget

any of them in the commotion. And in addition, I'll want to make sure that I have them if anybody else would like to see them."

"All right. I'll write them up and send them to you."

He sighed quietly. He was definitely going to be sleeping on the *da Vinci* tonight.

"Yes. Because I'm convinced that in your rush to get back here to Earth, you left your heart orbiting Andor. Which is a shame for you."

"Oh? Why?"

Rachel stood up. "Samuel 13:14. 'But now thy kingdom shall not continue: the Lord hath sought him a man after his own heart, and the Lord hath commanded him to be captain over his people, because thou hast not kept that which the Lord commanded thee.'" She turned on her heel and headed out the door so quickly that he was amazed it slid open in time.

One of the technicians looked up from what he was doing—or rather looked down from the ladder. "She's magnificent." The other one was muttering something in Klingon that sounded like poetry, and they both laughed.

He hated it when she quoted Scripture. The devil wasn't the only one who could quote Scripture to suit his own purposes. Resignedly, he pulled the plate of flatkes to him.

"Captain?"

Gold looked up from his plate. Lantar was standing in the doorway. Gold stood up. "Ambassador. I didn't hear the door chime."

"It was open."

"Probably isn't going to close right after being slammed."

"How can an auto—"

"Never mind." He pushed the plate of flatkes aside. He knew that they'd be cold by the time he got back to them. "Please come in." Gold swore that he could hear the door sigh as it closed.

"How are the repairs going?" Lantar said to the technicians.

"We are done, Excellency. We merely have to pack up our—"

"Surely you can do that later, after I am done speaking with the captain?" The tone was smooth, but the undercurrent was unmistakably "Here's your hat, what's your hurry? Don't let the door nip you on the way out." The technicians picked up on it and left, not even stopping to grab their tools.

When the door had closed behind the exiting Klingons, Lantar spread his arms wide. "Captain, before we start, I would like to register my regrets at the acrimonious tone that these negotiations have taken."

"As would I. I'm hoping we can come to an amicable resolution."

“Indeed?”

“Yes.”

“I will be pleased if we can do so. I am always happy to engage in a productive dialogue that will increase the understanding and warm friendship between our two cultures. I know you share the same concerns as all decent and hardworking Klingons. You want to achieve the best possible outcome, just like I do.”

Ambassador, Gold thought, your words could be used as a renewable energy source for dirigibles.

“Lantar, level with me. How did you ever become an ambassador in the first place?”

The ambassador pursed his lips, then said, “Good manners.” After a moment’s pause, he added, “For a Klingon.”

“What does that mean?”

“Good manners is the art of pretending one is not superior.”

“Ah. And what about cases where you are not superior?”

“There is no such occurrence.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

Lantar made no visible reaction. “Really?”

“Really.”

“And why should I brook this new insult to me?”

“Because you’ve been trying to use indignation as a debating point, instead of actually having any substantive points you might have to concede.” Gold expected an additional outburst or retort, but Lantar merely sat back in his chair, his face calm and impassive. Gold took the silence as a good sign and went on. “In this world, you have to be oh-so-smart or oh-so-pleasant. I’ve spent years being smart. I highly recommend pleasant.”

“Indeed you do, Captain. Are you familiar with the concept of QIp’ong?”

“Can’t say that I know it under that name.”

“It would probably translate as ‘stupid-cunning’ or ‘stupid-smart.’ It refers to the concept of one who plays the fool but hides great subtlety and facility.”

“Ah, I see.” Gold thought for a moment. “There is an old Earth word that describes a similar sort of person—dummschlau, I believe. That is applied to someone who is not all that smart but possesses animal cunning. A very dangerous sort of person.”

Then Lantar smiled—or rather, Gold hoped it was a smile, because otherwise Lantar was baring his teeth at him. “I’m glad to see that you are not without wit,” Lantar said. “It shows me that you are

amenable to reason.”

“I’m always open to hearing what other cultures have to say. It’s important to keep an open mind.”

“Indeed, but not so open your brains fall out.”

“Do you anticipate that being a problem, Ambassador?”

“It has already happened to people close to me in the past.”

“I see.” Gold steepled his fingers, then pointed forward. “Someone very close to you?”

“Unquestionably.”

Gold picked up his padd. “You know, Khor was in here earlier. His list seems quite reasonable—there are enough points of congruence that we should be able to find common ground.”

“Sadly, I doubt it, Captain. Khor has let the heat of his blood affect his reason. He is thinking with his heart, not his head. As such, my son has lost sight of the duties he must perform in his marriage ceremony. Therefore, it is my duty to remind him.”

“Lantar, can Khor pick up a blade?”

“Of course he can.”

“And he has gone through an Age of Ascension ritual?”

“Certainly.”

“Got poked with painsticks? Traveled the River of Blood?”

“Captain, is there a point you are trying to make?”

“Is your son not a warrior, capable of making his own decisions?”

“It is not merely his decision.”

“Granted. There’s hispar’machkai to consi—”

“Captain, you make me tired. You are playing an endgame with a king and no other pieces.”

“All things considered, that’s okay, Ambassador. I’m not looking to win—I’m looking to reach a draw among all parties. You don’t need to bring your adversaries to their knees, just to their senses.”

“There will be no compromise on the part of the empire, Captain.”

“The empire? With all respect, what do they have to do with it?”

“The wedding will take place, and it will take place in accordance with Klingon customs. If it does not, we will take it as an insult to the Klingon Empire, and we will be forced to sever our ties with you.”

Gold sat upright. “Ambassador, I believe you’re taking this a bit too far.”

“Make no mistake, Captain. I will not brook an insult to my House or my empire. Do not take advantage of my kindness, and never mistake it for weakness.” He stood up abruptly. “Here is my list. Now I must go and remind my son of his obligations. I expect that you will accommodate all of my concerns, for I am sure you are cognizant of what will occur if you don’t. Feel free to use my office for the remainder of the day.” And with that he left.

Gold sat there, trying to resolve what had just been thrust in front of him. His position had become even more intractable since the earlier discussions, and he didn’t think that was possible. The list included a full Klingon wedding, right down to the preliminary evaluations and tests of strength for the bride. No mention was to be made of the bride’s religion—in fact, no human religious component at all. He wanted Rachel out entirely. And Gold himself would also have to undergo the full Kal’hayh rituals—including the trials of fasting, blood, pain, sacrifice, anguish, and death.

Perfect. Maybe he could get the death thing out of the way early.

The door chimed. Of course. “Come in, Esther. Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.”

The technicians stood at the door, slightly puzzled. “May we retrieve our tools now?”

“Oh. Sure.” Gold quietly considered how Starfleet would take the news that the Klingons were willing to break treaties over a wedding he was supposed to perform. Something less drastic than the punishment for visiting Talos IV, but not by much...

Esther poked her head inside the door. “Grandpa Gold?”

“There you are. I was hoping you’d eloped.”

“Uhh, is this a bad time?”

“No, come in. This is as good a time as any.”

“Oh, good. I came up with the list you wanted, but I wasn’t able to keep it under ten items.”

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “How many?”

“Twenty-seven.”

“Twenty-seven?”

“If I combine a few of them, I can probably get it down to eighteen or nineteen, depending on how you—”

Gold held up a hand. “Esther, I am having a very hard day here. People are bringing me grief upon grief. Your fiancé is frustrated, your grandmother is furious, and your father-in-law is ready to tear up treaties, and for all I know is willing to go to war over all this. My headache can probably be heard from orbit. And my food is getting cold.”

“Wow.” She paused. “I’ve heard of women that empires go to war over, but I never thought I’d be one. My shoulder blades are too bony.”

“Look, Esther. You have always tried to be a delight to your old grandpapa. Please, give me some good news. A bright side to all of this. Anything.”

“Anything?”

“Yes, anything.”

“Well...” Her voice trailed off. “You’re going to be a great-grandfather again.”

Captain Gold looked at Esther. She nodded.

“Esther, that wasn’t quite the good news I had in mind.”

## Chapter 9

“All done on my end,” Alex called from his desk. “They’re locked out for good this time. What about yours?”

“Nearly there,” Fabian said, typing into his console. “A few of the safety protocols were off—nothing major, probably just a holdover from a previous exercise in here. I’m resetting them now.” He clicked off a few more of the protocols, then started the testing sequence to make sure they would be back at normal levels when switched back on. But both he and Alex glanced up when they heard what sounded like screaming.

“Something’s wrong!” Alex was already out of his chair and racing back to the public part of the ship, and Fabian had to sprint to catch up. A minute later they were back on theHyperion, where sirens were already blaring again.

“Tev, what’s going on?” Fabian demanded over his comlink. Fortunately, his teammate showed his usual efficiency in responding.

“The lift is malfunctioning,” was his reply. “I believe Cadet Martin is still inside.”

“Crap.” This time Fabian led the way, with Sparks right behind him. They barreled down the hall to the lift doors and ordered the computer to open them.

“This turbolift is presently out of service,” the computer replied in that calm voice that always made Fabian want to reprogram it with an ax. “It has been quarantined, and is about to undergo emergency decontamination.”

“Damn!” Fabian bashed his hand against the door, but of course that didn’t help. “We’ve got to get that kid out of there!”

“What’s wrong?” Alex asked, following Fabian as he turned back down the hallway, heading for the nearest access panel. “Decontamination?”

“Somebody’s tricked the lift into thinking it’s contaminated.” Fabian removed the panel and crouching



down to crawl inside. Fortunately, Kendra had clearly remembered one of their old gripes about early ship designs—“only a mouse could fit back behind those walls, and mice can’t repair wiring!”—and the Hyperion was riddled with access ports and panels.

“So it’ll shut down until cleaned?”

“Worse.” The word came out as more of a grunt, but that couldn’t be helped, since he was currently crawling around a corner and back toward the lift tube. “The lift cleans itself. It releases nitrogen into the compartment, to kill any bacteria, then uses microwaves to make sure nothing’s left.”

“They’ll be killed!”

“That’s the idea. Freeze or cook any potential dangers. Of course, there are about half a dozen blocks to keep the lift from doing that without express authorization and with a live body in the lift, but clearly someone’s bypassed those.” He did actually growl this time, as he stepped out into the wider space before the emergency lift access door and straightened up. “When I get my hands on whoever did this—”

“It’s not a problem, Fabian,” Alex said with that annoying calm, “and you’re wasting your time. Computer, are safety protocols engaged?”

Fabian stopped in mid-crawl. I’m an idiot, he thought. This is a holosuite. It’ll keep everyone safe. And if that doesn’t work, we’ll just turn it off. No problem.

Then the computer said the last thing Fabian wanted to hear. “Safety protocols disengaged.”

Quickly, Alex said, “Computer, reengage safety protocols, authorization Sparks alpha-three-bravo.”

“Access denied.”

“This is very not good,” Fabian muttered. “Computer, shut down Hyperion program.”

“Access denied.”

He tapped his combadge. “Stevens to Tev.”

“This is—”

“Shut down the holosuite, now.”

“Why should I—?”

Fabian didn’t have time for Tev’s arrogance. “If you don’t, Ben will die!”

That got Tev’s attention. “Computer, shut down Hyperion program.”

“Access denied.”

“I beg your pardon? Computer, don’t you know who I am?”

Now Fabian had even less time for Tev’s arrogance. “We’ve got to shut this thing down the hard way. I

need to get to the lift capsule and manually override the process,” Fabian explained, tugging on the manual release lever. “Let’s hope the computer will still talk to me about routine stuff. Computer, what is the lift capsule’s present location, relative to my own?”

“The lift capsule is twenty-point-four-five meters below and one-point-three-one meters ahead of your present location,” the computer replied immediately, to Fabian’s relief.

“Okay, it’s below us,” Alex said to Fabian. “Which is good.”

“Quite a ways below,” Fabian said. “At least one level down. And there’s no time to climb down and then back around to the lift tube again. The problem is, I’m going to need to keep hold of the ladder, which means basically tapping the system one-handed.”

“Why can’t we use those?” Alex pointed, and Fabian almost laughed when he looked. Kendra, you think of everything, he thought, admiring the safety harnesses hanging just inside the door. The two of them quickly slid harnesses on and connected their safety lines to anchor points set in the wall. Then they pulled the door open and peered inside. Sure enough, the lift was visible below them. A good ways below them. Fabian made sure the tether was secure, since he no longer could depend on the holosuite’s safety protocols to protect him, played out what he thought would be enough line, took a deep breath, and jumped.

“Oof!” Fabian hit the lift and remembered to bend his knees, for all the good that did. His legs were going to burn tomorrow. He’d guessed right with the line, though, and had just enough slack to move around comfortably. Almost immediately after he landed, he heard pounding from inside the lift.

“Somebody, help!” It was Ben.

“Hang on!” Fabe called back, then cursed as he realized the boy couldn’t hear him. “Computer, deactivate cloaking on myself and Professor Sparks,” he said instinctively.

“Cloaking deactivated,” the computer replied.

“Will wonders never cease. Ben, can you hear me?”

“Yes! Help!”

“Hang on!” Fabian jumped a little when Alex landed on the roof behind him, then turned back to locating the release lever for the lift’s access panel.

“What can I do?” Alex asked him, and Fabian gestured him back so that the instructor wasn’t standing on the panel itself.

“Give me a hand here,” he replied, wrestling with the lever. “Once we get this open, I’ll drag him out and hand him to you, then try to shut down the sequence.” But the lever wasn’t budging.

“I think it’s locked,” Alex said, gesturing at the small red light at the lever’s base.

“Damn!” It made sense, of course. With a possible contaminant inside, the lift had been locked down—including the emergency hatch. He should have realized that. “Okay, change of plans. You find the lift computer access port, which should be over there somewhere.” He gestured toward the far corner. “Tap into it and shut down the process. I’ll try to short out this circuit here, see if I can disconnect

this lock and get the panel open. Whoever gets the door open first, wins.”

They set to work, both trying to ignore Ben’s pounding and shouting from inside. Fabian had the easier task in that the lever’s locking mechanism was right at hand. But the lock was supposed to be foolproof—the idea was that the computer wouldn’t lock down unless absolutely necessary, so if it did the lock should stay closed—and Kendra had done everything she could to make it that way. Severing its connection to the computer didn’t work, because it had several backup switches that ran through the lift structure itself. Removing its power supply wasn’t an option, because doing that would have required cutting out a section of the lift, and if he’d had that option he simply would have cut a hole and been done with it. For once, Fabian wished Kendra wasn’t so damned thorough.

Alex kept him posted on his progress, which wasn’t much better. He’d gotten into the access port, and was trying to reprogram the lift system, overriding its current initiative. But Kendra had set up the code to prevent unauthorized alteration, and she knew enough about illegal programming to cover most of the obvious entry points. There’s never a Bynar around when you need one, Fabian thought dolefully.

Meanwhile, Ben was still hollering from inside, and the computer was counting down. “Forty-five seconds to decontamination.”

Then something occurred to Fabian. “I’m an idiot,” he muttered, “again.” He settled back on his haunches for a second. There was no way he was going to break the locking code in time. And the lift walls were too strong and too thick for him to cut through. But what about the lock itself? The actual physical latching mechanism was only a few inches wide, and he could clearly see where it hooked into the door frame.

“Computer, give me a phaser,” he demanded, and a phaser materialized in his hand. Again, Fabian cursed the luck that allowed him to do pretty much whatever he wanted inside the holosuite—except turn it off.

He set the phaser to a narrow, high-intensity beam, full disintegrate, and aimed at the lock. It took two seconds to cut through the tough material, but finally there was a clank as the lock flange fell to the roof, and a faint pop as the lock released its hold, reducing some of the pressure on the access panel.

“Got it!” Fabian shouted, setting down the phaser and yanking on the lever. “How’s your end?”

“I’ve gotten past the first levels,” Alex called back. “The computer’s recognizing my authorization, finally. Now I’ve just got to track down the decon activation code, halt the process, and prevent it from resending. Give me a minute.”

Fabian listened for a second, and heard the faint computerized voice counting down. “Twenty seconds to decontamination.”

“We haven’t got a minute,” he called, and slammed the lever down. “I’m going in!” Hauling up on the panel, he pulled it aside, revealing the lift compartment below. There was Ben, his face pale and shiny with sweat, one hand raised as if about to bang on the wall again.

“Thank God!” the student said as he looked up at Fabian.

“Later,” Fabian said. “Grab my hand!” But Ben was short and skinny, and couldn’t jump high enough to reach him. After two tries, Fabian growled and lowered himself into the compartment.

“Okay, give me your foot,” he told the terrified youth, and boosted him up toward the access panel. “Now grab the edge and haul yourself up.” Ben did as he was told, though his arms shook so much he could barely lever himself out of the lift. “Good, now move aside.” Fabian leaped up, and caught the edge of the opening with one hand. “Damn, I need to stop snacking,” he muttered as he grabbed on with his other hand and started pulling himself up. Around him, he could hear the computer still.

“Now starting decontamination process.”

Suddenly the lift compartment was filled with a hissing sound, and Fabian felt cold wash over him. Fear gave him added strength, and he swung one leg out of the lift, then the other, and collapsed, panting, on its roof.

“Damn, that was close,” he muttered to himself, ignoring the boy who stood quaking nearby. Too close. In fact, he realized as he caught his breath, he couldn’t feel his left leg.

“Got it!” Alex called out, and below them Fabian heard the hissing stop. A moment later the instructor appeared beside him. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll live,” Fabian admitted, sitting up, “but I think I’ve got some frostbite, and possibly some nerve damage in one leg.” He glanced over at Ben. “You okay?”

The boy nodded. “Yeah, thanks. I wouldn’t have been, though. What the hell happened?”

“I don’t know,” Fabian admitted, accepting Alex’s hand and hauling himself to his feet. “But we’re going to find out. This is way beyond a prank, and I’m sure as hell not laughing.”

\* \* \*

An hour later, however, the two of them were still stumped. They had helped Ben get back out of the lift tube, and then had returned to their office to look into the matter, switching back to “ghost mode” in order to step outside the Hyperion and across the holosuite. Alex had used the holosuite’s emergency medkit to patch Fabian up, but it was only a quick fix—he was going to need to see a real doctor soon to avoid permanent damage to that leg. But for now he was more concerned with finding out who had done this, and how—and why they couldn’t turn the holosuite off or reengage the safety protocols.

“It can’t be one of the students,” Alex insisted. “I’d locked them all out just before the lift malfunctioned. They’ve got no access to the system.”

“Sure, but what if one of them had programmed it in advance?” Fabian said. “They modified the codes before the lockout, so it was already in place. They can’t do anything else, maybe, but that one slipped past.”

But Alex shook his head. “When I locked them out, I also ordered the computer to kill any pending processes they’d started.” He half-grinned, the first sign of amusement Fabian had seen on him. “Trust me, I know how students think, and how to get around them.”

“Okay, fair enough.” Fabian absently massaged his left leg, which was still numb. “But if it didn’t come from them, and we know it wasn’t one of us, that only leaves one option.”

They both nodded. If the reprogramming hadn’t been done from inside, it could only have come from outside. Which meant that someone was actively trying to sabotage the exercise.

“Whoever it is, they’ve done a pretty good job so far.”

“Much as I hate to admit it, we’d better bring Tev in on this. Let’s head upstairs.”

Together they walked back to the ship and up to the bridge, Fabian limping a little. They found Tev pacing in front of the captain’s chair, while one of the students—the girl, Zoe—and the hologram crew looked on.

“Where are they?” Tev was saying as Fabian and Alex entered. “This is typical of Stevens.”

“Computer,” Fabian said, “remove cloaking for Captain Tev only, please.” He waited, but got no response. “Computer, make me visible to Captain Tev, please.” Still nothing. “Computer, acknowledge.”

“Acknowledged,” came the reply.

“Computer, deactivate cloaking on myself and Professor Sparks.”

“Access denied.”

“What?” That was Alex. “Computer, I am Professor Alex Sparks, deactivate my cloaking immediately.”

“Access denied.”

Alex looked at Fabian, who stared back at him. Then both of them looked at Tev, who was pacing mere feet from them but completely unaware of their presence.

“This time the joke’s on us,” Alex whispered, and Fabian couldn’t help but agree. Obviously whoever had been pulling these pranks had decided to pull one on them. They were locked in ghost mode, and until they figured out how to get around that, they couldn’t talk to anyone. They were stuck in here, while whoever had trapped them continued to play games that could get them all killed.

TO BE CONTINUED IN  
CREATIVE COUPLINGSBOOK 2

## About the Authors

GLENN HAUMAN returns to S.C.E. after a long hiatus—his story ideas of having the da Vinci battle Leonardo da Vinci over the name; stranding the S.C.E. crew on a desert island with no raw materials for communication devices but coconuts; and having Gomez waking up from a dream and finding Duffy alive in the shower were all deemed unsuitable. He has been called a “young Turk of publishing” by the New York Observer and a “Silicon Alley Veteran” by Crain’s New York Business. He has been a featured speaker on the future of publishing at numerous industry trade shows. His latest Star Trek work was in the New Frontier anthology No Limits; and he has been an editorial consultant on many Star Trek CD-ROMs. He is also, among other things, the webmaster for PeterDavid.net. As for what he’s doing with his company LotAuctions.com, his biography, like this story, will be continued in Part 2.

\* \* \*

AARON ROSENBERG writes role-playing games (including the Origins Award–winning *Gamemastering Secrets*), S.C.E. eBooks (including the Psi Phi Awards Hall of Fame inductee *Collective Hindsight*), short stories (“Inescapable Justice” in *Imaginations: An Anthology of Long Short Fiction*), educational books, and anything else people want to pay him for. When not writing, he runs his game publishing company Clockworks ([www.clockworksgames.com](http://www.clockworksgames.com)), reads comics, watches movies, or spends time with his wife, their daughter, and their cat. Every so often he sleeps, just for variety.

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